

THE

POWER-HOUSE

PREFACE BY THE EDITOR

We were at Glenaicill—six of us—for the duck-shooting, when Leithen told us this story. Since five in the morning we had been out on the skerries, and had been blown home by a wind which threatened to root the house and its wind-blown woods from their precarious lodgment on the hill. A vast nondescript meal, luncheon and dinner in one, had occupied us till the last daylight departed, and we settled ourselves in the smoking-room for a sleepy evening of talk and tobacco.

Conversation, I remember, turned on some of Jim's trophies which grinned at us from the firelit walls, and we began to spin hunting yarns. Then Hoppy Byng, who was killed next year on the Bramaputra, told us some queer things about his doings in New Guinea, where he tried to climb Carstensz, and lived for six months in mud. Jim said he couldn't abide mud—anything was better than a country where your boots rotted. (He was to get enough of it last winter in the Ypres Salient.) You know how one tale begets another, and soon the whole place hummed with odd recollections, for five of us had been a good deal about the world.

All except Leithen, the man who was afterwards Solicitor-General, and, they say, will get to the Woolsack in time. I don't suppose he had ever been farther from home than Monte Carlo, but he liked hearing about the ends of the earth.

Jim had just finished a fairly steep yarn about his experiences on a Boundary Commission near Lake Chad, and Leithen got up to find a drink.

"Lucky devils," he said. "You've had all the fun out of life. I've had my nose to the grindstone ever since I left school."

I said something about his having all the honour and glory.

"All the same," he went on, "I once played the chief part in a rather exciting business without ever once budging from London. And the joke of it was that the man who went out to look for adventure only saw a bit of the game, and I who sat in my chambers saw it all and pulled the strings. 'They also serve who only stand and wait,' you know."

Then he told us this story. The version I give is one he afterwards wrote down when he had looked up his diary for some of the details.

CHAPTER I

BEGINNING OF THE WILD-GOOSE CHASE

It all started one afternoon, early in May, when I came out of the House of Commons with Tommy Deloraine. I had got in by an accident at a by-election, when I was supposed to be fighting a forlorn hope, and as I was just beginning to be busy at the Bar I found my hands pretty full. It was before Tommy succeeded, in the days when he sat for the family seat in Yorkshire, and that afternoon he was in a powerful bad temper. Out of doors it was jolly spring weather, there was greenery in Parliament Square and bits of gay colour, and a light wind was blowing up from the river. Inside a dull debate was winding on, and an advertising member had been trying to get up a row with the Speaker. The contrast between the frowsy place and the cheerful world outside would have impressed even the soul of a Government Whip.

Tommy sniffed the spring breeze like a supercilious stag.

"This about finishes me," he groaned. "What a juggins I am to be mouldering here! Joggleberry is the celestial limit, what they call in happier lands the pink penultimate. And the frowst on those back benches! Was there ever such a moth-eaten old museum?"

"It is the Mother of Parliaments," I observed.

"Damned monkey-house," said Tommy. "I must get off for a bit, or I'll bonnet Joggleberry or get up and propose a national monument to Guy Fawkes, or something silly."

I did not see him for a day or two, and then one morning he rang me up and peremptorily summoned me to dine with him. I went, knowing very well what I should find. Tommy was off next day to shoot lions on the Equator, or something equally unconscientious. He was a bad acquaintance for a placid sedentary soul like me, for though he could work like a Trojan when the fit took him, he was never at the same job very long. In the same week he would harass an Under Secretary about horses for the Army, write voluminously to the press about a gun he had invented for potting aeroplanes, give a fancy-dress ball which he forgot to attend, and get into the semi-final of the racquets championship. I waited daily to see him start a new religion.

That night, I recollect, he had an odd assortment of guests. A Cabinet Minister was there, a gentle being for whom Tommy professed public scorn and private affection; a sailor; an Indian cavalry fellow; Chapman, the Labour member, whom Tommy called Chipmunk; myself, and old Milson of the Treasury. Our host was in tremendous form, chaffing everybody, and sending Chipmunk into great rolling gusts of merriment. The two lived adjacent in Yorkshire, and on platforms abused each other like pickpockets.

Tommy enlarged on the misfits of civilised life. He maintained that none of us, except perhaps the sailor and the cavalryman, were at our proper job. He would have had Wytham—that was the Minister—a cardinal of the Roman Church, and he said that Milson should have been the Warden of a college full of port and prejudice. Me he was kind enough to allocate to some reconstructed Imperial General Staff, merely because I had a craze for military history. Tommy's perception did not go very deep. He told Chapman he should have been a lumberman in California. "You'd have made an uncommon good logger, Chipmunk, and you know you're a dashed bad politician."

When questioned about himself he became reticent, as the newspapers say. "I doubt if I'm much good at any job," he confessed, "except to ginger up my friends. Anyhow, I'm getting out of this hole. Paired for the rest of the session with a chap who has lockjaw. I'm off to stretch my legs and get back my sense of proportion."

Some one asked him where he was going, and was told "Venezuela, to buy Government bonds and look for birds' nests."

Nobody took Tommy seriously, so his guests did not trouble to bid him the kind of farewell a prolonged journey would demand. But when the others had gone, and we were sitting in the little back smoking-room on the first floor, he became solemn. Portentously solemn, for he wrinkled up his brows and dropped his jaw in the way he had when he fancied he was in earnest.

"I've taken on a queer job, Leithen," he said, "and I want you to hear about it. None of my family know, and I would like to leave some one behind me who could get on to my tracks if things got troublesome."

I braced myself for some preposterous confidence, for I was experienced in Tommy's vagaries. But I own to being surprised when he asked me if I remembered Pitt-Heron.

I remembered Pitt-Heron very well. He had been at Oxford with me, but he was no great friend of mine, though for about two years Tommy and he had been inseparable. He had had a prodigious reputation for cleverness with everybody but the college authorities, and used to spend his vacations doing mad things in the Alps and the Balkans and writing about them in the half-penny press. He was enormously rich—cotton mills and Liverpool ground rents—and, being without a father, did pretty much what his fantastic taste dictated. He was rather a hero for a bit after he came down, for he had made some wild journey in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan and written an exciting book about it.

Then he married a pretty cousin of Tommy's, who happened to be the only person that ever captured my stony heart, and settled down in London. I did not go to their house, and soon I found that very few of his friends saw much of him, either. His travels and magazine articles suddenly stopped, and I put it down to the common course of successful domesticity. Apparently I was wrong.

"Charles Pitt-Heron," said Tommy, "is blowing up for a most thundering mess."

I asked what kind of mess, and Tommy said he didn't know. "That's the mischief of it. You remember the wild beggar he used to be, always off on the spree to the Mountains of the Moon, or somewhere. Well, he has been damping down his fires lately and trying to behave like a respectable citizen, but God knows what he has been thinking! I go a good deal to Portman Square, and all last year he has been getting queerer."

Questions as to the nature of the queerness only elicited the fact that Pitt-Heron had taken to science with some enthusiasm.

"He has got a laboratory at the back of the house—used to be the billiard-room—where he works away half the night. And Lord! The crew you meet there! Every kind of heathen—Chinese and Turks, and long-haired chaps from Russia, and fat Germans. I've several times blundered into the push. They've all got an odd secretive air about them, and Charlie is becoming like them. He won't answer a plain question or look you straight in the face. Ethel sees it, too, and she has often talked to me about it."

I said I saw no harm in such a hobby.

"I do," said Tommy grimly. "Anyhow, the fellow has bolted."

"What on earth——" I began, but was cut short.

"Bolted without a word to a mortal soul. He told Ethel he would be home for luncheon yesterday, and never came. His man knew nothing about him, hadn't packed for him, or anything; but he found he had stuffed some things into a kit-bag and gone out by the back through the mews. Ethel was in terrible straits, and sent for me, and I ranged all yesterday afternoon like a wolf on the scent. I found he had drawn a biggish sum in gold from the bank, but I couldn't find any trace of where he had gone.

"I was just setting out for Scotland Yard this morning, when Tomlin, the valet, rang me up and said he had found a card in the waistcoat of the dress clothes that Charles had worn the night before he left. It had a name on it like Konalevsky, and it struck me that they might know something about the business at the Russian Embassy. Well, I went round there, and the long and short of it was that I found there was a fellow of that name among the clerks. I saw him, and he said he had gone to see Mr. Pitt-Heron two days before with a letter from some Embassy chap. Unfortunately, the man in question had gone off to New York next day, but Konalevsky told me one thing which helped to clear up matters. It seemed that the letter had been one of those passports that Embassies give to their friends—a higher-powered sort than the ordinary make—and Konalevsky gathered from something he had heard that Charles was aiming for Moscow."

Tommy paused to let his news sink in.

"Well, that was good enough for me. I'm off to-morrow to run him to ground."

"But why shouldn't a man go to Moscow if he wants?" I said feebly.

"You don't understand," said the sage Tommy. "You don't know old Charles as I know him. He's got into a queer set, and there's no knowing what mischief he's up to. He's perfectly capable of starting a revolution in Armenia or somewhere merely to see how it feels like to be a revolutionary. That's the damned thing about the artistic temperament. Anyhow, he's got to chuck it. I won't have Ethel scared to death by his whims. I am going to hale him back from Moscow, even if I have to pretend he's an escaped lunatic. He's probably like enough one by this time if he has taken no clothes."

I have forgotten what I said, but it was some plea for caution. I could not see the reason for these heroics. Pitt-Heron did not interest me greatly, and the notion of Tommy as a defender of the hearth amused me. I thought that he was working on very slight evidence and would probably make a fool of himself.

"It's only another of the man's fads," I said. "He never could do things like an ordinary mortal. What possible trouble could there be? Money?"

"Rich as Croesus," said Tommy.

"A woman?"

"Blind as a bat to female beauty."

"The wrong side of the law?"

"Don't think so. He could settle any ordinary scrape with a cheque."

"Then I give it up. Whatever it is it looks as if Pitt-Heron would have a companion in misfortune before you are done with the business. I'm all for your taking a holiday, for at present you are a nuisance to your friends and a disgrace to your country's legislature. But for goodness' sake curb your passion for romance. They don't like it in Russia."

Next morning Tommy turned up to see me in Chambers. The prospect of travel always went to his head like wine. He was in wild spirits, and had forgotten his anger at the defaulting Pitt-Heron in gratitude for his provision of an occupation. He talked of carrying him off to the Caucasus when he had found him, to investigate the habits of the Caucasian stag.

I remember the scene as if it were yesterday. It was a hot May morning, and the sun which came through the dusty window in Fountain Court lit up the dust and squalor of my working chambers. I was pretty busy at the time, and my table was well-nourished with briefs. Tommy picked up one and began to read it. It was about a new drainage scheme in West Ham. He tossed it down and looked at me pityingly.

"Poor old beggar!" he said. "To spend your days on such work when the world is chockful of amusing things. Life goes roaring by and you only hear the echo in your stuffy rooms. You can hardly see the sun for the cobwebs on these windows of yours. Charles is a fool, but I'm blessed if he isn't wiser than you. Don't you wish you were coming with me?"

The queer thing was that I did. I remember the occasion, as I have said, for it was one of the few on which I have had a pang of dissatisfaction with the calling I had chosen. As Tommy's footsteps grew faint on the stairs I suddenly felt as if I were missing something, as if somehow I were out of it. It is an unpleasant feeling, even when you know that the thing you are out of is foolishness.

Tommy went off at 11 from Victoria, and my work was pretty well ruined for the day. I felt oddly restless, and the cause was not merely Tommy's departure. My thoughts kept turning to the Pitt-Herons—chiefly to Ethel, that adorable child unequally yoked to a perverse egoist, but a good deal to the egoist himself. I have never suffered much from whimsies, but I suddenly began to feel a curious interest in the business, an unwilling interest, for I found it in my heart to regret my robust scepticism of the night before. And it was more than interest. I had a sort of presentiment that I was going to be mixed up in the affair more than I wanted. I told myself angrily that the life of an industrious common-law barrister could have little to do with the wanderings of two maniacs in Muscovy. But, try as I might, I could not get rid of the obsession. That night it followed me into my dreams, and I saw myself with a knout coercing Tommy and Pitt-Heron in a Russian fortress which faded away into the Carlton Hotel.

Next afternoon I found my steps wending in the direction of Portman Square. I lived at the time in Down Street, and I told myself I would be none the worse of a walk in the Park before dinner. I had a fancy to see Mrs. Pitt-Heron, for, though I had only met her twice since her marriage, there had been a day when we were the closest of friends.

I found her alone, a perplexed and saddened lady with imploring eyes. Those eyes questioned me as to how much I knew. I told her presently that I had seen Tommy and was aware of his errand. I was moved to add that she might count on me if there were anything she wished done on this side of the Channel.

She was very little changed. There was still the old exquisite slimness, the old shy courtesy. But she told me nothing. Charles was full of business and becoming very forgetful. She was sure the Russian journey was all a stupid mistake. He probably thought he had told her of his departure. He would write; she expected a letter by every post.

But her haggard eyes belied her optimism. I could see that there had been odd happenings of late in the Pitt-Heron household. She either knew or feared something—the latter, I thought, for her air was more of apprehension than of painful enlightenment.

I did not stay long, and, as I walked home, I had an awkward feeling that I had intruded. Also I was increasingly certain that there was trouble brewing, and that Tommy had more warrant for his journey than I had given him credit for. I cast my mind back to gather recollections of Pitt-Heron, but all I could find was an impression of a brilliant uncomfortable being, who had been too fond of the byways of life for my sober tastes. There was nothing crooked in him in the wrong sense, but there might be a good deal that was perverse. I remember consoling myself with the thought that, though he might shatter his wife's nerves by his vagaries, he would scarcely break her heart.

To be watchful, I decided, was my business. And I could not get rid of the feeling that I might soon have cause for all my vigilance.

CHAPTER II

I FIRST HEAR OF MR. ANDREW LUMLEY

A fortnight later—to be accurate, on the 21st of May—I did a thing I rarely do, and went down to South London on a County Court case. It was an ordinary taxi-cab accident, and, as the solicitors for the company were good clients of mine, and the regular

county-court junior was ill in bed, I took the case to oblige them. There was the usual dull conflict of evidence. An empty taxi-cab, proceeding slowly on the right side of the road and hooting decorously at the corners, had been run into by a private motor-car, which had darted down a side street. The taxi had been swung round and its bonnet considerably damaged, while its driver had suffered a dislocated shoulder. The bad feature in the case was that the motor-car had not halted to investigate the damage, but had proceeded unconscientiously on its way, and the assistance of the London police had been called in to trace it. It turned out to be the property of a Mr. Julius Pavia, a retired East India merchant, who lived in a large villa in the neighbourhood of Blackheath, and at the time of the accident it had been occupied by his butler. The company brought an action for damages against its owner.

The butler, Tuke, by name, was the only witness for the defence. He was a tall man, with a very long, thin face, and a jaw the two parts of which seemed scarcely to fit. He was profuse in his apologies on behalf of his master, who was abroad. It seemed that on the morning in question—it was the 8th of May—he had received instructions from Mr. Pavia to convey a message to a passenger by the Continental express from Victoria, and had been hot on this errand when he met the taxi. He was not aware that there had been any damage, thought it only a slight grazing of the two cars, and on his master's behalf consented to the judgment of the court.

It was a commonplace business, but Tuke was by no means a commonplace witness. He was very unlike the conventional butler, much liker one of those successful financiers whose portraits you see in the picture papers. His little eyes were quick with intelligence, and there were lines of ruthlessness around his mouth, like those of a man often called to decisive action. His story was simplicity itself, and he answered my questions with an air of serious candour. The train he had to meet was the 11 a.m. from Victoria, the train by which Tommy had travelled. The passenger he had to see was an American gentleman, Mr. Wright Davies. His master, Mr. Pavia, was in Italy, but would shortly be home again.

The case was over in twenty minutes, but it was something unique in my professional experience. For I took a most intense and unreasoning dislike to that bland butler. I cross-examined with some rudeness, was answered with steady courtesy, and hopelessly snubbed. The upshot was that I lost my temper, to the surprise of the County Court judge. All the way back I was both angry and ashamed of myself. Half way home I realised that the accident had happened on the very day that Tommy left London. The coincidence merely flickered across my mind, for there could be no earthly connection between the two events.

That afternoon I wasted some time in looking up Pavia in the directory. He was there sure enough, as the occupier of a suburban mansion called the White Lodge. He had no city address, so it was clear that he was out of business. My irritation with the man had made me inquisitive about the master. It was a curious name he bore, possibly Italian, possibly Goanese. I wondered how he got on with his highly competent butler. If Tuke had been my servant I would have wrung his neck or bolted before a week was out.

Have you ever noticed that, when you hear a name that strikes you, you seem to be constantly hearing it for a bit. Once I had a case in which one of the parties was called Jubber, a name I had never met before, but I ran across two other Jubbers before the case was over. Anyhow, the day after the Blackheath visit I was briefed in a big Stock Exchange case, which turned on the true ownership of certain bearer bonds. It was a complicated business which I need not trouble you with, and it involved a number of consultations with my lay clients, a famous firm of brokers. They produced their books and my chambers were filled with glossy gentlemen talking a strange jargon.

I had to examine my clients closely on their practice in treating a certain class of bearer security, and they were very frank in expounding their business. I was not surprised to hear that Pitt-Heron was one of the most valued names on their lists. With his wealth he was bound to be a good deal in the city. Now I had no desire to pry into Pitt-Heron's private affairs, especially his financial arrangements, but his name was in my thoughts at the time, and I could not help looking curiously at what was put before me. He seemed to have been buying these bonds on a big scale. I had the indiscretion to ask if Mr. Pitt-Heron had long followed this course, and was told that he had begun to purchase some six months before.

"Mr. Pitt-Heron," volunteered the stockbroker, "is very closely connected in his financial operations with another esteemed client of ours, Mr. Julius Pavia. They are both attracted by this class of security."

At the moment I scarcely noted the name, but after dinner that night I began to speculate about the connection. I had found out the name of one of Charles's mysterious new friends.

It was not a very promising discovery. A retired East India merchant did not suggest anything wildly speculative, but I began to wonder if Charles's preoccupation, to which Tommy had been witness, might not be connected with financial worries. I could not believe that the huge Pitt-Heron fortune had been seriously affected, or that his flight was that of a defaulter, but he might have got entangled in some shady city business which preyed on his sensitive soul. Somehow or other I could not believe that Mr. Pavia was a wholly innocent old gentleman; his butler looked too formidable. It was possible that he was blackmailing Pitt-Heron, and that the latter had departed to get out of his clutches.

But on what ground? I had no notion as to the blackmailable thing that might lurk in Charles's past, and the guesses which flitted through my brain were too fantastic to consider seriously. After all, I had only the flimsiest basis for conjecture. Pavia and Pitt-Heron were friends; Tommy had gone off in quest of Pitt-Heron; Pavia's butler had broken the law of the land in order, for some reason or other, to see the departure of the train by which Tommy had travelled. I remember laughing at myself for my suspicions, and reflecting that, if Tommy could see into my head, he would turn a deaf ear in the future to my complaints of his lack of balance.

But the thing stuck in my mind, and I called again that week on Mrs. Pitt-Heron. She had had no word from her husband, and

only a bare line from Tommy, giving his Moscow address. Poor child, it was a wretched business for her. She had to keep a smiling face to the world, invent credible tales to account for her husband's absence, and all the while anxiety and dread were gnawing at her heart. I asked her if she had ever met a Mr. Pavia, but the name was unknown to her. She knew nothing of Charles's business dealings, but at my request she interviewed his bankers, and I heard from her next day that his affairs were in perfect order. It was no financial crisis which had precipitated him abroad.

A few days later I stumbled by the merest accident upon what sailors call a "cross-bearing." At the time I used to "devil" a little for the Solicitor-General, and "note" cases sent to him from the different Government offices. It was thankless work, but it was supposed to be good for an ambitious lawyer. By this prosaic channel I received the first hint of another of Charles's friends.

I had sent me one day the papers dealing with the arrest of a German spy at Plymouth, for at the time there was a sort of epidemic of roving Teutons who got themselves into compromising situations, and gravely troubled the souls of the Admiralty and the War-Office. This case was distinguished from the common ruck by the higher social standing of the accused. Generally the spy is a photographer or bagman who attempts to win the bibulous confidence of minor officials. But this specimen was no less than a professor of a famous German University, a man of excellent manners, wide culture, and attractive presence, who had dined with Port officers and danced with Admirals' daughters.

I have forgotten the evidence or what was the legal point submitted for the Law Officers' opinion; in any case it matters little, for he was acquitted. What interested me at the time was the testimonials as to character which he carried with him. He had many letters of introduction. One was from Pitt-Heron to his wife's sailor uncle; and when he was arrested one Englishman went so far as to wire that he took upon himself the whole costs of the defence. This gentleman was a Mr. Andrew Lumley, stated in the papers sent me to be a rich bachelor, a member of the Athenæum and Carlton Clubs, and a dweller in the Albany.

Remember, that till a few weeks before I had known nothing of Pitt-Heron's circle, and here were three bits of information dropping in on me unsolicited, just when my interest had been awakened. I began to get really keen, for every man at the bottom of his heart believes that he is a born detective. I was on the look-out for Charles's infrequent friends, and I argued that if he knew the spy and the spy knew Mr. Lumley, the odds were that Pitt-Heron and Lumley were acquaintances. I hunted up the latter in the Red Book. Sure enough, he lived in the Albany, belonged to half a dozen clubs, and had a country house in Hampshire.

I tucked the name away in a pigeon-hole of my memory, and for some days asked every one I met if he knew the philanthropist of the Albany. I had no luck till the Saturday, when, lunching at the club, I ran against Jenkinson, the art critic.

I forget if you know that I have always been a bit of a connoisseur in a mild way. I used to dabble in prints and miniatures, but at that time my interest lay chiefly in Old Wedgwood, of which I had collected some good pieces. Old Wedgwood is a thing which few people collect seriously, but the few who do are apt to be monomaniacs. Whenever a big collection comes into the market it fetches high prices, but it generally finds its way into not more than half a dozen hands. Wedgwoodites all know each other, and they are less cut-throat in their methods than most collectors. Of all I have ever met Jenkinson was the keenest, and he would discourse for hours on the "feel" of good jasper and the respective merits of blue and sage-green grounds.

That day he was full of excitement. He babbled through luncheon about the Wentworth sale, which he had attended the week before. There had been a pair of magnificent plaques, with a unique Flaxman design, which had roused his enthusiasm. Urns and medallions and what not had gone to this or that connoisseur, and Jenkinson could quote their prices, but the plaques dominated his fancy, and he was furious that the nation had not acquired them. It seemed that he had been to South Kensington and the British Museum and all sorts of dignitaries, and he thought he might yet persuade the authorities to offer for them if the purchaser would re-sell. They had been bought by Lutrin for a well-known private collector, by name Andrew Lumley.

I pricked up my ears and asked about Mr. Lumley.

Jenkinson said he was a rich old buffer who locked up his things in cupboards and never let the public get a look at them. He suspected that a lot of the best things at recent sales had found their way to him, and that meant that they were put in cold storage for good.

I asked if he knew him.

No, he told me, but he had once or twice been allowed to look at his things for books he had been writing. He had never seen the man, for he always bought through agents, but he had heard of people who knew him. "It is the old silly game," he said. "He will fill half a dozen houses with priceless treasures, and then die, and the whole show will be sold at auction and the best things carried off to America. It's enough to make a patriot swear."

There was balm in Gilead, however. Mr. Lumley apparently might be willing to re-sell the Wedgwood plaques if he got a fair offer. So Jenkinson had been informed by Lutrin, and that very afternoon he was going to look at them. He asked me to come with him, and, having nothing to do, I accepted.

Jenkinson's car was waiting for us at the club door. It was closed, for the afternoon was wet. I did not hear his directions to the

chauffeur, and we had been on the road ten minutes or so before I discovered that we had crossed the river and were traversing South London. I had expected to find the things in Lutrin's shop, but to my delight I was told that Lumley had taken delivery of them at once.

"He keeps very few of his things in the Albany except his books," I was told. "But he has a house at Blackheath which is stuffed from cellar to garret."

"What is the name of it?" I asked with a sudden suspicion.

"The White Lodge," said Jenkinson.

"But that belongs to a man called Pavia," I said.

"I can't help that. The things in it belong to old Lumley, all right. I know, for I've been three times there with his permission."

Jenkinson got little out of me for the rest of the ride. Here was excellent corroborative evidence of what I had allowed myself to suspect. Pavia was a friend of Pitt-Heron, Lumley was a friend of Pitt-Heron; Lumley was obviously a friend of Pavia, and he might be Pavia himself, for the retired East India merchant, as I figured him, would not be above an innocent impersonation. Anyhow, if I could find one or the other, I might learn something about Charles's recent doings. I sincerely hoped that the owner might be at home that afternoon when we inspected his treasures, for so far I had found no one who could procure me an introduction to that mysterious old bachelor of artistic and philo-Teutonic tastes.

We reached the White Lodge about half-past three. It was one of those small, square, late-Georgian mansions which you see all around London—once a country-house among fields, now only a villa in a pretentious garden. I looked to see my super-butler Tuke, but the door was opened by a female servant, who inspected Jenkinson's card of admission, and somewhat unwillingly allowed us to enter.

My companion had not exaggerated when he described the place as full of treasures. It was far more like the shop of a Bond Street art-dealer than a civilised dwelling. The hall was crowded with Japanese armour and lacquer cabinets. One room was lined from floor to ceiling with good pictures, mostly seventeenth-century Dutch, and had enough Chippendale chairs to accommodate a public meeting. Jenkinson would fain have prowled around, but we were moved on by the inexorable servant to the little back room where lay the objects of our visit. The plaques had been only half-unpacked, and in a moment Jenkinson was busy on them with a magnifying glass, purring to himself like a contented cat.

The housekeeper stood on guard by the door, Jenkinson was absorbed, and after the first inspection of the treasures I had leisure to look about me. It was an untidy little room, full of fine Chinese porcelain in dusty glass cabinets, and in a corner stood piles of old Persian rugs.

Pavia, I reflected, must be an easy-going soul, entirely oblivious of comfort, if he allowed his friend to turn his dwelling into such a pantechnicon. Less and less did I believe in the existence of the retired East Indian merchant. The house was Lumley's, who chose to pass under another name during his occasional visits. His motive might be innocent enough, but somehow I did not think so. His butler had looked too infernally intelligent.

With my foot I turned over the lid of one of the packing-cases that had held the Wedgwoods. It was covered with a litter of cotton-wool and shavings, and below it lay a crumpled piece of paper. I looked again, and saw that it was a telegraph form. Clearly somebody, with the telegram in his hand, had opened the cases, and had left it on the top of one, whence it had dropped to the floor and been covered by the lid when it was flung off.

I hope and believe that I am as scrupulous as other people, but then and there came on me the conviction that I must read that telegram. I felt the gimlet eye of the housekeeper on me, so I had recourse to craft. I took out my cigarette case as if to smoke, and clumsily upset its contents amongst the shavings. Then on my knees I began to pick them up, turning over the litter till the telegram was exposed.

It was in French and I read it quite clearly. It had been sent from Vienna, but the address was in some code. "*Suivez a Bokhare Saronov*"—these were the words. I finished my collection of the cigarettes, and turned the lid over again on the telegram, so that its owner, if he chose to look for it diligently, might find it.

When we sat in the car going home, Jenkinson absorbed in meditation on the plaques, I was coming to something like a decision. A curious feeling of inevitability possessed me. I had collected by accident a few odd disjointed pieces of information, and here by the most amazing accident of all was the connecting link. I knew I had no evidence to go upon which would have convinced the most credulous common jury. Pavia knew Pitt-Heron; so probably did Lumley. Lumley knew Pavia, possibly was identical with him. Somebody in Pavia's house got a telegram in which a trip to Bokhara was indicated. It didn't sound much. Yet I was absolutely convinced, with the queer sub-conscious certitude of the human brain, that Pitt-Heron was or was about to be in Bokhara, and that Pavia-Lumley knew of his being there and was deeply concerned in his journey.

That night after dinner I rang up Mrs. Pitt-Heron.

She had had a letter from Tommy, a very dispirited letter, for he had had no luck. Nobody in Moscow had seen or heard of any wandering Englishman remotely like Charles, and Tommy, after playing the private detective for three weeks, was nearly at the end of his tether and spoke of returning home.

I told her to send him the following wire in her own name. "*Go on to Bokhara. Have information you will meet him there.*"

She promised to send the message next day and asked no further questions. She was a pearl among women.

CHAPTER III

TELLS OF A MIDSUMMER NIGHT

Hitherto I had been the looker-on; now I was to become a person of the drama. That telegram was the beginning of my active part in this curious affair. They say that everybody turns up in time at the corner of Piccadilly Circus if you wait long enough. I was to find myself like a citizen of Bagdad in the days of the great Caliph, and yet never stir from my routine of flat, chambers, club, and flat.

I am wrong; there was one episode out of London, and that perhaps was the true beginning of my story.

Whitsuntide that year came very late, and I was glad of the fortnight's rest, for Parliament and the Law Courts had given me a busy time. I had recently acquired a car and a chauffeur called Stagg, and I looked forward to trying it in a tour in the West country. But before I left London I went again to Portman Square.

I found Ethel Pitt-Heron in grave distress. You must remember that Tommy and I had always gone on the hypothesis that Charles's departure had been in pursuance of some mad scheme of his own which might get him into trouble. We thought that he had become mixed up with highly undesirable friends, and was probably embarking in some venture which might not be criminal but was certain to be foolish. I had long rejected the idea of blackmail, and convinced myself that Lumley and Pavia were his colleagues. The same general notion, I fancy, had been in his wife's mind. But now she had found something which altered the case.

She had ransacked his papers in the hope of finding a clue to the affair which had taken him abroad, but there was nothing but business letters, notes of investments, and such like. He seemed to have burned most of his papers in the queer laboratory at the back of the house. But, stuffed into the pocket of a blotter on a bureau in the drawing-room where he scarcely ever wrote, she had found a document. It seemed to be the rough draft of a letter, and it was addressed to her. I give it as it was written; the blank spaces were left blank in the manuscript.

"You must have thought me mad, or worse, to treat you as I have done. But there was a terrible reason, which some day I hope to tell you all about. I want you as soon as you get this to make ready to come out to me at ... You will travel by ... and arrive at ... I enclose a letter which I want you to hand in deepest confidence to Knowles, the solicitor. He will make all arrangements about your journey and about sending me the supplies of money I want. Darling, you must leave as secretly as I did, and tell nobody anything, not even that I am alive—that least of all. I would not frighten you for worlds, but I am on the edge of a horrible danger; which I hope with God's help and yours to escape..."

That was all—obviously the draft of a letter which he intended to post to her from some foreign place. But can you conceive a missive more calculated to shatter a woman's nerves? It filled me, I am bound to say, with heavy disquiet. Pitt-Heron was no coward, and he was not the man to make too much of a risk. Yet it was clear that he had fled that day in May under the pressure of some mortal fear.

The affair in my eyes began to look very bad. Ethel wanted me to go to Scotland Yard, but I dissuaded her. I have the utmost esteem for Scotland Yard, but I shrank from publicity at this stage. There might be something in the case too delicate for the police to handle, and I thought it better to wait.

I reflected a great deal about the Pitt-Heron business the first day or two of my trip, but the air and the swift motion helped me to forget it. We had a fortnight of superb weather, and sailed all day through a glistening green country under the hazy blue heavens of June. Soon I fell into the blissful state of physical and mental ease which such a life induces. Hard toil, such as deer-stalking, keeps the nerves on the alert and the mind active, but swimming all day in a smooth car through a heavenly landscape mesmerises brain and body.

We ran up the Thames valley, explored the Cotswolds, and turned south through Somerset till we reached the fringes of Exmoor. I stayed a day or two at a little inn high up in the moor, and spent the time tramping the endless ridges of hill or scrambling in the arbutus thickets where the moor falls in steep to the sea. We returned by Dartmoor and the south coast, meeting with our first rain in

Dorset, and sweeping into sunlight again on Salisbury Plain. The time came when only two days remained to me. The car had behaved beyond all my hopes, and Stagg, a sombre and silent man, was lyrical in his praises.

I wanted to be in London by the Monday afternoon, and to insure this I made a long day of it on the Sunday. It was the long day which brought our pride to a fall. The car had run so well that I resolved to push on and sleep in a friend's house near Farnham. It was about half-past eight, and we were traversing the somewhat confused and narrow roads in the neighbourhood of Wolmer Forest, when, as we turned a sharp corner, we ran full into the tail of a heavy carrier's cart. Stagg clapped on the brakes, but the collision, though it did no harm to the cart, was sufficient to send the butt-end of something through our glass screen, damage the tyre of the near front-wheel, and derange the steering-gear. Neither of us suffered much hurt, but Stagg got a long scratch on his cheek from broken glass, and I had a bruised shoulder.

The carrier was friendly but useless, and there was nothing for it but to arrange for horses to take the car to Farnham. This meant a job of some hours, and I found on inquiry at a neighbouring cottage that there was no inn where I could stay within eight miles. Stagg borrowed a bicycle somehow and went off to collect horses, while I morosely reviewed the alternatives before me.

I did not like the prospect of spending the June night beside my derelict car, and the thought of my friend's house near Farnham beckoned me seductively. I might have walked there, but I did not know the road, and I found that my shoulder was paining me, so I resolved to try to find some gentleman's house in the neighbourhood where I could borrow a conveyance. The south of England is now so densely peopled by Londoners that even in a wild district where there are no inns and few farms there are certain to be several week-end cottages.

I walked along the white ribbon of road in the scented June dusk. At first it was bounded by high gorse, then came patches of open heath, and then woods. Beyond the woods I found a park-railing, and presently an entrance-gate with a lodge. It seemed to be the place I was looking for, and I woke the lodge-keeper, who thus early had retired to bed. I asked the name of the owner, but was told the name of the place instead—it was High Ashes. I asked if the owner was at home, and got a sleepy nod for answer.

The house, as seen in the half-light, was a long white-washed cottage, rising to two storeys in the centre. It was plentifully covered with creepers and roses, and the odour of flowers was mingled with the faintest savour of wood-smoke, pleasant to a hungry traveller in the late hours. I pulled an old-fashioned bell, and the door was opened by a stolid young parlour-maid.

I explained my errand, and offered my card. I was, I said, a Member of Parliament and of the Bar, who had suffered a motor accident. Would it be possible for the master of the house to assist me to get to my destination near Farnham? I was bidden enter, and wearily seated myself on a settle in the hall.

In a few minutes an ancient housekeeper appeared, a grim dame whom at other times I should have shunned. She bore, however, a hospitable message. There was no conveyance in the place, as the car had gone that day to London for repairs. But if I cared to avail myself of the accommodation of the house for the night it was at my service. Meantime my servant could be looking after the car, and a message would go to him to pick me up in the morning.

I gratefully accepted, for my shoulder was growing troublesome, and was conducted up a shallow oak staircase to a very pleasant bedroom with a bathroom adjoining. I had a bath, and afterwards found a variety of comforts put at my service, from slippers to razors. There was also some Elliman for my wounded shoulder. Clean and refreshed, I made my way downstairs and entered a room from which I caught a glow of light.

It was a library, the most attractive I think I have ever seen. The room was long, as libraries should be, and entirely lined with books, save over the fireplace, where hung a fine picture, which I took to be a Raeburn. The books were in glass cases, which showed the beautiful shallow mouldings of a more artistic age. A table was laid for dinner in a corner, for the room was immense, and the shaded candlesticks on it, along with the late June dusk, gave such light as there was. At first I thought the place was empty, but as I crossed the floor a figure rose from a deep chair by the hearth.

"Good evening, Mr. Leithen," a voice said. "It is a kindly mischance which gives a lonely old man the pleasure of your company."

He switched on an electric lamp, and I saw before me—what I had not guessed from the voice—an old man. I was thirty-four at the time, and counted anything over fifty old, but I judged my host to be well on in the sixties. He was about my own size, but a good deal bent in the shoulders as if from study. His face was clean-shaven and extraordinarily fine, with every feature delicately chiselled. He had a sort of Hapsburg mouth and chin, very long and pointed, but modelled with a grace which made the full lower lip seem entirely right. His hair was silver, brushed so low on the forehead as to give him a slightly foreign air, and he wore tinted glasses, as if for reading.

Altogether it was a very dignified and agreeable figure who greeted me in a voice so full and soft that it belied his obvious age.

Dinner was a light meal, but perfect in its way. There were soles, I remember, an exceedingly well-cooked chicken, fresh strawberries and a savoury. We drank a '95 Perrier-Jouet and some excellent Madeira. The stolid parlour-maid waited on us, and, as we talked of the weather and the Hampshire roads, I kept trying to guess my host's profession. He was not a lawyer, for he had not the inevitable lines on the cheek. I thought that he might be a retired Oxford don, or one of the higher civil servants, or perhaps some official of the British Museum. His library proclaimed him a scholar, and his voice a gentleman.

Afterwards we settled ourselves in armchairs and he gave me a good cigar. We talked about many things—books, the right furnishing of a library, a little politics in deference to my M.P.-ship. My host was apathetic about party questions, but curious about defence matters and in his way an amateur strategist. I could fancy him inditing letters to *The Times* on national service.

Then we wandered into foreign affairs, where I found his interest acute, and his knowledge immense. Indeed he was so well informed that I began to suspect that my guesses had been wrong, and that he was a retired diplomat. At that time there was some difficulty between France and Italy over customs duties, and he sketched for me with remarkable clearness the weak points in the French tariff administration. I had been recently engaged in a big South American railway case, and I asked him a question about the property of my clients. He gave me a much better account than I had ever got from the solicitors who briefed me.

The fire had been lit before we finished dinner, and presently it began to burn up and light the figure of my host, who sat in a deep arm-chair. He had taken off his tinted glasses, and as I rose to get a match I saw his eyes looking abstractedly before him.

Somehow they reminded me of Pitt-Heron. Charles had always a sort of dancing light in his, a restless intelligence which was at once attractive and disquieting. My host had this and more. His eyes were paler than I had ever seen in a human head—pale, bright, and curiously wild. But, whereas Pitt-Heron's had only given the impression of reckless youth, this man's spoke of wisdom and power as well as of endless vitality.

All my theories vanished, for I could not believe that my host had ever followed any profession. If he had, he would have been at the head of it, and the world would have been familiar with his features. I began to wonder if my recollection was not playing me false, and I was in the presence of some great man whom I ought to recognise.

As I dived into the recesses of my memory I heard his voice asking if I were not a lawyer.

I told him, Yes. A barrister with a fair common-law practice and some work in Privy Council appeals.

He asked me why I chose the profession.

"It came handiest," I said. "I am a dry creature, who loves facts and logic. I am not a flier, I have no new ideas, I don't want to lead men and I like work. I am the ordinary educated Englishman, and my sort gravitates to the Bar. We like feeling that, if we are not the builders, at any rate we are the cement of civilisation."

He repeated the words "cement of civilisation" in his soft voice.

"In a sense you are right. But civilisation needs more than the law to hold it together. You see all mankind are not equally willing to accept as divine justice what is called human law."

"Of course there are further sanctions," I said. "Police and armies and the good-will of civilisation."

He caught me up quickly. "The last is your true cement. Did you ever reflect, Mr. Leithen, how precarious is the tenure of the civilisation we boast about?"

"I should have thought it fairly substantial," I said, "and the foundations grow daily firmer."

He laughed. "That is the lawyer's view, but believe me you are wrong. Reflect, and you will find that the foundations are sand. You think that a wall as solid as the earth separates civilisation from barbarism. I tell you the division is a thread, a sheet of glass. A touch here, a push there, and you bring back the reign of Saturn."

It was the kind of paradoxical, undergraduate speculation which grown men indulge in sometimes after dinner. I looked at my host to discover his mood, and at the moment a log flared up again.

His face was perfectly serious. His light wild eyes were intently watching me.

"Take one little instance," he said. "We are a commercial world, and have built up a great system of credit. Without our cheques and bills of exchange and currency the whole of our life would stop. But credit only exists because behind it we have a standard of value. My Bank of England notes are worthless paper unless I can get sovereigns for them if I choose. Forgive this elementary disquisition, but the point is important. We have fixed a gold standard, because gold is sufficiently rare, and because it allows itself to be coined into a portable form. I am aware that there are economists who say that the world could be run on a pure credit basis, with no metal currency at the back of it; but, however sound their argument may be in the abstract, the thing is practically impossible. You would have to convert the whole of the world's stupidity to their economic faith before it would work."

"Now, suppose something happened to make our standard of value useless. Suppose the dream of the alchemists came true, and all metals were readily transmutable. We have got very near it in recent years, as you will know if you interest yourself in chemical science. Once gold and silver lost their intrinsic value, the whole edifice of our commerce would collapse. Credit would become meaningless, because it would be untranslatable. We should be back at a bound in the age of barter, for it is hard to see what other standard of value could take the place of the precious metals. All our civilisation, with its industries and commerce, would come toppling down. Once more, like primitive man, I would plant cabbages for a living and exchange them for services in kind from the

cobbler and the butcher. We should have the simple life with a vengeance—not the self-conscious simplicity of the civilised man, but the compulsory simplicity of the savage."

I was not greatly impressed by the illustration. "Of course, there are many key-points in civilisation," I said, "and the loss of them would bring ruin. But these keys are strongly held."

"Not so strongly as you think. Consider how delicate the machine is growing. As life grows more complex, the machinery grows more intricate and therefore more vulnerable. Your so-called sanctions become so infinitely numerous that each in itself is frail. In the Dark Ages you had one great power—the terror of God and His Church. Now you have a multiplicity of small things, all delicate and fragile, and strong only by our tacit agreement not to question them."

"You forget one thing," I said—"the fact that men really are agreed to keep the machine going. That is what I called the 'good-will of civilisation.'"

He got up from his chair and walked up and down the floor, a curious dusky figure lit by the rare spurts of flame from the hearth.

"You have put your finger on the one thing that matters. Civilisation is a conspiracy. What value would your police be if every criminal could find a sanctuary across the Channel, or your law courts if no other tribunal recognised their decisions? Modern life is the silent compact of comfortable folk to keep up pretences. And it will succeed till the day comes when there is another compact to strip them bare."

I do not think that I have ever listened to a stranger conversation. It was not so much what he said—you will hear the same thing from any group of half-baked young men—as the air with which he said it. The room was almost dark, but the man's personality seemed to take shape and bulk in the gloom. Though I could scarcely see him, I knew that those pale strange eyes were looking at me. I wanted more light, but did not know where to look for a switch. It was all so eery and odd that I began to wonder if my host were not a little mad. In any case, I was tired of his speculations.

"We won't dispute on the indisputable," I said. "But I should have thought that it was the interest of all the best brains of the world to keep up what you call the conspiracy."

He dropped into his chair again.

"I wonder," he said slowly. "Do we really get the best brains working on the side of the compact? Take the business of Government. When all is said, we are ruled by the amateurs and the second-rate. The methods of our departments would bring any private firm to bankruptcy. The methods of Parliament—pardon me—would disgrace any board of directors. Our rulers pretend to buy expert knowledge, but they never pay the price for it that a business man would pay, and if they get it they have not the courage to use it. Where is the inducement for a man of genius to sell his brains to our insipid governors?"

"And yet knowledge is the only power—now as ever. A little mechanical device will wreck your navies. A new chemical combination will upset every rule of war. It is the same with our commerce. One or two minute changes might sink Britain to the level of Ecuador or give China the key of the world's wealth. And yet we never dream that these things are possible. We think our castles of sand are the ramparts of the universe."

I have never had the gift of the gab, but I admire it in others. There is a morbid charm in such talk, a kind of exhilaration of which one is half ashamed. I found myself interested and more than a little impressed.

"But surely," I said, "the first thing a discoverer does is to make his discovery public. He wants the honour and glory, and he wants money for it. It becomes part of the world's knowledge, and everything is readjusted to meet it. That was what happened with electricity. You call our civilisation a machine, but it is something far more flexible. It has the power of adaptation of a living organism."

"That might be true if the new knowledge really became the world's property. But does it? I read now and then in the papers that some eminent scientist has made a great discovery. He reads a paper before some Academy of Science, and there are leading articles on it, and his photograph adorns the magazines. That kind of man is not the danger. He is a bit of the machine, a party to the compact. It is the men who stand outside it that are to be reckoned with, the artists in discovery who will never use their knowledge till they can use it with full effect. Believe me, the biggest brains are without the ring which we call civilisation."

Then his voice seemed to hesitate. "You may hear people say that submarines have done away with the battleship, and that aircraft have annulled the mastery of the sea. That is what our pessimists say. But do you imagine that the clumsy submarine or the fragile aeroplane is really the last word of science?"

"No doubt they will develop," I said, "but by that time the power of the defence will have advanced also."

He shook his head. "It is not so. Even now the knowledge which makes possible great engines of destruction is far beyond the capacity of any defence. You see only the productions of second-rate folk who are in a hurry to get wealth and fame. The true knowledge, the deadly knowledge, is still kept secret. But, believe me, my friend, it is there."

He paused for a second, and I saw the faint outline of the smoke from his cigar against the background of the dark. Then he quoted me one or two cases, slowly, as if in some doubt about the wisdom of his words.

It was these cases which startled me. They were of different kinds—a great calamity, a sudden breach between two nations, a blight on a vital crop, a war, a pestilence. I will not repeat them. I do not think I believed in them then, and now I believe less. But they were horribly impressive, as told in that quiet voice in that sombre room on that dark June night. If he was right, these things had not been the work of Nature or accident, but of a devilish art. The nameless brains that he spoke of, working silently in the background, now and then showed their power by some cataclysmic revelation. I did not believe him, but, as he put the case, showing with strange clearness the steps in the game, I had no words to protest.

At last I found my voice.

"What you describe is super-anarchy, and yet it makes no headway. What is the motive of those diabolical brains?"

He laughed. "How should I be able to tell you? I am a humble inquirer, and in my researches I come on curious bits of fact. But I cannot pry into motives. I only know of the existence of great extra-social intelligences. Let us say that they distrust the machine. They may be idealists and desire to make a new world, or they may simply be artists, loving for its own sake the pursuit of truth. If I were to hazard a guess, I should say that it took both types to bring about results, for the second find the knowledge and the first the will to use it."

A recollection came back to me. It was of a hot upland meadow in Tyrol, where among acres of flowers and beside a leaping stream I was breakfasting after a morning spent in climbing the white crags. I had picked up a German on the way, a small man of the Professor class, who did me the honour to share my sandwiches. He conversed fluently, but quaintly in English, and he was, I remember, a Nietzschean, and a hot rebel against the established order. "The pity," he cried, "is that the reformers do not know, and those who know are too idle to reform. Some day there will come the marriage of knowledge and will, and then the world will march."

"You draw an awful picture," I said. "But if those extra-social brains are so potent, why after all do they effect so little? A dull police-officer, with the machine behind him, can afford to laugh at most experiments in anarchy."

"True," he said, "and civilisation will win until its enemies learn from it the importance of the machine. The compact must endure until there is a counter-compact. Consider the ways of that form of foolishness which to-day we call nihilism or anarchy. A few illiterate bandits in a Paris slum defy the world, and in a week they are in jail. Half a dozen crazy Russian *intellectuels* in Geneva conspire to upset the Romanoffs and are hunted down by the police of Europe. All the Governments and their not very intelligent police forces join hands, and hey, presto! there is an end of the conspirators. For civilisation knows how to use such powers as it has, while the immense potentiality of the unlicensed is dissipated in vapour. Civilisation wins because it is a world-wide league; its enemies fail because they are parochial. But supposing——"

Again he stopped and rose from his chair. He found a switch and flooded the room with light. I glanced up blinking to see my host smiling down on me, a most benevolent and courteous old gentleman. He had resumed his tinted glasses.

"Forgive me," he said, "for leaving you in darkness while I bored you with my gloomy prognostications. A recluse is apt to forget what is due to a guest."

He handed the cigar-box to me, and pointed to a table where whisky and mineral waters had been set out.

"I want to hear the end of your prophecies," I said. "You were saying——?"

"I said—supposing anarchy learned from civilisation and became international. Oh, I don't mean the bands of advertising donkeys who call themselves International Unions of Workers and such-like rubbish. I mean if the real brain-stuff of the world were internationalised. Suppose that the links in the cordon of civilisation were neutralised by other links in a far more potent chain. The earth is seething with incoherent power and unorganised intelligence. Have you ever reflected on the case of China? There you have millions of quick brains stifled in trumpery crafts. They have no direction, no driving power, so the sum of their efforts is futile, and the world laughs at China. Europe throws her a million or two on loan now and then, and she cynically responds by begging the prayers of Christendom. And yet, I say, supposing——"

"It's a horrible idea," I said, "and, thank God, I don't believe it possible. Mere destruction is too barren a creed to inspire a new Napoleon, and you can do with nothing short of one."

"It would scarcely be destruction," he replied gently. "Let us call it iconoclasm, the swallowing of formulas, which has always had its full retinue of idealists. And you do not want a Napoleon. All that is needed is direction, which could be given by men of far lower gifts than a Bonaparte. In a word, you want a Power-House, and then the age of miracles will begin."

I got up, for the hour was late, and I had had enough of this viewy talk. My host was smiling, and I think that smile was the thing I really disliked about him. It was too—what shall I say?—superior and Olympian.

As he led me into the hall he apologised for indulging his whims. "But you, as a lawyer, should welcome the idea. If there is an

atom of truth in my fancies, your task is far bigger than you thought. You are not defending an easy case, but fighting in a contest where the issues are still doubtful. That should encourage your professional pride..."

By all the rules I should have been sleepy, for it was past midnight, and I had had a long day in the open air. But that wretched talk had unsettled me, and I could not get my mind off it. I have reproduced very crudely the substance of my host's conversation, but no words of mine could do justice to his eery persuasiveness. There was a kind of magnetism in the man, a sense of vast powers and banked-up fires, which would have given weight to the tritest platitudes. I had a horrible feeling that he was trying to convince me, to fascinate me, to prepare the ground for some proposal. Again and again I told myself it was crazy nonsense, the heated dream of a visionary, but again and again I came back to some details which had a horrid air of reality. If the man was a romancer he had an uncommon gift of realism.

I flung open my bedroom window and let in the soft air of the June night and the scents from leagues of clover and pines and sweet grasses. It momentarily refreshed me, for I could not believe that this homely and gracious world held such dire portents.

But always that phrase of his, the "Power-House," kept recurring. You know how twisted your thoughts get during a wakeful night, and long before I fell asleep towards morning I had worked myself up into a very complete dislike of that bland and smiling gentleman, my host. Suddenly it occurred to me that I did not know his name, and that set me off on another train of reflection.

I did not wait to be called, but rose about seven, dressed, and went downstairs. I heard the sound of a car on the gravel of the drive, and to my delight saw that Stagg had arrived. I wanted to get away from the house as soon as possible, and I had no desire to meet its master again in this world.

The grim housekeeper, who answered my summons, received my explanation in silence. Breakfast would be ready in twenty minutes; eight was Mr. Lumley's hour for it.

"Mr. Andrew Lumley?" I asked with a start.

"Mr. Andrew Lumley," she said.

So that was my host's name. I sat down at a bureau in the hall and did a wildly foolish thing.

I wrote a letter, beginning "Dear Mr. Lumley," thanking him for his kindness and explaining the reason of my early departure. It was imperative, I said, that I should be in London by midday. Then I added: "I wish I had known who you were last night, for I think you know an old friend of mine, Charles Pitt-Heron."

Breakfastless I joined Stagg in the car, and soon we were swinging down from the uplands to the shallow vale of the Wey. My thoughts were very little on my new toy or on the mid-summer beauties of Surrey. The friend of Pitt-Heron, who knew about his going to Bokhara, was the maniac who dreamed of the "Power-House." There were going to be dark scenes in the drama before it was played out.

CHAPTER IV

I FOLLOW THE TRAIL OF THE SUPER-BUTLER

My first thought, as I journeyed towards London, was that I was horribly alone in this business. Whatever was to be done I must do it myself, for the truth was I had no evidence which any authority would recognise. Pitt-Heron was the friend of a strange being who collected objects of art, probably passed under an alias in South London, and had absurd visions of the end of civilisation. That, in cold black and white, was all my story came to. If I went to the police they would laugh at me, and they would be right.

Now I am a sober and practical person, but, slender though my evidence was, it brought to my mind the most absolute conviction. I seemed to know Pitt-Heron's story as if I had heard it from his own lips—his first meeting with Lumley and their growing friendship; his initiation into secret and forbidden things; the revolt of the decent man, appalled that his freakishness had led him so far; the realisation that he could not break so easily with his past, and that Lumley held him in his power; and last, the mad flight under the pressure of overwhelming terror.

I could read, too, the purpose of that flight. He knew the Indian frontier as few men know it, and in the wild tangle of the Pamirs he hoped to baffle his enemy. Then from some far refuge he would send for his wife and spend the rest of his days in exile. It must have been an omnipotent terror to drive such a man, young, brilliant, rich, successful, to the fate of an absconding felon.

But Lumley was on his trail. So I read the telegram I had picked up on the floor of the Blackheath house, and my business was to frustrate the pursuit. Some one must have gone to Bokhara, some creature of Lumley's, perhaps the super-butler I had met in the County Court. The telegram, for I had noted the date, had been received on the 27th day of May. It was now the 15th of June, so if some one had started immediately on its receipt, in all probability he would by now be in Bokhara.

I must find out who had gone and endeavour to warn Tommy. I calculated that it would have taken him seven or eight days to get from Moscow by the Transcaspian; probably he would find Pitt-Heron gone, but inquiries would set him on the track. I might be able to get in touch with him through the Russian officials. In any case, if Lumley were stalking Pitt-Heron, I, unknown and unsuspected, would be stalking Lumley.

And then in a flash I realised my folly.

The wretched letter I had written that morning had given the whole show away. Lumley knew that I was a friend of Pitt-Heron, and that I knew that he was a friend of Pitt-Heron. If my guess was right, friendship with Lumley was not a thing Charles was likely to confess to, and he would argue that my knowledge of it meant that I was in Charles's confidence. I would therefore know of his disappearance and its cause, and alone in London would connect it with the decorous bachelor of the Albany. My letter was a warning to him that he could not play the game unobserved, and I, too, would be suspect in his eyes.

It was no good crying over spilt milk, and Lumley's suspicions must be accepted. But I confess that the thought gave me the shivers. The man had a curious terror for me, a terror I cannot hope to analyse and reproduce for you. My bald words can give no idea of the magnetic force of his talk, the sense of brooding and unholy craft. I was proposing to match my wits against a master's, one, too, who must have at his command an organisation far beyond my puny efforts. I have said that my first feeling was that of loneliness and isolation; my second was one of hopeless insignificance. It was a boy's mechanical toy arrayed against a Power-House with its shining wheels and monstrous dynamos.

My first business was to get into touch with Tommy.

At that time I had a friend in one of the Embassies, whose acquaintance I had made on a dry-fly stream in Hampshire. I will not tell you his name, for he has since become a great figure in the world's diplomacy, and I am by no means certain that the part he played in this tale was strictly in accordance with official etiquette. I had assisted him on the legal side in some of the international worries that beset all Embassies, and we had reached the point of intimacy which is marked by the use of Christian names and by dining frequently together. Let us call him Monsieur Felix. He was a grave young man, slightly my senior, learned, discreet, and ambitious, but with an engaging boyishness cropping up now and then under the official gold lace. It occurred to me that in him I might find an ally.

I reached London about eleven in the morning, and went straight to Belgrave Square. Felix I found in the little library off the big secretaries' room, a sunburnt sportsman fresh from a Norwegian salmon river. I asked him if he had half an hour to spare, and was told that the day was at my service.

"You know Tommy Deloraine?" I asked.

He nodded.

"And Charles Pitt-Heron?"

"I have heard of him."

"Well, here is my trouble. I have reason to believe that Tommy has joined Pitt-Heron in Bokhara. If he has, my mind will be greatly relieved, for, though I can't tell you the story, I can tell you that Pitt-Heron is in very considerable danger. Can you help me?"

Felix reflected. "That should be simple enough. I can wire in cypher to the Military Governor. The police there are pretty efficient, as you may imagine, and travellers don't come and go without being remarked. I should be able to give you an answer within twenty-four hours. But I must describe Tommy. How does one do that in telegraphese?"

"I want you to tell me another thing," I said. "You remember that Pitt-Heron has some reputation as a Central Asian traveller. Tommy, as you know, is as mad as a hatter. Suppose these two fellows at Bokhara, wanting to make a long trek into wild country—how would they go? You've been there, and know the lie of the land."

Felix got down a big German atlas, and for half an hour we pored over it. From Bokhara, he said, the only routes for madmen ran to the south. East and north you got into Siberia; west lay the Transcaspian desert; but southward you might go through the Hissar range by Pamirski Post to Gilgit and Kashmir, or you might follow up the Oxus and enter the north of Afghanistan, or you might go by Merv into north-eastern Persia. The first he thought the likeliest route, if a man wanted to travel fast.

I asked him to put in his cable a suggestion about watching the Indian roads, and left him with a promise of early enlightenment.

Then I went down to the Temple, fixed some consultations, and spent a quiet evening in my rooms. I had a heavy sense of impending disaster, not unnatural in the circumstances. I really cannot think what it was that held me to the job, for I don't mind admitting that I felt pretty queasy about it. Partly, no doubt, liking for Tommy and Ethel, partly regret for that unfortunate fellow Pitt-Heron, most of all, I think, dislike of Lumley. That bland super-man had fairly stirred my prosaic antipathies.

That night I went carefully over every item in the evidence to try and decide on my next step. I had got to find out more about my enemies. Lumley I was pretty certain would baffle me, but I thought I might have a better chance with the super-butler. As it turned out I hit his trail almost at once.

Next day I was in a case at the Old Bailey. It was an important prosecution for fraud, and I appeared, with two leaders, for the Bank concerned. The amazing and almost incredible thing about this story of mine is the way clues kept rolling in unsolicited, and I was to get another from this dull prosecution. I suppose that the explanation is that the world is full of clues to everything, and that, if a man's mind is sharp-set on any quest, he happens to notice and take advantage of what otherwise he would miss.

My leaders were both absent the first day, and I had to examine our witnesses alone. Towards the close of the afternoon I put a fellow in the box, an oldish, drink-sodden clerk from a Cannon Street bucket-shop. His evidence was valuable for our case, but I was very doubtful how he would stand a cross-examination as to credit. His name was Routh, and he spoke with a strong North-country accent. But what caught my attention was his face. His jaw looked as if it had been made in two pieces which did not fit, and he had little, bright protuberant eyes. At my first glance I was conscious of a recollection.

He was still in the box when the Court rose, and I informed the solicitors that before going further I wanted a conference with the witness. I mentioned also that I should like to see him alone. A few minutes later he was brought to my chambers, and I put one or two obvious questions on the case, till the managing clerk who accompanied him announced with many excuses that he must hurry away. Then I shut the door, gave Mr. Routh a cigar, and proceeded to conduct a private inquiry.

He was a pathetic being, only too ready to talk. I learned the squalid details of his continuous misfortunes. He had been the son of a dissenting minister in Northumberland, and had drifted through half a dozen occupations till he found his present unsavoury billet. Truth was written large on his statement, he had nothing to conceal, for his foible was folly, not crime, and he had not a rag of pride to give him reticence. He boasted that he was a gentleman and well-educated, too, but he had never had a chance. His brother had advised him badly; his brother was too clever for a prosaic world; always through his reminiscences came this echo of fraternal admiration and complaint.

It was about the brother I wanted to know, and Mr. Routh was very willing to speak. Indeed, it was hard to disentangle facts from his copious outpourings. The brother had been an engineer and a highly successful one; had dallied with politics, too, and had been a great inventor. He had put Mr. Routh on to a South American speculation, where he had made a little money but speedily lost it again. Oh, he had been a good brother in his way, and had often helped him, but he was a busy man, and his help never went quite far enough. Besides, he did not like to apply to him too often. I gathered that the brother was not a person to take liberties with.

I asked him what he was doing now.

"Ah," said Mr. Routh, "that is what I wish I could tell you. I will not conceal from you that for the moment I am in considerable financial straits, and this case, though my hands are clean enough, God knows, will not make life easier for me. My brother is a mysterious man, whose business often takes him abroad. I have never known even his address, for I write always to a London office from which my communications are forwarded. I only know that he is in some big electrical business, for I remember that he once let

drop the remark that he was in charge of some power station. No, I do not think it is in London, probably somewhere abroad. I heard from him a fortnight ago, and he told me he was just leaving England for a couple of months. It is very annoying, for I want badly to get into touch with him."

"Do you know, Mr. Routh," I said, "I believe I have met your brother. Is he like you in any way?"

"We have a strong family resemblance, but he is taller and slimmer. He has been more prosperous, and has lived a healthier life, you see."

"Do you happen to know," I asked, "if he ever uses another name? I don't think that the man I knew was called Routh."

The clerk flushed. "I think it highly unlikely that my brother would use an alias. He has done nothing to disgrace a name of which we are proud."

I told him that my memory had played me false, and we parted on very good terms. He was an innocent soul, one of those people that clever rascals get to do their dirty work for them. But there was no mistaking the resemblance. There, without the brains and force and virility, went my super-butler of Blackheath, who passed under the name of Tuke.

The clerk had given me the name of the office to whose address he had written to his brother. I was not surprised to find that it was that of the firm of stockbrokers for whom I was still acting in the bearer-bonds case where I had heard Pavia's name.

I rang up the partner whom I knew and told him a very plausible story of having a message for one of Mr. Pavia's servants, and asked him if he were in touch with them and could forward letters. He made me hold the line, and then came back and told me that he had forwarded letters for Tuke, the butler, and one Routh who was a groom or footman. Tuke had gone abroad to join his master and he did not know his address. But he advised me to write to the White Lodge.

I thanked him and rang off. That was settled anyhow. Tuke's real name was Routh, and it was Tuke who had gone to Bokhara.

My next step was to ring up Macgillivray at Scotland Yard and get an appointment in half an hour's time. Macgillivray had been at the Bar—I had read in his chambers—and was now one of the heads of the Criminal Investigation Department. I was about to ask him for information which he was in no way bound to give me, but I presumed on our old acquaintance.

I asked him first whether he had ever heard of a secret organisation which went under the name of the Power-House. He laughed out loud at my question.

"I should think we have several hundreds of such pet names on our records," he said. "Everything from the Lodge of the Baldfaced Ravens to Solomon's Seal No. X. Fancy nomenclature is the relaxation of the tired anarchist, and matters very little. The dangerous fellows have no names, no numbers even, which we can get hold of. But I'll get a man to look up our records. There may be something filed about your Power-House."

My second question he answered differently. "Routh! Routh! Why, yes, there was a Routh we had dealings with a dozen years ago, when I used to go the North-Eastern circuit. He was a trade-union official who bagged the funds, and they couldn't bring him to justice because of the ridiculous extra-legal status they possess. He knew it, and played their own privileges against them. Oh, yes, he was a very complete rogue. I once saw him at a meeting in Sunderland, and I remember his face—sneering eyes, diabolically clever mouth, and with it all as smug as a family butler. He has disappeared from England—at least we haven't heard of him for some years, but I can show you his photograph."

Macgillivray took from a lettered cabinet a bundle of cards, selected one and tossed it towards me. It was that of a man of thirty or so, with short side-whiskers and a drooping moustache. The eyes, the ill-fitting jaw, and the brow were those of my friend, Mr. Tuke, brother and patron of the sorrowful Mr. Routh, who had already that afternoon occupied my attention.

Macgillivray promised to make certain inquiries, and I walked home in a state of elation. Now I knew for certain who had gone to Bokhara, and I knew something, too, of the traveller's past. A discredited genius was the very man for Lumley's schemes—one who asked for nothing better than to use his brains outside the ring-fence of convention. Somewhere in the wastes of Turkestan the ex-trade-union official was in search of Pitt-Heron. I did not fancy that Mr. Tuke would be very squeamish.

I dined at the club and left early. Going home, I had an impression that I was being shadowed.

You know the feeling that some one is watching you, a sort of sensation which the mind receives without actual evidence. If the watcher is behind where you can't see him you have a cold feeling between your shoulders. I daresay it is a legacy from the days when the cave-man had to look pretty sharp to keep from getting his enemy's knife between the ribs.

It was a bright summer evening, and Piccadilly had its usual crowd of motor-cars and busses and foot passengers. I halted twice, once in St. James's Street and once at the corner of Stratton Street, and retraced my steps for a bit, and each time I had the impression that some one a hundred yards or so off had done the same. My instinct was to turn round and face him, whoever he was, but I saw that that was foolishness. Obviously in such a crowd I could get no certainty in the matter, so I put it out of my mind.

I spent the rest of the evening in my rooms, reading cases and trying to keep my thoughts off Central Asia. About ten I was rung up on the telephone by Felix. He had had his answer from Bokhara. Pitt-Heron had left with a small caravan on June 2d by the main road through the Hissar range. Tommy had arrived on June 10th and on the 12th had set off with two servants on the same trail. Travelling the lighter of the two, he should have overtaken Pitt-Heron by the 15th at latest.

That was yesterday, and my mind was immensely relieved. Tommy in such a situation was a tower of strength, for, whatever his failings in politics, I knew no one I would rather have with me to go tiger-shooting.

Next day the sense of espionage increased. I was in the habit of walking down to the Temple by way of Pall Mall and the Embankment, but, as I did not happen to be in Court that morning, I resolved to make a detour and test my suspicions. There seemed to be nobody in Down Street as I emerged from my flat, but I had not walked five yards before, turning back, I saw a man enter from the Piccadilly end, while another moved across the Hertford Street opening. It may have been only my imagination, but I was convinced that these were my watchers.

I walked up Park Lane, for it seemed to me that by taking the Tube at the Marble Arch Station I could bring matters to the proof. I have a knack of observing small irrelevant details, and I happened to have noticed that a certain carriage in the train which left Marble Arch about 9.30 stopped exactly opposite the exit at the Chancery Lane Station, and by hurrying up the passage one could just catch the lift which served an earlier train and so reach the street before any of the other travellers.

I performed this manoeuvre with success, caught the early lift, reached the street and took cover behind a pillar-box from which I could watch the exit of passengers from the stairs. I judged that my tracker, if he missed me below, would run up the stairs rather than wait for the lift. Sure enough, a breathless gentleman appeared, who scanned the street eagerly, and then turned to the lift to watch the emerging passengers. It was clear that the espionage was no figment of my brain.

I walked slowly to my chambers and got through the day's work as best I could, for my mind was preoccupied with the unpleasant business in which I found myself entangled. I would have given a year's income to be honestly quit of it, but there seemed to be no way of escape. The maddening thing was that I could do so little. There was no chance of forgetting anxiety in strenuous work. I could only wait with the patience at my command, and hope for the one chance in a thousand which I might seize. I felt miserably that it was no game for me. I had never been brought up to harry wild beasts and risk my neck twice a day at polo like Tommy Deloraine. I was a peaceful, sedentary man, a lover of a quiet life, with no appetite for perils and commotions. But I was beginning to realize that I was very obstinate.

At four o'clock I left the Temple and walked to the Embassy. I had resolved to banish the espionage from my mind, for that was the least of my difficulties.

Felix gave me an hour of his valuable time. It was something that Tommy had joined Pitt-Heron, but there were other matters to be arranged in that far country. The time had come, in my opinion, to tell him the whole story.

The telling was a huge relief to my mind. He did not laugh at me as I had half feared, but took the whole thing as gravely as possible. In his profession, I fancy, he had found too many certainties behind suspicions to treat anything as trivial. The next step, he said, was to warn the Russian police of the presence of the man called Saronov and the super-butler. Happily we had materials for the description of Tuke or Routh, and I could not believe that such a figure would be hard to trace. Felix cabled again in cypher, asking that the two should be watched, more especially if there was reason to believe that they had followed Tommy's route. Once more we got out the big map and discussed the possible ways. It seemed to me a land created by Providence for surprises, for the roads followed the valleys, and to the man who travelled light there must be many short cuts through the hills.

I left the Embassy before six o'clock and, crossing the Square engrossed with my own thoughts, ran full into Lumley.

I hope I played my part well, though I could not repress a start of surprise. He wore a grey morning-coat and a white top-hat and looked the image of benevolent respectability.

"Ah, Mr. Leithen," he said, "we meet again."

I murmured something about my regrets at my early departure three days ago, and added the feeble joke that I wished he would hurry on his Twilight of Civilisation, for the burden of it was becoming too much for me.

He looked me in the eyes with all the friendliness in the world. "So you have not forgotten our evening's talk? You owe me something, my friend, for giving you a new interest in your profession."

"I owe you much," I said, "for your hospitality, your advice, and your warnings."

He was wearing his tinted glasses and peered quizzically into my face.

"I am going to make a call in Grosvenor Place," he said, "and shall beg in return the pleasure of your company. So you know my young friend, Pitt-Heron?"

With an ingenuous countenance I explained that he had been at Oxford with me and that we had common friends.

"A brilliant young man," said Lumley. "Like you, he has occasionally cheered an old man's solitude. And he has spoken of me to you?"

"Yes," I said, lying stoutly. "He used to tell me about your collections." (If Lumley knew Charles well he would find me out, for the latter would not have crossed the road for all the treasures of the Louvre.)

"Ah, yes, I have picked up a few things. If ever you should care to see them I should be honoured. You are a connoisseur? Of a sort? You interest me for I should have thought your taste lay in other directions than the dead things of art. Pitt-Heron is no collector. He loves life better than art, as a young man should. A great traveller our friend—the Laurence Oliphant or Richard Burton of our day."

We stopped at a house in Grosvenor Place, and he relinquished my arm. "Mr. Leithen," he said, "a word from one who wishes you no ill. You are a friend of Pitt-Heron, but where he goes you cannot follow. Take my advice and keep out of his affairs. You will do no good to him, and you may bring yourself into serious danger. You are a man of sense, a practical man, so I speak to you frankly. But, remember, I do not warn twice."

He took off his glasses, and his light, wild eyes looked me straight in the face. All benevolence had gone, and something implacable and deadly burned in them. Before I could say a word in reply he shuffled up the steps of the house and was gone....

CHAPTER V

I TAKE A PARTNER

That meeting with Lumley scared me badly, but it also clinched my resolution. The most pacific fellow on earth can be ginged into pugnacity. I had now more than my friendship for Tommy and my sympathy with Pitt-Heron to urge me on. A man had tried to bully me, and that roused all the worst stubbornness of my soul. I was determined to see the game through at any cost.

But I must have an ally if my nerves were to hold out, and my mind turned at once to Tommy's friend Chapman. I thought with comfort of the bluff independence of the Labour member. So that night at the House I hunted him out in the smoking-room.

He had been having a row with the young bloods of my party that afternoon and received me ungraciously.

"I'm about sick of you fellows," he growled. (I shall not attempt to reproduce Chapman's accent. He spoke rich Yorkshire with a touch of the drawl of the western dales.) "They went and spoiled the best speech, though I say it as shouldn't, which this old place has heard for a twelvemonth. I've been workin' for days at it in the Library. I was tellin' them how much more bread cost under Protection, and the Jew Hilderstein started a laugh because I said kilometres for kilogrammes. It was just a slip o' the tongue, for I had it right in my notes, and besides there furrin' words don't matter a curse. Then that young lord as sits for East Claygate gets up and goes out as I was gettin' into my peroration, and he drops his topper and knocks off old Higgins's spectacles, and all the idiots laughed. After that I gave it them hot and strong, and got called to order. And then Wattles, him as used to be as good a socialist as me, replied for the Government and his blamed Board and said that the Board thought this and the Board thought that, and was damned if the Board would stir its stumps. Well I mind the day when I was hanging on to the Board's coat-tails in Hyde Park to keep it from talking treason."

It took me a long time to get Chapman settled down and anchored to a drink.

"I want you," I said, "to tell me about Routh—you know the fellow I mean—the ex-Union-Leader."

At that he fairly blazed up.

"There you are, you Tories," he shouted, causing a pale Liberal member on the next sofa to make a hurried exit. "You can't fight fair. You hate the Unions, and you rake up any rotten old prejudice to discredit them. You can find out about Routh for yourself, for I'm damned if I help you."

I saw I could do nothing with Chapman unless I made a clean breast of it, so for the second time that day I told the whole story.

I couldn't have wished for a better audience. He got wildly excited before I was half through with it. No doubt of the correctness of my evidence ever entered his head, for, like most of his party, he hated anarchism worse than capitalism, and the notion of a highly capitalised, highly scientific, highly undemocratic anarchism fairly revolted his soul. Besides, he adored Tommy Deloraine. Routh, he told me, had been a young engineer of a superior type, with a job in a big shop at Sheffield. He had professed advanced political views, and, although he had strictly no business to be there, had taken a large part in Trade Union work, and was treasurer of one big branch. Chapman had met him often at conferences and on platforms, and had been impressed by the fertility and ingenuity of his mind and the boldness of his purpose. He was the leader of the left wing of the movement, and had that gift of half-scientific, half-philosophic jargon

which is dear at all times to the hearts of the half-baked. A seat in Parliament had been repeatedly offered him, but he had always declined; wisely, Chapman thought, for he judged him the type which is more effective behind the scenes.

But with all his ability he had not been popular. "He was a cold-blooded, sneering devil," as Chapman put it, "a sort of Parnell. He tyrannised over his followers, and he was the rudest brute I ever met."

Then followed the catastrophe, in which it became apparent that he had speculated with the funds of his Union and had lost a large sum. Chapman, however, was suspicious of these losses, and was inclined to suspect that he had the money all the time in a safe place. A year or two earlier the Unions, greatly to the disgust of old-fashioned folk, had been given certain extra-legal privileges, and this man Routh had been one of the chief advocates of the Unions' claims. Now he had the cool effrontery to turn the tables on them and use those very privileges to justify his action and escape prosecution.

There was nothing to be done. Some of the fellows, said Chapman, swore to wring his neck, but he did not give them the chance. He had disappeared from England, and was generally believed to be living in some foreign capital.

"What I would give to be even with the swine!" cried my friend, clenching and unclenching his big fist. "But we're up against no small thing in Josiah Routh. There isn't a crime on earth he'd stick at, and he's as clever as the old Devil, his master."

"If that's how you feel, I can trust you to back me up," I said. "And the first thing I want you to do is to come and stay at my flat. God knows what may happen next, and two men are better than one. I tell you frankly, I'm nervous, and I would like to have you with me."

Chapman had no objection. I accompanied him to his Bloomsbury lodgings, where he packed a bag, and we returned to the Down Street flat. The sight of his burly figure and sagacious face was a relief to me in the mysterious darkness where I now found myself walking.

Thus begun my housekeeping with Chapman—one of the queerest episodes in my life. He was the best fellow in the world, but I found that I had misjudged his character. To see him in the House, you would have thought him a piece of granite, with his Yorkshire bluntness and hard, downright, north-country sense. He had all that somewhere inside him, but he was also as romantic as a boy. The new situation delighted him. He was quite clear that it was another case of the strife between Capital and Labour—Tommy and I standing for Labour, though he used to refer to Tommy in public as a "gilded popinjay," and only a month before had described me in the House as a "viperous lackey of Capitalism." It was the best kind of strife, in which you had not to meet your adversary with long-winded speeches but might any moment get a chance to pummel him with your fists.

He made me ache with laughter. The spying business used to rouse him to fury. I don't think he was tracked as I was, but he chose to fancy he was, and was guilty of assault and battery on one butcher's boy, two cabbies, and a gentleman who turned out to be a bookmaker's assistant. This side of him got to be an infernal nuisance, and I had many rows with him. Among other things, he chose to suspect my man Waters of treachery—Waters, who was the son of a gardener at home, and hadn't wits enough to put up an umbrella when it rained.

"You're not taking this business rightly," he maintained one night. "What's the good of waiting for these devils to down you? Let's go out and down them." And he announced his intention, from which no words of mine could dissuade him, of keeping watch on Mr. Andrew Lumley at the Albany.

His resolution led to a complete disregard of his Parliamentary duties. Deputations of constituents waited for him in vain. Of course he never got a sight of Lumley. All that happened was that he was very nearly given in charge more than once for molesting peaceable citizens in the neighbourhood of Piccadilly and Regent Street.

One night, on my way home from the Temple, I saw in the bills of the evening papers the announcement of the arrest of a Labour Member. It was Chapman, sure enough. At first, I feared that he had got himself into serious trouble, and was much relieved to find him in the flat in a state of blazing anger. It seemed that he had found somebody whom he thought was Lumley, for he only knew him from my descriptions. The man was in a shop in Jermyn Street, with a car waiting outside, and Chapman had—politely, as he swore—asked the chauffeur his master's name. The chauffeur had replied abusively, upon which Chapman had hauled him from the driver's seat and shaken him till his teeth rattled. The owner came out, and Chapman was arrested and taken off to the nearest police-court. He had been compelled to apologise and had been fined five pounds and costs.

By the mercy of Heaven, the chauffeur's master was a money-lender of evil repute, so the affair did Chapman no harm. But I was forced to talk to him seriously. I knew it was no use explaining that for him to spy on the Power-House was like an elephant stalking a gazelle. The only way was to appeal to his incurable romanticism.

"Don't you see," I told him, "that you are playing Lumley's game? He will trap you sooner or later into some escapade which will land you in jail, and where will I be then? That is what he and his friends are out for. We have got to meet cunning with cunning, and lie low till we get our chance."

He allowed himself to be convinced, and handed over to me the pistol he had bought, which had been the terror of my life.

"All right," he said, "I'll keep quiet. But you promise to let me into the big scrap when it comes off."

I promised. Chapman's notion of the grand finale was a Homeric combat in which he would get his fill of fisticuffs.

He was an anxiety, but all the same he was an enormous comfort. His imperturbable cheerfulness and his racy talk were the tonics I wanted. He had plenty of wisdom, too. My nerves were getting bad those days, and, whereas I had rarely touched the things before, I now found myself smoking cigarettes from morning till night. I am pretty abstemious, as you know, but I discovered, to my horror, that I was drinking far too many whiskeys-and-sodas. Chapman knocked me off all that and got me back to a pipe and a modest nightcap.

He did more, for he undertook to put me in training. His notion was that we should win in the end by superior muscles. He was a square, thick-set fellow, who had been a good middle-weight boxer. I could box a bit myself, but I improved mightily under his tuition. We got some gloves, and used to hammer each other for half an hour every morning. Then might have been seen the shameful spectacle of a rising barrister with a swollen lip and a black eye arguing in court, and proceeding of an evening to his country's legislature, where he was confronted from the opposite benches by the sight of a Leader of the People in the same vulgar condition.

In those days I wanted all the relief I could get, for it was a beastly time. I knew I was in grave danger, so I made my will and went through the other doleful performances consequent on the expectation of a speedy decease. You see, I had nothing to grip on, no clear job to tackle, only to wait on the off-chance, with an atmosphere of suspicion thickening around me. The spying went on—there was no mistake about that—but I soon ceased to mind it, though I did my best to give my watchers little satisfaction. There was a hint of bullying about the spying. It is disconcerting at night to have a man bump against you and look you greedily in the face.

I did not go again to Scotland Yard, but one night I ran across Macgillivray in the club.

He had something of profound interest to tell me. I had asked about the phrase, the "Power-House." Well, he had come across it in the letter of a German friend, a private letter, in which the writer gave the results of his inquiries into a curious affair which a year before had excited Europe.

I have forgotten the details, but it had something to do with the Slav States of Austria and an Italian Students' Union, and it threatened at one time to be dangerous. Macgillivray's correspondent said that in some documents which were seized he found constant allusion to a thing called the *Krafthaus*, evidently the headquarters-staff of the plot. And this same word, *Krafthaus*, had appeared elsewhere—in a sonnet of a poet-anarchist who shot himself in the slums of Antwerp, in the last ravings of more than one criminal, in the extraordinary testament of Professor M——, of Jena, who, at the age of thirty-seven, took his life after writing a strange, mystical message to his fellow citizens.

Macgillivray's correspondent concluded by saying that, in his opinion, if this *Krafthaus* could be found, the key would be discovered to the most dangerous secret organisation in the world. He added that he had some reason to believe that the motive power of the concern was English.

"Macgillivray," I said, "you have known me for some time, and I fancy you think me a sober and discreet person. Well, I believe I am on the edge of discovering the secret of your *Krafthaus*. I want you to promise me that if in the next week I send you an urgent message you will act on it, however fantastic it seems. I can't tell you more. I ask you to take me on trust, and believe that for anything I do I have tremendous reasons."

He knit his shaggy grey eyebrows and looked curiously at me. "Yes, I'll go bail for your sanity. It's a good deal to promise, but if you make an appeal to me I will see that it is met."

Next day I had news from Felix. Tuke and the man called Saronov had been identified. If you are making inquiries about anybody it is fairly easy to find those who are seeking for the same person, and the Russian police, in tracking Tommy and Pitt-Heron, had easily come on the two gentlemen who were following the same trail. The two had gone by Samarkand, evidently intending to strike into the hills by a shorter route than the main road from Bokhara. The frontier posts had been warned, and the stalkers had become the stalked.

That was one solid achievement, at any rate. I had saved Pitt-Heron from the worst danger, for first I had sent him Tommy, and now I had put the police on guard against his enemies. I had not the slightest doubt that enemies they were. Charles knew too much, and Tuke was the man appointed to reason with him, to bring him back, if possible; or, if not—— As Chapman had said, the ex-Union leader was not the man to stick at trifles.

It was a broiling June, the London season was at its height, and I had never been so busy in the Courts before. But that crowded and garish world was little more than a dream to me. I went through my daily tasks, dined out, went to the play, had consultations, talked to my fellows, but all the while I had the feeling that I was watching somebody else perform the same functions. I believe I did my work well, and I know I was twice complimented by the Court of Appeal.

But my real interests were far away. Always I saw two men in the hot glens of the Oxus, with the fine dust of the *loess* rising in yellow clouds behind them. One of these men had a drawn and anxious face, and both rode hard. They passed by the closes of apricot and cherry and the green, watered gardens, and soon the Oxus ceased to flow wide among rushes and water-lilies and became a turbid hill-stream. By-and-by the roadside changed, and the horses of the travellers trod on mountain turf, crushing the irises and marigolds

and thyme. I could feel the free air blowing from the roof of the world, and see far ahead the snowy saddle of the pass which led to India.

Far behind the riders I saw two others, and they chose a different way, now over waterless plateaux, now in rugged *nullahs*. They rode the faster and their route was the shorter. Sooner or later they must catch up the first riders, and I knew, though how I could not tell, that death would attend the meeting.

I, and only I, sitting in London, four thousand miles away, could prevent disaster. The dream haunted me at night, and often, walking in the Strand or sitting at a dinner-table, I have found my eyes fixed clearly on the shining upland with the thin white mountains at the back of it, and the four dots, which were men, hurrying fast on their business.

One night I met Lumley. It was at a big political dinner given by the chief of my party in the House of Lords—fifty or sixty guests, and a blaze of stars and decorations. I sat near the bottom of the table, and he was near the top, sitting between a famous General and an ex-Viceroy of India. I asked my right-hand neighbour who he was, but he could not tell me. The same question to my left-hand neighbour brought an answer:

"It is old Lumley. Have you never met him? He doesn't go out much, but he gives a man's dinner now and then which are the best in London. No. He's not a politician, though he favours our side, and I expect has given a lot to our funds. I can't think why they don't make him a Peer. He's enormously rich and very generous, and the most learned old fellow in Britain. My Chief"—my neighbour was an Under-Secretary—"knows him, and told me once that if you wanted any out-of-the-way bit of knowledge you could get it by asking Lumley. I expect he pulls the strings more than anybody living. But he scarcely ever goes out, and it's a feather in our host's cap to have got him to-night. You never see his name in the papers, either. He probably pays the Press to keep him out, like some of those millionaire fellows in America."

I watched him through dinner. He was the centre of the talk at his end of the table. I could see the blue ribbon bulging out on Lord Morecambe's breast as he leaned forward to question him. He was wearing some foreign orders, including the Legion of Honour, and I could hear in the pause of conversation echoes of his soft, rich voice. I could see him beaming through his glasses on his neighbours, and now and then he would take them off and look mildly at a speaker. I wondered why nobody realised, as I did, what was in his light wild eyes.

The dinner, I believe, was excellent and the company was good, but down at my end I could eat little, and I did not want to talk. Here in this pleasant room, with servants moving softly about and a mellow light on the silver from the shaded candles, I felt the man was buttressed and defended beyond my reach. A kind of despairing hatred gripped me when I looked his way. For I was always conscious of that other picture—the Asian desert, Pitt-Heron's hunted face, and the grim figure of Tuke on his trail. That, and the great secret wheels of what was too inhuman to be called crime moving throughout the globe under this man's hand.

There was a party afterwards, but I did not stay. No more did Lumley, and for a second I brushed against him in the hall at the foot of the big staircase.

He smiled on me affectionately.

"Have you been dining here? I did not notice you."

"You had better things to think of," I said. "By the way, you gave me good advice some weeks ago. It may interest you to hear that I have taken it."

"I am so glad," he said softly. "You are a very discreet young man."

But his eyes told me that he knew I lied.

CHAPTER VI

THE RESTAURANT IN ANTIOCH STREET

I was working late at the Temple next day, and it was nearly seven before I got up to go home. Macgillivray had telephoned to me in the afternoon saying he wanted to see me, and suggesting dinner at the Club, and I had told him I should come straight there from my Chambers. But just after six he had rung me up again and proposed another meeting place.

"I've got some very important news for you, and want to be quiet. There's a little place where I sometimes dine—Rapaccini's, in Antioch Street. I'll meet you there at half-past seven."

I agreed, and sent a message to Chapman at the flat, telling him I would be out to dinner. It was a Wednesday night, so the House

rose early. He asked me where I was dining, and I told him, but I did not mention with whom. His voice sounded very cross, for he hated a lonely meal.

It was a hot, still night, and I had had a heavy day in Court, so heavy that my private anxieties had almost slipped from my mind. I walked along the Embankment, and up Regent Street towards Oxford Circus. Antioch Street, as I had learned from the Directory, was in the area between Langham Place and Tottenham Court Road. I wondered vaguely why Macgillivray should have chosen such an out-of-the-way spot, but I knew him for a man of many whims.

The street, when I found it, turned out to be a respectable little place, boarding-houses and architects' offices, with a few antiquity shops and a picture-cleaner's. The restaurant took some finding, for it was one of those discreet establishments, common enough in France, where no edibles are displayed in the British fashion, and muslin half-curtains deck the windows. Only the doormat, lettered with the proprietor's name, remained to guide the hungry.

I gave a waiter my hat and stick, and was ushered into a garish dining-room, apparently full of people. A single violinist was discoursing music from beside the grill. The occupants were not quite the kind one expects to find in an eating-house in a side street. The men were all in evening dress with white waistcoats, and the women looked either demi-mondaines or those who follow their taste in clothes. Various eyes looked curiously at me as I entered. I guessed that the restaurant had, by one of those odd freaks of Londoners, become for a moment the fashion.

The proprietor met me half way up the room. He might call himself Rapaccini, but he was obviously a German.

"Mr. Geelvrai," he nodded. "He has engaged a private room. Will you follow, sir?"

A narrow stairway broke into the wall on the left side of the dining-room. I followed the manager up it and along a short corridor to a door which filled its end. He ushered me into a brightly lit little room where a table was laid for two.

"Mr. Geelvrai comes often here," said the manager. "He will be late—sometimes. Everything is ready, sir. I hope you will be pleased."

It looked inviting enough, but the air smelt stuffy. Then I saw that, though the night was warm, the window was shut and the curtains drawn. I pulled back the curtains, and, to my surprise, saw that the shutters were closed.

"You must open these," I said, "or we'll stifle."

The manager glanced at the window. "I will send a waiter," he said, and departed. The door seemed to shut with an odd click.

I flung myself down in one of the armchairs, for I was feeling pretty tired. The little table beckoned alluringly, for I was also hungry. I remember there was a mass of pink roses on it. A bottle of champagne, with the cork loose, stood in a wine-cooler on the side-board, and there was an unopened bottle beside it. It seemed to me that Macgillivray, when he dined here, did himself rather well.

The promised waiter did not arrive, and the stuffiness was making me very thirsty. I looked for a bell, but could not see one. My watch told me it was now a quarter to eight, but there was no sign of Macgillivray. I poured myself out a glass of champagne from the opened bottle, and was just about to drink it when my eye caught something in a corner of the room.

It was one of those little mid-Victorian corner tables—I believe they call them "what-nots"—which you will find in any boarding-house, littered up with photographs and coral and "Presents from Brighton." On this one stood a photograph in a shabby frame, and I thought I recognised it.

I crossed the room and picked it up. It showed a man of thirty, with short side-whiskers and ill-fitting jaw and a drooping moustache. The duplicate of it was in Macgillivray's cabinet. It was Mr. Routh, the ex-Union leader.

There was nothing very remarkable about that, after all, but it gave me a nasty shock. The room now seemed a sinister place, as well as intolerably close. There was still no sign of the waiter to open the window, so I thought I would wait for Macgillivray downstairs.

But the door would not open. The handle would not turn. It did not seem to be locked, but rather to have shut with some kind of patent spring. I noticed that the whole thing was a powerful piece of oak, with a heavy framework, very unlike the usual flimsy restaurant doors.

My first instinct was to make a deuce of a row and attract the attention of the diners below. I own I was beginning to feel badly frightened. Clearly, I had got into some sort of trap. Macgillivray's invitation might have been a hoax, for it is not difficult to counterfeit a man's voice on the telephone. With an effort I forced myself into calmness. It was preposterous to think that anything could happen to me in a room not thirty feet from where a score or two of ordinary citizens were dining. I had only to raise my voice to bring inquirers.

Yes, but above all things I did not want a row. It would never do for a rising lawyer and a Member of Parliament to be found shouting for help in an upper chamber of a Bloomsbury restaurant. The worst deduction would be drawn from the open bottle of

champagne. Besides, it might be all right after all. The door might have got stuck. Macgillivray at that very moment might be on his way up.

So I sat down and waited. Then I remembered my thirst, and stretched out my hand to the glass of champagne.

But at that instant I looked towards the window, and set down the wine untasted.

It was a very odd window. The lower end was about flush with the floor, and the hinges of the shutters seemed to be only on one side. As I stared, I began to wonder whether it was a window at all.

Next moment my doubts were solved. The window swung open like a door, and in the dark cavity stood a man.

Strangely enough, I knew him. His figure was not one that is readily forgotten.

"Good evening, Mr. Docker," I said. "Will you have a glass of champagne?"

A year before, on the South Eastern Circuit, I had appeared for the defence in a burglary case. Criminal law was not my province, but now and then I took a case to keep my hand in, for it is the best training in the world for the handling of witnesses. This case had been peculiar. A certain Bill Docker was the accused, a gentleman who bore a bad reputation in the eyes of the police. The evidence against him was strong, but it was more or less tainted, being chiefly that of two former accomplices—a proof that there is small truth in the proverbial honour among thieves. It was an ugly business, and my sympathies were with the accused, for though he may very well have been guilty, yet he had been the victim of a shabby trick. Anyhow, I put my back into the case, and after a hard struggle got a verdict of "Not guilty." Mr. Docker had been kind enough to express his appreciation of my efforts, and to ask, in a hoarse whisper, how I had "squared the old bird," meaning the Judge. He did not understand the subtleties of the English law of evidence.

He shambled into the room, a huge, hulking figure of a man, with the thickness of chest which, under happier circumstances, might have made him a terror in the prize-ring. His features wore a heavy scowl, which slowly cleared to a flicker of recognition.

"By God, it's the lawyer-chap," he muttered.

I pointed to the glass of champagne.

"I don't mind if I do," he said. "Ere's health!" He swallowed the wine at a gulp, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "'Ave a drop yourself, guvnor," he added. "A glass of bubbly will cheer you up."

"Well, Mr. Docker," I said, "I hope I see you fit." I was getting wonderfully collected now that the suspense was over.

"Pretty fair, sir. Pretty fair. Able to do my day's work like an honest man."

"And what brings you here?"

"A little job I'm on. Some friends of mine wants you out of the road for a bit, and they've sent me to fetch you. It's a bit of luck for you that you've struck a pal. We needn't 'ave no unpleasantness, seein' we're both what you might call men of the world."

"I appreciate the compliment," I said. "But where do you propose to take me?"

"Dunno. It's some lay near the Docks. I've got a motor-car waitin' at the back of the 'ouse."

"But supposing I don't want to go?"

"My orders hadmit no hexcuse," he said solemnly. "You're a sensible chap, and can see that in a scrap I could down you easy."

"Very likely," I said. "But, man, you must be mad to talk like that. Downstairs there is a dining-room full of people. I have only to lift my voice to bring the police."

"You're a kid," he said scornfully. "Them geesers downstairs are all in the job. That was a flat-catching rig to get you up here so as you wouldn't suspect nothing. If you was to go down now—which you ain't going to be allowed to do—you wouldn't find a blamed soul in the place. I must say you're a bit softer than I 'oped after the 'andsome way you talked over the old juggins with the wig at Maidstone."

Mr. Docker took the bottle from the wine-cooler and filled himself another glass.

It sounded horribly convincing. If I was to be kidnapped and smuggled away Lumley would have scored half a success. Not the whole, for, as I swiftly reflected, I had put Felix on the track of Tuke, and there was every chance that Tommy and Pitt-Heron would be saved. But for myself it looked pretty black. The more my scheme succeeded the more likely the Power-House would be to wreak its vengeance on me once I was spirited from the open-air world into its dark labyrinths.

I made a great effort to keep my voice even and calm.

"Mr. Docker," I said. "I once did you a good turn. But for me you might be doing time now instead of drinking champagne like a gentleman. Your pals played you a pretty low trick, and that was why I stuck out for you. I didn't think you were the kind of man to forget a friend."

"No more I am," said he. "The man who says Bill Docker would go back on a pal is a liar."

"Well, here's your chance to pay your debts. The men who employ you are my deadly enemies, and want to do me in. I'm not a match for you. You're a stronger fellow and can drag me off and hand me over to them. But if you do I'm done with. Make no mistake about that. I put it to you as a decent fellow. Are you going to go back on the man who has been a good friend to you?"

He shifted from one foot to another with his eyes on the ceiling. He was obviously in difficulties. Then he tried another glass of champagne.

"I dursn't, guv'nor. I dursn't let you go. Them I work for would cut my throat as soon as look at me. Besides, it ain't no good. If I was to go off and leave you there'd be plenty more in this 'ouse as would do the job. You're up against it, guv'nor. But take a sensible view and come with me. They don't mean you no real 'arm. I'll take my Bible oath on it. Only to keep you quiet for a bit, for you've run across one of their games. They won't do you no 'urt if you speak 'em fair. Be a sport and take it smiling-like——"

"You're afraid of them," I said.

"Yuss. I'm afraid. Black afraid. So would you be if you knew the gents. I'd rather take on the whole Rat Lane crowd—you know them as I mean—on a Saturday night, when they're out for business, than go back to my gents and say as 'ow I had shirked the job."

He shivered. "Good Lord, they'd freeze the 'eart out of a bull-pup."

"You're afraid," I said slowly. "So you're going to give me up to the men you're afraid of to do as they like with me. I never expected it of you, Bill. I thought you were the kind of lad who would send any gang to the devil before you'd go back on a pal."

"Don't say that," he said almost plaintively. "You don't 'alf know the 'ole I'm in." His eye seemed to be wandering, and he yawned deeply.

Just then a great noise began below. I heard a voice speaking, a loud peremptory voice. Then my name was shouted: "Leithen! Leithen! Are you there?"

There could be no mistaking that broad Yorkshire tongue. By some miracle Chapman had followed me and was raising Cain downstairs.

My heart leaped with the sudden revulsion. "I'm here," I yelled. "Upstairs. Come up and let me out!"

Then I turned with a smile of triumph to Bill.

"My friends have come," I said. "You're too late for the job. Get back and tell your masters that."

He was swaying on his feet, and he suddenly lurched towards me. "You come along. By God, you think you've done me. I'll let you see."

His voice was growing thick and he stopped short. "What the 'ell's wrong with me?" he gasped. "I'm goin' all queer. I..."

He was like a man far gone in liquor, but three glasses of champagne would never have touched a head like Bill's. I saw what was up with him. He was not drunk, but drugged.

"They've doped the wine," I cried. "They put it there for me to drink it and go to sleep."

There is always something which is the last straw to any man. You may insult and outrage him and he will bear it patiently, but touch the quick in his temper and he will turn. Apparently for Bill drugging was the unforgivable sin. His eye lost for a moment its confusion. He squared his shoulders and roared like a bull.

"Doped, by God," he cried. "Who done it?"

"The men who shut me in this room. Burst that door and you will find them."

He turned a blazing face on the locked door and hurled his huge weight on it. It cracked and bent but the lock and hinges held. I could see that sleep was overwhelming him and that his limbs were stiffening, but his anger was still strong enough for another effort. Again he drew himself together like a big cat and flung himself on the woodwork. The hinges tore from the jambs and the whole outfit fell forward into the passage in a cloud of splinters and dust and broken plaster.

It was Mr. Docker's final effort. He lay on the top of the wreckage he had made, like Samson among the ruins of Gaza, a senseless and slumbering hulk.

I picked up the unopened bottle of champagne—it was the only weapon available—and stepped over his body. I was beginning to enjoy myself amazingly.

As I expected, there was a man in the corridor, a little fellow in waiter's clothes, with a tweed jacket instead of a dress coat. If he had a pistol I knew I was done, but I gambled upon the disinclination of the management for the sound of shooting.

He had a knife, but he never had a chance to use it. My champagne bottle descended on his head and he dropped like a log.

There were men coming upstairs—not Chapman, for I still heard his hoarse shouts in the dining-room. If they once got up they could force me back through that hideous room by the door through which Docker had come, and in five minutes I should be in their motor-car.

There was only one thing to do. I jumped from the stair-head right down among them. I think there were three, and my descent toppled them over. We rolled in a wild, whirling mass and cascaded into the dining-room, where my head bumped violently on the parquet.

I expected a bit of a grapple, but none came. My wits were pretty woolly, but I managed to scramble to my feet. The heels of my enemies were disappearing up the staircase. Chapman was pawing my ribs to discover if there were any bones broken. There was not another soul in the room except two policemen who were pushing their way in from the street.

Chapman was flushed and breathing heavily: his coat had a big split down the seams at the shoulder, but his face was happy as a child's.

I caught his arm and spoke in his ear. "We've got to get out of this at once. How can we square these policemen? There must be no inquiry and nothing in the papers. Do you hear?"

"That's all right," said Chapman. "These bobbies are friends of mine, two good lads from Wensleydale. On my road here I told them to give me a bit of law and follow me, for I thought they might be wanted. They didn't come too soon to spoil sport, for I've been knocking furriners about for ten minutes. You seem to have been putting up a tidy scrap yourself."

"Let's get home first," I said, for I was beginning to think of the bigger thing.

I wrote a chit for Macgillivray which I asked one of the constables to take to Scotland Yard. It was to beg that nothing should be done yet in the business of the restaurant, and above all that nothing should get into the papers. Then I asked the other to see us home. It was a queer request for two able-bodied men to make on a summer evening in the busiest part of London, but I was taking no chances. The Power-House had declared war on me, and I knew it would be war without quarter.

I was in a fever to get out of that place. My momentary lust of battle had gone, and every stone of that building seemed to me a threat. Chapman would have liked to spend a happy hour rummaging through the house, but the gravity of my face persuaded him. The truth is I was bewildered. I could not understand the reason of this sudden attack. Lumley's spies must long ago have told him enough to connect me with the Bokhara business. My visits to the Embassy alone were sufficient proof. But now he must have found out something new, something which startled him, or else there had been wild doings in Turkestan.

I won't forget that walk home in a hurry. It was a fine July twilight. The streets were full of the usual crowd, shop-girls in thin frocks, promenading clerks, and all the flotsam of a London summer. You would have said it was the safest place on earth. But I was glad we had the policeman with us, who at the end of one beat passed us on to his colleague, and I was glad of Chapman. For I am morally certain I would never have got home alone.

The queer thing is that there was no sign of trouble till we got into Oxford Street. Then I became aware that there were people on those pavements who knew all about me. I first observed it at the mouth of one of those little dark side-alleys which run up into mews and small dingy courts. I found myself being skilfully edged away from Chapman into the shadow, but I noticed it in time and butted my way back to the pavement. I couldn't make out who the people were who hustled me. They seemed nondescripts of all sorts, but I fancied there were women among them.

This happened twice, and I got wary, but I was nearly caught before we reached Oxford Circus. There was a front of a big shop rebuilding, and the usual wooden barricade with a gate. Just as we passed it there was a special throng on the pavement and I, being next the wall, got pushed against the gate. Suddenly it gave and I was pressed inward. I was right inside before I realised my danger, and the gate was closing. There must have been people there, but I could see nothing in the gloom.

It was no time for false pride. I yelled to Chapman and the next second his burly shoulder was in the gap. The hustlers vanished and I seemed to hear a polite voice begging my pardon.

After that Chapman and I linked arms and struck across Mayfair. But I did not feel safe till I was in the flat with the door bolted.

We had a long drink and I stretched myself in an armchair, for I was as tired as if I had come out of a big game of Rugby football.

"I owe you a good deal, old man," I said. "I think I'll join the Labour Party. You can tell your fellows to send me their whips."

What possessed you to come to look for me?"

The explanation was simple. I had mentioned the restaurant in my telephone message, and the name had awakened a recollection in Chapman's mind. He could not fix it at first, but by and by he remembered that the place had cropped up in the Routh case. Routh's London headquarters had been at the restaurant in Antioch Street. As soon as he remembered this he got into a taxi and descended at the corner of the street, where by sheer luck he fell in with his Wensleydale friends.

He said he had marched into the restaurant and found it empty, but for an ill-favoured manager, who denied all knowledge of me. Then fortunately he chose to make certain by shouting my name, and heard my answer. After that he knocked the manager down, and was presently assaulted by several men whom he described as "furrin' muck." They had knives, of which he made very little, for he seems to have swung a table as a battering ram and left sore limbs behind him.

He was on the top of his form. "I haven't enjoyed anything so much since I was a lad at school," he informed me. "I was beginning to think your Power-House was a wash-out, but Lord I it's been busy enough to-night. This is what I call life!"

My spirits could not keep pace with his. The truth is that I was miserably puzzled—not afraid so much as mystified. I couldn't make out this sudden dead-set at me. Either they knew more than I bargained for or I knew far too little.

"It's all very well," I said, "but I don't see how this is going to end. We can't keep up the pace long. At this rate it will be only a matter of hours till they get me."

We pretty well barricaded ourselves in the flat, and, at his earnest request, I restored to Chapman his revolver. Then I got the clue I had been longing for.

It was about eleven o'clock, while we were sitting smoking, when the telephone bell rang. It was Felix who spoke.

"I have news for you," he said. "The hunters have met the hunted and one of the hunters is dead. The other is a prisoner in our hands. He has confessed."

It had been black murder in intent. The frontier police had shadowed the two men into the cup of a glen where they met Tommy and Pitt-Heron. The four had spoken together for a little, and then Tuke had fired deliberately at Charles and had grazed his ear. Whereupon Tommy had charged him and knocked the pistol from his hand. The assailant had fled, but a long shot from the police on the hillside had toppled him over. Tommy had felled Saronov with his fists, and the man had abjectly surrendered. He had confessed, Felix said, but what the confession was he did not know.

CHAPTER VII

I FIND SANCTUARY

My nervousness and indecision dropped from me at the news. I had won the first round, and I would win the last, for it suddenly became clear to me that I had now evidence which would blast Lumley. I believed that it would not be hard to prove his identity with Pavia and his receipt of the telegram from Saronov; Tuke was his creature, and Tuke's murderous mission was his doing. No doubt I knew little and could prove nothing about the big thing, the Power-House, but conspiracy to murder is not the lightest of criminal charges. I was beginning to see my way to checkmating my friend, at least so far as Pitt-Heron was concerned. Provided—and it was a pretty big proviso—that he gave me the chance to use my knowledge.

That I foresaw, was going to be the difficulty. What I knew now Lumley had known hours before. The reason of the affair at Antioch Street was now only too clear. If he believed that I had damning evidence against him—and there was no doubt he suspected it—then he would do his best to stop my mouth. I must get my statement lodged in the proper quarter at the earliest possible moment.

The next twenty-four hours, I feared, were going to be too sensational for comfort. And yet I cannot say that I was afraid. I was too full of pride to be in a funk. I had lost my awe of Lumley through scoring a point against him. Had I known more I should have been less at my ease. It was this confidence which prevented me doing the obvious safe thing—ringing up Macgillivray, telling him the gist of my story, and getting him to put me under police protection. I thought I was clever enough to see the thing through myself. And it must have been the same over-confidence which prevented Lumley getting at me that night. An organisation like his could easily have got into the flat and done for us both. I suppose the explanation is that he did not yet know how much I knew and was not yet ready to take the last steps in silencing me.

I sat up till the small hours, marshalling my evidence in a formal statement and making two copies of it. One was destined for Macgillivray and the other for Felix, for I was taking no risks. I went to bed and slept peacefully and was awakened as usual by Waters. My man slept out, and used to turn up in the morning about seven. It was all so normal and homely that I could have believed

my adventures of the night before a dream. In the summer sunlight the ways of darkness seemed very distant. I dressed in excellent spirits and made a hearty breakfast.

Then I gave the docile Chapman his instructions. He must take the document to Scotland Yard, ask to see Macgillivray, and put it into his hands. Then he must ring me up at once at Down Street and tell me that he had done this. I had already telephoned to my clerk that I would not be at the Temple that day.

It seems a simple thing to travel less than a mile in the most frequented part of London in broad daylight, and perform an easy act like carrying a letter; but I knew that Lumley's spies would be active, and would connect Chapman sufficiently with me to think him worth following. In that case there might be an attempt at violence. I thought it my duty to tell him this, but he laughed me to scorn. He proposed to walk, and he begged to be shown the man who would meddle with him. Chapman after last night was prepared to take on all comers. He put my letter to Macgillivray in his inner pocket, buttoned his coat, crushed down his felt hat on his head, and defiantly set forth.

I expected a message from him in half an hour, for he was a rapid walker. But the half hour passed, then the three-quarters, and nothing happened. At eleven I rang up Scotland Yard, but they had no news of him.

Then I became miserably anxious, for it was clear that some disaster had overtaken my messenger. My first impulse was to set out myself to look for him, but a moment's reflection convinced me that that would be playing into the enemy's hands. For an hour I wrestled with my impatience, and then a few minutes after twelve I was rung up by St. Thomas's Hospital.

A young doctor spoke, and said that Mr. Chapman had asked him to tell me what had happened. He had been run down by a motor-car at the corner of Whitehall—nothing serious—only a bad shake and some scalp wounds. In a day or so he would be able to leave.

Then he added what drove the blood from my heart. "Mr. Chapman personally wished me to tell you," he said, "that the letter has gone." I stammered some reply asking his meaning. "He said he thinks," I was told, "that, while he was being assisted to his feet, his pocket was picked and a letter taken. He said you would know what he meant."

I knew only too well what he meant. Lumley had got my statement, and realised precisely how much I knew and what was the weight of evidence against him. Before he had only suspected, now he knew. He must know, too, that there would be a copy somewhere which I would try to deliver. It was going to be harder than I had fancied to get my news to the proper ears, and I had to anticipate the extreme of violence on the part of my opponents.

The thought of the peril restored my coolness. I locked the outer door of my flat, and telephoned to the garage where I kept my car, bidding Stagg call for me at two o'clock precisely. Then I lit a pipe and strove to banish the whole business from my thoughts, for fussing would do me no good.

Presently it occurred to me to ring up Felix and give him some notion of the position. But I found that my telephone was now broken and connection was impossible. The spoken as well as the written word was to be denied me. That had happened in the last half hour and I didn't believe it was by accident. Also my man Waters, whom I had sent out on an errand after breakfast, had never returned. The state of siege had begun.

It was a blazing hot midsummer day. The water-carts were sprinkling Piccadilly, and looking from my window I could see leisurely and elegant gentlemen taking their morning stroll. A florist's cart full of roses stood below me in the street. The summer smell of town—a mixture of tar, flowers, dust and patchouli—rose in gusts through the hot air. It was the homely London I knew so well, and I was somehow an exile from it. I was being shepherded into a dismal isolation, which, unless I won help, might mean death. I was cool enough now, but I will not deny that I was miserably anxious. I cursed my false confidence the night before. By now I might have had Macgillivray and his men by my side. As it was I wondered if I should ever see them.

I changed into a flannel suit, lunched off sandwiches and a whisky and soda, and at two o'clock looked for Stagg and my car. He was five minutes late, a thing which had never happened before. But I never welcomed anything so gladly as the sight of that car. I had hardly dared to hope that it would reach me.

My goal was the Embassy in Belgrave Square, but I was convinced that if I approached it directly I should share the fate of Chapman. Worse, for from me they would not merely snatch the letter. What I had once written I could write again, and if they wished to ensure my silence it must be by more drastic methods. I proposed to baffle my pursuers by taking a wide circuit round the western suburbs of London, returning to the Embassy when I thought the coast clear.

It was a tremendous relief to go down the stairs and emerge into the hot daylight. I gave Stagg his instructions, and lay back in the closed car with a curious fluttering sense of anticipation. I had begun the last round in the wild game. There was a man at the corner of Down Street who seemed to peer curiously at the car. He was doubtless one of my watchers.

We went up Park Lane into the Edgware Road, my instructions to Stagg being to make a circuit by Harrow and Brentford. Now that I was ensconced in my car I felt a trifle safer, and my tense nerves relaxed. I grew drowsy and allowed myself to sink into a half doze. The stolid back of Stagg filled my gaze, as it had filled it a fortnight ago on the western road, and I admired lazily the brick-red of his neck. He had been in the Guards, and a Boer bullet at Modder River had left a long scar at the nape of his neck, which gave to his hair the appearance of being badly cut. He had told me the story on Exmoor.

Suddenly I rubbed my eyes. There was no scar there; the hair of the chauffeur grew regularly down to his coat-collar. The resemblance had been perfect, the voice was Stagg's, but clearly it was not Stagg who now drove my car.

I pulled the blind down over the front window as if to shelter myself from the sun. Looking out I saw that we were some distance up the Edgware Road, nearing the point where the Marylebone Road joins it. Now or never was my chance, for at the corner there is always a block in the traffic.

The car slowed down in obedience to a policeman's uplifted hand, and very gently I opened the door on the left side. Since the car was new it opened softly, and in two seconds I had stepped out, shut it again, and made a dive between a butcher's cart and a motor-bus for the side-walk. I gave one glance back and saw the unconscious chauffeur still rigid at the wheel.

I dodged unobtrusively through the crowd on the pavement, with my hand on my breast-pocket to see that my paper was still there. There was a little picture-shop near by to which I used to go occasionally, owned by a man who was an adept at cleaning and restoring. I had sent him customers and he was likely to prove a friend. So I dived into his doorway, which made a cool pit of shade after the glaring street, and found him, spectacles on nose, busy examining some dusty prints.

He greeted me cordially and followed me into the back shop.

"Mr. Levison," I said, "have you a back door?"

He looked at me in some surprise. "Why, yes; there is the door into the lane which runs from Edgeley Street into Connaught Mews."

"Will you let me use it? There is a friend outside whom I wish to avoid. Such things happen, you know."

He smiled comprehendingly. "Certainly, sir. Come this way," and he led me through a dark passage hung with dingy Old Masters to a little yard filled with the debris of picture frames. There he unlocked a door in the wall and I found myself in a narrow alley. As I emerged I heard the bell of the shop-door ring. "If any one inquires, you have not seen me here, remember," I said, and Mr. Levison nodded. He was an artist in his small way and liked the scent of a mystery.

I ran down the lane and by various cross streets made my way into Bayswater. I believed that I had thrown my trackers for the moment off the scent, but I had got to get to the Embassy, and that neighbourhood was sure to be closely watched. I came out on the Bayswater Road pretty far west, and resolved to strike south-east across the Park. My reason was that the neighbourhood of Hyde Park Corner was at that time of day certain to be pretty well crowded, and I felt more security in a throng than in the empty streets of

Kensington. Now that I come to think of it, it was a rash thing to do, for since Lumley knew the full extent of my knowledge, he was likely to deal more violently with me than with Chapman, and the seclusion of the Park offered him too good a chance.

I crossed the riding-track and struck over the open space where the Sunday demonstrations are held. There was nothing there but nurses and perambulators, children at play, and dogs being exercised. Presently I reached Grosvenor Gate, where on the little green chairs well-dressed people were taking the air. I recognised several acquaintances and stopped for a moment to talk to one of them. Then I emerged in Park Lane and walked down it to Hamilton Place.

So far I thought I had not been followed, but now once more I had the indefinable but unerring sensation of being watched. I caught a man looking eagerly at me from the other side of the street, and it seemed to me that he made a sign to someone farther off. There was now less than a quarter of a mile between me and Belgrave Square, but I saw that it would be a hard course to cover.

Once in Piccadilly there could be no doubt about my watchers. Lumley was doing the thing in style this time. Last night it had only been a trial trip, but now the whole energies of the Power-House were on the job. The place was filled with the usual mid-season crowd, and I had to take off my hat several times. Up in the bow-window of the Bachelors' Club a young friend of mine was writing a letter and sipping a long drink with an air of profound boredom. I would have given much for his *ennui*, for my life at the moment was painfully exciting. I was alone in that great crowd, isolated and proscribed, and there was no help save in my own wits. If I spoke to a policeman he would think me drunk or mad, and yet I was on the edge of being made the victim of a far subtler crime than fell within the purview of the Metropolitan force.

Now I saw how thin is the protection of civilisation. An accident and a bogus ambulance—a false charge and a bogus arrest—there were a dozen ways of spiriting me out of this gay, bustling world. I foresaw that, if I delayed, my nerve would break, so I boldly set off across the road.

I jolly nearly shared the fate of Chapman. A car which seemed about to draw up at a club door suddenly swerved across the street, and I had to dash to an island to escape it. It was no occasion to hesitate, so, dodging a bus and missing a motor bicycle by a hair's breadth, I rushed across the remaining distance and reached the railings of the Green Park.

Here there were fewer people, and several queer things began to happen. A little group of workmen with their tools were standing by the kerb, and they suddenly moved towards me. A pavement artist, who looked like a cripple, scrambled to his feet and moved in the same direction. There was a policeman at the corner, and I saw a well-dressed man go up to him, say something and nod in my direction, and the policeman too began to move towards me.

I did not await them. I took to my heels and ran for my life down Grosvenor Place.

Long ago at Eton I had won the school mile, and at Oxford I was a second string for the quarter. But never at Eton or at Oxford did I run as I ran then. It was blisteringly hot, but I did not feel it, for my hands were clammy and my heart felt like a cold stone. I do not know how the pursuit got on, for I did not think of it. I did not reflect what kind of spectacle I must afford running like a thief in a London thoroughfare on a June afternoon. I only knew that my enemies were around and behind me, and that in front, a few hundred yards away, lay safety.

But even as I ran I had the sense to think out my movements, and to realise that the front door of the Embassy was impossible. For one thing it would be watched, and for another, before the solemn footmen opened it, my pursuers would be upon me. My only hope was the back door.

I twisted into the mews behind the north side of the Square, and as I turned I saw two men run up from the Square as if to cut me off. A whistle was blown and more men appeared—one entering from the far end of the mews, one darting from a public-house door, and one sliding down a ladder from a stable-loft. This last was nearest me and tried to trip me, but I rejoice to say that a left-hander on the chin sent him sprawling on the cobbles. I remembered that the Embassy was the fifth house from the end, and feverishly I tried to count the houses by their backs. It is not so easy as it sounds, for the modern London householder studs his back premises with excrescences which seem to melt into his neighbour's. In the end I had to make a guess at the door, which to my joy was unlocked. I rushed in and banged it behind me. I found myself in a stone passage, with on one side a door opening on a garage. There was a wooden staircase leading to an upper floor, and a glass door in front which opened into a large disused room full of boxes. Beyond were two doors, one of which was locked. The other abutted on a steep iron stairway which obviously led to the lower regions of the house.

I ran down the stair—it was no more than a ladder—crossed a small courtyard, traversed a passage, and burst into the kitchen, where I confronted an astonished white-capped chef in the act of lifting a pot from the fire.

His face was red and wrathful, and I thought that he was going to fling the pot at my head. I had disturbed him in some delicate operation, and his artist's pride was outraged.

"Monsieur," I stammered in French, "I seek your pardon for my intrusion. There were circumstances which compelled me to enter this house by the back premises. I am an acquaintance of His Excellency, your patron, and an old friend of Monsieur Felix. I beg you of your kindness to direct me to Monsieur Felix's room, or to bid some one take me there."

My abject apologies mollified him.

"It is a grave offence, monsieur," he said, "an unparalleled offence, to enter my kitchen at this hour. I fear you have irremediably spoiled the new casserole dish that I was endeavouring to compose."

I was ready to go on my knees to the offended artist.

"It grieves me indeed to have interfered with so rare an art, which I have often admired at His Excellency's table. But there is danger behind me and an urgent mission in front. Monsieur will forgive me? Necessity will, sometimes, overrule the finest sensibility."

He bowed to me and I bowed to him, and my pardon was assured.

Suddenly a door opened, another than that by which I had entered, and a man appeared whom I took to be a footman. He was struggling into his livery coat, but at the sight of me he dropped it. I thought I recognised the face as that of the man who had emerged from the public-house and tried to cut me off.

"Ere, Mister Alphonse," he cried, "elp me to collar this man. The police are after 'im."

"You forget, my friend," I said, "that an Embassy is privileged ground which the police can't enter. I desire to be taken before His Excellency."

"So that's yer game," he shouted. "But two can play at that. 'Ere, give me an 'and, moosoo, and we'll 'ave him in the street in a jiffy. There's two 'undred of the best in our pockets if we 'ands 'im over to them as wants 'im."

The cook looked puzzled and a little frightened.

"Will you allow them to outrage your kitchen—an Embassy kitchen too—without your consent?" I said.

"What have you done?" he asked in French.

"Only what your patron will approve," I replied in the same tongue. "*Messieurs les assassins* have a grudge against me."

He still hesitated, while the young footman advanced on me. He was fingering something in his trousers pocket which I did not like.

Now was the time when, as they say in America, I should have got busy with my gun; but alas! I had no gun. I feared supports for the enemy, for the footman at the first sight of me had run back the way he had come, and I had heard a low whistle.

What might have happened I do not know, had not the god appeared from the machine in the person of Hewins, the butler.

"Hewins," I said, "you know me. I have often dined here, and you know that I am a friend of Monsieur Felix. I am on my way to see him on an urgent matter, and for various reasons I had to enter by Monsieur Alphonse's kitchen. Will you take me at once to Monsieur Felix?"

Hewins bowed, and on his imperturbable face there appeared no sign of surprise. "This way, sir," was all he said.

As I followed him I saw the footman plucking nervously at the something in his trousers-pocket. Lumley's agents apparently had not always the courage to follow his instructions to the letter, for I made no doubt that the order had been to take me alive or dead.

I found Felix alone, and flung myself into an arm-chair. "My dear chap," I said, "take my advice and advise His Excellency to sack the red-haired footman."

From that moment I date that sense of mastery over a situation which drives out fear. I had been living for weeks under a dark pall and suddenly the skies had lightened. I had found sanctuary. Whatever happened to me now the worst was past, for I had done my job.

Felix was looking at me curiously, for, jaded, scarlet, dishevelled, I was an odd figure for a London afternoon. "Things seem to have been marching fast with you," he said.

"They have, but I think the march is over. I want to ask several favours. First, here is a document which sets out certain facts. I shall ring up Macgillivray at Scotland Yard and ask him to come here at 9.30 this evening. When he comes I want you to give him this and ask him to read it at once. He will know how to act on it."

Felix nodded. "And the next?"

"Give me a telegraph form. I want a wire sent at once by someone who can be trusted." He handed me a form and I wrote out a telegram to Lumley at the Albany, saying that I proposed to call upon him that evening at 8 sharp, and asking him to receive me.

"Next?" said Felix.

"Next and last, I want a room with a door which will lock, a hot bath, and something to eat about seven. I might be permitted to taste Monsieur Alphonse's new casserole dish."

I rang up Macgillivray, reminded him of his promise, and told him what awaited him at 9.30. Then I had a wash, and afterwards at my leisure gave Felix a sketch of the day's doings. I have never felt more completely at my ease, for whatever happened I was certain that I had spoiled Lumley's game. He would know by now that I had reached the Embassy, and that any further attempts on my life and liberty were futile. My telegram would show him that I was prepared to offer terms, and I would certainly be permitted to reach the Albany unmolested. To the meeting with my adversary I looked forward without qualms, but with the most lively interest. I had my own theories about that distinguished criminal, and I hoped to bring them to the proof.

Just before seven I had a reply to my wire. Mr. Lumley said he would be delighted to see me. The telegram was directed to me at the Embassy, though I had put no address on the one I sent. Lumley of course knew all my movements. I could picture him sitting in his chair, like some Chief of Staff, receiving every few minutes the reports of his agents. All the same Napoleon had fought his Waterloo.

CHAPTER VIII

THE POWER-HOUSE

I left Belgrave Square about a quarter to eight and retraced my steps along the route which for me that afternoon had been so full of tremors. I was still being watched—a little observation told me that—but I would not be interfered with, provided my way lay in a certain direction. So completely without nervousness was I that at the top of Constitution Hill I struck into the Green Park and kept to the grass till I emerged into Piccadilly, opposite Devonshire House. A light wind had risen and the evening had grown pleasantly cool. I met several men I knew going out to dinner on foot and stopped to exchange greetings. From my clothes they thought I had just returned from a day in the country.

I reached the Albany as the clock was striking eight. Lumley's rooms were on the first floor, and I was evidently expected, for the porter himself conducted me to them and waited by me till the door was opened by a man-servant.

You know those rococo, late Georgian Albany rooms, large, square, clumsily corniced. Lumley's was lined with books, which I saw at a glance were of a different type from those in his working library at his country house. This was the collection of a bibliophile, and in the light of the summer evening the rows of tall volumes in vellum and morocco lined the walls like some rich tapestry.

The valet retired and shut the door, and presently from a little inner chamber came his master. He was dressed for dinner and wore more than ever the air of the eminent diplomat. Again I had the old feeling of incredulity. It was the Lumley I had met two nights before at dinner, the friend of Viceroy and Cabinet Ministers. It was hard to connect him with Antioch Street or the red-haired footman with a pistol. Or with Tuke? Yes, I decided, Tuke fitted into the frame. Both were brains cut loose from the decencies that make life possible.

"Good evening, Mr. Leithen," he said pleasantly. "As you have fixed the hour of eight, may I offer you dinner?"

"Thank you," I replied, "but I have already dined. I have chosen an awkward time, but my business need not take long."

"So," he said. "I am always glad to see you at any hour."

"And I prefer to see the master rather than the subordinates who have been infesting my life during the past week."

We both laughed. "I am afraid you have had some annoyance, Mr. Leithen," he said. "But remember, I gave you fair warning."

"True. And I have come to do the same kindness to you. That part of the game, at any rate, is over."

"Over?" he queried, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes, over," I said, and took out my watch. "Let us be quite frank with each other, Mr. Lumley. There is really very little time to waste. As you have doubtless read the paper which you stole from my friend this morning you know more or less the extent of my information."

"Let us have frankness by all means. Yes, I have read your paper. A very creditable piece of work, if I may say so. You will rise in your profession, Mr. Leithen. But surely you must realise that it carries you a very little way."

"In a sense you are right. I am not in a position to reveal the full extent of your misdeeds. Of the Power-House and its doings I can only guess. But Pitt-Heron is on his way home, and he will be carefully safeguarded on that journey. Your creature, Saronov, has confessed. We shall know more very soon, and meantime I have clear evidence which implicates you in a conspiracy to murder."

He did not answer, but I wished I could see behind his tinted spectacles to the look in his eyes. I think he had not been quite prepared for the line I took.

"I need not tell you as a lawyer, Mr. Leithen," he said at last, "that what seems good evidence on paper is often feeble enough in Court. You cannot suppose that I will tamely plead guilty to your charges. On the contrary, I will fight them with all the force that brains and money can give. You are an ingenious young man, but you are not the brightest jewel of the English Bar."

"That also is true. I do not deny that some of my evidence may be weakened at the trial. It is even conceivable that you may be acquitted on some technical doubt. But you have forgotten one thing. From the day you leave the Court you will be a suspected man. The police of all Europe will be on your trail. You have been highly successful in the past, and why? Because you have been above suspicion, an honourable and distinguished gentleman, belonging to the best clubs, counting as your acquaintances the flower of our society. Now you will be a suspect, a man with a past, a centre of strange stories. I put it to you—how far are you likely to succeed under these conditions?"

He laughed.

"You have a talent for character drawing, my friend. What makes you think that I can work only if I live in the limelight of popularity?"

"The talent you mentioned," I said. "As I read your character—and I think I am right—you are an artist in crime. You are not the common cut-throat who acts out of passion or greed. No, I think you are something subtler than that. You love power, hidden power. You flatter your vanity by despising mankind and making them your tools. You scorn the smattering of inaccuracies which passes for human knowledge, and I will not venture to say you are wrong. Therefore you use your brains to frustrate it. Unhappily the life of millions is built on that smattering, so you are a foe to society. But there would be no flavour in controlling subterranean things if you were yourself a mole working in the dark. To get the full flavour, the irony of it all, you must live in the light. I can imagine you laughing in your soul as you move about our world, praising it with your lips, patting it with your hands, and kicking its props away with your feet. I can see the charm of it. But it is over now."

"Over?" he asked.

"Over," I repeated. "The end has come—the utter, final and absolute end."

He made a sudden, odd, nervous movement, pushing his glasses close back upon his eyes.

"What about yourself?" he said hoarsely. "Do you think you can play against me without suffering desperate penalties?"

He was holding a cord in his hand with a knob on the end of it. He now touched a button in the knob and there came the faint sound of a bell.

The door was behind me and he was looking beyond me towards it. I was entirely at his mercy, but I never budged an inch. I do not know how I managed to keep calm, but I did it, and without much effort. I went on speaking, conscious that the door had opened and that someone was at my back.

"It is really quite useless trying to frighten me. I am safe, because I am dealing with an intelligent man and not with the ordinary half-witted criminal. You do not want my life in silly revenge. If you call in your men and strangle me between you what earthly good would it do you?"

He was looking beyond me and the passion—a sudden white-hot passion like an epilepsy—was dying out of his face.

"A mistake, James," he said. "You can go."

The door closed softly at my back.

"Yes. A mistake. I have a considerable admiration for you, Mr. Lumley, and should be sorry to be disappointed."

He laughed quite like an ordinary mortal. "I am glad this affair is to be conducted on a basis of mutual respect. Now that the melodramatic overture is finished, let us get to the business."

"By all means," I said. "I promised to deal with you frankly. Well, let me put my last cards on the table. At half-past nine precisely the duplicate of that statement of mine which you annexed this morning will be handed to Scotland Yard. I may add that the authorities there know me, and are proceeding under my advice. When they read that statement they will act on it. You have therefore about one and a half, or say one and three-quarter hours to make up your mind. You can still secure your freedom, but it must be elsewhere than in England."

He had risen to his feet, and was pacing up and down the room.

"Will you oblige me by telling me one thing," he said. "If you believe me to be, as you say, a dangerous criminal, how do you reconcile it with your conscience to give me a chance of escape? It is your duty to bring me to justice."

"I will tell you why," I said. "I, too, have a weak joint in my armour. Yours is that you only succeed under the disguise of high respectability. That disguise, in any case, will be stripped from you. Mine is Pitt-Heron. I do not know how far he has entangled himself with you, but I know something of his weakness, and I don't want his career ruined and his wife's heart broken. He has learned his lesson, and will never mention you and your schemes to a mortal soul. Indeed, if I can help it, he will never know that anyone shares his secret. The price of the chance of escape I offer you is that Pitt-Heron's past be buried for ever."

He did not answer. He had his arms folded, walking up and down the room, and suddenly seemed to have aged enormously. I had the impression that I was dealing with a very old man.

"Mr. Leithen," he said at last, "you are bold. You have a frankness which almost amounts to genius. You are wasted in your stupid profession, but your speculative powers are not equal to your other endowments, so you will probably remain in it, deterred by an illogical scruple from following your true bent. Your true *métier*, believe me, is what shallow people call crime. Speaking 'without prejudice,' as the idiot solicitors say, it would appear that we have both weak spots in our cases. Mine, you say, is that I can only work by using the conventions of what we agreed to call the Machine. There may be truth in that. Yours is that you have a friend who lacks your iron-clad discretion. You offer a plan which saves both our weaknesses. By the way, what is it?"

I looked at my watch again. "You have ample time to catch the night express to Paris."

"And if not?"

"Then I am afraid there may be trouble with the police between ten and eleven o'clock."

"Which for all our sakes would be a pity. Do you know you interest me uncommonly, for you confirm the accuracy of my judgment. I have always had a notion that some day I should run across to my sorrow just such a man as you. A man of very great intellectual power I can deal with, for that kind of brain is usually combined with the sort of high-strung imagination on which I can work. The same with your over-imaginative man. Yes Pitt-Heron was of that type. Ordinary brains do not trouble me, for I puzzle them. Now you are a man of good average intelligence. Pray forgive the lukewarmness of the phrase; it is really a high compliment, for I am an austere critic. If you were that and no more you would not have succeeded. But you possess also a quite irrelevant gift of imagination. Not enough to upset your balance, but enough to do what your mere lawyer's talent could never have done. You have achieved a feat which is given to few—you have partially understood me. Believe me, I rate you high. You are the kind of four-square being bedded in the concrete of our civilisation, on whom I have always felt I might some day come to grief.... No, no, I am not trying to wheedle you. If I thought I could do that I should be sorry, for my discernment would have been at fault."

"I warn you," I said, "that you are wasting precious time."

He laughed quite cheerfully.

"I believe you are really anxious about my interests," he said. "That is a triumph indeed. Do you know, Mr. Leithen, it is a mere whimsey of fate that you are not my disciple. If we had met earlier and under other circumstances I should have captured you. It is because you have in you a capacity for discipleship that you have succeeded in your opposition."

"I abominate you and all your works," I said, "but I admire your courage."

He shook his head gently.

"It is the wrong word. I am not courageous. To be brave means that you have conquered fear, but I have never had any fear to conquer. Believe me, Mr. Leithen, I am quite impervious to threats. You come to me to-night and hold a pistol to my head. You offer me two alternatives, both of which mean failure. But how do you know that I regard them as failure? I have had what they call a good run for my money. No man since Napoleon has tasted such power. I may be willing to end it. Age creeps on and power may grow burdensome. I have always sat loose from common ambitions and common affections. For all you know I may regard you as a benefactor."

All this talk looks futile when it is written down, but it was skilful enough, for it was taking every atom of exhilaration out of my victory. It was not idle brag. Every syllable rang true, as I knew in my bones. I felt myself in the presence of something enormously big, as if a small barbarian was desecrating the colossal Zeus of Pheidias with a coal hammer. But I also felt it inhuman, and I hated it and I clung to that hatred.

"You fear nothing and you believe nothing," I said. "Man, you should never have been allowed to live."

He raised a deprecating hand. "I am a sceptic about most things," he said, "but, believe me, I have my own worship. I venerate the intellect of man. I believe in its undreamed-of possibilities, when it grows free like an oak in the forest and is not dwarfed in a flower-pot. From that allegiance I have never wavered. That is the God I have never forsworn."

I took out my watch.

"Permit me again to remind you that time presses."

"True," he said smiling, "the continental express will not wait upon my confession. Your plan is certainly conceivable. There may be other and easier ways. I am not certain. I must think.... Perhaps it would be wiser if you left me now, Mr. Leithen. If I take your advice there will be various things to do.... In any case there will be much to do...."

He led me to the door as if he were an ordinary host speeding an ordinary guest. I remember that on my way he pointed out a set of Aldines and called my attention to their beauty. He shook hands quite cordially and remarked on the fineness of the weather. That was the last I saw of this amazing man.

It was with profound relief that I found myself in Piccadilly in the wholesome company of my kind. I had carried myself boldly enough in the last hour, but I would not have gone through it again for a king's ransom. Do you know what it is to deal with a pure intelligence, a brain stripped of every shred of humanity? It is like being in the company of a snake.

I drove to the club and telephoned to Macgillivray, asking him to take no notice of my statement till he heard from me in the morning. Then I went to the hospital to see Chapman.

That leader of the people was in a furious temper and he was scarcely to be appeased by my narrative of the day's doings. Your Labour Member is the greatest of all sticklers for legality, and the outrage he had suffered that morning had grievously weakened his trust in public security. The Antioch Street business had seemed to him eminently right; if you once got mixed up in melodrama you had to expect such things. But for a Member of Parliament to be robbed in broad daylight next door to the House of Commons upset the foundations of his faith. There was little the matter with his body and the doctor promised that he would be allowed up next day, but his soul was a mass of bruises.

It took me a lot of persuasion to get him to keep quiet. He wanted a public exposure of Lumley, a big trial, a general ferreting out of secret agents, the whole winding up with a speech in Parliament by himself on this last outrage of Capitalism. Gloomily he listened to my injunctions to silence. But he saw the reason of it and promised to hold his tongue out of loyalty to Tommy. I knew that Pitt-Heron's secret was safe with him.

As I crossed Westminster Bridge on my way home the night express to the Continent rumbled over the river. I wondered if Lumley was on board or if he had taken one of the other ways of which he had spoken.

CHAPTER IX

RETURN OF THE WILD GEESE

I do not think I was surprised at the news I read in *The Times* next morning.

Mr. Andrew Lumley had died suddenly in the night of heart failure, and the newspapers woke up to the fact that we had been entertaining a great man unawares. There was an obituary in "leader" type of nearly two columns. He had been older than I thought—close on seventy—and *The Times* spoke of him as a man who might have done anything he pleased in public life, but had chosen to give to a small coterie of friends what was due to the country. I read of his wit and learning, his amazing connoisseurship, his social gifts, his personal charm. According to the writer, he was the finest type of cultivated amateur, a Beckford with more than a Beckford's wealth and none of his folly. Large private charities were hinted at, and a hope was expressed that some part at least of his collections might come to the nation.

The halfpenny papers said the same thing in their own way. One declared he reminded it of Atticus, another of Maecenas, another of Lord Houghton. There must have been a great run on biographical dictionaries in the various offices. Chapman's own particular rag said that, although this kind of philanthropist was a dilettante and a back-number, yet Mr. Lumley was a good specimen of the class and had been a true friend to the poor. I thought Chapman would have a fit when he read this. After that he took in the *Morning Post*.

It was no business of mine to explode the myth. Indeed I couldn't even if I had wanted to, for no one would have believed me unless I produced proofs, and these proofs were not to be made public. Besides I had an honest compunction. He had had, as he expressed it, a good run for his money, and I wanted the run to be properly rounded off.

Three days later I went to the funeral. It was a wonderful occasion. Two eminent statesmen were among the pallbearers, Royalty was represented, and there were wreaths from learned societies and scores of notable people. It was a queer business to listen to that stately service which was never read over stranger dust. I was thinking all the time of the vast subterranean machine which he had controlled, and which now was so much old iron. I could dimly imagine what his death meant to the hosts who had worked blindly at

his direction. He was a Napoleon who left no Marshals behind him. From the Power-House came no wreaths or newspaper tributes, but I knew that it had lost its power....

De mortuis, etc. My task was done, and it only remained to get Pitt-Heron home.

Of the three people in London besides myself who knew the story—Macgillivray, Chapman and Felix—the two last might be trusted to be silent, and Scotland Yard is not in the habit of publishing its information. Tommy, of course, must some time or other be told; it was his right; but I knew that Tommy would never breathe a word of it. I wanted Charles to believe that his secret died with Lumley, for otherwise I don't think he would have ever come back to England.

The thing took some arranging, for we could not tell him directly about Lumley's death without giving away the fact that we knew of the connection between the two. We had to approach it by a roundabout road. I got Felix to arrange to have the news telegraphed to and inserted by special order in a Russian paper which Charles could not avoid seeing.

The device was successful. Calling at Portman Square a few days later I learned from Ethel Pitt-Heron's glowing face that her troubles were over. That same evening a cable to me from Tommy announced the return of the wanderers.

It was the year of the Chilian Arbitration, in which I held a junior brief for the British Government, and that and the late sitting of Parliament kept me in London after the end of the term. I had had a bad reaction from the excitements of the summer, and in these days I was feeling pretty well hipped and overdone. On a hot August afternoon I met Tommy again.

The sun was shining through my Temple chambers, much as it had done when he started. So far as I remember the West Ham brief which had aroused his contempt was still adorning my table. I was very hot and cross and fagged, for I had been engaged in the beastly job of comparing half a dozen maps of a despicable little bit of South American frontier.

Suddenly the door opened, and Tommy, lean and sunburnt, stalked in.

"Still at the old grind," he cried, after we had shaken hands. "Fellows like you give me a notion of the meaning of Eternity."

"The same uneventful sedentary life," I replied. "Nothing happens except that my scale of fees grows. I suppose nothing *will* happen till the conductor comes to take the tickets. I shall soon grow fat."

"I notice it already, my lad. You want a bit of waking up or you'll get a liver. A little sensation would do you a lot of good."

"And you?" I asked. "I congratulate you on your success. I hear you have retrieved Pitt-Heron for his mourning family."

Tommy's laughing eyes grew solemn.

"I have had the time of my life," he said. "It was like a chapter out of the Arabian Nights with a dash of Fenimore Cooper. I feel as if I had lived years since I left England in May. While you have been sitting among your musty papers we have been riding like moss-troopers and seeing men die. Come and dine to-night and hear about our adventures. I can't tell you the full story, for I don't know it, but there is enough to curl your hair."

Then I achieved my first and last score at the expense of Tommy Deloraine.

"No," I said, "you will dine with me instead and *I* will tell you the full story. All the papers on the subject are over there in my safe."

THE END

* * * * *

The Thirty-Nine Steps

John Buchan



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE

CHAPTER ONE

THE MAN WHO DIED

I returned from the City about three o'clock on that May afternoon pretty well disgusted with life. I had been three months in the Old Country, and was fed up with it. If anyone had told me a year ago that I would have been feeling like that I should have laughed at him; but there was the fact. The weather made me liverish, the talk of the ordinary Englishman made me sick, I couldn't get enough exercise, and the amusements of London seemed as flat as soda-water that has been standing in the sun. 'Richard Hannay,' I kept telling myself, 'you have got into the wrong ditch, my friend, and you had better climb out.'

It made me bite my lips to think of the plans I had been building up those last years in Bulawayo. I had got my pile — not one of the big ones, but good enough for me; and I had figured out all kinds of ways of enjoying myself. My father had brought me out from Scotland at the age of six, and I had never been home since; so England was a sort of Arabian Nights to me, and I counted on stopping there for the rest of my days.

But from the first I was disappointed with it. In about a week I was tired of seeing sights, and in less than a month I had had enough of restaurants and theatres and race-meetings. I had no real pal to go about with, which probably explains things. Plenty of people invited me to their houses, but they didn't seem much interested in me. They would fling me a question or two about South Africa, and then get on their own affairs. A lot of Imperialist ladies asked me to tea to meet schoolmasters from New Zealand and editors from Vancouver, and that was the dismalest business of all. Here was I, thirty-seven years old, sound in wind and limb, with enough money to have a good time, yawning my head off all day. I had just about settled to clear out and get back to the veld, for I was the best bored man in the United Kingdom.

That afternoon I had been worrying my brokers about investments to give my mind something to work on, and on my way home I turned into my club — rather a pot-house, which took in Colonial members. I had a long drink, and read the evening papers. They were full of the row in the Near East, and there was an article about Karolides, the Greek Premier. I rather fancied the chap. From all accounts he seemed the one big man in the show; and he played a straight game too, which was more than could be said for most of them. I gathered that they hated him pretty blackly in Berlin and Vienna, but that we were going to stick by him, and one paper said that he was the only barrier between Europe and Armageddon. I remember wondering if I could get a job in those parts. It struck me that Albania was the sort of place that might keep a man from yawning.

About six o'clock I went home, dressed, dined at the Café Royal, and turned into a music-hall. It was a silly show, all capering women and monkey-faced men, and I did not stay long. The night was fine and clear as I walked back to the flat I had hired near Portland Place. The crowd surged past me on the pavements, busy and chattering, and I envied the people for having something to do. These shop-girls and clerks and dandies and policemen had some interest in life that kept them going. I gave half-a-crown to a beggar because I saw him yawn; he was a fellow-sufferer. At Oxford Circus I looked up into the spring sky and I made a vow. I would give the Old Country another day to fit me into something; if nothing happened, I would take the next boat for the Cape.

My flat was the first floor in a new block behind Langham Place. There was a common staircase, with a porter and a liftman at the entrance, but there was no restaurant or anything of that sort, and each flat was quite shut off from the others. I hate servants on the premises, so I had a fellow to look after me who came in by the day. He arrived before eight o'clock every morning and used to depart at seven, for I never dined at home.

I was just fitting my key into the door when I noticed a man at my elbow. I had not seen him approach, and the sudden appearance made me start. He was a slim man, with a short brown beard and small, gimlety blue eyes. I recognized him as the occupant of a flat on the top floor, with whom I had passed the time of day on the stairs.

'Can I speak to you?' he said. 'May I come in for a minute?' He was steadying his voice with an effort, and his hand was pawing my arm.

I got my door open and motioned him in. No sooner was he over the threshold than he made a dash for my back room, where I used to smoke and write my letters. Then he bolted back.

‘Is the door locked?’ he asked feverishly, and he fastened the chain with his own hand.

‘I’m very sorry,’ he said humbly. ‘It’s a mighty liberty, but you looked the kind of man who would understand. I’ve had you in my mind all this week when things got troublesome. Say, will you do me a good turn?’

‘I’ll listen to you,’ I said. ‘That’s all I’ll promise.’ I was getting worried by the antics of this nervous little chap.

There was a tray of drinks on a table beside him, from which he filled himself a stiff whisky-and-soda. He drank it off in three gulps, and cracked the glass as he set it down.

‘Pardon,’ he said, ‘I’m a bit rattled tonight. You see, I happen at this moment to be dead.’

I sat down in an armchair and lit my pipe.

‘What does it feel like?’ I asked. I was pretty certain that I had to deal with a madman.

A smile flickered over his drawn face. ‘I’m not mad — yet. Say, Sir, I’ve been watching you, and I reckon you’re a cool customer. I reckon, too, you’re an honest man, and not afraid of playing a bold hand. I’m going to confide in you. I need help worse than any man ever needed it, and I want to know if I can count you in.’

‘Get on with your yarn,’ I said, ‘and I’ll tell you.’

He seemed to brace himself for a great effort, and then started on the queerest rigmarole. I didn’t get hold of it at first, and I had to stop and ask him questions. But here is the gist of it:

He was an American, from Kentucky, and after college, being pretty well off, he had started out to see the world. He wrote a bit, and acted as war correspondent for a Chicago paper, and spent a year or two in South–Eastern Europe. I gathered that he was a fine linguist, and had got to know pretty well the society in those parts. He spoke familiarly of many names that I remembered to have seen in the newspapers.

He had played about with politics, he told me, at first for the interest of them, and then because he couldn’t help himself. I read him as a sharp, restless fellow, who always wanted to get down to the roots of things. He got a little further down than he wanted.

I am giving you what he told me as well as I could make it out. Away behind all the Governments and the armies there was a big subterranean movement going on, engineered by very dangerous people. He had come on it by accident; it fascinated him; he went further, and then he got caught. I gathered that most of the people in it were the sort of educated anarchists that make revolutions, but that beside them there were financiers who were playing for money. A clever man can make big profits on a falling market, and it suited the book of both classes to set Europe by the ears.

He told me some queer things that explained a lot that had puzzled me — things that happened in the Balkan War, how one state suddenly came out on top, why alliances were made and broken, why certain men disappeared, and where the sinews of war came from. The aim of the whole conspiracy was to get Russia and Germany at loggerheads.

When I asked why, he said that the anarchist lot thought it would give them their chance. Everything would be in the melting-pot, and they looked to see a new world emerge. The capitalists would rake in the shekels, and make fortunes by buying up wreckage. Capital, he said, had no conscience and no fatherland. Besides, the Jew was behind it, and the Jew hated Russia worse than hell.

‘Do you wonder?’ he cried. ‘For three hundred years they have been persecuted, and this is the return match for the pogroms. The Jew is everywhere, but you have to go far down the backstairs to find him. Take any big Teutonic business concern. If you have dealings with it the first man you meet is Prince *von und zu* Something, an elegant young man who talks Eton-and-Harrow English. But he cuts no ice. If your business is big, you get behind him and find a prognathous Westphalian with a retreating brow and the manners of a hog. He is the German business man that gives your English papers the shakes. But if you’re on the biggest kind of job and are bound to get to the real boss, ten to one you are brought up against a little white-faced Jew in a bath-chair with an eye like a rattlesnake. Yes, Sir, he is the man who is ruling the world just now, and he has his knife in the Empire of the Tzar, because his aunt was outraged and his father flogged in some one-horse location on the Volga.’

I could not help saying that his Jew-anarchists seemed to have got left behind a little.

‘Yes and no,’ he said. ‘They won up to a point, but they struck a bigger thing than money, a thing that couldn’t be bought, the old elemental fighting instincts of man. If you’re going to be killed you invent some kind of flag and country to fight for, and if you survive you get to love the thing. Those foolish devils of soldiers have found something they care for,

and that has upset the pretty plan laid in Berlin and Vienna. But my friends haven't played their last card by a long sight. They've gotten the ace up their sleeves, and unless I can keep alive for a month they are going to play it and win.'

'But I thought you were dead,' I put in.

'*Mors janua vitae*,' he smiled. (I recognized the quotation: it was about all the Latin I knew.) 'I'm coming to that, but I've got to put you wise about a lot of things first. If you read your newspaper, I guess you know the name of Constantine Karolides?'

I sat up at that, for I had been reading about him that very afternoon.

'He is the man that has wrecked all their games. He is the one big brain in the whole show, and he happens also to be an honest man. Therefore he has been marked down these twelve months past. I found that out — not that it was difficult, for any fool could guess as much. But I found out the way they were going to get him, and that knowledge was deadly. That's why I have had to de cease.'

He had another drink, and I mixed it for him myself, for I was getting interested in the beggar.

'They can't get him in his own land, for he has a bodyguard of Epirotes that would skin their grandmothers. But on the 15th day of June he is coming to this city. The British Foreign Office has taken to having International tea-parties, and the biggest of them is due on that date. Now Karolides is reckoned the principal guest, and if my friends have their way he will never return to his admiring countrymen.'

'That's simple enough, anyhow,' I said. 'You can warn him and keep him at home.'

'And play their game?' he asked sharply. 'If he does not come they win, for he's the only man that can straighten out the tangle. And if his Government are warned he won't come, for he does not know how big the stakes will be on June the 15th.'

'What about the British Government?' I said. 'They're not going to let their guests be murdered. Tip them the wink, and they'll take extra precautions.'

'No good. They might stuff your city with plain-clothes detectives and double the police and Constantine would still be a doomed man. My friends are not playing this game for candy. They want a big occasion for the taking off, with the eyes of all Europe on it. He'll be murdered by an Austrian, and there'll be plenty of evidence to show the connivance of the big folk in Vienna and Berlin. It will all be an infernal lie, of course, but the case will look black enough to the world. I'm not talking hot air, my friend. I happen to know every detail of the hellish contrivance, and I can tell you it will be the most finished piece of blackguardism since the Borgias. But it's not going to come off if there's a certain man who knows the wheels of the business alive right here in London on the 15th day of June. And that man is going to be your servant, Franklin P. Scudder.'

I was getting to like the little chap. His jaw had shut like a rat-trap, and there was the fire of battle in his gimlety eyes. If he was spinning me a yarn he could act up to it.

'Where did you find out this story?' I asked.

'I got the first hint in an inn on the Achensee in Tyrol. That set me inquiring, and I collected my other clues in a fur-shop in the Galician quarter of Buda, in a Strangers' Club in Vienna, and in a little bookshop off the Racknitzstrasse in Leipsic. I completed my evidence ten days ago in Paris. I can't tell you the details now, for it's something of a history. When I was quite sure in my own mind I judged it my business to disappear, and I reached this city by a mighty queer circuit. I left Paris a dandified young French-American, and I sailed from Hamburg a Jew diamond merchant. In Norway I was an English student of Ibsen collecting materials for lectures, but when I left Bergen I was a cinema-man with special ski films. And I came here from Leith with a lot of pulp-wood propositions in my pocket to put before the London newspapers. Till yesterday I thought I had muddled my trail some, and was feeling pretty happy. Then . . .'

The recollection seemed to upset him, and he gulped down some more whisky.

'Then I saw a man standing in the street outside this block. I used to stay close in my room all day, and only slip out after dark for an hour or two. I watched him for a bit from my window, and I thought I recognized him . . . He came in and spoke to the porter . . . When I came back from my walk last night I found a card in my letter-box. It bore the name of the man I want least to meet on God's earth.'

I think that the look in my companion's eyes, the sheer naked scare on his face, completed my conviction of his

honesty. My own voice sharpened a bit as I asked him what he did next.

‘I realized that I was bottled as sure as a pickled herring, and that there was only one way out. I had to die. If my pursuers knew I was dead they would go to sleep again.’

‘How did you manage it?’

‘I told the man that valets me that I was feeling pretty bad, and I got myself up to look like death. That wasn’t difficult, for I’m no slouch at disguises. Then I got a corpse — you can always get a body in London if you know where to go for it. I fetched it back in a trunk on the top of a four-wheeler, and I had to be assisted upstairs to my room. You see I had to pile up some evidence for the inquest. I went to bed and got my man to mix me a sleeping-draught, and then told him to clear out. He wanted to fetch a doctor, but I swore some and said I couldn’t abide leeches. When I was left alone I started in to fake up that corpse. He was my size, and I judged had perished from too much alcohol, so I put some spirits handy about the place. The jaw was the weak point in the likeness, so I blew it away with a revolver. I daresay there will be somebody tomorrow to swear to having heard a shot, but there are no neighbours on my floor, and I guessed I could risk it. So I left the body in bed dressed up in my pyjamas, with a revolver lying on the bed-clothes and a considerable mess around. Then I got into a suit of clothes I had kept waiting for emergencies. I didn’t dare to shave for fear of leaving tracks, and besides, it wasn’t any kind of use my trying to get into the streets. I had had you in my mind all day, and there seemed nothing to do but to make an appeal to you. I watched from my window till I saw you come home, and then slipped down the stair to meet you . . . There, Sir, I guess you know about as much as me of this business.’

He sat blinking like an owl, fluttering with nerves and yet desperately determined. By this time I was pretty well convinced that he was going straight with me. It was the wildest sort of narrative, but I had heard in my time many steep tales which had turned out to be true, and I had made a practice of judging the man rather than the story. If he had wanted to get a location in my flat, and then cut my throat, he would have pitched a milder yarn.

‘Hand me your key,’ I said, ‘and I’ll take a look at the corpse. Excuse my caution, but I’m bound to verify a bit if I can.’

He shook his head mournfully. ‘I reckoned you’d ask for that, but I haven’t got it. It’s on my chain on the dressing-table. I had to leave it behind, for I couldn’t leave any clues to breed suspicions. The gentry who are after me are pretty bright-eyed citizens. You’ll have to take me on trust for the night, and tomorrow you’ll get proof of the corpse business right enough.’

I thought for an instant or two. ‘Right. I’ll trust you for the night. I’ll lock you into this room and keep the key. Just one word, Mr Scudder. I believe you’re straight, but if so be you are not I should warn you that I’m a handy man with a gun.’

‘Sure,’ he said, jumping up with some briskness. ‘I haven’t the privilege of your name, Sir, but let me tell you that you’re a white man. I’ll thank you to lend me a razor.’

I took him into my bedroom and turned him loose. In half an hour’s time a figure came out that I scarcely recognized. Only his gimlety, hungry eyes were the same. He was shaved clean, his hair was parted in the middle, and he had cut his eyebrows. Further, he carried himself as if he had been drilled, and was the very model, even to the brown complexion, of some British officer who had had a long spell in India. He had a monocle, too, which he stuck in his eye, and every trace of the American had gone out of his speech.

‘My hat! Mr Scudder —’ I stammered.

‘Not Mr Scudder,’ he corrected; ‘Captain Theophilus Digby, of the 40th Gurkhas, presently home on leave. I’ll thank you to remember that, Sir.’

I made him up a bed in my smoking-room and sought my own couch, more cheerful than I had been for the past month. Things did happen occasionally, even in this God-forgotten metropolis.

I woke next morning to hear my man, Paddock, making the deuce of a row at the smoking-room door. Paddock was a fellow I had done a good turn to out on the Selakwe, and I had inspanned him as my servant as soon as I got to England. He had about as much gift of the gab as a hippopotamus, and was not a great hand at valeting, but I knew I could count on his loyalty.

‘Stop that row, Paddock,’ I said. ‘There’s a friend of mine, Captain — Captain’ (I couldn’t remember the name) ‘dossing down in there. Get breakfast for two and then come and speak to me.’

I told Paddock a fine story about how my friend was a great swell, with his nerves pretty bad from overwork, who wanted absolute rest and stillness. Nobody had got to know he was here, or he would be besieged by communications from

the India Office and the Prime Minister and his cure would be ruined. I am bound to say Scudder played up splendidly when he came to breakfast. He fixed Paddock with his eyeglass, just like a British officer, asked him about the Boer War, and slung out at me a lot of stuff about imaginary pals. Paddock couldn't learn to call me 'Sir', but he 'sirred' Scudder as if his life depended on it.

I left him with the newspaper and a box of cigars, and went down to the City till luncheon. When I got back the liftman had an important face.

'Nawsty business 'ere this morning, Sir. Gent in No. 15 been and shot 'isself. They've just took 'im to the mortuary. The police are up there now.'

I ascended to No. 15, and found a couple of bobbies and an inspector busy making an examination. I asked a few idiotic questions, and they soon kicked me out. Then I found the man that had valeted Scudder, and pumped him, but I could see he suspected nothing. He was a whining fellow with a churchyard face, and half-a-crown went far to console him.

I attended the inquest next day. A partner of some publishing firm gave evidence that the deceased had brought him wood-pulp propositions, and had been, he believed, an agent of an American business. The jury found it a case of suicide while of unsound mind, and the few effects were handed over to the American Consul to deal with. I gave Scudder a full account of the affair, and it interested him greatly. He said he wished he could have attended the inquest, for he reckoned it would be about as spicy as to read one's own obituary notice.

The first two days he stayed with me in that back room he was very peaceful. He read and smoked a bit, and made a heap of jottings in a note-book, and every night we had a game of chess, at which he beat me hollow. I think he was nursing his nerves back to health, for he had had a pretty trying time. But on the third day I could see he was beginning to get restless. He fixed up a list of the days till June 15th, and ticked each off with a red pencil, making remarks in shorthand against them. I would find him sunk in a brown study, with his sharp eyes abstracted, and after those spells of meditation he was apt to be very despondent.

Then I could see that he began to get edgy again. He listened for little noises, and was always asking me if Paddock could be trusted. Once or twice he got very peevish, and apologized for it. I didn't blame him. I made every allowance, for he had taken on a fairly stiff job.

It was not the safety of his own skin that troubled him, but the success of the scheme he had planned. That little man was clean grit all through, without a soft spot in him. One night he was very solemn.

'Say, Hannay,' he said, 'I judge I should let you a bit deeper into this business. I should hate to go out without leaving somebody else to put up a fight.' And he began to tell me in detail what I had only heard from him vaguely.

I did not give him very close attention. The fact is, I was more interested in his own adventures than in his high politics. I reckoned that Karolides and his affairs were not my business, leaving all that to him. So a lot that he said slipped clean out of my memory. I remember that he was very clear that the danger to Karolides would not begin till he had got to London, and would come from the very highest quarters, where there would be no thought of suspicion. He mentioned the name of a woman — Julia Czechenyi — as having something to do with the danger. She would be the decoy, I gathered, to get Karolides out of the care of his guards. He talked, too, about a Black Stone and a man that lisped in his speech, and he described very particularly somebody that he never referred to without a shudder — an old man with a young voice who could hood his eyes like a hawk.

He spoke a good deal about death, too. He was mortally anxious about winning through with his job, but he didn't care a rush for his life.

'I reckon it's like going to sleep when you are pretty well tired out, and waking to find a summer day with the scent of hay coming in at the window. I used to thank God for such mornings way back in the Blue-Grass country, and I guess I'll thank Him when I wake up on the other side of Jordan.'

Next day he was much more cheerful, and read the life of Stonewall Jackson much of the time. I went out to dinner with a mining engineer I had got to see on business, and came back about half-past ten in time for our game of chess before turning in.

I had a cigar in my mouth, I remember, as I pushed open the smoking-room door. The lights were not lit, which struck me as odd. I wondered if Scudder had turned in already.

I snapped the switch, but there was nobody there. Then I saw something in the far corner which made me drop my cigar and fall into a cold sweat. My guest was lying sprawled on his back. There was a long knife through his heart which skewered him to the floor.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MILKMAN SETS OUT ON HIS TRAVELS

I sat down in an armchair and felt very sick. That lasted for maybe five minutes, and was succeeded by a fit of the horrors. The poor staring white face on the floor was more than I could bear, and I managed to get a table-cloth and cover it. Then I staggered to a cupboard, found the brandy and swallowed several mouthfuls. I had seen men die violently before; indeed I had killed a few myself in the Matabele War; but this cold-blooded indoor business was different. Still I managed to pull myself together. I looked at my watch, and saw that it was half-past ten.

An idea seized me, and I went over the flat with a small-tooth comb. There was nobody there, nor any trace of anybody, but I shuttered and bolted all the windows and put the chain on the door. By this time my wits were coming back to me, and I could think again. It took me about an hour to figure the thing out, and I did not hurry, for, unless the murderer came back, I had till about six o'clock in the morning for my cogitations.

I was in the soup — that was pretty clear. Any shadow of a doubt I might have had about the truth of Scudder's tale was now gone. The proof of it was lying under the table-cloth. The men who knew that he knew what he knew had found him, and had taken the best way to make certain of his silence. Yes; but he had been in my rooms four days, and his enemies must have reckoned that he had confided in me. So I would be the next to go. It might be that very night, or next day, or the day after, but my number was up all right.

Then suddenly I thought of another probability. Supposing I went out now and called in the police, or went to bed and let Paddock find the body and call them in the morning. What kind of a story was I to tell about Scudder? I had lied to Paddock about him, and the whole thing looked desperately fishy. If I made a clean breast of it and told the police everything he had told me, they would simply laugh at me. The odds were a thousand to one that I would be charged with the murder, and the circumstantial evidence was strong enough to hang me. Few people knew me in England; I had no real pal who could come forward and swear to my character. Perhaps that was what those secret enemies were playing for. They were clever enough for anything, and an English prison was as good a way of getting rid of me till after June 15th as a knife in my chest.

Besides, if I told the whole story, and by any miracle was believed, I would be playing their game. Karolides would stay at home, which was what they wanted. Somehow or other the sight of Scudder's dead face had made me a passionate believer in his scheme. He was gone, but he had taken me into his confidence, and I was pretty well bound to carry on his work.

You may think this ridiculous for a man in danger of his life, but that was the way I looked at it. I am an ordinary sort of fellow, not braver than other people, but I hate to see a good man downed, and that long knife would not be the end of Scudder if I could play the game in his place.

It took me an hour or two to think this out, and by that time I had come to a decision. I must vanish somehow, and keep vanished till the end of the second week in June. Then I must somehow find a way to get in touch with the Government people and tell them what Scudder had told me. I wished to Heaven he had told me more, and that I had listened more carefully to the little he had told me. I knew nothing but the barest facts. There was a big risk that, even if I weathered the other dangers, I would not be believed in the end. I must take my chance of that, and hope that something might happen which would confirm my tale in the eyes of the Government.

My first job was to keep going for the next three weeks. It was now the 24th day of May, and that meant twenty days of hiding before I could venture to approach the powers that be. I reckoned that two sets of people would be looking for me — Scudder's enemies to put me out of existence, and the police, who would want me for Scudder's murder. It was going to be a giddy hunt, and it was queer how the prospect comforted me. I had been slack so long that almost any chance of activity was welcome. When I had to sit alone with that corpse and wait on Fortune I was no better than a crushed worm, but if my neck's safety was to hang on my own wits I was prepared to be cheerful about it.

My next thought was whether Scudder had any papers about him to give me a better clue to the business. I drew back the table-cloth and searched his pockets, for I had no longer any shrinking from the body. The face was wonderfully calm

for a man who had been struck down in a moment. There was nothing in the breast-pocket, and only a few loose coins and a cigar-holder in the waistcoat. The trousers held a little penknife and some silver, and the side pocket of his jacket contained an old crocodile-skin cigar-case. There was no sign of the little black book in which I had seen him making notes. That had no doubt been taken by his murderer.

But as I looked up from my task I saw that some drawers had been pulled out in the writing-table. Scudder would never have left them in that state, for he was the tidiest of mortals. Someone must have been searching for something — perhaps for the pocket-book.

I went round the flat and found that everything had been ransacked — the inside of books, drawers, cupboards, boxes, even the pockets of the clothes in my wardrobe, and the sideboard in the dining-room. There was no trace of the book. Most likely the enemy had found it, but they had not found it on Scudder's body.

Then I got out an atlas and looked at a big map of the British Isles. My notion was to get off to some wild district, where my veldcraft would be of some use to me, for I would be like a trapped rat in a city. I considered that Scotland would be best, for my people were Scotch and I could pass anywhere as an ordinary Scotsman. I had half an idea at first to be a German tourist, for my father had had German partners, and I had been brought up to speak the tongue pretty fluently, not to mention having put in three years prospecting for copper in German Damaraland. But I calculated that it would be less conspicuous to be a Scot, and less in a line with what the police might know of my past. I fixed on Galloway as the best place to go. It was the nearest wild part of Scotland, so far as I could figure it out, and from the look of the map was not over thick with population.

A search in Bradshaw informed me that a train left St Pancras at 7.10, which would land me at any Galloway station in the late afternoon. That was well enough, but a more important matter was how I was to make my way to St Pancras, for I was pretty certain that Scudder's friends would be watching outside. This puzzled me for a bit; then I had an inspiration, on which I went to bed and slept for two troubled hours.

I got up at four and opened my bedroom shutters. The faint light of a fine summer morning was flooding the skies, and the sparrows had begun to chatter. I had a great revulsion of feeling, and felt a God-forgotten fool. My inclination was to let things slide, and trust to the British police taking a reasonable view of my case. But as I reviewed the situation I could find no arguments to bring against my decision of the previous night, so with a wry mouth I resolved to go on with my plan. I was not feeling in any particular funk; only disinclined to go looking for trouble, if you understand me.

I hunted out a well-used tweed suit, a pair of strong nailed boots, and a flannel shirt with a collar. Into my pockets I stuffed a spare shirt, a cloth cap, some handkerchiefs, and a tooth-brush. I had drawn a good sum in gold from the bank two days before, in case Scudder should want money, and I took fifty pounds of it in sovereigns in a belt which I had brought back from Rhodesia. That was about all I wanted. Then I had a bath, and cut my moustache, which was long and drooping, into a short stubbly fringe.

Now came the next step. Paddock used to arrive punctually at 7.30 and let himself in with a latch-key. But about twenty minutes to seven, as I knew from bitter experience, the milkman turned up with a great clatter of cans, and deposited my share outside my door. I had seen that milkman sometimes when I had gone out for an early ride. He was a young man about my own height, with an ill-nourished moustache, and he wore a white overall. On him I staked all my chances.

I went into the darkened smoking-room where the rays of morning light were beginning to creep through the shutters. There I breakfasted off a whisky-and-soda and some biscuits from the cupboard. By this time it was getting on for six o'clock. I put a pipe in My Pocket and filled my pouch from the tobacco jar on the table by the fireplace.

As I poked into the tobacco my fingers touched something hard, and I drew out Scudder's little black pocket-book . . .

That seemed to me a good omen. I lifted the cloth from the body and was amazed at the peace and dignity of the dead face. 'Goodbye, old chap,' I said; 'I am going to do my best for you. Wish me well, wherever you are.'

Then I hung about in the hall waiting for the milkman. That was the worst part of the business, for I was fairly choking to get out of doors. Six-thirty passed, then six-forty, but still he did not come. The fool had chosen this day of all days to be late.

At one minute after the quarter to seven I heard the rattle of the cans outside. I opened the front door, and there was my man, singling out my cans from a bunch he carried and whistling through his teeth. He jumped a bit at the sight of me.

‘Come in here a moment,’ I said. ‘I want a word with you.’ And I led him into the dining-room.

‘I reckon you’re a bit of a sportsman,’ I said, ‘and I want you to do me a service. Lend me your cap and overall for ten minutes, and here’s a sovereign for you.’

His eyes opened at the sight of the gold, and he grinned broadly. ‘Wot’s the gyme?’ he asked.

‘A bet,’ I said. ‘I haven’t time to explain, but to win it I’ve got to be a milkman for the next ten minutes. All you’ve got to do is to stay here till I come back. You’ll be a bit late, but nobody will complain, and you’ll have that quid for yourself.’

‘Right-o!’ he said cheerily. ‘I ain’t the man to spoil a bit of sport. ‘Ere’s the rig, guv’nor.’

I stuck on his flat blue hat and his white overall, picked up the cans, banged my door, and went whistling downstairs. The porter at the foot told me to shut my jaw, which sounded as if my make-up was adequate.

At first I thought there was nobody in the street. Then I caught sight of a policeman a hundred yards down, and a loafer shuffling past on the other side. Some impulse made me raise my eyes to the house opposite, and there at a first-floor window was a face. As the loafer passed he looked up, and I fancied a signal was exchanged.

I crossed the street, whistling gaily and imitating the jaunty swing of the milkman. Then I took the first side street, and went up a left-hand turning which led past a bit of vacant ground. There was no one in the little street, so I dropped the milk-cans inside the hoarding and sent the cap and overall after them. I had only just put on my cloth cap when a postman came round the corner. I gave him good morning and he answered me unsuspiciously. At the moment the clock of a neighbouring church struck the hour of seven.

There was not a second to spare. As soon as I got to Euston Road I took to my heels and ran. The clock at Euston Station showed five minutes past the hour. At St Pancras I had no time to take a ticket, let alone that I had not settled upon my destination. A porter told me the platform, and as I entered it I saw the train already in motion. Two station officials blocked the way, but I dodged them and clambered into the last carriage.

Three minutes later, as we were roaring through the northern tunnels, an irate guard interviewed me. He wrote out for me a ticket to Newton–Stewart, a name which had suddenly come back to my memory, and he conducted me from the first-class compartment where I had ensconced myself to a third-class smoker, occupied by a sailor and a stout woman with a child. He went off grumbling, and as I mopped my brow I observed to my companions in my broadest Scots that it was a sore job catching trains. I had already entered upon my part.

‘The impidence o’ that gyaird!’ said the lady bitterly. ‘He needit a Scotch tongue to pit him in his place. He was complainin’ o’ this wean no haein’ a ticket and her no fower till August twalmonth, and he was objectin’ to this gentleman spittin’.’

The sailor morosely agreed, and I started my new life in an atmosphere of protest against authority. I reminded myself that a week ago I had been finding the world dull.



CHAPTER THREE

THE ADVENTURE OF THE LITERARY INNKEEPER

I had a solemn time travelling north that day. It was fine May weather, with the hawthorn flowering on every hedge, and I asked myself why, when I was still a free man, I had stayed on in London and not got the good of this heavenly country. I didn't dare face the restaurant car, but I got a luncheon-basket at Leeds and shared it with the fat woman. Also I got the morning's papers, with news about starters for the Derby and the beginning of the cricket season, and some paragraphs about how Balkan affairs were settling down and a British squadron was going to Kiel.

When I had done with them I got out Scudder's little black pocket-book and studied it. It was pretty well filled with jottings, chiefly figures, though now and then a name was printed in. For example, I found the words 'Hofgaard', 'Luneville', and 'Avocado' pretty often, and especially the word 'Pavia'.

Now I was certain that Scudder never did anything without a reason, and I was pretty sure that there was a cypher in all this. That is a subject which has always interested me, and I did a bit at it myself once as intelligence officer at Delagoa Bay during the Boer War. I have a head for things like chess and puzzles, and I used to reckon myself pretty good at finding out cyphers. This one looked like the numerical kind where sets of figures correspond to the letters of the alphabet, but any fairly shrewd man can find the clue to that sort after an hour or two's work, and I didn't think Scudder would have been content with anything so easy. So I fastened on the printed words, for you can make a pretty good numerical cypher if you have a key word which gives you the sequence of the letters.

I tried for hours, but none of the words answered. Then I fell asleep and woke at Dumfries just in time to bundle out and get into the slow Galloway train. There was a man on the platform whose looks I didn't like, but he never glanced at me, and when I caught sight of myself in the mirror of an automatic machine I didn't wonder. With my brown face, my old tweeds, and my slouch, I was the very model of one of the hill farmers who were crowding into the third-class carriages.

I travelled with half a dozen in an atmosphere of shag and clay pipes. They had come from the weekly market, and their mouths were full of prices. I heard accounts of how the lambing had gone up the Cairn and the Deuch and a dozen other mysterious waters. Above half the men had lunched heavily and were highly flavoured with whisky, but they took no notice of me. We rumbled slowly into a land of little wooded glens and then to a great wide moorland place, gleaming with lochs, with high blue hills showing northwards.

About five o'clock the carriage had emptied, and I was left alone as I had hoped. I got out at the next station, a little place whose name I scarcely noted, set right in the heart of a bog. It reminded me of one of those forgotten little stations in the Karroo. An old station-master was digging in his garden, and with his spade over his shoulder sauntered to the train, took charge of a parcel, and went back to his potatoes. A child of ten received my ticket, and I emerged on a white road that straggled over the brown moor.

It was a gorgeous spring evening, with every hill showing as clear as a cut amethyst. The air had the queer, rooty smell of bogs, but it was as fresh as mid-ocean, and it had the strangest effect on my spirits. I actually felt light-hearted. I might have been a boy out for a spring holiday tramp, instead of a man of thirty-seven very much wanted by the police. I felt just as I used to feel when I was starting for a big trek on a frosty morning on the high veld. If you believe me, I swung along that road whistling. There was no plan of campaign in my head, only just to go on and on in this blessed, honest-smelling hill country, for every mile put me in better humour with myself.

In a roadside planting I cut a walking-stick of hazel, and presently struck off the highway up a bypath which followed the glen of a brawling stream. I reckoned that I was still far ahead of any pursuit, and for that night might please myself. It was some hours since I had tasted food, and I was getting very hungry when I came to a herd's cottage set in a nook beside a waterfall. A brown-faced woman was standing by the door, and greeted me with the kindly shyness of moorland places. When I asked for a night's lodging she said I was welcome to the 'bed in the loft', and very soon she set before me a hearty meal of ham and eggs, scones, and thick sweet milk.

At the darkening her man came in from the hills, a lean giant, who in one step covered as much ground as three paces of ordinary mortals. They asked me no questions, for they had the perfect breeding of all dwellers in the wilds, but I could

see they set me down as a kind of dealer, and I took some trouble to confirm their view. I spoke a lot about cattle, of which my host knew little, and I picked up from him a good deal about the local Galloway markets, which I tucked away in my memory for future use. At ten I was nodding in my chair, and the 'bed in the loft' received a weary man who never opened his eyes till five o'clock set the little homestead a-going once more.

They refused any payment, and by six I had breakfasted and was striding southwards again. My notion was to return to the railway line a station or two farther on than the place where I had alighted yesterday and to double back. I reckoned that that was the safest way, for the police would naturally assume that I was always making farther from London in the direction of some western port. I thought I had still a good bit of a start, for, as I reasoned, it would take some hours to fix the blame on me, and several more to identify the fellow who got on board the train at St Pancras.

It was the same jolly, clear spring weather, and I simply could not contrive to feel careworn. Indeed I was in better spirits than I had been for months. Over a long ridge of moorland I took my road, skirting the side of a high hill which the herd had called Cairnsmore of Fleet. Nesting curlews and plovers were crying everywhere, and the links of green pasture by the streams were dotted with young lambs. All the slackness of the past months was slipping from my bones, and I stepped out like a four-year-old. By-and-by I came to a swell of moorland which dipped to the vale of a little river, and a mile away in the heather I saw the smoke of a train.

The station, when I reached it, proved to be ideal for my purpose. The moor surged up around it and left room only for the single line, the slender siding, a waiting-room, an office, the station-master's cottage, and a tiny yard of gooseberries and sweet-william. There seemed no road to it from anywhere, and to increase the desolation the waves of a tarn lapped on their grey granite beach half a mile away. I waited in the deep heather till I saw the smoke of an east-going train on the horizon. Then I approached the tiny booking-office and took a ticket for Dumfries.

The only occupants of the carriage were an old shepherd and his dog — a wall-eyed brute that I mistrusted. The man was asleep, and on the cushions beside him was that morning's *Scotsman*. Eagerly I seized on it, for I fancied it would tell me something.

There were two columns about the Portland Place Murder, as it was called. My man Paddock had given the alarm and had the milkman arrested. Poor devil, it looked as if the latter had earned his sovereign hardly; but for me he had been cheap at the price, for he seemed to have occupied the police for the better part of the day. In the latest news I found a further instalment of the story. The milkman had been released, I read, and the true criminal, about whose identity the police were reticent, was believed to have got away from London by one of the northern lines. There was a short note about me as the owner of the flat. I guessed the police had stuck that in, as a clumsy contrivance to persuade me that I was unsuspected.

There was nothing else in the paper, nothing about foreign politics or Karolides, or the things that had interested Scudder. I laid it down, and found that we were approaching the station at which I had got out yesterday. The potato-digging station-master had been gingered up into some activity, for the west-going train was waiting to let us pass, and from it had descended three men who were asking him questions. I supposed that they were the local police, who had been stirred up by Scotland Yard, and had traced me as far as this one-horse siding. Sitting well back in the shadow I watched them carefully. One of them had a book, and took down notes. The old potato-digger seemed to have turned peevish, but the child who had collected my ticket was talking volubly. All the party looked out across the moor where the white road departed. I hoped they were going to take up my tracks there.

As we moved away from that station my companion woke up. He fixed me with a wandering glance, kicked his dog viciously, and inquired where he was. Clearly he was very drunk.

'That's what comes o' bein' a teetotaler,' he observed in bitter regret.

I expressed my surprise that in him I should have met a blue-ribbon stalwart.

'Ay, but I'm a strong teetotaler,' he said pugnaciously. 'I took the pledge last Martinmas, and I havena touched a drop o' whisky sinsyne. Not even at Hogmanay, though I was sair temptit.'

He swung his heels up on the seat, and burrowed a frowsy head into the cushions.

'And that's a' I get,' he moaned. 'A heid better than hell fire, and twae een lookin' different ways for the Sabbath.'

'What did it?' I asked.

'A drink they ca' brandy. Bein' a teetotaler I keepit off the whisky, but I was nip-nippin' a' day at this brandy, and I

doubt I'll no be weel for a fortnicht.' His voice died away into a splutter, and sleep once more laid its heavy hand on him.

My plan had been to get out at some station down the line, but the train suddenly gave me a better chance, for it came to a standstill at the end of a culvert which spanned a brawling porter-coloured river. I looked out and saw that every carriage window was closed and no human figure appeared in the landscape. So I opened the door, and dropped quickly into the tangle of hazels which edged the line.

It would have been all right but for that infernal dog. Under the impression that I was decamping with its master's belongings, it started to bark, and all but got me by the trousers. This woke up the herd, who stood bawling at the carriage door in the belief that I had committed suicide. I crawled through the thicket, reached the edge of the stream, and in cover of the bushes put a hundred yards or so behind me. Then from my shelter I peered back, and saw the guard and several passengers gathered round the open carriage door and staring in my direction. I could not have made a more public departure if I had left with a bugler and a brass band.

Happily the drunken herd provided a diversion. He and his dog, which was attached by a rope to his waist, suddenly cascaded out of the carriage, landed on their heads on the track, and rolled some way down the bank towards the water. In the rescue which followed the dog bit somebody, for I could hear the sound of hard swearing. Presently they had forgotten me, and when after a quarter of a mile's crawl I ventured to look back, the train had started again and was vanishing in the cutting.

I was in a wide semicircle of moorland, with the brown river as radius, and the high hills forming the northern circumference. There was not a sign or sound of a human being, only the plashing water and the interminable crying of curlews. Yet, oddly enough, for the first time I felt the terror of the hunted on me. It was not the police that I thought of, but the other folk, who knew that I knew Scudder's secret and dared not let me live. I was certain that they would pursue me with a keenness and vigilance unknown to the British law, and that once their grip closed on me I should find no mercy.

I looked back, but there was nothing in the landscape. The sun glinted on the metals of the line and the wet stones in the stream, and you could not have found a more peaceful sight in the world. Nevertheless I started to run. Crouching low in the runnels of the bog, I ran till the sweat blinded my eyes. The mood did not leave me till I had reached the rim of mountain and flung myself panting on a ridge high above the young waters of the brown river.

From my vantage-ground I could scan the whole moor right away to the railway line and to the south of it where green fields took the place of heather. I have eyes like a hawk, but I could see nothing moving in the whole countryside. Then I looked east beyond the ridge and saw a new kind of landscape — shallow green valleys with plentiful fir plantations and the faint lines of dust which spoke of highroads. Last of all I looked into the blue May sky, and there I saw that which set my pulses racing . . .

Low down in the south a monoplane was climbing into the heavens. I was as certain as if I had been told that that aeroplane was looking for me, and that it did not belong to the police. For an hour or two I watched it from a pit of heather. It flew low along the hill-tops, and then in narrow circles over the valley up which I had come. Then it seemed to change its mind, rose to a great height, and flew away back to the south.

I did not like this espionage from the air, and I began to think less well of the countryside I had chosen for a refuge. These heather hills were no sort of cover if my enemies were in the sky, and I must find a different kind of sanctuary. I looked with more satisfaction to the green country beyond the ridge, for there I should find woods and stone houses.

About six in the evening I came out of the moorland to a white ribbon of road which wound up the narrow vale of a lowland stream. As I followed it, fields gave place to bent, the glen became a plateau, and presently I had reached a kind of pass where a solitary house smoked in the twilight. The road swung over a bridge, and leaning on the parapet was a young man.

He was smoking a long clay pipe and studying the water with spectacled eyes. In his left hand was a small book with a finger marking the place. Slowly he repeated —

As when a Gryphon through the wilderness
With winged step, o'er hill and moory dale
Pursues the Arimaspians.

He jumped round as my step rung on the keystone, and I saw a pleasant sunburnt boyish face.

‘Good evening to you,’ he said gravely. ‘It’s a fine night for the road.’

The smell of peat smoke and of some savoury roast floated to me from the house.

‘Is that place an inn?’ I asked.

‘At your service,’ he said politely. ‘I am the landlord, Sir, and I hope you will stay the night, for to tell you the truth I have had no company for a week.’

I pulled myself up on the parapet of the bridge and filled my pipe. I began to detect an ally.

‘You’re young to be an innkeeper,’ I said.

‘My father died a year ago and left me the business. I live there with my grandmother. It’s a slow job for a young man, and it wasn’t my choice of profession.’

‘Which was?’

He actually blushed. ‘I want to write books,’ he said.

‘And what better chance could you ask?’ I cried. ‘Man, I’ve often thought that an innkeeper would make the best storyteller in the world.’

‘Not now,’ he said eagerly. ‘Maybe in the old days when you had pilgrims and ballad-makers and highwaymen and mail-coaches on the road. But not now. Nothing comes here but motor-cars full of fat women, who stop for lunch, and a fisherman or two in the spring, and the shooting tenants in August. There is not much material to be got out of that. I want to see life, to travel the world, and write things like Kipling and Conrad. But the most I’ve done yet is to get some verses printed in *Chambers’s Journal*.’ I looked at the inn standing golden in the sunset against the brown hills.

‘I’ve knocked a bit about the world, and I wouldn’t despise such a hermitage. D’you think that adventure is found only in the tropics or among gentry in red shirts? Maybe you’re rubbing shoulders with it at this moment.’

‘That’s what Kipling says,’ he said, his eyes brightening, and he quoted some verse about ‘Romance bringing up the 9.15’.

‘Here’s a true tale for you then,’ I cried, ‘and a month from now you can make a novel out of it.’

Sitting on the bridge in the soft May gloaming I pitched him a lovely yarn. It was true in essentials, too, though I altered the minor details. I made out that I was a mining magnate from Kimberley, who had had a lot of trouble with I.D.B. and had shown up a gang. They had pursued me across the ocean, and had killed my best friend, and were now on my tracks.

I told the story well, though I say it who shouldn’t. I pictured a flight across the Kalahari to German Africa, the crackling, parching days, the wonderful blue-velvet nights. I described an attack on my life on the voyage home, and I made a really horrid affair of the Portland Place murder. ‘You’re looking for adventure,’ I cried; ‘well, you’ve found it here. The devils are after me, and the police are after them. It’s a race that I mean to win.’

‘By God!’ he whispered, drawing his breath in sharply, ‘it is all pure Rider Haggard and Conan Doyle.’

‘You believe me,’ I said gratefully.

‘Of course I do,’ and he held out his hand. ‘I believe everything out of the common. The only thing to distrust is the normal.’

He was very young, but he was the man for my money.

‘I think they’re off my track for the moment, but I must lie close for a couple of days. Can you take me in?’

He caught my elbow in his eagerness and drew me towards the house. ‘You can lie as snug here as if you were in a moss-hole. I’ll see that nobody blabs, either. And you’ll give me some more material about your adventures?’

As I entered the inn porch I heard from far off the beat of an engine. There silhouetted against the dusky West was my friend, the monoplane.

He gave me a room at the back of the house, with a fine outlook over the plateau, and he made me free of his own study, which was stacked with cheap editions of his favourite authors. I never saw the grandmother, so I guessed she was bedridden. An old woman called Margit brought me my meals, and the innkeeper was around me at all hours. I wanted some time to myself, so I invented a job for him. He had a motor-bicycle, and I sent him off next morning for the daily paper, which usually arrived with the post in the late afternoon. I told him to keep his eyes skinned, and make note of any strange figures he saw, keeping a special sharp look-out for motors and aeroplanes. Then I sat down in real earnest to

Scudder's note-book.

He came back at midday with the *Scotsman*. There was nothing in it, except some further evidence of Paddock and the milkman, and a repetition of yesterday's statement that the murderer had gone North. But there was a long article, reprinted from *The Times*, about Karolides and the state of affairs in the Balkans, though there was no mention of any visit to England. I got rid of the innkeeper for the afternoon, for I was getting very warm in my search for the cypher.

As I told you, it was a numerical cypher, and by an elaborate system of experiments I had pretty well discovered what were the nulls and stops. The trouble was the key word, and when I thought of the odd million words he might have used I felt pretty hopeless. But about three o'clock I had a sudden inspiration.

The name Julia Czechenyi flashed across my memory. Scudder had said it was the key to the Karolides business, and it occurred to me to try it on his cypher.

It worked. The five letters of 'Julia' gave me the position of the vowels. A was J, the tenth letter of the alphabet, and so represented by X in the cypher. E was XXI, and so on. 'Czechenyi' gave me the numerals for the principal consonants. I scribbled that scheme on a bit of paper and sat down to read Scudder's pages.

In half an hour I was reading with a whitish face and fingers that drummed on the table.

I glanced out of the window and saw a big touring-car coming up the glen towards the inn. It drew up at the door, and there was the sound of people alighting. There seemed to be two of them, men in aquascutum and tweed caps.

Ten minutes later the innkeeper slipped into the room, his eyes bright with excitement.

'There's two chaps below looking for you,' he whispered. 'They're in the dining-room having whiskies-and-sodas. They asked about you and said they had hoped to meet you here. Oh! and they described you jolly well, down to your boots and shirt. I told them you had been here last night and had gone off on a motor bicycle this morning, and one of the chaps swore like a navvy.'

I made him tell me what they looked like. One was a dark-eyed thin fellow with bushy eyebrows, the other was always smiling and lisped in his talk. Neither was any kind of foreigner; on this my young friend was positive.

I took a bit of paper and wrote these words in German as if they were part of a letter —

'... Black Stone. Scudder had got on to this, but he could not act for a fortnight. I doubt if I can do any good now, especially as Karolides is uncertain about his plans. But if Mr T. advises I will do the best I ...'

I manufactured it rather neatly, so that it looked like a loose page of a private letter.

'Take this down and say it was found in my bedroom, and ask them to return it to me if they overtake me.'

Three minutes later I heard the car begin to move, and peeping from behind the curtain caught sight of the two figures. One was slim, the other was sleek; that was the most I could make of my reconnaissance.

The innkeeper appeared in great excitement. 'Your paper woke them up,' he said gleefully. 'The dark fellow went as white as death and cursed like blazes, and the fat one whistled and looked ugly. They paid for their drinks with half-a-sovereign and wouldn't wait for change.'

'Now I'll tell you what I want you to do,' I said. 'Get on your bicycle and go off to Newton-Stewart to the Chief Constable. Describe the two men, and say you suspect them of having had something to do with the London murder. You can invent reasons. The two will come back, never fear. Not tonight, for they'll follow me forty miles along the road, but first thing tomorrow morning. Tell the police to be here bright and early.'

He set off like a docile child, while I worked at Scudder's notes. When he came back we dined together, and in common decency I had to let him pump me. I gave him a lot of stuff about lion hunts and the Matabele War, thinking all the while what tame businesses these were compared to this I was now engaged in! When he went to bed I sat up and finished Scudder. I smoked in a chair till daylight, for I could not sleep.

About eight next morning I witnessed the arrival of two constables and a sergeant. They put their car in a coach-house under the innkeeper's instructions, and entered the house. Twenty minutes later I saw from my window a second car come across the plateau from the opposite direction. It did not come up to the inn, but stopped two hundred yards off in the shelter of a patch of wood. I noticed that its occupants carefully reversed it before leaving it. A minute or two later I heard their steps on the gravel outside the window.

My plan had been to lie hid in my bedroom, and see what happened. I had a notion that, if I could bring the police and

my other more dangerous pursuers together, something might work out of it to my advantage. But now I had a better idea. I scribbled a line of thanks to my host, opened the window, and dropped quietly into a gooseberry bush. Unobserved I crossed the dyke, crawled down the side of a tributary burn, and won the highroad on the far side of the patch of trees. There stood the car, very spick and span in the morning sunlight, but with the dust on her which told of a long journey. I started her, jumped into the chauffeur's seat, and stole gently out on to the plateau.

Almost at once the road dipped so that I lost sight of the inn, but the wind seemed to bring me the sound of angry voices.



CHAPTER FOUR

THE ADVENTURE OF THE RADICAL CANDIDATE

You may picture me driving that 40 h.p. car for all she was worth over the crisp moor roads on that shining May morning; glancing back at first over my shoulder, and looking anxiously to the next turning; then driving with a vague eye, just wide enough awake to keep on the highway. For I was thinking desperately of what I had found in Scudder's pocket-book.

The little man had told me a pack of lies. All his yarns about the Balkans and the Jew-Anarchists and the Foreign Office Conference were eyewash, and so was Karolides. And yet not quite, as you shall hear. I had staked everything on my belief in his story, and had been let down; here was his book telling me a different tale, and instead of being once-bitten-twice-shy, I believed it absolutely.

Why, I don't know. It rang desperately true, and the first yarn, if you understand me, had been in a queer way true also in spirit. The fifteenth day of June was going to be a day of destiny, a bigger destiny than the killing of a Dago. It was so big that I didn't blame Scudder for keeping me out of the game and wanting to play a lone hand. That, I was pretty clear, was his intention. He had told me something which sounded big enough, but the real thing was so immortally big that he, the man who had found it out, wanted it all for himself. I didn't blame him. It was risks after all that he was chiefly greedy about.

The whole story was in the notes — with gaps, you understand, which he would have filled up from his memory. He stuck down his authorities, too, and had an odd trick of giving them all a numerical value and then striking a balance, which stood for the reliability of each stage in the yarn. The four names he had printed were authorities, and there was a man, Ducrosne, who got five out of a possible five; and another fellow, Ammersfoort, who got three. The bare bones of the tale were all that was in the book — these, and one queer phrase which occurred half a dozen times inside brackets. '(Thirty-nine steps)' was the phrase; and at its last time of use it ran — '(Thirty-nine steps, I counted them — high tide 10.17 P.M.)'. I could make nothing of that.

The first thing I learned was that it was no question of preventing a war. That was coming, as sure as Christmas: had been arranged, said Scudder, ever since February 1912. Karolides was going to be the occasion. He was booked all right, and was to hand in his checks on June 14th, two weeks and four days from that May morning. I gathered from Scudder's notes that nothing on earth could prevent that. His talk of Epirote guards that would skin their own grandmothers was all billy-o.

The second thing was that this war was going to come as a mighty surprise to Britain. Karolides' death would set the Balkans by the ears, and then Vienna would chip in with an ultimatum. Russia wouldn't like that, and there would be high words. But Berlin would play the peacemaker, and pour oil on the waters, till suddenly she would find a good cause for a quarrel, pick it up, and in five hours let fly at us. That was the idea, and a pretty good one too. Honey and fair speeches, and then a stroke in the dark. While we were talking about the goodwill and good intentions of Germany our coast would be silently ringed with mines, and submarines would be waiting for every battleship.

But all this depended upon the third thing, which was due to happen on June 15th. I would never have grasped this if I hadn't once happened to meet a French staff officer, coming back from West Africa, who had told me a lot of things. One was that, in spite of all the nonsense talked in Parliament, there was a real working alliance between France and Britain, and that the two General Staffs met every now and then, and made plans for joint action in case of war. Well, in June a very great swell was coming over from Paris, and he was going to get nothing less than a statement of the disposition of the British Home Fleet on mobilization. At least I gathered it was something like that; anyhow, it was something uncommonly important.

But on the 15th day of June there were to be others in London — others, at whom I could only guess. Scudder was content to call them collectively the 'Black Stone'. They represented not our Allies, but our deadly foes; and the information, destined for France, was to be diverted to their pockets. And it was to be used, remember — used a week or two later, with great guns and swift torpedoes, suddenly in the darkness of a summer night.

This was the story I had been deciphering in a back room of a country inn, overlooking a cabbage garden. This was the story that hummed in my brain as I swung in the big touring-car from glen to glen.

My first impulse had been to write a letter to the Prime Minister, but a little reflection convinced me that that would be useless. Who would believe my tale? I must show a sign, some token in proof, and Heaven knew what that could be. Above all, I must keep going myself, ready to act when things got riper, and that was going to be no light job with the police of the British Isles in full cry after me and the watchers of the Black Stone running silently and swiftly on my trail.

I had no very clear purpose in my journey, but I steered east by the sun, for I remembered from the map that if I went north I would come into a region of coalpits and industrial towns. Presently I was down from the moorlands and traversing the broad haugh of a river. For miles I ran alongside a park wall, and in a break of the trees I saw a great castle. I swung through little old thatched villages, and over peaceful lowland streams, and past gardens blazing with hawthorn and yellow laburnum. The land was so deep in peace that I could scarcely believe that somewhere behind me were those who sought my life; ay, and that in a month's time, unless I had the almightiest of luck, these round country faces would be pinched and staring, and men would be lying dead in English fields.

About mid-day I entered a long straggling village, and had a mind to stop and eat. Half-way down was the Post Office, and on the steps of it stood the postmistress and a policeman hard at work conning a telegram. When they saw me they wakened up, and the policeman advanced with raised hand, and cried on me to stop.

I nearly was fool enough to obey. Then it flashed upon me that the wire had to do with me; that my friends at the inn had come to an understanding, and were united in desiring to see more of me, and that it had been easy enough for them to wire the description of me and the car to thirty villages through which I might pass. I released the brakes just in time. As it was, the policeman made a claw at the hood, and only dropped off when he got my left in his eye.

I saw that main roads were no place for me, and turned into the byways. It wasn't an easy job without a map, for there was the risk of getting on to a farm road and ending in a duck-pond or a stable-yard, and I couldn't afford that kind of delay. I began to see what an ass I had been to steal the car. The big green brute would be the safest kind of clue to me over the breadth of Scotland. If I left it and took to my feet, it would be discovered in an hour or two and I would get no start in the race.

The immediate thing to do was to get to the loneliest roads. These I soon found when I struck up a tributary of the big river, and got into a glen with steep hills all about me, and a corkscrew road at the end which climbed over a pass. Here I met nobody, but it was taking me too far north, so I slewed east along a bad track and finally struck a big double-line railway. Away below me I saw another broadish valley, and it occurred to me that if I crossed it I might find some remote inn to pass the night. The evening was now drawing in, and I was furiously hungry, for I had eaten nothing since breakfast except a couple of buns I had bought from a baker's cart. Just then I heard a noise in the sky, and lo and behold there was that infernal aeroplane, flying low, about a dozen miles to the south and rapidly coming towards me.

I had the sense to remember that on a bare moor I was at the aeroplane's mercy, and that my only chance was to get to the leafy cover of the valley. Down the hill I went like blue lightning, screwing my head round, whenever I dared, to watch that damned flying machine. Soon I was on a road between hedges, and dipping to the deep-cut glen of a stream. Then came a bit of thick wood where I slackened speed.

Suddenly on my left I heard the hoot of another car, and realized to my horror that I was almost up on a couple of gate-posts through which a private road debouched on the highway. My horn gave an agonized roar, but it was too late. I clapped on my brakes, but my impetus was too great, and there before me a car was sliding athwart my course. In a second there would have been the deuce of a wreck. I did the only thing possible, and ran slap into the hedge on the right, trusting to find something soft beyond.

But there I was mistaken. My car slithered through the hedge like butter, and then gave a sickening plunge forward. I saw what was coming, leapt on the seat and would have jumped out. But a branch of hawthorn got me in the chest, lifted me up and held me, while a ton or two of expensive metal slipped below me, bucked and pitched, and then dropped with an almighty smash fifty feet to the bed of the stream.

Slowly that thorn let me go. I subsided first on the hedge, and then very gently on a bower of nettles. As I scrambled to my feet a hand took me by the arm, and a sympathetic and badly scared voice asked me if I were hurt.

I found myself looking at a tall young man in goggles and a leather ulster, who kept on blessing his soul and whinnying

apologies. For myself, once I got my wind back, I was rather glad than otherwise. This was one way of getting rid of the car.

'My blame, Sir,' I answered him. 'It's lucky that I did not add homicide to my follies. That's the end of my Scotch motor tour, but it might have been the end of my life.'

He plucked out a watch and studied it. 'You're the right sort of fellow,' he said. 'I can spare a quarter of an hour, and my house is two minutes off. I'll see you clothed and fed and snug in bed. Where's your kit, by the way? Is it in the burn along with the car?'

'It's in my pocket,' I said, brandishing a toothbrush. 'I'm a Colonial and travel light.'

'A Colonial,' he cried. 'By Gad, you're the very man I've been praying for. Are you by any blessed chance a Free Trader?'

'I am,' said I, without the foggiest notion of what he meant.

He patted my shoulder and hurried me into his car. Three minutes later we drew up before a comfortable-looking shooting box set among pine-trees, and he ushered me indoors. He took me first to a bedroom and flung half a dozen of his suits before me, for my own had been pretty well reduced to rags. I selected a loose blue serge, which differed most conspicuously from my former garments, and borrowed a linen collar. Then he haled me to the dining-room, where the remnants of a meal stood on the table, and announced that I had just five minutes to feed. 'You can take a snack in your pocket, and we'll have supper when we get back. I've got to be at the Masonic Hall at eight o'clock, or my agent will comb my hair.'

I had a cup of coffee and some cold ham, while he yarned away on the hearth-rug.

'You find me in the deuce of a mess, Mr — by-the-by, you haven't told me your name. Twisdon? Any relation of old Tommy Twisdon of the Sixtieth? No? Well, you see I'm Liberal Candidate for this part of the world, and I had a meeting on tonight at Brattleburn — that's my chief town, and an infernal Tory stronghold. I had got the Colonial ex-Premier fellow, Crumpleton, coming to speak for me tonight, and had the thing tremendously billed and the whole place ground-baited. This afternoon I had a wire from the ruffian saying he had got influenza at Blackpool, and here am I left to do the whole thing myself. I had meant to speak for ten minutes and must now go on for forty, and, though I've been racking my brains for three hours to think of something, I simply cannot last the course. Now you've got to be a good chap and help me. You're a Free Trader and can tell our people what a wash-out Protection is in the Colonies. All you fellows have the gift of the gab — I wish to Heaven I had it. I'll be for evermore in your debt.'

I had very few notions about Free Trade one way or the other, but I saw no other chance to get what I wanted. My young gentleman was far too absorbed in his own difficulties to think how odd it was to ask a stranger who had just missed death by an ace and had lost a 1,000-guinea car to address a meeting for him on the spur of the moment. But my necessities did not allow me to contemplate oddnesses or to pick and choose my supports.

'All right,' I said. 'I'm not much good as a speaker, but I'll tell them a bit about Australia.'

At my words the cares of the ages slipped from his shoulders, and he was rapturous in his thanks. He lent me a big driving coat — and never troubled to ask why I had started on a motor tour without possessing an ulster — and, as we slipped down the dusty roads, poured into my ears the simple facts of his history. He was an orphan, and his uncle had brought him up — I've forgotten the uncle's name, but he was in the Cabinet, and you can read his speeches in the papers. He had gone round the world after leaving Cambridge, and then, being short of a job, his uncle had advised politics. I gathered that he had no preference in parties. 'Good chaps in both,' he said cheerfully, 'and plenty of blighters, too. I'm Liberal, because my family have always been Whigs.' But if he was lukewarm politically he had strong views on other things. He found out I knew a bit about horses, and jawed away about the Derby entries; and he was full of plans for improving his shooting. Altogether, a very clean, decent, callow young man.

As we passed through a little town two policemen signalled us to stop, and flashed their lanterns on us.

'Beg pardon, Sir Harry,' said one. 'We've got instructions to look out for a car, and the description's no unlike yours.'

'Right-o,' said my host, while I thanked Providence for the devious ways I had been brought to safety. After that he spoke no more, for his mind began to labour heavily with his coming speech. His lips kept muttering, his eye wandered, and I began to prepare myself for a second catastrophe. I tried to think of something to say myself, but my mind was dry as a stone. The next thing I knew we had drawn up outside a door in a street, and were being welcomed by some noisy gentlemen with rosettes. The hall had about five hundred in it, women mostly, a lot of bald heads, and a dozen or two

young men. The chairman, a weaselly minister with a reddish nose, lamented Crumpleton's absence, soliloquized on his influenza, and gave me a certificate as a 'trusted leader of Australian thought'. There were two policemen at the door, and I hoped they took note of that testimonial. Then Sir Harry started.

I never heard anything like it. He didn't begin to know how to talk. He had about a bushel of notes from which he read, and when he let go of them he fell into one prolonged stutter. Every now and then he remembered a phrase he had learned by heart, straightened his back, and gave it off like Henry Irving, and the next moment he was bent double and crooning over his papers. It was the most appalling rot, too. He talked about the 'German menace', and said it was all a Tory invention to cheat the poor of their rights and keep back the great flood of social reform, but that 'organized labour' realized this and laughed the Tories to scorn. He was all for reducing our Navy as a proof of our good faith, and then sending Germany an ultimatum telling her to do the same or we would knock her into a cocked hat. He said that, but for the Tories, Germany and Britain would be fellow-workers in peace and reform. I thought of the little black book in my pocket! A giddy lot Scudder's friends cared for peace and reform.

Yet in a queer way I liked the speech. You could see the niceness of the chap shining out behind the muck with which he had been spoon-fed. Also it took a load off my mind. I mightn't be much of an orator, but I was a thousand per cent better than Sir Harry.

I didn't get on so badly when it came to my turn. I simply told them all I could remember about Australia, praying there should be no Australian there — all about its labour party and emigration and universal service. I doubt if I remembered to mention Free Trade, but I said there were no Tories in Australia, only Labour and Liberals. That fetched a cheer, and I woke them up a bit when I started in to tell them the kind of glorious business I thought could be made out of the Empire if we really put our backs into it.

Altogether I fancy I was rather a success. The minister didn't like me, though, and when he proposed a vote of thanks, spoke of Sir Harry's speech as 'statesmanlike' and mine as having 'the eloquence of an emigration agent'.

When we were in the car again my host was in wild spirits at having got his job over. 'A ripping speech, Twisdon,' he said. 'Now, you're coming home with me. I'm all alone, and if you'll stop a day or two I'll show you some very decent fishing.'

We had a hot supper — and I wanted it pretty badly — and then drank grog in a big cheery smoking-room with a crackling wood fire. I thought the time had come for me to put my cards on the table. I saw by this man's eye that he was the kind you can trust.

'Listen, Sir Harry,' I said. 'I've something pretty important to say to you. You're a good fellow, and I'm going to be frank. Where on earth did you get that poisonous rubbish you talked tonight?'

His face fell. 'Was it as bad as that?' he asked ruefully. 'It did sound rather thin. I got most of it out of the *Progressive Magazine* and pamphlets that agent chap of mine keeps sending me. But you surely don't think Germany would ever go to war with us?'

'Ask that question in six weeks and it won't need an answer,' I said. 'If you'll give me your attention for half an hour I am going to tell you a story.'

I can see yet that bright room with the deers' heads and the old prints on the walls, Sir Harry standing restlessly on the stone curb of the hearth, and myself lying back in an armchair, speaking. I seemed to be another person, standing aside and listening to my own voice, and judging carefully the reliability of my tale. It was the first time I had ever told anyone the exact truth, so far as I understood it, and it did me no end of good, for it straightened out the thing in my own mind. I blinked no detail. He heard all about Scudder, and the milkman, and the note-book, and my doings in Galloway. Presently he got very excited and walked up and down the hearth-rug.

'So you see,' I concluded, 'you have got here in your house the man that is wanted for the Portland Place murder. Your duty is to send your car for the police and give me up. I don't think I'll get very far. There'll be an accident, and I'll have a knife in my ribs an hour or so after arrest. Nevertheless, it's your duty, as a law-abiding citizen. Perhaps in a month's time you'll be sorry, but you have no cause to think of that.'

He was looking at me with bright steady eyes. 'What was your job in Rhodesia, Mr Hannay?' he asked.

'Mining engineer,' I said. 'I've made my pile cleanly and I've had a good time in the making of it.'

'Not a profession that weakens the nerves, is it?'

I laughed. 'Oh, as to that, my nerves are good enough.' I took down a hunting-knife from a stand on the wall, and did the old Mashona trick of tossing it and catching it in my lips. That wants a pretty steady heart.

He watched me with a smile. 'I don't want proof. I may be an ass on the platform, but I can size up a man. You're no murderer and you're no fool, and I believe you are speaking the truth. I'm going to back you up. Now, what can I do?'

'First, I want you to write a letter to your uncle. I've got to get in touch with the Government people sometime before the 15th of June.'

He pulled his moustache. 'That won't help you. This is Foreign Office business, and my uncle would have nothing to do with it. Besides, you'd never convince him. No, I'll go one better. I'll write to the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office. He's my godfather, and one of the best going. What do you want?'

He sat down at a table and wrote to my dictation. The gist of it was that if a man called Twisdon (I thought I had better stick to that name) turned up before June 15th he was to entreat him kindly. He said Twisdon would prove his bona fides by passing the word 'Black Stone' and whistling 'Annie Laurie'.

'Good,' said Sir Harry. 'That's the proper style. By the way, you'll find my godfather — his name's Sir Walter Bullivant — down at his country cottage for Whitsuntide. It's close to Artinswell on the Kenner. That's done. Now, what's the next thing?'

'You're about my height. Lend me the oldest tweed suit you've got. Anything will do, so long as the colour is the opposite of the clothes I destroyed this afternoon. Then show me a map of the neighbourhood and explain to me the lie of the land. Lastly, if the police come seeking me, just show them the car in the glen. If the other lot turn up, tell them I caught the south express after your meeting.'

He did, or promised to do, all these things. I shaved off the remnants of my moustache, and got inside an ancient suit of what I believe is called heather mixture. The map gave me some notion of my whereabouts, and told me the two things I wanted to know — where the main railway to the south could be joined and what were the wildest districts near at hand. At two o'clock he wakened me from my slumbers in the smoking-room armchair, and led me blinking into the dark starry night. An old bicycle was found in a tool-shed and handed over to me.

'First turn to the right up by the long fir-wood,' he enjoined. 'By daybreak you'll be well into the hills. Then I should pitch the machine into a bog and take to the moors on foot. You can put in a week among the shepherds, and be as safe as if you were in New Guinea.'

I pedalled diligently up steep roads of hill gravel till the skies grew pale with morning. As the mists cleared before the sun, I found myself in a wide green world with glens falling on every side and a far-away blue horizon. Here, at any rate, I could get early news of my enemies.



CHAPTER FIVE

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SPECTACLED ROADMAN

I sat down on the very crest of the pass and took stock of my position.

Behind me was the road climbing through a long cleft in the hills, which was the upper glen of some notable river. In front was a flat space of maybe a mile, all pitted with bog-holes and rough with tussocks, and then beyond it the road fell steeply down another glen to a plain whose blue dimness melted into the distance. To left and right were round-shouldered green hills as smooth as pancakes, but to the south — that is, the left hand — there was a glimpse of high heathery mountains, which I remembered from the map as the big knot of hill which I had chosen for my sanctuary. I was on the central boss of a huge upland country, and could see everything moving for miles. In the meadows below the road half a mile back a cottage smoked, but it was the only sign of human life. Otherwise there was only the calling of plovers and the tinkling of little streams.

It was now about seven o'clock, and as I waited I heard once again that ominous beat in the air. Then I realized that my vantage-ground might be in reality a trap. There was no cover for a tomtit in those bald green places.

I sat quite still and hopeless while the beat grew louder. Then I saw an aeroplane coming up from the east. It was flying high, but as I looked it dropped several hundred feet and began to circle round the knot of hill in narrowing circles, just as a hawk wheels before it pounces. Now it was flying very low, and now the observer on board caught sight of me. I could see one of the two occupants examining me through glasses.

Suddenly it began to rise in swift whorls, and the next I knew it was speeding eastward again till it became a speck in the blue morning.

That made me do some savage thinking. My enemies had located me, and the next thing would be a cordon round me. I didn't know what force they could command, but I was certain it would be sufficient. The aeroplane had seen my bicycle, and would conclude that I would try to escape by the road. In that case there might be a chance on the moors to the right or left. I wheeled the machine a hundred yards from the highway, and plunged it into a moss-hole, where it sank among pond-weed and water-buttercups. Then I climbed to a knoll which gave me a view of the two valleys. Nothing was stirring on the long white ribbon that threaded them.

I have said there was not cover in the whole place to hide a rat. As the day advanced it was flooded with soft fresh light till it had the fragrant sunniness of the South African veld. At other times I would have liked the place, but now it seemed to suffocate me. The free moorlands were prison walls, and the keen hill air was the breath of a dungeon.

I tossed a coin — heads right, tails left — and it fell heads, so I turned to the north. In a little I came to the brow of the ridge which was the containing wall of the pass. I saw the highroad for maybe ten miles, and far down it something that was moving, and that I took to be a motor-car. Beyond the ridge I looked on a rolling green moor, which fell away into wooded glens.

Now my life on the veld has given me the eyes of a kite, and I can see things for which most men need a telescope . . . Away down the slope, a couple of miles away, several men were advancing, like a row of beaters at a shoot . . .

I dropped out of sight behind the sky-line. That way was shut to me, and I must try the bigger hills to the south beyond the highway. The car I had noticed was getting nearer, but it was still a long way off with some very steep gradients before it. I ran hard, crouching low except in the hollows, and as I ran I kept scanning the brow of the hill before me. Was it imagination, or did I see figures — one, two, perhaps more — moving in a glen beyond the stream?

If you are hemmed in on all sides in a patch of land there is only one chance of escape. You must stay in the patch, and let your enemies search it and not find you. That was good sense, but how on earth was I to escape notice in that table-cloth of a place? I would have buried myself to the neck in mud or lain below water or climbed the tallest tree. But there was not a stick of wood, the bog-holes were little puddles, the stream was a slender trickle. There was nothing but short heather, and bare hill bent, and the white highway.

Then in a tiny bight of road, beside a heap of stones, I found the roadman.

He had just arrived, and was wearily flinging down his hammer. He looked at me with a fishy eye and yawned.

‘Confoond the day I ever left the herdin’!’ he said, as if to the world at large. ‘There I was my ain maister. Now I’m a slave to the Goavernment, tethered to the roadside, wi’ sair een, and a back like a suckle.’

He took up the hammer, struck a stone, dropped the implement with an oath, and put both hands to his ears. ‘Mercy on me! My heid’s burstin’!’ he cried.

He was a wild figure, about my own size but much bent, with a week’s beard on his chin, and a pair of big horn spectacles.

‘I canna dae’t,’ he cried again. ‘The Surveyor maun just report me. I’m for my bed.’

I asked him what was the trouble, though indeed that was clear enough.

‘The trouble is that I’m no sober. Last nicht my dochter Merran was waddit, and they danced till fower in the byre. Me and some ither chieles sat down to the drinkin’, and here I am. Peety that I ever lookit on the wine when it was red!’

I agreed with him about bed. ‘It’s easy speakin’,’ he moaned. ‘But I got a postcard yestreen sayin’ that the new Road Surveyor would be round the day. He’ll come and he’ll no find me, or else he’ll find me fou, and either way I’m a done man. I’ll awa’ back to my bed and say I’m no weel, but I doot that’ll no help me, for they ken my kind o’ no-weel-ness.’

Then I had an inspiration. ‘Does the new Surveyor know you?’ I asked.

‘No him. He’s just been a week at the job. He rins about in a wee motor-cawr, and wad speir the inside oot o’ a whelk.’

‘Where’s your house?’ I asked, and was directed by a wavering finger to the cottage by the stream.

‘Well, back to your bed,’ I said, ‘and sleep in peace. I’ll take on your job for a bit and see the Surveyor.’

He stared at me blankly; then, as the notion dawned on his fuddled brain, his face broke into the vacant drunkard’s smile.

‘You’re the billy,’ he cried. ‘It’ll be easy eneuch managed. I’ve finished that bing o’ stanes, so you needna chap ony mair this forenoon. Just take the barry, and wheel eneuch metal frae yon quarry doon the road to mak anither bing the morn. My name’s Alexander Turnbull, and I’ve been seeven year at the trade, and twenty afore that herdin’ on Leithen Water. My freens ca’ me Ecky, and whiles Specky, for I wear glesses, being waik i’ the sicht. Just you speak the Surveyor fair, and ca’ him Sir, and he’ll be fell pleased. I’ll be back or mid-day.’

I borrowed his spectacles and filthy old hat; stripped off coat, waistcoat, and collar, and gave him them to carry home; borrowed, too, the foul stump of a clay pipe as an extra property. He indicated my simple tasks, and without more ado set off at an amble bedwards. Bed may have been his chief object, but I think there was also something left in the foot of a bottle. I prayed that he might be safe under cover before my friends arrived on the scene.

Then I set to work to dress for the part. I opened the collar of my shirt — it was a vulgar blue-and-white check such as ploughmen wear — and revealed a neck as brown as any tinker’s. I rolled up my sleeves, and there was a forearm which might have been a blacksmith’s, sunburnt and rough with old scars. I got my boots and trouser-legs all white from the dust of the road, and hitched up my trousers, tying them with string below the knee. Then I set to work on my face. With a handful of dust I made a water-mark round my neck, the place where Mr Turnbull’s Sunday ablutions might be expected to stop. I rubbed a good deal of dirt also into the sunburn of my cheeks. A roadman’s eyes would no doubt be a little inflamed, so I contrived to get some dust in both of mine, and by dint of vigorous rubbing produced a bleary effect.

The sandwiches Sir Harry had given me had gone off with my coat, but the roadman’s lunch, tied up in a red handkerchief, was at my disposal. I ate with great relish several of the thick slabs of scone and cheese and drank a little of the cold tea. In the handkerchief was a local paper tied with string and addressed to Mr Turnbull — obviously meant to solace his mid-day leisure. I did up the bundle again, and put the paper conspicuously beside it.

My boots did not satisfy me, but by dint of kicking among the stones I reduced them to the granite-like surface which marks a roadman’s foot-gear. Then I bit and scraped my finger-nails till the edges were all cracked and uneven. The men I was matched against would miss no detail. I broke one of the bootlaces and retied it in a clumsy knot, and loosed the other so that my thick grey socks bulged over the uppers. Still no sign of anything on the road. The motor I had observed half an hour ago must have gone home.

My toilet complete, I took up the barrow and began my journeys to and from the quarry a hundred yards off.

I remember an old scout in Rhodesia, who had done many queer things in his day, once telling me that the secret of playing a part was to think yourself into it. You could never keep it up, he said, unless you could manage to convince

yourself that you were it. So I shut off all other thoughts and switched them on to the road-mending. I thought of the little white cottage as my home, I recalled the years I had spent herding on Leithen Water, I made my mind dwell lovingly on sleep in a box-bed and a bottle of cheap whisky. Still nothing appeared on that long white road.

Now and then a sheep wandered off the heather to stare at me. A heron flopped down to a pool in the stream and started to fish, taking no more notice of me than if I had been a milestone. On I went, trundling my loads of stone, with the heavy step of the professional. Soon I grew warm, and the dust on my face changed into solid and abiding grit. I was already counting the hours till evening should put a limit to Mr Turnbull's monotonous toil. Suddenly a crisp voice spoke from the road, and looking up I saw a little Ford two-seater, and a round-faced young man in a bowler hat.

'Are you Alexander Turnbull?' he asked. 'I am the new County Road Surveyor. You live at Blackhopefoot, and have charge of the section from Laidlawbyres to the Riggs? Good! A fair bit of road, Turnbull, and not badly engineered. A little soft about a mile off, and the edges want cleaning. See you look after that. Good morning. You'll know me the next time you see me.'

Clearly my get-up was good enough for the dreaded Surveyor. I went on with my work, and as the morning grew towards noon I was cheered by a little traffic. A baker's van breasted the hill, and sold me a bag of ginger biscuits which I stowed in my trouser-pockets against emergencies. Then a herd passed with sheep, and disturbed me somewhat by asking loudly, 'What had become o' Specky?'

'In bed wi' the colic,' I replied, and the herd passed on . . . just about mid-day a big car stole down the hill, glided past and drew up a hundred yards beyond. Its three occupants descended as if to stretch their legs, and sauntered towards me.

Two of the men I had seen before from the window of the Galloway inn — one lean, sharp, and dark, the other comfortable and smiling. The third had the look of a countryman — a vet, perhaps, or a small farmer. He was dressed in ill-cut knickerbockers, and the eye in his head was as bright and wary as a hen's.

'Morning,' said the last. 'That's a fine easy job o' yours.'

I had not looked up on their approach, and now, when accosted, I slowly and painfully straightened my back, after the manner of roadmen; spat vigorously, after the manner of the low Scot; and regarded them steadily before replying. I confronted three pairs of eyes that missed nothing.

'There's waur jobs and there's better,' I said sententiously. 'I wad rather hae yours, sittin' a' day on your hinderlands on thae cushions. It's you and your muckle cawrs that wreck my roads! If we a' had oor richts, ye sud be made to mend what ye break.'

The bright-eyed man was looking at the newspaper lying beside Turnbull's bundle.

'I see you get your papers in good time,' he said.

I glanced at it casually. 'Aye, in gude time. Seein' that that paper cam' out last Setterday I'm just sax days late.'

He picked it up, glanced at the superscription, and laid it down again. One of the others had been looking at my boots, and a word in German called the speaker's attention to them.

'You've a fine taste in boots,' he said. 'These were never made by a country shoemaker.'

'They were not,' I said readily. 'They were made in London. I got them frae the gentleman that was here last year for the shootin'. What was his name now?' And I scratched a forgetful head. Again the sleek one spoke in German. 'Let us get on,' he said. 'This fellow is all right.'

They asked one last question.

'Did you see anyone pass early this morning? He might be on a bicycle or he might be on foot.'

I very nearly fell into the trap and told a story of a bicyclist hurrying past in the grey dawn. But I had the sense to see my danger. I pretended to consider very deeply.

'I wasna up very early,' I said. 'Ye see, my dochter was merrit last nicht, and we keepit it up late. I opened the house door about seeven and there was naebody on the road then. Since I cam' up here there has just been the baker and the Ruchill herd, besides you gentlemen.'

One of them gave me a cigar, which I smelt gingerly and stuck in Turnbull's bundle. They got into their car and were out of sight in three minutes.

My heart leaped with an enormous relief, but I went on wheeling my stones. It was as well, for ten minutes later the

car returned, one of the occupants waving a hand to me. Those gentry left nothing to chance.

I finished Turnbull's bread and cheese, and pretty soon I had finished the stones. The next step was what puzzled me. I could not keep up this roadmaking business for long. A merciful Providence had kept Mr Turnbull indoors, but if he appeared on the scene there would be trouble. I had a notion that the cordon was still tight round the glen, and that if I walked in any direction I should meet with questioners. But get out I must. No man's nerve could stand more than a day of being spied on.

I stayed at my post till five o'clock. By that time I had resolved to go down to Turnbull's cottage at nightfall and take my chance of getting over the hills in the darkness. But suddenly a new car came up the road, and slowed down a yard or two from me. A fresh wind had risen, and the occupant wanted to light a cigarette. It was a touring car, with the tonneau full of an assortment of baggage. One man sat in it, and by an amazing chance I knew him. His name was Marmaduke Jopley, and he was an offence to creation. He was a sort of blood stockbroker, who did his business by toadying eldest sons and rich young peers and foolish old ladies. 'Marmie' was a familiar figure, I understood, at balls and polo-weeks and country houses. He was an adroit scandal-monger, and would crawl a mile on his belly to anything that had a title or a million. I had a business introduction to his firm when I came to London, and he was good enough to ask me to dinner at his club. There he showed off at a great rate, and pattered about his duchesses till the snobbery of the creature turned me sick. I asked a man afterwards why nobody kicked him, and was told that Englishmen revered the weaker sex.

Anyhow there he was now, nattily dressed, in a fine new car, obviously on his way to visit some of his smart friends. A sudden daftness took me, and in a second I had jumped into the tonneau and had him by the shoulder.

'Hullo, Jopley,' I sang out. 'Well met, my lad!' He got a horrid fright. His chin dropped as he stared at me. 'Who the devil are *you*?' he gasped.

'My name's Hannay,' I said. 'From Rhodesia, you remember.'

'Good God, the murderer!' he choked.

'Just so. And there'll be a second murder, my dear, if you don't do as I tell you. Give me that coat of yours. That cap, too.'

He did as bid, for he was blind with terror. Over my dirty trousers and vulgar shirt I put on his smart driving-coat, which buttoned high at the top and thereby hid the deficiencies of my collar. I stuck the cap on my head, and added his gloves to my get-up. The dusty roadman in a minute was transformed into one of the neatest motorists in Scotland. On Mr Jopley's head I clapped Turnbull's unspeakable hat, and told him to keep it there.

Then with some difficulty I turned the car. My plan was to go back the road he had come, for the watchers, having seen it before, would probably let it pass unremarked, and Marmie's figure was in no way like mine.

'Now, my child,' I said, 'sit quite still and be a good boy. I mean you no harm. I'm only borrowing your car for an hour or two. But if you play me any tricks, and above all if you open your mouth, as sure as there's a God above me I'll wring your neck. *Savez?*'

I enjoyed that evening's ride. We ran eight miles down the valley, through a village or two, and I could not help noticing several strange-looking folk lounging by the roadside. These were the watchers who would have had much to say to me if I had come in other garb or company. As it was, they looked incuriously on. One touched his cap in salute, and I responded graciously.

As the dark fell I turned up a side glen which, as I remember from the map, led into an unfrequented corner of the hills. Soon the villages were left behind, then the farms, and then even the wayside cottage. Presently we came to a lonely moor where the night was blackening the sunset gleam in the bog pools. Here we stopped, and I obligingly reversed the car and restored to Mr Jopley his belongings.

'A thousand thanks,' I said. 'There's more use in you than I thought. Now be off and find the police.'

As I sat on the hillside, watching the tail-light dwindle, I reflected on the various kinds of crime I had now sampled. Contrary to general belief, I was not a murderer, but I had become an unholy liar, a shameless impostor, and a highwayman with a marked taste for expensive motor-cars.



CHAPTER SIX

THE ADVENTURE OF THE BALD ARCHAEOLOGIST

I spent the night on a shelf of the hillside, in the lee of a boulder where the heather grew long and soft. It was a cold business, for I had neither coat nor waistcoat. These were in Mr Turnbull's keeping, as was Scudder's little book, my watch and — worst of all — my pipe and tobacco pouch. Only my money accompanied me in my belt, and about half a pound of ginger biscuits in my trousers pocket.

I supped off half those biscuits, and by worming myself deep into the heather got some kind of warmth. My spirits had risen, and I was beginning to enjoy this crazy game of hide-and-seek. So far I had been miraculously lucky. The milkman, the literary innkeeper, Sir Harry, the roadman, and the idiotic Marmie, were all pieces of undeserved good fortune. Somehow the first success gave me a feeling that I was going to pull the thing through.

My chief trouble was that I was desperately hungry. When a Jew shoots himself in the City and there is an inquest, the newspapers usually report that the deceased was 'well-nourished'. I remember thinking that they would not call me well-nourished if I broke my neck in a bog-hole. I lay and tortured myself — for the ginger biscuits merely emphasized the aching void — with the memory of all the good food I had thought so little of in London. There were Paddock's crisp sausages and fragrant shavings of bacon, and shapely poached eggs — how often I had turned up my nose at them! There were the cutlets they did at the club, and a particular ham that stood on the cold table, for which my soul lusted. My thoughts hovered over all varieties of mortal edible, and finally settled on a porterhouse steak and a quart of bitter with a welsh rabbit to follow. In longing hopelessly for these dainties I fell asleep.

I woke very cold and stiff about an hour after dawn. It took me a little while to remember where I was, for I had been very weary and had slept heavily. I saw first the pale blue sky through a net of heather, then a big shoulder of hill, and then my own boots placed neatly in a blaeberry bush. I raised myself on my arms and looked down into the valley, and that one look set me lacing up my boots in mad haste.

For there were men below, not more than a quarter of a mile off, spaced out on the hillside like a fan, and beating the heather. Marmie had not been slow in looking for his revenge.

I crawled out of my shelf into the cover of a boulder, and from it gained a shallow trench which slanted up the mountain face. This led me presently into the narrow gully of a burn, by way of which I scrambled to the top of the ridge. From there I looked back, and saw that I was still undiscovered. My pursuers were patiently quartering the hillside and moving upwards.

Keeping behind the skyline I ran for maybe half a mile, till I judged I was above the uppermost end of the glen. Then I showed myself, and was instantly noted by one of the flankers, who passed the word to the others. I heard cries coming up from below, and saw that the line of search had changed its direction. I pretended to retreat over the skyline, but instead went back the way I had come, and in twenty minutes was behind the ridge overlooking my sleeping place. From that viewpoint I had the satisfaction of seeing the pursuit streaming up the hill at the top of the glen on a hopelessly false scent.

I had before me a choice of routes, and I chose a ridge which made an angle with the one I was on, and so would soon put a deep glen between me and my enemies. The exercise had warmed my blood, and I was beginning to enjoy myself amazingly. As I went I breakfasted on the dusty remnants of the ginger biscuits.

I knew very little about the country, and I hadn't a notion what I was going to do. I trusted to the strength of my legs, but I was well aware that those behind me would be familiar with the lie of the land, and that my ignorance would be a heavy handicap. I saw in front of me a sea of hills, rising very high towards the south, but northwards breaking down into broad ridges which separated wide and shallow dales. The ridge I had chosen seemed to sink after a mile or two to a moor which lay like a pocket in the uplands. That seemed as good a direction to take as any other.

My stratagem had given me a fair start — call it twenty minutes — and I had the width of a glen behind me before I saw the first heads of the pursuers. The police had evidently called in local talent to their aid, and the men I could see had the appearance of herds or gamekeepers. They hallooed at the sight of me, and I waved my hand. Two dived into the glen and began to climb my ridge, while the others kept their own side of the hill. I felt as if I were taking part in a schoolboy game

of hare and hounds.

But very soon it began to seem less of a game. Those fellows behind were hefty men on their native heath. Looking back I saw that only three were following direct, and I guessed that the others had fetched a circuit to cut me off. My lack of local knowledge might very well be my undoing, and I resolved to get out of this tangle of glens to the pocket of moor I had seen from the tops. I must so increase my distance as to get clear away from them, and I believed I could do this if I could find the right ground for it. If there had been cover I would have tried a bit of stalking, but on these bare slopes you could see a fly a mile off. My hope must be in the length of my legs and the soundness of my wind, but I needed easier ground for that, for I was not bred a mountaineer. How I longed for a good Afrikander pony!

I put on a great spurt and got off my ridge and down into the moor before any figures appeared on the skyline behind me. I crossed a burn, and came out on a highroad which made a pass between two glens. All in front of me was a big field of heather sloping up to a crest which was crowned with an odd feather of trees. In the dyke by the roadside was a gate, from which a grass-grown track led over the first wave of the moor.

I jumped the dyke and followed it, and after a few hundred yards — as soon as it was out of sight of the highway — the grass stopped and it became a very respectable road, which was evidently kept with some care. Clearly it ran to a house, and I began to think of doing the same. Hitherto my luck had held, and it might be that my best chance would be found in this remote dwelling. Anyhow there were trees there, and that meant cover.

I did not follow the road, but the burnside which flanked it on the right, where the bracken grew deep and the high banks made a tolerable screen. It was well I did so, for no sooner had I gained the hollow than, looking back, I saw the pursuit topping the ridge from which I had descended.

After that I did not look back; I had no time. I ran up the burnside, crawling over the open places, and for a large part wading in the shallow stream. I found a deserted cottage with a row of phantom peat-stacks and an overgrown garden. Then I was among young hay, and very soon had come to the edge of a plantation of wind-blown firs. From there I saw the chimneys of the house smoking a few hundred yards to my left. I forsook the burnside, crossed another dyke, and almost before I knew was on a rough lawn. A glance back told me that I was well out of sight of the pursuit, which had not yet passed the first lift of the moor.

The lawn was a very rough place, cut with a scythe instead of a mower, and planted with beds of scrubby rhododendrons. A brace of black-game, which are not usually garden birds, rose at my approach. The house before me was the ordinary moorland farm, with a more pretentious whitewashed wing added. Attached to this wing was a glass veranda, and through the glass I saw the face of an elderly gentleman meekly watching me.

I stalked over the border of coarse hill gravel and entered the open veranda door. Within was a pleasant room, glass on one side, and on the other a mass of books. More books showed in an inner room. On the floor, instead of tables, stood cases such as you see in a museum, filled with coins and queer stone implements.

There was a knee-hole desk in the middle, and seated at it, with some papers and open volumes before him, was the benevolent old gentleman. His face was round and shiny, like Mr Pickwick's, big glasses were stuck on the end of his nose, and the top of his head was as bright and bare as a glass bottle. He never moved when I entered, but raised his placid eyebrows and waited on me to speak.

It was not an easy job, with about five minutes to spare, to tell a stranger who I was and what I wanted, and to win his aid. I did not attempt it. There was something about the eye of the man before me, something so keen and knowledgeable, that I could not find a word. I simply stared at him and stuttered.

'You seem in a hurry, my friend,' he said slowly.

I nodded towards the window. It gave a prospect across the moor through a gap in the plantation, and revealed certain figures half a mile off straggling through the heather.

'Ah, I see,' he said, and took up a pair of field-glasses through which he patiently scrutinized the figures.

'A fugitive from justice, eh? Well, we'll go into the matter at our leisure. Meantime I object to my privacy being broken in upon by the clumsy rural policeman. Go into my study, and you will see two doors facing you. Take the one on the left and close it behind you. You will be perfectly safe.'

And this extraordinary man took up his pen again.

I did as I was bid, and found myself in a little dark chamber which smelt of chemicals, and was lit only by a tiny

window high up in the wall. The door had swung behind me with a click like the door of a safe. Once again I had found an unexpected sanctuary.

All the same I was not comfortable. There was something about the old gentleman which puzzled and rather terrified me. He had been too easy and ready, almost as if he had expected me. And his eyes had been horribly intelligent.

No sound came to me in that dark place. For all I knew the police might be searching the house, and if they did they would want to know what was behind this door. I tried to possess my soul in patience, and to forget how hungry I was.

Then I took a more cheerful view. The old gentleman could scarcely refuse me a meal, and I fell to reconstructing my breakfast. Bacon and eggs would content me, but I wanted the better part of a fitch of bacon and half a hundred eggs. And then, while my mouth was watering in anticipation, there was a click and the door stood open.

I emerged into the sunlight to find the master of the house sitting in a deep armchair in the room he called his study, and regarding me with curious eyes.

‘Have they gone?’ I asked.

‘They have gone. I convinced them that you had crossed the hill. I do not choose that the police should come between me and one whom I am delighted to honour. This is a lucky morning for you, Mr Richard Hannay.’

As he spoke his eyelids seemed to tremble and to fall a little over his keen grey eyes. In a flash the phrase of Scudder’s came back to me, when he had described the man he most dreaded in the world. He had said that he ‘could hood his eyes like a hawk’. Then I saw that I had walked straight into the enemy’s headquarters.

My first impulse was to throttle the old ruffian and make for the open air. He seemed to anticipate my intention, for he smiled gently, and nodded to the door behind me.

I turned, and saw two men-servants who had me covered with pistols.

He knew my name, but he had never seen me before. And as the reflection darted across my mind I saw a slender chance.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ I said roughly. ‘And who are you calling Richard Hannay? My name’s Ainslie.’

‘So?’ he said, still smiling. ‘But of course you have others. We won’t quarrel about a name.’

I was pulling myself together now, and I reflected that my garb, lacking coat and waistcoat and collar, would at any rate not betray me. I put on my surliest face and shrugged my shoulders.

‘I suppose you’re going to give me up after all, and I call it a damned dirty trick. My God, I wish I had never seen that cursed motor-car! Here’s the money and be damned to you,’ and I flung four sovereigns on the table.

He opened his eyes a little. ‘Oh no, I shall not give you up. My friends and I will have a little private settlement with you, that is all. You know a little too much, Mr Hannay. You are a clever actor, but not quite clever enough.’

He spoke with assurance, but I could see the dawning of a doubt in his mind.

‘Oh, for God’s sake stop jawing,’ I cried. ‘Everything’s against me. I haven’t had a bit of luck since I came on shore at Leith. What’s the harm in a poor devil with an empty stomach picking up some money he finds in a bust-up motor-car? That’s all I done, and for that I’ve been chivvied for two days by those blasted bobbies over those blasted hills. I tell you I’m fair sick of it. You can do what you like, old boy! Ned Ainslie’s got no fight left in him.’

I could see that the doubt was gaining.

‘Will you oblige me with the story of your recent doings?’ he asked.

‘I can’t, guv’nor,’ I said in a real beggar’s whine. ‘I’ve not had a bite to eat for two days. Give me a mouthful of food, and then you’ll hear God’s truth.’

I must have showed my hunger in my face, for he signalled to one of the men in the doorway. A bit of cold pie was brought and a glass of beer, and I wolfed them down like a pig — or rather, like Ned Ainslie, for I was keeping up my character. In the middle of my meal he spoke suddenly to me in German, but I turned on him a face as blank as a stone wall.

Then I told him my story — how I had come off an Archangel ship at Leith a week ago, and was making my way overland to my brother at Wigtown. I had run short of cash — I hinted vaguely at a spree — and I was pretty well on my uppers when I had come on a hole in a hedge, and, looking through, had seen a big motor-car lying in the burn. I had poked about to see what had happened, and had found three sovereigns lying on the seat and one on the floor. There was

nobody there or any sign of an owner, so I had pocketed the cash. But somehow the law had got after me. When I had tried to change a sovereign in a baker's shop, the woman had cried on the police, and a little later, when I was washing my face in a burn, I had been nearly gripped, and had only got away by leaving my coat and waistcoat behind me.

'They can have the money back,' I cried, 'for a fat lot of good it's done me. Those perishers are all down on a poor man. Now, if it had been you, guv'nor, that had found the quids, nobody would have troubled you.'

'You're a good liar, Hannay,' he said.

I flew into a rage. 'Stop fooling, damn you! I tell you my name's Ainslie, and I never heard of anyone called Hannay in my born days. I'd sooner have the police than you with your Hannays and your monkey-faced pistol tricks . . . No, guv'nor, I beg pardon, I don't mean that. I'm much obliged to you for the grub, and I'll thank you to let me go now the coast's clear.'

It was obvious that he was badly puzzled. You see he had never seen me, and my appearance must have altered considerably from my photographs, if he had got one of them. I was pretty smart and well dressed in London, and now I was a regular tramp.

'I do not propose to let you go. If you are what you say you are, you will soon have a chance of clearing yourself. If you are what I believe you are, I do not think you will see the light much longer.'

He rang a bell, and a third servant appeared from the veranda.

'I want the Lanchester in five minutes,' he said. 'There will be three to luncheon.'

Then he looked steadily at me, and that was the hardest ordeal of all.

There was something weird and devilish in those eyes, cold, malignant, unearthly, and most hellishly clever. They fascinated me like the bright eyes of a snake. I had a strong impulse to throw myself on his mercy and offer to join his side, and if you consider the way I felt about the whole thing you will see that that impulse must have been purely physical, the weakness of a brain mesmerized and mastered by a stronger spirit. But I managed to stick it out and even to grin.

'You'll know me next time, guv'nor,' I said.

'Karl,' he spoke in German to one of the men in the doorway, 'you will put this fellow in the storeroom till I return, and you will be answerable to me for his keeping.'

I was marched out of the room with a pistol at each ear.

The storeroom was a damp chamber in what had been the old farmhouse. There was no carpet on the uneven floor, and nothing to sit down on but a school form. It was black as pitch, for the windows were heavily shuttered. I made out by groping that the walls were lined with boxes and barrels and sacks of some heavy stuff. The whole place smelt of mould and disuse. My gaolers turned the key in the door, and I could hear them shifting their feet as they stood on guard outside.

I sat down in that chilly darkness in a very miserable frame of mind. The old boy had gone off in a motor to collect the two ruffians who had interviewed me yesterday. Now, they had seen me as the roadman, and they would remember me, for I was in the same rig. What was a roadman doing twenty miles from his beat, pursued by the police? A question or two would put them on the track. Probably they had seen Mr Turnbull, probably Marmie too; most likely they could link me up with Sir Harry, and then the whole thing would be crystal clear. What chance had I in this moorland house with three desperadoes and their armed servants?

I began to think wistfully of the police, now plodding over the hills after my wraith. They at any rate were fellow-countrymen and honest men, and their tender mercies would be kinder than these ghoulish aliens. But they wouldn't have listened to me. That old devil with the eyelids had not taken long to get rid of them. I thought he probably had some kind of graft with the constabulary. Most likely he had letters from Cabinet Ministers saying he was to be given every facility for plotting against Britain. That's the sort of owlish way we run our politics in the Old Country.

The three would be back for lunch, so I hadn't more than a couple of hours to wait. It was simply waiting on destruction, for I could see no way out of this mess. I wished that I had Scudder's courage, for I am free to confess I didn't feel any great fortitude. The only thing that kept me going was that I was pretty furious. It made me boil with rage to think of those three spies getting the pull on me like this. I hoped that at any rate I might be able to twist one of their necks before they downed me.

The more I thought of it the angrier I grew, and I had to get up and move about the room. I tried the shutters, but they were the kind that lock with a key, and I couldn't move them. From the outside came the faint clucking of hens in the warm

sun. Then I groped among the sacks and boxes. I couldn't open the latter, and the sacks seemed to be full of things like dog-biscuits that smelt of cinnamon. But, as I circumnavigated the room, I found a handle in the wall which seemed worth investigating.

It was the door of a wall cupboard — what they call a 'press' in Scotland — and it was locked. I shook it, and it seemed rather flimsy. For want of something better to do I put out my strength on that door, getting some purchase on the handle by looping my braces round it. Presently the thing gave with a crash which I thought would bring in my warders to inquire. I waited for a bit, and then started to explore the cupboard shelves.

There was a multitude of queer things there. I found an odd vesta or two in my trouser pockets and struck a light. It was out in a second, but it showed me one thing. There was a little stock of electric torches on one shelf. I picked up one, and found it was in working order.

With the torch to help me I investigated further. There were bottles and cases of queer-smelling stuffs, chemicals no doubt for experiments, and there were coils of fine copper wire and yanks and yanks of thin oiled silk. There was a box of detonators, and a lot of cord for fuses. Then away at the back of the shelf I found a stout brown cardboard box, and inside it a wooden case. I managed to wrench it open, and within lay half a dozen little grey bricks, each a couple of inches square.

I took up one, and found that it crumbled easily in my hand. Then I smelt it and put my tongue to it. After that I sat down to think. I hadn't been a mining engineer for nothing, and I knew lentonite when I saw it.

With one of these bricks I could blow the house to smithereens. I had used the stuff in Rhodesia and knew its power. But the trouble was that my knowledge wasn't exact. I had forgotten the proper charge and the right way of preparing it, and I wasn't sure about the timing. I had only a vague notion, too, as to its power, for though I had used it I had not handled it with my own fingers.

But it was a chance, the only possible chance. It was a mighty risk, but against it was an absolute black certainty. If I used it the odds were, as I reckoned, about five to one in favour of my blowing myself into the tree-tops; but if I didn't I should very likely be occupying a six-foot hole in the garden by the evening. That was the way I had to look at it. The prospect was pretty dark either way, but anyhow there was a chance, both for myself and for my country.

The remembrance of little Scudder decided me. It was about the beastliest moment of my life, for I'm no good at these cold-blooded resolutions. Still I managed to rake up the pluck to set my teeth and choke back the horrid doubts that flooded in on me. I simply shut off my mind and pretended I was doing an experiment as simple as Guy Fawkes fireworks.

I got a detonator, and fixed it to a couple of feet of fuse. Then I took a quarter of a lentonite brick, and buried it near the door below one of the sacks in a crack of the floor, fixing the detonator in it. For all I knew half those boxes might be dynamite. If the cupboard held such deadly explosives, why not the boxes? In that case there would be a glorious skyward journey for me and the German servants and about an acre of surrounding country. There was also the risk that the detonation might set off the other bricks in the cupboard, for I had forgotten most that I knew about lentonite. But it didn't do to begin thinking about the possibilities. The odds were horrible, but I had to take them.

I ensconced myself just below the sill of the window, and lit the fuse. Then I waited for a moment or two. There was dead silence — only a shuffle of heavy boots in the passage, and the peaceful cluck of hens from the warm out-of-doors. I commended my soul to my Maker, and wondered where I would be in five seconds . . .

A great wave of heat seemed to surge upwards from the floor, and hang for a blistering instant in the air. Then the wall opposite me flashed into a golden yellow and dissolved with a rending thunder that hammered my brain into a pulp. Something dropped on me, catching the point of my left shoulder.

And then I think I became unconscious.

My stupor can scarcely have lasted beyond a few seconds. I felt myself being choked by thick yellow fumes, and struggled out of the debris to my feet. Somewhere behind me I felt fresh air. The jambs of the window had fallen, and through the ragged rent the smoke was pouring out to the summer noon. I stepped over the broken lintel, and found myself standing in a yard in a dense and acrid fog. I felt very sick and ill, but I could move my limbs, and I staggered blindly forward away from the house.

A small mill-lade ran in a wooden aqueduct at the other side of the yard, and into this I fell. The cool water revived me, and I had just enough wits left to think of escape. I squirmed up the lade among the slippery green slime till I reached the mill-wheel. Then I wriggled through the axle hole into the old mill and tumbled on to a bed of chaff. A nail caught the seat

of my trousers, and I left a wisp of heather-mixture behind me.

The mill had been long out of use. The ladders were rotten with age, and in the loft the rats had gnawed great holes in the floor. Nausea shook me, and a wheel in my head kept turning, while my left shoulder and arm seemed to be stricken with the palsy. I looked out of the window and saw a fog still hanging over the house and smoke escaping from an upper window. Please God I had set the place on fire, for I could hear confused cries coming from the other side.

But I had no time to linger, since this mill was obviously a bad hiding-place. Anyone looking for me would naturally follow the lade, and I made certain the search would begin as soon as they found that my body was not in the storeroom. From another window I saw that on the far side of the mill stood an old stone dovecot. If I could get there without leaving tracks I might find a hiding-place, for I argued that my enemies, if they thought I could move, would conclude I had made for open country, and would go seeking me on the moor.

I crawled down the broken ladder, scattering chaff behind me to cover my footsteps. I did the same on the mill floor, and on the threshold where the door hung on broken hinges. Peeping out, I saw that between me and the dovecot was a piece of bare cobbled ground, where no footmarks would show. Also it was mercifully hid by the mill buildings from any view from the house. I slipped across the space, got to the back of the dovecot and prospected a way of ascent.

That was one of the hardest jobs I ever took on. My shoulder and arm ached like hell, and I was so sick and giddy that I was always on the verge of falling. But I managed it somehow. By the use of out-jutting stones and gaps in the masonry and a tough ivy root I got to the top in the end. There was a little parapet behind which I found space to lie down. Then I proceeded to go off into an old-fashioned swoon.

I woke with a burning head and the sun glaring in my face. For a long time I lay motionless, for those horrible fumes seemed to have loosened my joints and dulled my brain. Sounds came to me from the house — men speaking throatily and the throbbing of a stationary car. There was a little gap in the parapet to which I wriggled, and from which I had some sort of prospect of the yard. I saw figures come out — a servant with his head bound up, and then a younger man in knickerbockers. They were looking for something, and moved towards the mill. Then one of them caught sight of the wisp of cloth on the nail, and cried out to the other. They both went back to the house, and brought two more to look at it. I saw the rotund figure of my late captor, and I thought I made out the man with the lisp. I noticed that all had pistols.

For half an hour they ransacked the mill. I could hear them kicking over the barrels and pulling up the rotten planking. Then they came outside, and stood just below the dovecot arguing fiercely. The servant with the bandage was being soundly rated. I heard them fiddling with the door of the dovecote and for one horrid moment I fancied they were coming up. Then they thought better of it, and went back to the house.

All that long blistering afternoon I lay baking on the rooftop. Thirst was my chief torment. My tongue was like a stick, and to make it worse I could hear the cool drip of water from the mill-lade. I watched the course of the little stream as it came in from the moor, and my fancy followed it to the top of the glen, where it must issue from an icy fountain fringed with cool ferns and mosses. I would have given a thousand pounds to plunge my face into that.

I had a fine prospect of the whole ring of moorland. I saw the car speed away with two occupants, and a man on a hill pony riding east. I judged they were looking for me, and I wished them joy of their quest.

But I saw something else more interesting. The house stood almost on the summit of a swell of moorland which crowned a sort of plateau, and there was no higher point nearer than the big hills six miles off. The actual summit, as I have mentioned, was a biggish clump of trees — firs mostly, with a few ashes and beeches. On the dovecot I was almost on a level with the tree-tops, and could see what lay beyond. The wood was not solid, but only a ring, and inside was an oval of green turf, for all the world like a big cricket-field.

I didn't take long to guess what it was. It was an aerodrome, and a secret one. The place had been most cunningly chosen. For suppose anyone were watching an aeroplane descending here, he would think it had gone over the hill beyond the trees. As the place was on the top of a rise in the midst of a big amphitheatre, any observer from any direction would conclude it had passed out of view behind the hill. Only a man very close at hand would realize that the aeroplane had not gone over but had descended in the midst of the wood. An observer with a telescope on one of the higher hills might have discovered the truth, but only herds went there, and herds do not carry spy-glasses. When I looked from the dovecot I could see far away a blue line which I knew was the sea, and I grew furious to think that our enemies had this secret conning-tower to rake our waterways.

Then I reflected that if that aeroplane came back the chances were ten to one that I would be discovered. So through the afternoon I lay and prayed for the coming of darkness, and glad I was when the sun went down over the big western hills and the twilight haze crept over the moor. The aeroplane was late. The gloaming was far advanced when I heard the beat of wings and saw it volplaning downward to its home in the wood. Lights twinkled for a bit and there was much coming and going from the house. Then the dark fell, and silence.

Thank God it was a black night. The moon was well on its last quarter and would not rise till late. My thirst was too great to allow me to tarry, so about nine o'clock, so far as I could judge, I started to descend. It wasn't easy, and half-way down I heard the back door of the house open, and saw the gleam of a lantern against the mill wall. For some agonizing minutes I hung by the ivy and prayed that whoever it was would not come round by the dovecot. Then the light disappeared, and I dropped as softly as I could on to the hard soil of the yard.

I crawled on my belly in the lee of a stone dyke till I reached the fringe of trees which surrounded the house. If I had known how to do it I would have tried to put that aeroplane out of action, but I realized that any attempt would probably be futile. I was pretty certain that there would be some kind of defence round the house, so I went through the wood on hands and knees, feeling carefully every inch before me. It was as well, for presently I came on a wire about two feet from the ground. If I had tripped over that, it would doubtless have rung some bell in the house and I would have been captured.

A hundred yards farther on I found another wire cunningly placed on the edge of a small stream. Beyond that lay the moor, and in five minutes I was deep in bracken and heather. Soon I was round the shoulder of the rise, in the little glen from which the mill-lade flowed. Ten minutes later my face was in the spring, and I was soaking down pints of the blessed water.

But I did not stop till I had put half a dozen miles between me and that accursed dwelling.



CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DRY-FLY FISHERMAN

I sat down on a hill-top and took stock of my position. I wasn't feeling very happy, for my natural thankfulness at my escape was clouded by my severe bodily discomfort. Those lentonite fumes had fairly poisoned me, and the baking hours on the dovecot hadn't helped matters. I had a crushing headache, and felt as sick as a cat. Also my shoulder was in a bad way. At first I thought it was only a bruise, but it seemed to be swelling, and I had no use of my left arm.

My plan was to seek Mr Turnbull's cottage, recover my garments, and especially Scudder's note-book, and then make for the main line and get back to the south. It seemed to me that the sooner I got in touch with the Foreign Office man, Sir Walter Bullivant, the better. I didn't see how I could get more proof than I had got already. He must just take or leave my story, and anyway, with him I would be in better hands than those devilish Germans. I had begun to feel quite kindly towards the British police.

It was a wonderful starry night, and I had not much difficulty about the road. Sir Harry's map had given me the lie of the land, and all I had to do was to steer a point or two west of south-west to come to the stream where I had met the roadman. In all these travels I never knew the names of the places, but I believe this stream was no less than the upper waters of the river Tweed. I calculated I must be about eighteen miles distant, and that meant I could not get there before morning. So I must lie up a day somewhere, for I was too outrageous a figure to be seen in the sunlight. I had neither coat, waistcoat, collar, nor hat, my trousers were badly torn, and my face and hands were black with the explosion. I daresay I had other beauties, for my eyes felt as if they were furiously bloodshot. Altogether I was no spectacle for God-fearing citizens to see on a highroad.

Very soon after daybreak I made an attempt to clean myself in a hill burn, and then approached a herd's cottage, for I was feeling the need of food. The herd was away from home, and his wife was alone, with no neighbour for five miles. She was a decent old body, and a plucky one, for though she got a fright when she saw me, she had an axe handy, and would have used it on any evil-doer. I told her that I had had a fall — I didn't say how — and she saw by my looks that I was pretty sick. Like a true Samaritan she asked no questions, but gave me a bowl of milk with a dash of whisky in it, and let me sit for a little by her kitchen fire. She would have bathed my shoulder, but it ached so badly that I would not let her touch it.

I don't know what she took me for — a repentant burglar, perhaps; for when I wanted to pay her for the milk and tendered a sovereign which was the smallest coin I had, she shook her head and said something about 'giving it to them that had a right to it'. At this I protested so strongly that I think she believed me honest, for she took the money and gave me a warm new plaid for it, and an old hat of her man's. She showed me how to wrap the plaid around my shoulders, and when I left that cottage I was the living image of the kind of Scotsman you see in the illustrations to Burns's poems. But at any rate I was more or less clad.

It was as well, for the weather changed before midday to a thick drizzle of rain. I found shelter below an overhanging rock in the crook of a burn, where a drift of dead brackens made a tolerable bed. There I managed to sleep till nightfall, waking very cramped and wretched, with my shoulder gnawing like a toothache. I ate the oatcake and cheese the old wife had given me and set out again just before the darkening.

I pass over the miseries of that night among the wet hills. There were no stars to steer by, and I had to do the best I could from my memory of the map. Twice I lost my way, and I had some nasty falls into peat-bogs. I had only about ten miles to go as the crow flies, but my mistakes made it nearer twenty. The last bit was completed with set teeth and a very light and dizzy head. But I managed it, and in the early dawn I was knocking at Mr Turnbull's door. The mist lay close and thick, and from the cottage I could not see the highroad.

Mr Turnbull himself opened to me — sober and something more than sober. He was primly dressed in an ancient but well-tended suit of black; he had been shaved not later than the night before; he wore a linen collar; and in his left hand he carried a pocket Bible. At first he did not recognize me.

'Whae are ye that comes stravaigin' here on the Sabbath mornin'?' he asked.

I had lost all count of the days. So the Sabbath was the reason for this strange decorum.

My head was swimming so wildly that I could not frame a coherent answer. But he recognized me, and he saw that I was ill.

‘Hae ye got my specs?’ he asked.

I fetched them out of my trouser pocket and gave him them.

‘Ye’ll hae come for your jaicket and westcoat,’ he said. ‘Come inbye. Losh, man, ye’re terrible dune i’ the legs. Haud up till I get ye to a chair.’

I perceived I was in for a bout of malaria. I had a good deal of fever in my bones, and the wet night had brought it out, while my shoulder and the effects of the fumes combined to make me feel pretty bad. Before I knew, Mr Turnbull was helping me off with my clothes, and putting me to bed in one of the two cupboards that lined the kitchen walls.

He was a true friend in need, that old roadman. His wife was dead years ago, and since his daughter’s marriage he lived alone.

For the better part of ten days he did all the rough nursing I needed. I simply wanted to be left in peace while the fever took its course, and when my skin was cool again I found that the bout had more or less cured my shoulder. But it was a baddish go, and though I was out of bed in five days, it took me some time to get my legs again.

He went out each morning, leaving me milk for the day, and locking the door behind him; and came in in the evening to sit silent in the chimney corner. Not a soul came near the place. When I was getting better, he never bothered me with a question. Several times he fetched me a two days’ old *Scotsman*, and I noticed that the interest in the Portland Place murder seemed to have died down. There was no mention of it, and I could find very little about anything except a thing called the General Assembly — some ecclesiastical spree, I gathered.

One day he produced my belt from a lockfast drawer. ‘There’s a terrible heap o’ siller in’t,’ he said. ‘Ye’d better coont it to see it’s a’ there.’

He never even sought my name. I asked him if anybody had been around making inquiries subsequent to my spell at the road-making.

‘Ay, there was a man in a motor-cawr. He speired whae had ta’en my place that day, and I let on I thocht him daft. But he keepit on at me, and syne I said he maun be thinkin’ o’ my gude-brither frae the Cleuch that whiles lent me a haun’. He was a wersh-lookin’ sowl, and I couldna understand the half o’ his English tongue.’

I was getting restless those last days, and as soon as I felt myself fit I decided to be off. That was not till the twelfth day of June, and as luck would have it a drover went past that morning taking some cattle to Moffat. He was a man named Hislop, a friend of Turnbull’s, and he came in to his breakfast with us and offered to take me with him.

I made Turnbull accept five pounds for my lodging, and a hard job I had of it. There never was a more independent being. He grew positively rude when I pressed him, and shy and red, and took the money at last without a thank you. When I told him how much I owed him, he grunted something about ‘ae guid turn deservin’ anither’. You would have thought from our leave-taking that we had parted in disgust.

Hislop was a cheery soul, who chattered all the way over the pass and down the sunny vale of Annan. I talked of Galloway markets and sheep prices, and he made up his mind I was a ‘pack-shepherd’ from those parts — whatever that may be. My plaid and my old hat, as I have said, gave me a fine theatrical Scots look. But driving cattle is a mortally slow job, and we took the better part of the day to cover a dozen miles.

If I had not had such an anxious heart I would have enjoyed that time. It was shining blue weather, with a constantly changing prospect of brown hills and far green meadows, and a continual sound of larks and curlews and falling streams. But I had no mind for the summer, and little for Hislop’s conversation, for as the fateful fifteenth of June drew near I was overweighed with the hopeless difficulties of my enterprise.

I got some dinner in a humble Moffat public-house, and walked the two miles to the junction on the main line. The night express for the south was not due till near midnight, and to fill up the time I went up on the hillside and fell asleep, for the walk had tired me. I all but slept too long, and had to run to the station and catch the train with two minutes to spare. The feel of the hard third-class cushions and the smell of stale tobacco cheered me up wonderfully. At any rate, I felt now that I was getting to grips with my job.

I was decanted at Crewe in the small hours and had to wait till six to get a train for Birmingham. In the afternoon I got

to Reading, and changed into a local train which journeyed into the deeps of Berkshire. Presently I was in a land of lush water-meadows and slow reedy streams. About eight o'clock in the evening, a weary and travel-stained being — a cross between a farm-labourer and a vet — with a checked black-and-white plaid over his arm (for I did not dare to wear it south of the Border), descended at the little station of Artinswell. There were several people on the platform, and I thought I had better wait to ask my way till I was clear of the place.

The road led through a wood of great beeches and then into a shallow valley, with the green backs of downs peeping over the distant trees. After Scotland the air smelt heavy and flat, but infinitely sweet, for the limes and chestnuts and lilac bushes were domes of blossom. Presently I came to a bridge, below which a clear slow stream flowed between snowy beds of water-buttercups. A little above it was a mill; and the lasher made a pleasant cool sound in the scented dusk. Somehow the place soothed me and put me at my ease. I fell to whistling as I looked into the green depths, and the tune which came to my lips was 'Annie Laurie'.

A fisherman came up from the waterside, and as he neared me he too began to whistle. The tune was infectious, for he followed my suit. He was a huge man in untidy old flannels and a wide-brimmed hat, with a canvas bag slung on his shoulder. He nodded to me, and I thought I had never seen a shrewder or better-tempered face. He leaned his delicate ten-foot split-cane rod against the bridge, and looked with me at the water.

'Clear, isn't it?' he said pleasantly. 'I back our Kenner any day against the Test. Look at that big fellow. Four pounds if he's an ounce. But the evening rise is over and you can't tempt 'em.'

'I don't see him,' said I.

'Look! There! A yard from the reeds just above that stickle.'

'I've got him now. You might swear he was a black stone.'

'So,' he said, and whistled another bar of 'Annie Laurie'.

'Twisdon's the name, isn't it?' he said over his shoulder, his eyes still fixed on the stream.

'No,' I said. 'I mean to say, Yes.' I had forgotten all about my alias.

'It's a wise conspirator that knows his own name,' he observed, grinning broadly at a moor-hen that emerged from the bridge's shadow.

I stood up and looked at him, at the square, cleft jaw and broad, lined brow and the firm folds of cheek, and began to think that here at last was an ally worth having. His whimsical blue eyes seemed to go very deep.

Suddenly he frowned. 'I call it disgraceful,' he said, raising his voice. 'Disgraceful that an able-bodied man like you should dare to beg. You can get a meal from my kitchen, but you'll get no money from me.'

A dog-cart was passing, driven by a young man who raised his whip to salute the fisherman. When he had gone, he picked up his rod.

'That's my house,' he said, pointing to a white gate a hundred yards on. 'Wait five minutes and then go round to the back door.' And with that he left me.

I did as I was bidden. I found a pretty cottage with a lawn running down to the stream, and a perfect jungle of guelder-rose and lilac flanking the path. The back door stood open, and a grave butler was awaiting me.

'Come this way, Sir,' he said, and he led me along a passage and up a back staircase to a pleasant bedroom looking towards the river. There I found a complete outfit laid out for me — dress clothes with all the fixings, a brown flannel suit, shirts, collars, ties, shaving things and hair-brushes, even a pair of patent shoes. 'Sir Walter thought as how Mr Reggie's things would fit you, Sir,' said the butler. 'He keeps some clothes 'ere, for he comes regular on the week-ends. There's a bathroom next door, and I've prepared a 'ot bath. Dinner in 'alf an hour, Sir. You'll 'ear the gong.'

The grave being withdrew, and I sat down in a chintz-covered easy-chair and gaped. It was like a pantomime, to come suddenly out of beggardom into this orderly comfort. Obviously Sir Walter believed in me, though why he did I could not guess. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw a wild, haggard brown fellow, with a fortnight's ragged beard, and dust in ears and eyes, collarless, vulgarly shirted, with shapeless old tweed clothes and boots that had not been cleaned for the better part of a month. I made a fine tramp and a fair drover; and here I was ushered by a prim butler into this temple of gracious ease. And the best of it was that they did not even know my name.

I resolved not to puzzle my head but to take the gifts the gods had provided. I shaved and bathed luxuriously, and got

into the dress clothes and clean crackling shirt, which fitted me not so badly. By the time I had finished the looking-glass showed a not unpersonable young man.

Sir Walter awaited me in a dusky dining-room where a little round table was lit with silver candles. The sight of him — so respectable and established and secure, the embodiment of law and government and all the conventions — took me aback and made me feel an interloper. He couldn't know the truth about me, or he wouldn't treat me like this. I simply could not accept his hospitality on false pretences.

'I'm more obliged to you than I can say, but I'm bound to make things clear,' I said. 'I'm an innocent man, but I'm wanted by the police. I've got to tell you this, and I won't be surprised if you kick me out.'

He smiled. 'That's all right. Don't let that interfere with your appetite. We can talk about these things after dinner.' I never ate a meal with greater relish, for I had had nothing all day but railway sandwiches. Sir Walter did me proud, for we drank a good champagne and had some uncommon fine port afterwards. It made me almost hysterical to be sitting there, waited on by a footman and a sleek butler, and remember that I had been living for three weeks like a brigand, with every man's hand against me. I told Sir Walter about tiger-fish in the Zambesi that bite off your fingers if you give them a chance, and we discussed sport up and down the globe, for he had hunted a bit in his day.

We went to his study for coffee, a jolly room full of books and trophies and untidiness and comfort. I made up my mind that if ever I got rid of this business and had a house of my own, I would create just such a room. Then when the coffee-cups were cleared away, and we had got our cigars alight, my host swung his long legs over the side of his chair and bade me get started with my yarn.

'I've obeyed Harry's instructions,' he said, 'and the bribe he offered me was that you would tell me something to wake me up. I'm ready, Mr Hannay.'

I noticed with a start that he called me by my proper name.

I began at the very beginning. I told of my boredom in London, and the night I had come back to find Scudder gibbering on my doorstep. I told him all Scudder had told me about Karolides and the Foreign Office conference, and that made him purse his lips and grin.

Then I got to the murder, and he grew solemn again. He heard all about the milkman and my time in Galloway, and my deciphering Scudder's notes at the inn.

'You've got them here?' he asked sharply, and drew a long breath when I whipped the little book from my pocket.

I said nothing of the contents. Then I described my meeting with Sir Harry, and the speeches at the hall. At that he laughed uproariously.

'Harry talked dashed nonsense, did he? I quite believe it. He's as good a chap as ever breathed, but his idiot of an uncle has stuffed his head with maggots. Go on, Mr Hannay.'

My day as roadman excited him a bit. He made me describe the two fellows in the car very closely, and seemed to be raking back in his memory. He grew merry again when he heard of the fate of that ass Jopley.

But the old man in the moorland house solemnized him. Again I had to describe every detail of his appearance.

'Bland and bald-headed and hooded his eyes like a bird . . . He sounds a sinister wild-fowl! And you dynamited his hermitage, after he had saved you from the police. Spirited piece of work, that!' Presently I reached the end of my wanderings. He got up slowly, and looked down at me from the hearth-rug.

'You may dismiss the police from your mind,' he said. 'You're in no danger from the law of this land.'

'Great Scot!' I cried. 'Have they got the murderer?'

'No. But for the last fortnight they have dropped you from the list of possibles.'

'Why?' I asked in amazement.

'Principally because I received a letter from Scudder. I knew something of the man, and he did several jobs for me. He was half crank, half genius, but he was wholly honest. The trouble about him was his partiality for playing a lone hand. That made him pretty well useless in any Secret Service — a pity, for he had uncommon gifts. I think he was the bravest man in the world, for he was always shivering with fright, and yet nothing would choke him off. I had a letter from him on the 31st of May.'

'But he had been dead a week by then.'

‘The letter was written and posted on the 23rd. He evidently did not anticipate an immediate decease. His communications usually took a week to reach me, for they were sent under cover to Spain and then to Newcastle. He had a mania, you know, for concealing his tracks.’

‘What did he say?’ I stammered.

‘Nothing. Merely that he was in danger, but had found shelter with a good friend, and that I would hear from him before the 15th of June. He gave me no address, but said he was living near Portland Place. I think his object was to clear you if anything happened. When I got it I went to Scotland Yard, went over the details of the inquest, and concluded that you were the friend. We made inquiries about you, Mr Hannay, and found you were respectable. I thought I knew the motives for your disappearance — not only the police, the other one too — and when I got Harry’s scrawl I guessed at the rest. I have been expecting you any time this past week.’ You can imagine what a load this took off my mind. I felt a free man once more, for I was now up against my country’s enemies only, and not my country’s law.

‘Now let us have the little note-book,’ said Sir Walter.

It took us a good hour to work through it. I explained the cypher, and he was jolly quick at picking it up. He emended my reading of it on several points, but I had been fairly correct, on the whole. His face was very grave before he had finished, and he sat silent for a while.

‘I don’t know what to make of it,’ he said at last. ‘He is right about one thing — what is going to happen the day after tomorrow. How the devil can it have got known? That is ugly enough in itself. But all this about war and the Black Stone — it reads like some wild melodrama. If only I had more confidence in Scudder’s judgement. The trouble about him was that he was too romantic. He had the artistic temperament, and wanted a story to be better than God meant it to be. He had a lot of odd biases, too. Jews, for example, made him see red. Jews and the high finance.’

‘The Black Stone,’ he repeated. ‘*Der schwarze stein*. It’s like a penny novelette. And all this stuff about Karolides. That is the weak part of the tale, for I happen to know that the virtuous Karolides is likely to outlast us both. There is no State in Europe that wants him gone. Besides, he has just been playing up to Berlin and Vienna and giving my Chief some uneasy moments. No! Scudder has gone off the track there. Frankly, Hannay, I don’t believe that part of his story. There’s some nasty business afoot, and he found out too much and lost his life over it. But I am ready to take my oath that it is ordinary spy work. A certain great European Power makes a hobby of her spy system, and her methods are not too particular. Since she pays by piecework her blackguards are not likely to stick at a murder or two. They want our naval dispositions for their collection at the Marineamt; but they will be pigeon-holed — nothing more.’

Just then the butler entered the room.

‘There’s a trunk-call from London, Sir Walter. It’s Mr ‘Eath, and he wants to speak to you personally.’

My host went off to the telephone.

He returned in five minutes with a whitish face. ‘I apologize to the shade of Scudder,’ he said. ‘Karolides was shot dead this evening at a few minutes after seven.’



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE COMING OF THE BLACK STONE

I came down to breakfast next morning, after eight hours of blessed dreamless sleep, to find Sir Walter decoding a telegram in the midst of muffins and marmalade. His fresh rosiness of yesterday seemed a thought tarnished.

'I had a busy hour on the telephone after you went to bed,' he said. 'I got my Chief to speak to the First Lord and the Secretary for War, and they are bringing Royer over a day sooner. This wire clinches it. He will be in London at five. Odd that the code word for a *sous-chef d'Etat Major-General* should be "Porker".'

He directed me to the hot dishes and went on.

'Not that I think it will do much good. If your friends were clever enough to find out the first arrangement they are clever enough to discover the change. I would give my head to know where the leak is. We believed there were only five men in England who knew about Royer's visit, and you may be certain there were fewer in France, for they manage these things better there.'

While I ate he continued to talk, making me to my surprise a present of his full confidence.

'Can the dispositions not be changed?' I asked.

'They could,' he said. 'But we want to avoid that if possible. They are the result of immense thought, and no alteration would be as good. Besides, on one or two points change is simply impossible. Still, something could be done, I suppose, if it were absolutely necessary. But you see the difficulty, Hannay. Our enemies are not going to be such fools as to pick Royer's pocket or any childish game like that. They know that would mean a row and put us on our guard. Their aim is to get the details without any one of us knowing, so that Royer will go back to Paris in the belief that the whole business is still deadly secret. If they can't do that they fail, for, once we suspect, they know that the whole thing must be altered.'

'Then we must stick by the Frenchman's side till he is home again,' I said. 'If they thought they could get the information in Paris they would try there. It means that they have some deep scheme on foot in London which they reckon is going to win out.'

'Royer dines with my Chief, and then comes to my house where four people will see him — Whittaker from the Admiralty, myself, Sir Arthur Drew, and General Winstanley. The First Lord is ill, and has gone to Sheringham. At my house he will get a certain document from Whittaker, and after that he will be motored to Portsmouth where a destroyer will take him to Havre. His journey is too important for the ordinary boat-train. He will never be left unattended for a moment till he is safe on French soil. The same with Whittaker till he meets Royer. That is the best we can do, and it's hard to see how there can be any miscarriage. But I don't mind admitting that I'm horribly nervous. This murder of Karolides will play the deuce in the chancelleries of Europe.'

After breakfast he asked me if I could drive a car. 'Well, you'll be my chauffeur today and wear Hudson's rig. You're about his size. You have a hand in this business and we are taking no risks. There are desperate men against us, who will not respect the country retreat of an overworked official.'

When I first came to London I had bought a car and amused myself with running about the south of England, so I knew something of the geography. I took Sir Walter to town by the Bath Road and made good going. It was a soft breathless June morning, with a promise of sultriness later, but it was delicious enough swinging through the little towns with their freshly watered streets, and past the summer gardens of the Thames valley. I landed Sir Walter at his house in Queen Anne's Gate punctually by half-past eleven. The butler was coming up by train with the luggage.

The first thing he did was to take me round to Scotland Yard. There we saw a prim gentleman, with a clean-shaven, lawyer's face.

'I've brought you the Portland Place murderer,' was Sir Walter's introduction.

The reply was a wry smile. 'It would have been a welcome present, Bullivant. This, I presume, is Mr Richard Hannay, who for some days greatly interested my department.'

'Mr Hannay will interest it again. He has much to tell you, but not today. For certain grave reasons his tale must wait

for four hours. Then, I can promise you, you will be entertained and possibly edified. I want you to assure Mr Hannay that he will suffer no further inconvenience.'

This assurance was promptly given. 'You can take up your life where you left off,' I was told. 'Your flat, which probably you no longer wish to occupy, is waiting for you, and your man is still there. As you were never publicly accused, we considered that there was no need of a public exculpation. But on that, of course, you must please yourself.'

'We may want your assistance later on, MacGillivray,' Sir Walter said as we left.

Then he turned me loose.

'Come and see me tomorrow, Hannay. I needn't tell you to keep deadly quiet. If I were you I would go to bed, for you must have considerable arrears of sleep to overtake. You had better lie low, for if one of your Black Stone friends saw you there might be trouble.'

I felt curiously at a loose end. At first it was very pleasant to be a free man, able to go where I wanted without fearing anything. I had only been a month under the ban of the law, and it was quite enough for me. I went to the Savoy and ordered very carefully a very good luncheon, and then smoked the best cigar the house could provide. But I was still feeling nervous. When I saw anybody look at me in the lounge, I grew shy, and wondered if they were thinking about the murder.

After that I took a taxi and drove miles away up into North London. I walked back through fields and lines of villas and terraces and then slums and mean streets, and it took me pretty nearly two hours. All the while my restlessness was growing worse. I felt that great things, tremendous things, were happening or about to happen, and I, who was the cog-wheel of the whole business, was out of it. Royer would be landing at Dover, Sir Walter would be making plans with the few people in England who were in the secret, and somewhere in the darkness the Black Stone would be working. I felt the sense of danger and impending calamity, and I had the curious feeling, too, that I alone could avert it, alone could grapple with it. But I was out of the game now. How could it be otherwise? It was not likely that Cabinet Ministers and Admiralty Lords and Generals would admit me to their councils.

I actually began to wish that I could run up against one of my three enemies. That would lead to developments. I felt that I wanted enormously to have a vulgar scrap with those gentry, where I could hit out and flatten something. I was rapidly getting into a very bad temper.

I didn't feel like going back to my flat. That had to be faced some time, but as I still had sufficient money I thought I would put it off till next morning, and go to a hotel for the night.

My irritation lasted through dinner, which I had at a restaurant in Jermyn Street. I was no longer hungry, and let several courses pass untasted. I drank the best part of a bottle of Burgundy, but it did nothing to cheer me. An abominable restlessness had taken possession of me. Here was I, a very ordinary fellow, with no particular brains, and yet I was convinced that somehow I was needed to help this business through — that without me it would all go to blazes. I told myself it was sheer silly conceit, that four or five of the cleverest people living, with all the might of the British Empire at their back, had the job in hand. Yet I couldn't be convinced. It seemed as if a voice kept speaking in my ear, telling me to be up and doing, or I would never sleep again.

The upshot was that about half-past nine I made up my mind to go to Queen Anne's Gate. Very likely I would not be admitted, but it would ease my conscience to try.

I walked down Jermyn Street, and at the corner of Duke Street passed a group of young men. They were in evening dress, had been dining somewhere, and were going on to a music-hall. One of them was Mr Marmaduke Jopley.

He saw me and stopped short.

'By God, the murderer!' he cried. 'Here, you fellows, hold him! That's Hannay, the man who did the Portland Place murder!' He gripped me by the arm, and the others crowded round. I wasn't looking for any trouble, but my ill-temper made me play the fool. A policeman came up, and I should have told him the truth, and, if he didn't believe it, demanded to be taken to Scotland Yard, or for that matter to the nearest police station. But a delay at that moment seemed to me unendurable, and the sight of Marmie's imbecile face was more than I could bear. I let out with my left, and had the satisfaction of seeing him measure his length in the gutter.

Then began an unholy row. They were all on me at once, and the policeman took me in the rear. I got in one or two good blows, for I think, with fair play, I could have licked the lot of them, but the policeman pinned me behind, and one of them got his fingers on my throat.

Through a black cloud of rage I heard the officer of the law asking what was the matter, and Marmie, between his broken teeth, declaring that I was Hannay the murderer.

‘Oh, damn it all,’ I cried, ‘make the fellow shut up. I advise you to leave me alone, constable. Scotland Yard knows all about me, and you’ll get a proper wiggling if you interfere with me.’

‘You’ve got to come along of me, young man,’ said the policeman. ‘I saw you strike that gentleman crool ‘ard. You began it too, for he wasn’t doing nothing. I seen you. Best go quietly or I’ll have to fix you up.’

Exasperation and an overwhelming sense that at no cost must I delay gave me the strength of a bull elephant. I fairly wrenched the constable off his feet, floored the man who was gripping my collar, and set off at my best pace down Duke Street. I heard a whistle being blown, and the rush of men behind me.

I have a very fair turn of speed, and that night I had wings. In a jiffy I was in Pall Mall and had turned down towards St James’s Park. I dodged the policeman at the Palace gates, dived through a press of carriages at the entrance to the Mall, and was making for the bridge before my pursuers had crossed the roadway. In the open ways of the Park I put on a spurt. Happily there were few people about and no one tried to stop me. I was staking all on getting to Queen Anne’s Gate.

When I entered that quiet thoroughfare it seemed deserted. Sir Walter’s house was in the narrow part, and outside it three or four motor-cars were drawn up. I slackened speed some yards off and walked briskly up to the door. If the butler refused me admission, or if he even delayed to open the door, I was done.

He didn’t delay. I had scarcely rung before the door opened.

‘I must see Sir Walter,’ I panted. ‘My business is desperately important.’

That butler was a great man. Without moving a muscle he held the door open, and then shut it behind me. ‘Sir Walter is engaged, Sir, and I have orders to admit no one. Perhaps you will wait.’

The house was of the old-fashioned kind, with a wide hall and rooms on both sides of it. At the far end was an alcove with a telephone and a couple of chairs, and there the butler offered me a seat.

‘See here,’ I whispered. ‘There’s trouble about and I’m in it. But Sir Walter knows, and I’m working for him. If anyone comes and asks if I am here, tell him a lie.’

He nodded, and presently there was a noise of voices in the street, and a furious ringing at the bell. I never admired a man more than that butler. He opened the door, and with a face like a graven image waited to be questioned. Then he gave them it. He told them whose house it was, and what his orders were, and simply froze them off the doorstep. I could see it all from my alcove, and it was better than any play.

I hadn’t waited long till there came another ring at the bell. The butler made no bones about admitting this new visitor.

While he was taking off his coat I saw who it was. You couldn’t open a newspaper or a magazine without seeing that face — the grey beard cut like a spade, the firm fighting mouth, the blunt square nose, and the keen blue eyes. I recognized the First Sea Lord, the man, they say, that made the new British Navy.

He passed my alcove and was ushered into a room at the back of the hall. As the door opened I could hear the sound of low voices. It shut, and I was left alone again.

For twenty minutes I sat there, wondering what I was to do next. I was still perfectly convinced that I was wanted, but when or how I had no notion. I kept looking at my watch, and as the time crept on to half-past ten I began to think that the conference must soon end. In a quarter of an hour Royer should be speeding along the road to Portsmouth . . .

Then I heard a bell ring, and the butler appeared. The door of the back room opened, and the First Sea Lord came out. He walked past me, and in passing he glanced in my direction, and for a second we looked each other in the face.

Only for a second, but it was enough to make my heart jump. I had never seen the great man before, and he had never seen me. But in that fraction of time something sprang into his eyes, and that something was recognition. You can’t mistake it. It is a flicker, a spark of light, a minute shade of difference which means one thing and one thing only. It came involuntarily, for in a moment it died, and he passed on. In a maze of wild fancies I heard the street door close behind him.

I picked up the telephone book and looked up the number of his house. We were connected at once, and I heard a servant’s voice.

‘Is his Lordship at home?’ I asked.

‘His Lordship returned half an hour ago,’ said the voice, ‘and has gone to bed. He is not very well tonight. Will you leave a message, Sir?’

I rang off and almost tumbled into a chair. My part in this business was not yet ended. It had been a close shave, but I had been in time.

Not a moment could be lost, so I marched boldly to the door of that back room and entered without knocking.

Five surprised faces looked up from a round table. There was Sir Walter, and Drew the War Minister, whom I knew from his photographs. There was a slim elderly man, who was probably Whittaker, the Admiralty official, and there was General Winstanley, conspicuous from the long scar on his forehead. Lastly, there was a short stout man with an iron-grey moustache and bushy eyebrows, who had been arrested in the middle of a sentence.

Sir Walter’s face showed surprise and annoyance.

‘This is Mr Hannay, of whom I have spoken to you,’ he said apologetically to the company. ‘I’m afraid, Hannay, this visit is ill-timed.’

I was getting back my coolness. ‘That remains to be seen, Sir,’ I said; ‘but I think it may be in the nick of time. For God’s sake, gentlemen, tell me who went out a minute ago?’

‘Lord Alloa,’ Sir Walter said, reddening with anger. ‘It was not,’ I cried; ‘it was his living image, but it was not Lord Alloa. It was someone who recognized me, someone I have seen in the last month. He had scarcely left the doorstep when I rang up Lord Alloa’s house and was told he had come in half an hour before and had gone to bed.’

‘Who — who —’ someone stammered.

‘The Black Stone,’ I cried, and I sat down in the chair so recently vacated and looked round at five badly scared gentlemen.



CHAPTER NINE

THE THIRTY-NINE STEPS

‘Nonsense!’ said the official from the Admiralty.

Sir Walter got up and left the room while we looked blankly at the table. He came back in ten minutes with a long face. ‘I have spoken to Alloa,’ he said. ‘Had him out of bed — very grumpy. He went straight home after Mulross’s dinner.’

‘But it’s madness,’ broke in General Winstanley. ‘Do you mean to tell me that that man came here and sat beside me for the best part of half an hour and that I didn’t detect the imposture? Alloa must be out of his mind.’

‘Don’t you see the cleverness of it?’ I said. ‘You were too interested in other things to have any eyes. You took Lord Alloa for granted. If it had been anybody else you might have looked more closely, but it was natural for him to be here, and that put you all to sleep.’

Then the Frenchman spoke, very slowly and in good English.

‘The young man is right. His psychology is good. Our enemies have not been foolish!’

He bent his wise brows on the assembly.

‘I will tell you a tale,’ he said. ‘It happened many years ago in Senegal. I was quartered in a remote station, and to pass the time used to go fishing for big barbel in the river. A little Arab mare used to carry my luncheon basket — one of the salted dun breed you got at Timbuctoo in the old days. Well, one morning I had good sport, and the mare was unaccountably restless. I could hear her whinnying and squealing and stamping her feet, and I kept soothing her with my voice while my mind was intent on fish. I could see her all the time, as I thought, out of a corner of my eye, tethered to a tree twenty yards away. After a couple of hours I began to think of food. I collected my fish in a tarpaulin bag, and moved down the stream towards the mare, trolling my line. When I got up to her I flung the tarpaulin on her back —’

He paused and looked round.

‘It was the smell that gave me warning. I turned my head and found myself looking at a lion three feet off . . . An old man-eater, that was the terror of the village . . . What was left of the mare, a mass of blood and bones and hide, was behind him.’

‘What happened?’ I asked. I was enough of a hunter to know a true yarn when I heard it.

‘I stuffed my fishing-rod into his jaws, and I had a pistol. Also my servants came presently with rifles. But he left his mark on me.’ He held up a hand which lacked three fingers.

‘Consider,’ he said. ‘The mare had been dead more than an hour, and the brute had been patiently watching me ever since. I never saw the kill, for I was accustomed to the mare’s fretting, and I never marked her absence, for my consciousness of her was only of something tawny, and the lion filled that part. If I could blunder thus, gentlemen, in a land where men’s senses are keen, why should we busy preoccupied urban folk not err also?’

Sir Walter nodded. No one was ready to gainsay him.

‘But I don’t see,’ went on Winstanley. ‘Their object was to get these dispositions without our knowing it. Now it only required one of us to mention to Alloa our meeting tonight for the whole fraud to be exposed.’

Sir Walter laughed dryly. ‘The selection of Alloa shows their acumen. Which of us was likely to speak to him about tonight? Or was he likely to open the subject?’

I remembered the First Sea Lord’s reputation for taciturnity and shortness of temper.

‘The one thing that puzzles me,’ said the General, ‘is what good his visit here would do that spy fellow? He could not carry away several pages of figures and strange names in his head.’

‘That is not difficult,’ the Frenchman replied. ‘A good spy is trained to have a photographic memory. Like your own Macaulay. You noticed he said nothing, but went through these papers again and again. I think we may assume that he has every detail stamped on his mind. When I was younger I could do the same trick.’

‘Well, I suppose there is nothing for it but to change the plans,’ said Sir Walter ruefully.

Whittaker was looking very glum. 'Did you tell Lord Alloa what has happened?' he asked. 'No? Well, I can't speak with absolute assurance, but I'm nearly certain we can't make any serious change unless we alter the geography of England.'

'Another thing must be said,' it was Royer who spoke. 'I talked freely when that man was here. I told something of the military plans of my Government. I was permitted to say so much. But that information would be worth many millions to our enemies. No, my friends, I see no other way. The man who came here and his confederates must be taken, and taken at once.'

'Good God,' I cried, 'and we have not a rag of a clue.'

'Besides,' said Whittaker, 'there is the post. By this time the news will be on its way.'

'No,' said the Frenchman. 'You do not understand the habits of the spy. He receives personally his reward, and he delivers personally his intelligence. We in France know something of the breed. There is still a chance, *mes amis*. These men must cross the sea, and there are ships to be searched and ports to be watched. Believe me, the need is desperate for both France and Britain.'

Royer's grave good sense seemed to pull us together. He was the man of action among fumbler. But I saw no hope in any face, and I felt none. Where among the fifty millions of these islands and within a dozen hours were we to lay hands on the three cleverest rogues in Europe?

Then suddenly I had an inspiration.

'Where is Scudder's book?' I cried to Sir Walter. 'Quick, man, I remember something in it.'

He unlocked the door of a bureau and gave it to me.

I found the place. *Thirty-nine steps*, I read, and again, *Thirty-nine steps— I counted them—high tide 10.17 P.M.*

The Admiralty man was looking at me as if he thought I had gone mad.

'Don't you see it's a clue,' I shouted. 'Scudder knew where these fellows laired — he knew where they were going to leave the country, though he kept the name to himself. Tomorrow was the day, and it was some place where high tide was at 10.17.'

'They may have gone tonight,' someone said.

'Not they. They have their own snug secret way, and they won't be hurried. I know Germans, and they are mad about working to a plan. Where the devil can I get a book of Tide Tables?'

Whittaker brightened up. 'It's a chance,' he said. 'Let's go over to the Admiralty.'

We got into two of the waiting motor-cars — all but Sir Walter, who went off to Scotland Yard — to 'mobilize MacGillivray', so he said. We marched through empty corridors and big bare chambers where the charwomen were busy, till we reached a little room lined with books and maps. A resident clerk was unearthed, who presently fetched from the library the Admiralty Tide Tables. I sat at the desk and the others stood round, for somehow or other I had got charge of this expedition.

It was no good. There were hundreds of entries, and so far as I could see 10.17 might cover fifty places. We had to find some way of narrowing the possibilities.

I took my head in my hands and thought. There must be some way of reading this riddle. What did Scudder mean by steps? I thought of dock steps, but if he had meant that I didn't think he would have mentioned the number. It must be some place where there were several staircases, and one marked out from the others by having thirty-nine steps.

Then I had a sudden thought, and hunted up all the steamer sailings. There was no boat which left for the Continent at 10.17 P.M.

Why was high tide so important? If it was a harbour it must be some little place where the tide mattered, or else it was a heavy-draught boat. But there was no regular steamer sailing at that hour, and somehow I didn't think they would travel by a big boat from a regular harbour. So it must be some little harbour where the tide was important, or perhaps no harbour at all.

But if it was a little port I couldn't see what the steps signified. There were no sets of staircases on any harbour that I had ever seen. It must be some place which a particular staircase identified, and where the tide was full at 10.17. On the whole it seemed to me that the place must be a bit of open coast. But the staircases kept puzzling me.

Then I went back to wider considerations. Whereabouts would a man be likely to leave for Germany, a man in a hurry,

who wanted a speedy and a secret passage? Not from any of the big harbours. And not from the Channel or the West Coast or Scotland, for, remember, he was starting from London. I measured the distance on the map, and tried to put myself in the enemy's shoes. I should try for Ostend or Antwerp or Rotterdam, and I should sail from somewhere on the East Coast between Cromer and Dover.

All this was very loose guessing, and I don't pretend it was ingenious or scientific. I wasn't any kind of Sherlock Holmes. But I have always fancied I had a kind of instinct about questions like this. I don't know if I can explain myself, but I used to use my brains as far as they went, and after they came to a blank wall I guessed, and I usually found my guesses pretty right.

So I set out all my conclusions on a bit of Admiralty paper. They ran like this:

FAIRLY CERTAIN

- (1) Place where there are several sets of stairs; one that matters distinguished by having thirty-nine steps.
- (2) Full tide at 10.17 P.M. Leaving shore only possible at full tide.
- (3) Steps not dock steps, and so place probably not harbour.
- (4) No regular night steamer at 10.17. Means of transport must be tramp (unlikely), yacht, or fishing-boat.

There my reasoning stopped. I made another list, which I headed 'Guessed', but I was just as sure of the one as the other.

GUESSED

- (1) Place not harbour but open coast.
- (2) Boat small — trawler, yacht, or launch.
- (3) Place somewhere on East Coast between Cromer and Dover.

it struck me as odd that I should be sitting at that desk with a Cabinet Minister, a Field-Marshal, two high Government officials, and a French General watching me, while from the scribble of a dead man I was trying to drag a secret which meant life or death for us.

Sir Walter had joined us, and presently MacGillivray arrived. He had sent out instructions to watch the ports and railway stations for the three men whom I had described to Sir Walter. Not that he or anybody else thought that that would do much good.

'Here's the most I can make of it,' I said. 'We have got to find a place where there are several staircases down to the beach, one of which has thirty-nine steps. I think it's a piece of open coast with bigish cliffs, somewhere between the Wash and the Channel. Also it's a place where full tide is at 10.17 tomorrow night.'

Then an idea struck me. 'Is there no Inspector of Coastguards or some fellow like that who knows the East Coast?'

Whittaker said there was, and that he lived in Clapham. He went off in a car to fetch him, and the rest of us sat about the little room and talked of anything that came into our heads. I lit a pipe and went over the whole thing again till my brain grew weary.

About one in the morning the coastguard man arrived. He was a fine old fellow, with the look of a naval officer, and was desperately respectful to the company. I left the War Minister to cross-examine him, for I felt he would think it cheek in me to talk.

'We want you to tell us the places you know on the East Coast where there are cliffs, and where several sets of steps run down to the beach.'

He thought for a bit. 'What kind of steps do you mean, Sir? There are plenty of places with roads cut down through the cliffs, and most roads have a step or two in them. Or do you mean regular staircases — all steps, so to speak?'

Sir Arthur looked towards me. 'We mean regular staircases,' I said.

He reflected a minute or two. 'I don't know that I can think of any. Wait a second. There's a place in Norfolk — Brattlesham — beside a golf-course, where there are a couple of staircases, to let the gentlemen get a lost ball.'

'That's not it,' I said.

'Then there are plenty of Marine Parades, if that's what you mean. Every seaside resort has them.'

I shook my head. 'It's got to be more retired than that,' I said.

'Well, gentlemen, I can't think of anywhere else. Of course, there's the Ruff —'

'What's that?' I asked.

‘The big chalk headland in Kent, close to Bradgate. It’s got a lot of villas on the top, and some of the houses have staircases down to a private beach. It’s a very high-toned sort of place, and the residents there like to keep by themselves.’

I tore open the Tide Tables and found Bradgate. High tide there was at 10.17 P.M. on the 15th of June.

‘We’re on the scent at last,’ I cried excitedly. ‘How can I find out what is the tide at the Ruff?’

‘I can tell you that, Sir,’ said the coastguard man. ‘I once was lent a house there in this very month, and I used to go out at night to the deep-sea fishing. The tide’s ten minutes before Bradgate.’

I closed the book and looked round at the company.

‘If one of those staircases has thirty-nine steps we have solved the mystery, gentlemen,’ I said. ‘I want the loan of your car, Sir Walter, and a map of the roads. If Mr MacGillivray will spare me ten minutes, I think we can prepare something for tomorrow.’

It was ridiculous in me to take charge of the business like this, but they didn’t seem to mind, and after all I had been in the show from the start. Besides, I was used to rough jobs, and these eminent gentlemen were too clever not to see it. It was General Royer who gave me my commission. ‘I for one,’ he said, ‘am content to leave the matter in Mr Hannay’s hands.’

By half-past three I was tearing past the moonlit hedgerows of Kent, with MacGillivray’s best man on the seat beside me.



CHAPTER TEN

VARIOUS PARTIES CONVERGING ON THE SEA

A pink and blue June morning found me at Bradgate looking from the Griffin Hotel over a smooth sea to the lightship on the Cock sands which seemed the size of a bell-buoy. A couple of miles farther south and much nearer the shore a small destroyer was anchored. Scaife, MacGillivray's man, who had been in the Navy, knew the boat, and told me her name and her commander's, so I sent off a wire to Sir Walter.

After breakfast Scaife got from a house-agent a key for the gates of the staircases on the Ruff. I walked with him along the sands, and sat down in a nook of the cliffs while he investigated the half-dozen of them. I didn't want to be seen, but the place at this hour was quite deserted, and all the time I was on that beach I saw nothing but the sea-gulls.

It took him more than an hour to do the job, and when I saw him coming towards me, conning a bit of paper, I can tell you my heart was in my mouth. Everything depended, you see, on my guess proving right.

He read aloud the number of steps in the different stairs. 'Thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-nine, forty-two, forty-seven,' and 'twenty — one' where the cliffs grew lower. I almost got up and shouted.

We hurried back to the town and sent a wire to MacGillivray. I wanted half a dozen men, and I directed them to divide themselves among different specified hotels. Then Scaife set out to prospect the house at the head of the thirty-nine steps.

He came back with news that both puzzled and reassured me. The house was called Trafalgar Lodge, and belonged to an old gentleman called Appleton — a retired stockbroker, the house-agent said. Mr Appleton was there a good deal in the summer time, and was in residence now — had been for the better part of a week. Scaife could pick up very little information about him, except that he was a decent old fellow, who paid his bills regularly, and was always good for a fiver for a local charity. Then Scaife seemed to have penetrated to the back door of the house, pretending he was an agent for sewing-machines. Only three servants were kept, a cook, a parlour-maid, and a housemaid, and they were just the sort that you would find in a respectable middle-class household. The cook was not the gossiping kind, and had pretty soon shut the door in his face, but Scaife said he was positive she knew nothing. Next door there was a new house building which would give good cover for observation, and the villa on the other side was to let, and its garden was rough and shrubby.

I borrowed Scaife's telescope, and before lunch went for a walk along the Ruff. I kept well behind the rows of villas, and found a good observation point on the edge of the golf-course. There I had a view of the line of turf along the cliff top, with seats placed at intervals, and the little square plots, railed in and planted with bushes, whence the staircases descended to the beach. I saw Trafalgar Lodge very plainly, a red-brick villa with a veranda, a tennis lawn behind, and in front the ordinary seaside flower-garden full of marguerites and scraggy geraniums. There was a flagstaff from which an enormous Union Jack hung limply in the still air.

Presently I observed someone leave the house and saunter along the cliff. When I got my glasses on him I saw it was an old man, wearing white flannel trousers, a blue serge jacket, and a straw hat. He carried field-glasses and a newspaper, and sat down on one of the iron seats and began to read. Sometimes he would lay down the paper and turn his glasses on the sea. He looked for a long time at the destroyer. I watched him for half an hour, till he got up and went back to the house for his luncheon, when I returned to the hotel for mine.

I wasn't feeling very confident. This decent common-place dwelling was not what I had expected. The man might be the bald archaeologist of that horrible moorland farm, or he might not. He was exactly the kind of satisfied old bird you will find in every suburb and every holiday place. If you wanted a type of the perfectly harmless person you would probably pitch on that.

But after lunch, as I sat in the hotel porch, I perked up, for I saw the thing I had hoped for and had dreaded to miss. A yacht came up from the south and dropped anchor pretty well opposite the Ruff. She seemed about a hundred and fifty tons, and I saw she belonged to the Squadron from the white ensign. So Scaife and I went down to the harbour and hired a boatman for an afternoon's fishing.

I spent a warm and peaceful afternoon. We caught between us about twenty pounds of cod and lythe, and out in that dancing blue sea I took a cheerier view of things. Above the white cliffs of the Ruff I saw the green and red of the villas, and

especially the great flagstaff of Trafalgar Lodge. About four o'clock, when we had fished enough, I made the boatman row us round the yacht, which lay like a delicate white bird, ready at a moment to flee. Scaife said she must be a fast boat for her build, and that she was pretty heavily engined.

Her name was the *Ariadne*, as I discovered from the cap of one of the men who was polishing brasswork. I spoke to him, and got an answer in the soft dialect of Essex. Another hand that came along passed me the time of day in an unmistakable English tongue. Our boatman had an argument with one of them about the weather, and for a few minutes we lay on our oars close to the starboard bow.

Then the men suddenly disregarded us and bent their heads to their work as an officer came along the deck. He was a pleasant, clean-looking young fellow, and he put a question to us about our fishing in very good English. But there could be no doubt about him. His close-cropped head and the cut of his collar and tie never came out of England.

That did something to reassure me, but as we rowed back to Bradgate my obstinate doubts would not be dismissed. The thing that worried me was the reflection that my enemies knew that I had got my knowledge from Scudder, and it was Scudder who had given me the clue to this place. If they knew that Scudder had this clue, would they not be certain to change their plans? Too much depended on their success for them to take any risks. The whole question was how much they understood about Scudder's knowledge. I had talked confidently last night about Germans always sticking to a scheme, but if they had any suspicions that I was on their track they would be fools not to cover it. I wondered if the man last night had seen that I recognized him. Somehow I did not think he had, and to that I had clung. But the whole business had never seemed so difficult as that afternoon when by all calculations I should have been rejoicing in assured success.

In the hotel I met the commander of the destroyer, to whom Scaife introduced me, and with whom I had a few words. Then I thought I would put in an hour or two watching Trafalgar Lodge.

I found a place farther up the hill, in the garden of an empty house. From there I had a full view of the court, on which two figures were having a game of tennis. One was the old man, whom I had already seen; the other was a younger fellow, wearing some club colours in the scarf round his middle. They played with tremendous zest, like two city gents who wanted hard exercise to open their pores. You couldn't conceive a more innocent spectacle. They shouted and laughed and stopped for drinks, when a maid brought out two tankards on a salver. I rubbed my eyes and asked myself if I was not the most immortal fool on earth. Mystery and darkness had hung about the men who hunted me over the Scotch moor in aeroplane and motor-car, and notably about that infernal antiquarian. It was easy enough to connect those folk with the knife that pinned Scudder to the floor, and with fell designs on the world's peace. But here were two guileless citizens taking their innocuous exercise, and soon about to go indoors to a humdrum dinner, where they would talk of market prices and the last cricket scores and the gossip of their native Surbiton. I had been making a net to catch vultures and falcons, and lo and behold! two plump thrushes had blundered into it.

Presently a third figure arrived, a young man on a bicycle, with a bag of golf-clubs slung on his back. He strolled round to the tennis lawn and was welcomed riotously by the players. Evidently they were chaffing him, and their chaff sounded horribly English. Then the plump man, mopping his brow with a silk handkerchief, announced that he must have a tub. I heard his very words — 'I've got into a proper lather,' he said. 'This will bring down my weight and my handicap, Bob. I'll take you on tomorrow and give you a stroke a hole.' You couldn't find anything much more English than that.

They all went into the house, and left me feeling a precious idiot. I had been barking up the wrong tree this time. These men might be acting; but if they were, where was their audience? They didn't know I was sitting thirty yards off in a rhododendron. It was simply impossible to believe that these three hearty fellows were anything but what they seemed — three ordinary, game-playing, suburban Englishmen, wearisome, if you like, but sordidly innocent.

And yet there were three of them; and one was old, and one was plump, and one was lean and dark; and their house chimed in with Scudder's notes; and half a mile off was lying a steam yacht with at least one German officer. I thought of Karolides lying dead and all Europe trembling on the edge of earthquake, and the men I had left behind me in London who were waiting anxiously for the events of the next hours. There was no doubt that hell was afoot somewhere. The Black Stone had won, and if it survived this June night would bank its winnings.

There seemed only one thing to do — go forward as if I had no doubts, and if I was going to make a fool of myself to do it handsomely. Never in my life have I faced a job with greater disinclination. I would rather in my then mind have walked into a den of anarchists, each with his Browning handy, or faced a charging lion with a popgun, than enter that happy

home of three cheerful Englishmen and tell them that their game was up. How they would laugh at me!

But suddenly I remembered a thing I once heard in Rhodesia from old Peter Pienaar. I have quoted Peter already in this narrative. He was the best scout I ever knew, and before he had turned respectable he had been pretty often on the windy side of the law, when he had been wanted badly by the authorities. Peter once discussed with me the question of disguises, and he had a theory which struck me at the time. He said, barring absolute certainties like fingerprints, mere physical traits were very little use for identification if the fugitive really knew his business. He laughed at things like dyed hair and false beards and such childish follies. The only thing that mattered was what Peter called 'atmosphere'.

If a man could get into perfectly different surroundings from those in which he had been first observed, and — this is the important part — really play up to these surroundings and behave as if he had never been out of them, he would puzzle the cleverest detectives on earth. And he used to tell a story of how he once borrowed a black coat and went to church and shared the same hymn-book with the man that was looking for him. If that man had seen him in decent company before he would have recognized him; but he had only seen him snuffing the lights in a public-house with a revolver.

The recollection of Peter's talk gave me the first real comfort that I had had that day. Peter had been a wise old bird, and these fellows I was after were about the pick of the aviary. What if they were playing Peter's game? A fool tries to look different: a clever man looks the same and is different.

Again, there was that other maxim of Peter's which had helped me when I had been a roadman. 'If you are playing a part, you will never keep it up unless you convince yourself that you are it.' That would explain the game of tennis. Those chaps didn't need to act, they just turned a handle and passed into another life, which came as naturally to them as the first. It sounds a platitude, but Peter used to say that it was the big secret of all the famous criminals.

It was now getting on for eight o'clock, and I went back and saw Scaife to give him his instructions. I arranged with him how to place his men, and then I went for a walk, for I didn't feel up to any dinner. I went round the deserted golf-course, and then to a point on the cliffs farther north beyond the line of the villas.

On the little trim newly-made roads I met people in flannels coming back from tennis and the beach, and a coastguard from the wireless station, and donkeys and pierrots padding homewards. Out at sea in the blue dusk I saw lights appear on the *Ariadne* and on the destroyer away to the south, and beyond the Cock sands the bigger lights of steamers making for the Thames. The whole scene was so peaceful and ordinary that I got more dashed in spirits every second. It took all my resolution to stroll towards Trafalgar Lodge about half-past nine.

On the way I got a piece of solid comfort from the sight of a greyhound that was swinging along at a nursemaid's heels. He reminded me of a dog I used to have in Rhodesia, and of the time when I took him hunting with me in the Pali hills. We were after rhebok, the dun kind, and I recollected how we had followed one beast, and both he and I had clean lost it. A greyhound works by sight, and my eyes are good enough, but that buck simply leaked out of the landscape. Afterwards I found out how it managed it. Against the grey rock of the kopjes it showed no more than a crow against a thundercloud. It didn't need to run away; all it had to do was to stand still and melt into the background.

Suddenly as these memories chased across my brain I thought of my present case and applied the moral. The Black Stone didn't need to bolt. They were quietly absorbed into the landscape. I was on the right track, and I jammed that down in my mind and vowed never to forget it. The last word was with Peter Pienaar.

Scaife's men would be posted now, but there was no sign of a soul. The house stood as open as a market-place for anybody to observe. A three-foot railing separated it from the cliff road; the windows on the ground-floor were all open, and shaded lights and the low sound of voices revealed where the occupants were finishing dinner. Everything was as public and above-board as a charity bazaar. Feeling the greatest fool on earth, I opened the gate and rang the bell.

A man of my sort, who has travelled about the world in rough places, gets on perfectly well with two classes, what you may call the upper and the lower. He understands them and they understand him. I was at home with herds and tramps and roadmen, and I was sufficiently at my ease with people like Sir Walter and the men I had met the night before. I can't explain why, but it is a fact. But what fellows like me don't understand is the great comfortable, satisfied middle-class world, the folk that live in villas and suburbs. He doesn't know how they look at things, he doesn't understand their conventions, and he is as shy of them as of a black mamba. When a trim parlour-maid opened the door, I could hardly find my voice.

I asked for Mr Appleton, and was ushered in. My plan had been to walk straight into the dining-room, and by a sudden

appearance wake in the men that start of recognition which would confirm my theory. But when I found myself in that neat hall the place mastered me. There were the golf-clubs and tennis-rackets, the straw hats and caps, the rows of gloves, the sheaf of walking-sticks, which you will find in ten thousand British homes. A stack of neatly folded coats and waterproofs covered the top of an old oak chest; there was a grandfather clock ticking; and some polished brass warming-pans on the walls, and a barometer, and a print of Chiltern winning the St Leger. The place was as orthodox as an Anglican church. When the maid asked me for my name I gave it automatically, and was shown into the smoking-room, on the right side of the hall.

That room was even worse. I hadn't time to examine it, but I could see some framed group photographs above the mantelpiece, and I could have sworn they were English public school or college. I had only one glance, for I managed to pull myself together and go after the maid. But I was too late. She had already entered the dining-room and given my name to her master, and I had missed the chance of seeing how the three took it.

When I walked into the room the old man at the head of the table had risen and turned round to meet me. He was in evening dress — a short coat and black tie, as was the other, whom I called in my own mind the plump one. The third, the dark fellow, wore a blue serge suit and a soft white collar, and the colours of some club or school.

The old man's manner was perfect. 'Mr Hannay?' he said hesitatingly. 'Did you wish to see me? One moment, you fellows, and I'll rejoin you. We had better go to the smoking-room.'

Though I hadn't an ounce of confidence in me, I forced myself to play the game. I pulled up a chair and sat down on it.

'I think we have met before,' I said, 'and I guess you know my business.'

The light in the room was dim, but so far as I could see their faces, they played the part of mystification very well.

'Maybe, maybe,' said the old man. 'I haven't a very good memory, but I'm afraid you must tell me your errand, Sir, for I really don't know it.'

'Well, then,' I said, and all the time I seemed to myself to be talking pure foolishness — 'I have come to tell you that the game's up. I have a warrant for the arrest of you three gentlemen.'

'Arrest,' said the old man, and he looked really shocked. 'Arrest! Good God, what for?'

'For the murder of Franklin Scudder in London on the 23rd day of last month.'

'I never heard the name before,' said the old man in a dazed voice.

One of the others spoke up. 'That was the Portland Place murder. I read about it. Good heavens, you must be mad, Sir! Where do you come from?'

'Scotland Yard,' I said.

After that for a minute there was utter silence. The old man was staring at his plate and fumbling with a nut, the very model of innocent bewilderment.

Then the plump one spoke up. He stammered a little, like a man picking his words.

'Don't get flustered, uncle,' he said. 'It is all a ridiculous mistake; but these things happen sometimes, and we can easily set it right. It won't be hard to prove our innocence. I can show that I was out of the country on the 23rd of May, and Bob was in a nursing home. You were in London, but you can explain what you were doing.'

'Right, Percy! Of course that's easy enough. The 23rd! That was the day after Agatha's wedding. Let me see. What was I doing? I came up in the morning from Woking, and lunched at the club with Charlie Symons. Then — oh yes, I dined with the Fishmongers. I remember, for the punch didn't agree with me, and I was seedy next morning. Hang it all, there's the cigar-box I brought back from the dinner.' He pointed to an object on the table, and laughed nervously.

'I think, Sir,' said the young man, addressing me respectfully, 'you will see you are mistaken. We want to assist the law like all Englishmen, and we don't want Scotland Yard to be making fools of themselves. That's so, uncle?'

'Certainly, Bob.' The old fellow seemed to be recovering his voice. 'Certainly, we'll do anything in our power to assist the authorities. But — but this is a bit too much. I can't get over it.'

'How Nellie will chuckle,' said the plump man. 'She always said that you would die of boredom because nothing ever happened to you. And now you've got it thick and strong,' and he began to laugh very pleasantly.

'By Jove, yes. Just think of it! What a story to tell at the club. Really, Mr Hannay, I suppose I should be angry, to show my innocence, but it's too funny! I almost forgive you the fright you gave me! You looked so glum, I thought I might have

been walking in my sleep and killing people.'

It couldn't be acting, it was too confoundingly genuine. My heart went into my boots, and my first impulse was to apologize and clear out. But I told myself I must see it through, even though I was to be the laughing-stock of Britain. The light from the dinner-table candlesticks was not very good, and to cover my confusion I got up, walked to the door and switched on the electric light. The sudden glare made them blink, and I stood scanning the three faces.

Well, I made nothing of it. One was old and bald, one was stout, one was dark and thin. There was nothing in their appearance to prevent them being the three who had hunted me in Scotland, but there was nothing to identify them. I simply can't explain why I who, as a roadman, had looked into two pairs of eyes, and as Ned Ainslie into another pair, why I, who have a good memory and reasonable powers of observation, could find no satisfaction. They seemed exactly what they professed to be, and I could not have sworn to one of them.

There in that pleasant dining-room, with etchings on the walls, and a picture of an old lady in a bib above the mantelpiece, I could see nothing to connect them with the moorland desperadoes. There was a silver cigarette-box beside me, and I saw that it had been won by Percival Appleton, Esq., of the St Bede's Club, in a golf tournament. I had to keep a firm hold of Peter Pienaar to prevent myself bolting out of that house.

'Well,' said the old man politely, 'are you reassured by your scrutiny, Sir?'

I couldn't find a word.

'I hope you'll find it consistent with your duty to drop this ridiculous business. I make no complaint, but you'll see how annoying it must be to respectable people.'

I shook my head.

'O Lord,' said the young man. 'This is a bit too thick!'

'Do you propose to march us off to the police station?' asked the plump one. 'That might be the best way out of it, but I suppose you won't be content with the local branch. I have the right to ask to see your warrant, but I don't wish to cast any aspersions upon you. You are only doing your duty. But you'll admit it's horribly awkward. What do you propose to do?'

There was nothing to do except to call in my men and have them arrested, or to confess my blunder and clear out. I felt mesmerized by the whole place, by the air of obvious innocence — not innocence merely, but frank honest bewilderment and concern in the three faces.

'Oh, Peter Pienaar,' I groaned inwardly, and for a moment I was very near damning myself for a fool and asking their pardon.

'Meantime I vote we have a game of bridge,' said the plump one. 'It will give Mr Hannay time to think over things, and you know we have been wanting a fourth player. Do you play, Sir?'

I accepted as if it had been an ordinary invitation at the club. The whole business had mesmerized me. We went into the smoking-room where a card-table was set out, and I was offered things to smoke and drink. I took my place at the table in a kind of dream. The window was open and the moon was flooding the cliffs and sea with a great tide of yellow light. There was moonshine, too, in my head. The three had recovered their composure, and were talking easily — just the kind of slangy talk you will hear in any golf club-house. I must have cut a rum figure, sitting there knitting my brows with my eyes wandering.

My partner was the young dark one. I play a fair hand at bridge, but I must have been rank bad that night. They saw that they had got me puzzled, and that put them more than ever at their ease. I kept looking at their faces, but they conveyed nothing to me. It was not that they looked different; they were different. I clung desperately to the words of Peter Pienaar.

Then something awoke me.

The old man laid down his hand to light a cigar. He didn't pick it up at once, but sat back for a moment in his chair, with his fingers tapping on his knees.

It was the movement I remembered when I had stood before him in the moorland farm, with the pistols of his servants behind me.

A little thing, lasting only a second, and the odds were a thousand to one that I might have had my eyes on my cards at the time and missed it. But I didn't, and, in a flash, the air seemed to clear. Some shadow lifted from my brain, and I was

looking at the three men with full and absolute recognition.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck ten o'clock.

The three faces seemed to change before my eyes and reveal their secrets. The young one was the murderer. Now I saw cruelty and ruthlessness, where before I had only seen good-humour. His knife, I made certain, had skewered Scudder to the floor. His kind had put the bullet in Karolides.

The plump man's features seemed to dislimn, and form again, as I looked at them. He hadn't a face, only a hundred masks that he could assume when he pleased. That chap must have been a superb actor. Perhaps he had been Lord Alloa of the night before; perhaps not; it didn't matter. I wondered if he was the fellow who had first tracked Scudder, and left his card on him. Scudder had said he lisped, and I could imagine how the adoption of a lisp might add terror.

But the old man was the pick of the lot. He was sheer brain, icy, cool, calculating, as ruthless as a steam hammer. Now that my eyes were opened I wondered where I had seen the benevolence. His jaw was like chilled steel, and his eyes had the inhuman luminosity of a bird's. I went on playing, and every second a greater hate welled up in my heart. It almost choked me, and I couldn't answer when my partner spoke. Only a little longer could I endure their company.

'Whew! Bob! Look at the time,' said the old man. 'You'd better think about catching your train. Bob's got to go to town tonight,' he added, turning to me. The voice rang now as false as hell. I looked at the clock, and it was nearly half-past ten.

'I am afraid he must put off his journey,' I said.

'Oh, damn,' said the young man. 'I thought you had dropped that rot. I've simply got to go. You can have my address, and I'll give any security you like.'

'No,' I said, 'you must stay.'

At that I think they must have realized that the game was desperate. Their only chance had been to convince me that I was playing the fool, and that had failed. But the old man spoke again.

'I'll go bail for my nephew. That ought to content you, Mr Hannay.' Was it fancy, or did I detect some halt in the smoothness of that voice?

There must have been, for as I glanced at him, his eyelids fell in that hawk-like hood which fear had stamped on my memory.

I blew my whistle.

In an instant the lights were out. A pair of strong arms gripped me round the waist, covering the pockets in which a man might be expected to carry a pistol.

'*Schnell, Franz,*' cried a voice, '*das boot, das boot!*' As it spoke I saw two of my fellows emerge on the moonlit lawn.

The young dark man leapt for the window, was through it, and over the low fence before a hand could touch him. I grappled the old chap, and the room seemed to fill with figures. I saw the plump one collared, but my eyes were all for the out-of-doors, where Franz sped on over the road towards the railed entrance to the beach stairs. One man followed him, but he had no chance. The gate of the stairs locked behind the fugitive, and I stood staring, with my hands on the old boy's throat, for such a time as a man might take to descend those steps to the sea.

Suddenly my prisoner broke from me and flung himself on the wall. There was a click as if a lever had been pulled. Then came a low rumbling far, far below the ground, and through the window I saw a cloud of chalky dust pouring out of the shaft of the stairway.

Someone switched on the light.

The old man was looking at me with blazing eyes.

'He is safe,' he cried. 'You cannot follow in time . . . He is gone . . . He has triumphed . . . *Der schwarze stein ist in der siegeskrone.*'

There was more in those eyes than any common triumph. They had been hooded like a bird of prey, and now they flamed with a hawk's pride. A white fanatic heat burned in them, and I realized for the first time the terrible thing I had been up against. This man was more than a spy; in his foul way he had been a patriot.

As the handcuffs clinked on his wrists I said my last word to him. 'I hope Franz will bear his triumph well. I ought to tell you that the *Ariadne* for the last hour has been in our hands.' Three weeks later, as all the world knows, we went to war. I joined the New Army the first week, and owing to my Matabele experience got a captain's commission straight off. But I had done my best service, I think, before I put on khaki.

Greenmantle

John Buchan



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE

CHAPTER ONE

A MISSION IS PROPOSED

I had just finished breakfast and was filling my pipe when I got Bullivant's telegram. It was at Furling, the big country house in Hampshire where I had come to convalesce after Loos, and Sandy, who was in the same case, was hunting for the marmalade. I flung him the flimsy with the blue strip pasted down on it, and he whistled.

'Hullo, Dick, you've got the battalion. Or maybe it's a staff billet. You'll be a blighted brass-hat, coming it heavy over the hard-working regimental officer. And to think of the language you've wasted on brass-hats in your time!'

I sat and thought for a bit, for the name 'Bullivant' carried me back eighteen months to the hot summer before the war. I had not seen the man since, though I had read about him in the papers. For more than a year I had been a busy battalion officer, with no other thought than to hammer a lot of raw stuff into good soldiers. I had succeeded pretty well, and there was no prouder man on earth than Richard Hannay when he took his Lennox Highlanders over the parapets on that glorious and bloody 25th day of September. Loos was no picnic, and we had had some ugly bits of scrapping before that, but the worst bit of the campaign I had seen was a tea-party to the show I had been in with Bullivant before the war started. [Major Hannay's narrative of this affair has been published under the title of *The Thirty-nine Steps*.]

The sight of his name on a telegram form seemed to change all my outlook on life. I had been hoping for the command of the battalion, and looking forward to being in at the finish with Brother Boche. But this message jerked my thoughts on to a new road. There might be other things in the war than straightforward fighting. Why on earth should the Foreign Office want to see an obscure Major of the New Army, and want to see him in double-quick time?

'I'm going up to town by the ten train,' I announced; 'I'll be back in time for dinner.'

'Try my tailor,' said Sandy. 'He's got a very nice taste in red tabs. You can use my name.'

An idea struck me. 'You're pretty well all right now. If I wire for you, will you pack your own kit and mine and join me?'

'Right-o! I'll accept a job on your staff if they give you a corps. If so be as you come down tonight, be a good chap and bring a barrel of oysters from Sweeting's.'

I travelled up to London in a regular November drizzle, which cleared up about Wimbledon to watery sunshine. I never could stand London during the war. It seemed to have lost its bearings and broken out into all manner of badges and uniforms which did not fit in with my notion of it. One felt the war more in its streets than in the field, or rather one felt the confusion of war without feeling the purpose. I dare say it was all right; but since August 1914 I never spent a day in town without coming home depressed to my boots.

I took a taxi and drove straight to the Foreign Office. Sir Walter did not keep me waiting long. But when his secretary took me to his room I would not have recognized the man I had known eighteen months before.

His big frame seemed to have dropped flesh and there was a stoop in the square shoulders. His face had lost its rosiness and was red in patches, like that of a man who gets too little fresh air. His hair was much greyer and very thin about the temples, and there were lines of overwork below the eyes. But the eyes were the same as before, keen and kindly and shrewd, and there was no change in the firm set of the jaw.

'We must on no account be disturbed for the next hour,' he told his secretary. When the young man had gone he went across to both doors and turned the keys in them.

'Well, Major Hannay,' he said, flinging himself into a chair beside the fire. 'How do you like soldiering?'

'Right enough,' I said, 'though this isn't just the kind of war I would have picked myself. It's a comfortless, bloody business. But we've got the measure of the old Boche now, and it's dogged as does it. I count on getting back to the front in a week or two.'

'Will you get the battalion?' he asked. He seemed to have followed my doings pretty closely.

'I believe I've a good chance. I'm not in this show for honour and glory, though. I want to do the best I can, but I wish to heaven it was over. All I think of is coming out of it with a whole skin.'

He laughed. 'You do yourself an injustice. What about the forward observation post at the Lone Tree? You forgot about the whole skin then.'

I felt myself getting red. 'That was all rot,' I said, 'and I can't think who told you about it. I hated the job, but I had to do it to prevent my subalterns going to glory. They were a lot of fire-eating young lunatics. If I had sent one of them he'd have gone on his knees to Providence and asked for trouble.'

Sir Walter was still grinning.

'I'm not questioning your caution. You have the rudiments of it, or our friends of the Black Stone would have gathered you in at our last merry meeting. I would question it as little as your courage. What exercises my mind is whether it is best employed in the trenches.'

'Is the War Office dissatisfied with me?' I asked sharply.

'They are profoundly satisfied. They propose to give you command of your battalion. Presently, if you escape a stray bullet, you will no doubt be a Brigadier. It is a wonderful war for youth and brains. But . . . I take it you are in this business to serve your country, Hannay?'

'I reckon I am,' I said. 'I am certainly not in it for my health.'

He looked at my leg, where the doctors had dug out the shrapnel fragments, and smiled quizzically.

'Pretty fit again?' he asked.

'Tough as a sjambok. I thrive on the racket and eat and sleep like a schoolboy.'

He got up and stood with his back to the fire, his eyes staring abstractedly out of the window at the wintry park.

'It is a great game, and you are the man for it, no doubt. But there are others who can play it, for soldiering today asks for the average rather than the exception in human nature. It is like a big machine where the parts are standardized. You are fighting, not because you are short of a job, but because you want to help England. How if you could help her better than by commanding a battalion — or a brigade — or, if it comes to that, a division? How if there is a thing which you alone can do? Not some *embusque* business in an office, but a thing compared to which your fight at Loos was a Sunday-school picnic. You are not afraid of danger? Well, in this job you would not be fighting with an army around you, but alone. You are fond of tackling difficulties? Well, I can give you a task which will try all your powers. Have you anything to say?'

My heart was beginning to thump uncomfortably. Sir Walter was not the man to pitch a case too high.

'I am a soldier,' I said, 'and under orders.'

'True; but what I am about to propose does not come by any conceivable stretch within the scope of a soldier's duties. I shall perfectly understand if you decline. You will be acting as I should act myself — as any sane man would. I would not press you for worlds. If you wish it, I will not even make the proposal, but let you go here and now, and wish you good luck with your battalion. I do not wish to perplex a good soldier with impossible decisions.'

This piqued me and put me on my mettle.

'I am not going to run away before the guns fire. Let me hear what you propose.'

Sir Walter crossed to a cabinet, unlocked it with a key from his chain, and took a piece of paper from a drawer. It looked like an ordinary half-sheet of note-paper.

'I take it,' he said, 'that your travels have not extended to the East.'

'No,' I said, 'barring a shooting trip in East Africa.'

'Have you by any chance been following the present campaign there?'

'I've read the newspapers pretty regularly since I went to hospital. I've got some pals in the Mesopotamia show, and of course I'm keen to know what is going to happen at Gallipoli and Salonika. I gather that Egypt is pretty safe.'

'If you will give me your attention for ten minutes I will supplement your newspaper reading.'

Sir Walter lay back in an arm-chair and spoke to the ceiling. It was the best story, the clearest and the fullest, I had ever got of any bit of the war. He told me just how and why and when Turkey had left the rails. I heard about her grievances over our seizure of her ironclads, of the mischief the coming of the *Goeben* had wrought, of Enver and his precious Committee and the way they had got a cinch on the old Turk. When he had spoken for a bit, he began to question me.

'You are an intelligent fellow, and you will ask how a Polish adventurer, meaning Enver, and a collection of Jews and gipsies should have got control of a proud race. The ordinary man will tell you that it was German organization backed up with German money and German arms. You will inquire again how, since Turkey is primarily a religious power, Islam has played so small a part in it all. The Sheikh-ul-Islam is neglected, and though the Kaiser proclaims a Holy War and calls himself Hadji Mohammed Guiliamo, and says the Hohenzollerns are descended from the Prophet, that seems to have fallen pretty flat. The ordinary man again will answer that Islam in Turkey is becoming a back number, and that Krupp guns are the new gods. Yet — I don't know. I do not quite believe in Islam becoming a back number.'

'Look at it in another way,' he went on. 'If it were Enver and Germany alone dragging Turkey into a European war for purposes that no Turk cared a rush about, we might expect to find the regular army obedient, and Constantinople. But in the provinces, where Islam is strong, there would be trouble. Many of us counted on that. But we have been disappointed. The Syrian army is as fanatical as the hordes of the Mahdi. The Senussi have taken a hand in the game. The Persian Moslems are threatening trouble. There is a dry wind blowing through the East, and the parched grasses wait the spark. And that wind is blowing towards the Indian border. Whence comes that wind, think you?'

Sir Walter had lowered his voice and was speaking very slow and distinct. I could hear the rain dripping from the eaves of the window, and far off the hoot of taxis in Whitehall.

'Have you an explanation, Hannay?' he asked again.

'It looks as if Islam had a bigger hand in the thing than we thought,' I said. 'I fancy religion is the only thing to knit up such a scattered empire.'

'You are right,' he said. 'You must be right. We have laughed at the Holy War, the jihad that old Von der Goltz prophesied. But I believe that stupid old man with the big spectacles was right. There is a jihad preparing. The question is, How?'

'I'm hanged if I know,' I said; 'but I'll bet it won't be done by a pack of stout German officers in *pickelhaubes*. I fancy you can't manufacture Holy Wars out of Krupp guns alone and a few staff officers and a battle cruiser with her boilers burst.'

'Agreed. They are not fools, however much we try to persuade ourselves of the contrary. But supposing they had got some tremendous sacred sanction — some holy thing, some book or gospel or some new prophet from the desert, something which would cast over the whole ugly mechanism of German war the glamour of the old torrential raids which crumpled the Byzantine Empire and shook the walls of Vienna? Islam is a fighting creed, and the mullah still stands in the pulpit with the Koran in one hand and a drawn sword in the other. Supposing there is some Ark of the Covenant which will madden the remotest Moslem peasant with dreams of Paradise? What then, my friend?'

'Then there will be hell let loose in those parts pretty soon.'

'Hell which may spread. Beyond Persia, remember, lies India.'

'You keep to suppositions. How much do you know?' I asked.

'Very little, except the fact. But the fact is beyond dispute. I have reports from agents everywhere — pedlars in South Russia, Afghan horse-dealers, Turcoman merchants, pilgrims on the road to Mecca, sheikhs in North Africa, sailors on the Black Sea coasters, sheep-skinned Mongols, Hindu fakirs, Greek traders in the Gulf, as well as respectable Consuls who use cyphers. They tell the same story. The East is waiting for a revelation. It has been promised one. Some star — man, prophecy, or trinket — is coming out of the West. The Germans know, and that is the card with which they are going to astonish the world.'

'And the mission you spoke of for me is to go and find out?'

He nodded gravely. 'That is the crazy and impossible mission.'

'Tell me one thing, Sir Walter,' I said. 'I know it is the fashion in this country if a man has a special knowledge to set him to some job exactly the opposite. I know all about Damaraland, but instead of being put on Botha's staff, as I applied to be, I was kept in Hampshire mud till the campaign in German South West Africa was over. I know a man who could pass as an Arab, but do you think they would send him to the East? They left him in my battalion — a lucky thing for me, for he saved my life at Loos. I know the fashion, but isn't this just carrying it a bit too far? There must be thousands of men who have spent years in the East and talk any language. They're the fellows for this job. I never saw a Turk in my life except a chap who did wrestling turns in a show at Kimberley. You've picked about the most useless man on earth.'

'You've been a mining engineer, Hannay,' Sir Walter said. 'If you wanted a man to prospect for gold in Barotseland you would of course like to get one who knew the country and the people and the language. But the first thing you would require in him would be that he had a nose for finding gold and knew his business. That is the position now. I believe that you have a nose for finding out what our enemies try to hide. I know that you are brave and cool and resourceful. That is why I tell you the story. Besides . . .'

He unrolled a big map of Europe on the wall.

'I can't tell you where you'll get on the track of the secret, but I can put a limit to the quest. You won't find it east of the Bosphorus — not yet. It is still in Europe. It may be in Constantinople, or in Thrace. It may be farther west. But it is moving eastwards. If you are in time you may cut into its march to Constantinople. That much I can tell you. The secret is known in Germany, too, to those whom it concerns. It is in Europe that the seeker must search — at present.'

'Tell me more,' I said. 'You can give me no details and no instructions. Obviously you can give me no help if I come to grief.'

He nodded. 'You would be beyond the pale.'

'You give me a free hand.'

'Absolutely. You can have what money you like, and you can get what help you like. You can follow any plan you fancy, and go anywhere you think fruitful. We can give no directions.'

'One last question. You say it is important. Tell me just how important.'

'It is life and death,' he said solemnly. 'I can put it no higher and no lower. Once we know what is the menace we can meet it. As long as we are in the dark it works unchecked and we may be too late. The war must be won or lost in Europe. Yes; but if the East blazes up, our effort will be distracted from Europe and the great *coup* may fail. The stakes are no less than victory and defeat, Hannay.'

I got out of my chair and walked to the window. It was a difficult moment in my life. I was happy in my soldiering; above all, happy in the company of my brother officers. I was asked to go off into the enemy's lands on a quest for which I believed I was manifestly unfitted — a business of lonely days and nights, of nerve-racking strain, of deadly peril shrouding me like a garment. Looking out on the bleak weather I shivered. It was too grim a business, too inhuman for flesh and blood. But Sir Walter had called it a matter of life and death, and I had told him that I was out to serve my country. He could not give me orders, but was I not under orders — higher orders than my Brigadier's? I thought myself incompetent, but cleverer men than me thought me competent, or at least competent enough for a sporting chance. I knew in my soul that if I declined I should never be quite at peace in the world again. And yet Sir Walter had called the scheme madness, and said that he himself would never have accepted.

How does one make a great decision? I swear that when I turned round to speak I meant to refuse. But my answer was Yes, and I had crossed the Rubicon. My voice sounded cracked and far away.

Sir Walter shook hands with me and his eyes blinked a little.

'I may be sending you to your death, Hannay — Good God, what a damned task-mistress duty is! — If so, I shall be haunted with regrets, but you will never repent. Have no fear of that. You have chosen the roughest road, but it goes straight to the hill-tops.'

He handed me the half-sheet of note-paper. On it were written three words — '*Kasredin*', '*cancer*', and '*v. I.*'

'That is the only clue we possess,' he said. 'I cannot construe it, but I can tell you the story. We have had our agents working in Persia and Mesopotamia for years — mostly young officers of the Indian Army. They carry their lives in their hands, and now and then one disappears, and the sewers of Baghdad might tell a tale. But they find out many things, and they count the game worth the candle. They have told us of the star rising in the West, but they could give us no details. All but one — the best of them. He had been working between Mosul and the Persian frontier as a muleteer, and had been south into the Bakhtiari hills. He found out something, but his enemies knew that he knew and he was pursued. Three months ago, just before Kut, he staggered into Delamain's camp with ten bullet holes in him and a knife slash on his forehead. He mumbled his name, but beyond that and the fact that there was a Something coming from the West he told them nothing. He died in ten minutes. They found this paper on him, and since he cried out the word "*Kasredin*" in his last moments, it must have had something to do with his quest. It is for you to find out if it has any meaning.'

I folded it up and placed it in my pocket-book.

‘What a great fellow! What was his name?’ I asked.

Sir Walter did not answer at once. He was looking out of the window. ‘His name,’ he said at last, ‘was Harry Bullivant. He was my son. God rest his brave soul!’



CHAPTER TWO

THE GATHERING OF THE MISSIONARIES

I wrote out a wire to Sandy, asking him to come up by the two-fifteen train and meet me at my flat.

‘I have chosen my colleague,’ I said.

‘Billy Arbuthnot’s boy? His father was at Harrow with me. I know the fellow — Harry used to bring him down to fish — tallish, with a lean, high-boned face and a pair of brown eyes like a pretty girl’s. I know his record, too. There’s a good deal about him in this office. He rode through Yemen, which no white man ever did before. The Arabs let him pass, for they thought him stark mad and argued that the hand of Allah was heavy enough on him without their efforts. He’s blood-brother to every kind of Albanian bandit. Also he used to take a hand in Turkish politics, and got a huge reputation. Some Englishman was once complaining to old Mahmoud Shevkat about the scarcity of statesmen in Western Europe, and Mahmoud broke in with, “Have you not the Honourable Arbuthnot?” You say he’s in your battalion. I was wondering what had become of him, for we tried to get hold of him here, but he had left no address. Ludovick Arbuthnot — yes, that’s the man. Buried deep in the commissioned ranks of the New Army? Well, we’ll get him out pretty quick!’

‘I knew he had knocked about the East, but I didn’t know he was that kind of swell. Sandy’s not the chap to buck about himself.’

‘He wouldn’t,’ said Sir Walter. ‘He had always a more than Oriental reticence. I’ve got another colleague for you, if you like him.’

He looked at his watch. ‘You can get to the Savoy Grill Room in five minutes in a taxi-cab. Go in from the Strand, turn to your left, and you will see in the alcove on the right-hand side a table with one large American gentleman sitting at it. They know him there, so he will have the table to himself. I want you to go and sit down beside him. Say you come from me. His name is Mr John Scantlebury Blenkiron, now a citizen of Boston, Mass., but born and raised in Indiana. Put this envelope in your pocket, but don’t read its contents till you have talked to him. I want you to form your own opinion about Mr Blenkiron.’

I went out of the Foreign Office in as muddled a frame of mind as any diplomatist who ever left its portals. I was most desperately depressed. To begin with, I was in a complete funk. I had always thought I was about as brave as the average man, but there’s courage and courage, and mine was certainly not the impassive kind. Stick me down in a trench and I could stand being shot at as well as most people, and my blood could get hot if it were given a chance. But I think I had too much imagination. I couldn’t shake off the beastly forecasts that kept crowding my mind.

In about a fortnight, I calculated, I would be dead. Shot as a spy — a rotten sort of ending! At the moment I was quite safe, looking for a taxi in the middle of Whitehall, but the sweat broke on my forehead. I felt as I had felt in my adventure before the war. But this was far worse, for it was more cold-blooded and premeditated, and I didn’t seem to have even a sporting chance. I watched the figures in khaki passing on the pavement, and thought what a nice safe prospect they had compared to mine. Yes, even if next week they were in the Hohenzollern, or the Hairpin trench at the Quarries, or that ugly angle at Hooge. I wondered why I had not been happier that morning before I got that infernal wire. Suddenly all the trivialities of English life seemed to me inexpressibly dear and terribly far away. I was very angry with Bullivant, till I remembered how fair he had been. My fate was my own choosing.

When I was hunting the Black Stone the interest of the problem had helped to keep me going. But now I could see no problem. My mind had nothing to work on but three words of gibberish on a sheet of paper and a mystery of which Sir Walter had been convinced, but to which he couldn’t give a name. It was like the story I had read of Saint Teresa setting off at the age of ten with her small brother to convert the Moors. I sat huddled in the taxi with my chin on my breast, wishing that I had lost a leg at Loos and been comfortably tucked away for the rest of the war.

Sure enough I found my man in the Grill Room. There he was, feeding solemnly, with a napkin tucked under his chin. He was a big fellow with a fat, sallow, clean-shaven face. I disregarded the hovering waiter and pulled up a chair beside the American at the little table. He turned on me a pair of full sleepy eyes, like a ruminating ox.

‘Mr Blenkiron?’ I asked.

'You have my name, Sir,' he said. 'Mr John Scantlebury Blenkiron. I would wish you good morning if I saw anything good in this darned British weather.'

'I come from Sir Walter Bullivant,' I said, speaking low.

'So?' said he. 'Sir Walter is a very good friend of mine. Pleased to meet you, Mr — or I guess it's Colonel —'

'Hannay,' I said; 'Major Hannay.' I was wondering what this sleepy Yankee could do to help me.

'Allow me to offer you luncheon, Major. Here, waiter, bring the carte. I regret that I cannot join you in sampling the efforts of the management of this hotel. I suffer, Sir, from dyspepsia — duodenal dyspepsia. It gets me two hours after a meal and gives me hell just below the breast-bone. So I am obliged to adopt a diet. My nourishment is fish, Sir, and boiled milk and a little dry toast. It's a melancholy descent from the days when I could do justice to a lunch at Sherry's and sup off oyster-crabs and devilled bones.' He sighed from the depths of his capacious frame.

I ordered an omelette and a chop, and took another look at him. The large eyes seemed to be gazing steadily at me without seeing me. They were as vacant as an abstracted child's; but I had an uncomfortable feeling that they saw more than mine.

'You have been fighting, Major? The Battle of Loos? Well, I guess that must have been some battle. We in America respect the fighting of the British soldier, but we don't quite catch on to the de-vices of the British Generals. We opine that there is more bellicosity than science among your highbrows. That is so? My father fought at Chattanooga, but these eyes have seen nothing gorier than a Presidential election. Say, is there any way I could be let into a scene of real bloodshed?'

His serious tone made me laugh. 'There are plenty of your countrymen in the present show,' I said. 'The French Foreign Legion is full of young Americans, and so is our Army Service Corps. Half the chauffeurs you strike in France seem to come from the States.'

He sighed. 'I did think of some belligerent stunt a year back. But I reflected that the good God had not given John S. Blenkiron the kind of martial figure that would do credit to the tented field. Also I recollected that we Americans were nootrals — benevolent nootrals — and that it did not become me to be butting into the struggles of the effete monarchies of Europe. So I stopped at home. It was a big renunciation, Major, for I was lying sick during the Philippines business, and I have never seen the lawless passions of men let loose on a battlefield. And, as a student of humanity, I hankered for the experience.'

'What have you been doing?' I asked. The calm gentleman had begun to interest me.

'Waal,' he said, 'I just waited. The Lord has blessed me with money to burn, so I didn't need to go scrambling like a wild cat for war contracts. But I reckoned I would get let into the game somehow, and I was. Being a nootral, I was in an advantageous position to take a hand. I had a pretty hectic time for a while, and then I reckoned I would leave God's country and see what was doing in Europe. I have counted myself out of the bloodshed business, but, as your poet sings, peace has its victories not less renowned than war, and I reckon that means that a nootral can have a share in a scrap as well as a belligerent.'

'That's the best kind of neutrality I've ever heard of,' I said.

'It's the right kind,' he replied solemnly. 'Say, Major, what are your lot fighting for? For your own skins and your Empire and the peace of Europe. Waal, those ideals don't concern us one cent. We're not Europeans, and there aren't any German trenches on Long Island yet. You've made the ring in Europe, and if we came butting in it wouldn't be the rules of the game. You wouldn't welcome us, and I guess you'd be right. We're that delicate-minded we can't interfere and that was what my friend, President Wilson, meant when he opined that America was too proud to fight. So we're nootrals. But likewise we're benevolent nootrals. As I follow events, there's a skunk been let loose in the world, and the odour of it is going to make life none too sweet till it is cleared away. It wasn't us that stirred up that skunk, but we've got to take a hand in disinfecting the planet. See? We can't fight, but, by God! some of us are going to sweat blood to sweep the mess up. Officially we do nothing except give off Notes like a leaky boiler gives off steam. But as individual citizens we're in it up to the neck. So, in the spirit of Jefferson Davis and Woodrow Wilson, I'm going to be the nootralist kind of nootral till Kaiser will be sorry he didn't declare war on America at the beginning.'

I was completely recovering my temper. This fellow was a perfect jewel, and his spirit put purpose into me.

'I guess you British were the same kind of nootral when your Admiral warned off the German fleet from interfering with Dewey in Manila Bay in '98.' Mr Blenkiron drank up the last drop of his boiled milk and lit a thin black cigar.

I leaned forward. 'Have you talked to Sir Walter?' I asked.

'I have talked to him, and he has given me to understand that there's a deal ahead which you're going to boss. There are no flies on that big man, and if he says it's good business then you can count me in.'

'You know that it's uncommonly dangerous?'

'I judged so. But it don't do to begin counting risks. I believe in an all-wise and beneficent Providence, but you have got to trust Him and give Him a chance. What's life anyhow? For me, it's living on a strict diet and having frequent pains in my stomach. It isn't such an almighty lot to give up, provided you get a good price in the deal. Besides, how big is the risk? About one o'clock in the morning, when you can't sleep, it will be the size of Mount Everest, but if you run out to meet it, it will be a hillock you can jump over. The grizzly looks very fierce when you're taking your ticket for the Rockies and wondering if you'll come back, but he's just an ordinary bear when you've got the sight of your rifle on him. I won't think about risks till I'm up to my neck in them and don't see the road out.'

I scribbled my address on a piece of paper and handed it to the stout philosopher. 'Come to dinner tonight at eight,' I said.

'I thank you, Major. A little fish, please, plain-boiled, and some hot milk. You will forgive me if I borrow your couch after the meal and spend the evening on my back. That is the advice of my noo doctor.'

I got a taxi and drove to my club. On the way I opened the envelope Sir Walter had given me. It contained a number of jottings, the dossier of Mr Blenkiron. He had done wonders for the Allies in the States. He had nosed out the Dumba plot, and had been instrumental in getting the portfolio of Dr Albert. Von Papen's spies had tried to murder him, after he had defeated an attempt to blow up one of the big gun factories. Sir Walter had written at the end: 'The best man we ever had. Better than Scudder. He would go through hell with a box of bismuth tablets and a pack of Patience cards.'

I went into the little back smoking-room, borrowed an atlas from the library, poked up the fire, and sat down to think. Mr Blenkiron had given me the fillip I needed. My mind was beginning to work now, and was running wide over the whole business. Not that I hoped to find anything by my cogitations. It wasn't thinking in an arm-chair that would solve the mystery. But I was getting a sort of grip on a plan of operations. And to my relief I had stopped thinking about the risks. Blenkiron had shamed me out of that. If a sedentary dyspeptic could show that kind of nerve, I wasn't going to be behind him.

I went back to my flat about five o'clock. My man Paddock had gone to the wars long ago, so I had shifted to one of the new blocks in Park Lane where they provide food and service. I kept the place on to have a home to go to when I got leave. It's a miserable business holidaying in an hotel.

Sandy was devouring tea-cakes with the serious resolution of a convalescent.

'Well, Dick, what's the news? Is it a brass hat or the boot?'

'Neither,' I said. 'But you and I are going to disappear from His Majesty's forces. Seconded for special service.'

'O my sainted aunt!' said Sandy. 'What is it? For Heaven's sake put me out of pain. Have we to tout deputations of suspicious neutrals over munition works or take the shivering journalist in a motor-car where he can imagine he sees a Boche?'

'The news will keep. But I can tell you this much. It's about as safe and easy as to go through the German lines with a walking-stick.'

'Come, that's not so dusty,' said Sandy, and began cheerfully on the muffins.

I must spare a moment to introduce Sandy to the reader, for he cannot be allowed to slip into this tale by a side-door. If you will consult the Peerage you will find that to Edward Cospatrick, fifteenth Baron Clanroyden, there was born in the year 1882, as his second son, Ludovick Gustavus Arbuthnot, commonly called the Honourable, etc. The said son was educated at Eton and New College, Oxford, was a captain in the Tweeddale Yeomanry, and served for some years as honorary attache at various embassies. The Peerage will stop short at this point, but that is by no means the end of the story. For the rest you must consult very different authorities. Lean brown men from the ends of the earth may be seen on the London pavements now and then in creased clothes, walking with the light outland step, slinking into clubs as if they could not remember whether or not they belonged to them. From them you may get news of Sandy. Better still, you will hear of him at little forgotten fishing ports where the Albanian mountains dip to the Adriatic. If you struck a Mecca pilgrimage the odds are you would meet a dozen of Sandy's friends in it. In shepherds' huts in the Caucasus you will find

bits of his cast-off clothing, for he has a knack of shedding garments as he goes. In the caravanserais of Bokhara and Samarkand he is known, and there are shikaris in the Pamirs who still speak of him round their fires. If you were going to visit Petrograd or Rome or Cairo it would be no use asking him for introductions; if he gave them, they would lead you into strange haunts. But if Fate compelled you to go to Lhasa or Yarkand or Seistan he could map out your road for you and pass the word to potent friends. We call ourselves insular, but the truth is that we are the only race on earth that can produce men capable of getting inside the skin of remote peoples. Perhaps the Scots are better than the English, but we're all a thousand per cent better than anybody else. Sandy was the wandering Scot carried to the pitch of genius. In old days he would have led a crusade or discovered a new road to the Indies. Today he merely roamed as the spirit moved him, till the war swept him up and dumped him down in my battalion.

I got out Sir Walter's half-sheet of note-paper. It was not the original — naturally he wanted to keep that — but it was a careful tracing. I took it that Harry Bullivant had not written down the words as a memo for his own use. People who follow his career have good memories. He must have written them in order that, if he perished and his body was found, his friends might get a clue. Wherefore, I argued, the words must be intelligible to somebody or other of our persuasion, and likewise they must be pretty well gibberish to any Turk or German that found them.

The first, '*Kasredin*', I could make nothing of. I asked Sandy.

'You mean Nasr-ed-din,' he said, still munching crumpets.

'What's that?' I asked sharply.

'He's the General believed to be commanding against us in Mesopotamia. I remember him years ago in Aleppo. He talked bad French and drank the sweetest of sweet champagne.'

I looked closely at the paper. The 'K' was unmistakable.

'Kasredin is nothing. It means in Arabic the House of Faith, and might cover anything from Hagia Sofia to a suburban villa. What's your next puzzle, Dick? Have you entered for a prize competition in a weekly paper?'

'*Cancer*,' I read out.

'It is the Latin for a crab. Likewise it is the name of a painful disease. It is also a sign of the Zodiac.'

'*V. I.*' I read.

'There you have me. It sounds like the number of a motor-car. The police would find out for you. I call this rather a difficult competition. What's the prize?'

I passed him the paper. 'Who wrote it? It looks as if he had been in a hurry.'

'Harry Bullivant,' I said.

Sandy's face grew solemn. 'Old Harry. He was at my tutor's. The best fellow God ever made. I saw his name in the casualty list before Kut. . . . Harry didn't do things without a purpose. What's the story of this paper?'

'Wait till after dinner,' I said. 'I'm going to change and have a bath. There's an American coming to dine, and he's part of the business.'

Mr Blenkiron arrived punctual to the minute in a fur coat like a Russian prince's. Now that I saw him on his feet I could judge him better. He had a fat face, but was not too plump in figure, and very muscular wrists showed below his shirt-cuffs. I fancied that, if the occasion called, he might be a good man with his hands.

Sandy and I ate a hearty meal, but the American picked at his boiled fish and sipped his milk a drop at a time. When the servant had cleared away, he was as good as his word and laid himself out on my sofa. I offered him a good cigar, but he preferred one of his own lean black abominations. Sandy stretched his length in an easy chair and lit his pipe. 'Now for your story, Dick,' he said.

I began, as Sir Walter had begun with me, by telling them about the puzzle in the Near East. I pitched a pretty good yarn, for I had been thinking a lot about it, and the mystery of the business had caught my fancy. Sandy got very keen.

'It is possible enough. Indeed, I've been expecting it, though I'm hanged if I can imagine what card the Germans have got up their sleeve. It might be any one of twenty things. Thirty years ago there was a bogus prophecy that played the devil in Yemen. Or it might be a flag such as Ali Wad Helu had, or a jewel like Solomon's necklace in Abyssinia. You never know what will start off a jihad! But I rather think it's a man.'

'Where could he get his purchase?' I asked.

'It's hard to say. If it were merely wild tribesmen like the Bedouin he might have got a reputation as a saint and miracle-worker. Or he might be a fellow that preached a pure religion, like the chap that founded the Senussi. But I'm inclined to think he must be something extra special if he can put a spell on the whole Moslem world. The Turk and the Persian wouldn't follow the ordinary new theology game. He must be of the Blood. Your Mahdis and Mullahs and Imams were nobodies, but they had only a local prestige. To capture all Islam — and I gather that is what we fear — the man must be of the Koreish, the tribe of the Prophet himself.'

'But how could any impostor prove that? For I suppose he's an impostor.'

'He would have to combine a lot of claims. His descent must be pretty good to begin with, and there are families, remember, that claim the Koreish blood. Then he'd have to be rather a wonder on his own account — saintly, eloquent, and that sort of thing. And I expect he'd have to show a sign, though what that could be I haven't a notion.'

'You know the East about as well as any living man. Do you think that kind of thing is possible?' I asked.

'Perfectly,' said Sandy, with a grave face.

'Well, there's the ground cleared to begin with. Then there's the evidence of pretty well every secret agent we possess. That all seems to prove the fact. But we have no details and no clues except that bit of paper.' I told them the story of it.

Sandy studied it with wrinkled brows. 'It beats me. But it may be the key for all that. A clue may be dumb in London and shout aloud at Baghdad.'

'That's just the point I was coming to. Sir Walter says this thing is about as important for our cause as big guns. He can't give me orders, but he offers the job of going out to find what the mischief is. Once he knows that, he says he can checkmate it. But it's got to be found out soon, for the mine may be sprung at any moment. I've taken on the job. Will you help?'

Sandy was studying the ceiling.

'I should add that it's about as safe as playing chuck-farthing at the Loos Cross-roads, the day you and I went in. And if we fail nobody can help us.'

'Oh, of course, of course,' said Sandy in an abstracted voice.

Mr Blenkiron, having finished his after-dinner recumbency, had sat up and pulled a small table towards him. From his pocket he had taken a pack of Patience cards and had begun to play the game called the Double Napoleon. He seemed to be oblivious of the conversation.

Suddenly I had a feeling that the whole affair was stark lunacy. Here were we three simpletons sitting in a London flat and projecting a mission into the enemy's citadel without an idea what we were to do or how we were to do it. And one of the three was looking at the ceiling, and whistling softly through his teeth, and another was playing Patience. The farce of the thing struck me so keenly that I laughed.

Sandy looked at me sharply.

'You feel like that? Same with me. It's idiocy, but all war is idiotic, and the most whole-hearted idiot is apt to win. We're to go on this mad trail wherever we think we can hit it. Well, I'm with you. But I don't mind admitting that I'm in a blue funk. I had got myself adjusted to this trench business and was quite happy. And now you have hoicked me out, and my feet are cold.'

'I don't believe you know what fear is,' I said.

'There you're wrong, Dick,' he said earnestly. 'Every man who isn't a maniac knows fear. I have done some daft things, but I never started on them without wishing they were over. Once I'm in the show I get easier, and by the time I'm coming out I'm sorry to leave it. But at the start my feet are icy.'

'Then I take it you're coming?'

'Rather,' he said. 'You didn't imagine I would go back on you?'

'And you, sir?' I addressed Blenkiron.

His game of Patience seemed to be coming out. He was completing eight little heaps of cards with a contented grunt. As I spoke, he raised his sleepy eyes and nodded.

'Why, yes,' he said. 'You gentlemen mustn't think that I haven't been following your most engrossing conversation. I guess I haven't missed a syllable. I find that a game of Patience stimulates the digestion after meals and conduces to quiet

reflection. John S. Blenkiron is with you all the time.'

He shuffled the cards and dealt for a new game.

I don't think I ever expected a refusal, but this ready assent cheered me wonderfully. I couldn't have faced the thing alone.

'Well, that's settled. Now for ways and means. We three have got to put ourselves in the way of finding out Germany's secret, and we have to go where it is known. Somehow or other we have to reach Constantinople, and to beat the biggest area of country we must go by different roads. Sandy, my lad, you've got to get into Turkey. You're the only one of us that knows that engaging people. You can't get in by Europe very easily, so you must try Asia. What about the coast of Asia Minor?'

'It could be done,' he said. 'You'd better leave that entirely to me. I'll find out the best way. I suppose the Foreign Office will help me to get to the jumping-off place?'

'Remember,' I said, 'it's no good getting too far east. The secret, so far as concerns us, is still west of Constantinople.'

'I see that. I'll blow in on the Bosphorus by a short tack.'

'For you, Mr Blenkiron, I would suggest a straight journey. You're an American, and can travel through Germany direct. But I wonder how far your activities in New York will allow you to pass as a neutral?'

'I have considered that, Sir,' he said. 'I have given some thought to the peccoliar psychology of the great German nation. As I read them they're as cunning as cats, and if you play the feline game they will outwit you every time. Yes, Sir, they are no slouches at sleuth-work. If I were to buy a pair of false whiskers and dye my hair and dress like a Baptist parson and go into Germany on the peace racket, I guess they'd be on my trail like a knife, and I should be shot as a spy inside of a week or doing solitary in the Moabite prison. But they lack the larger vision. They can be bluffed, Sir. With your approval I shall visit the Fatherland as John S. Blenkiron, once a thorn in the side of their brightest boys on the other side. But it will be a different John S. I reckon he will have experienced a change of heart. He will have come to appreciate the great, pure, noble soul of Germany, and he will be sorrowing for his past like a converted gun-man at a camp meeting. He will be a victim of the meanness and perfidy of the British Government. I am going to have a first-class row with your Foreign Office about my passport, and I am going to speak harsh words about them up and down this metropolis. I am going to be shadowed by your sleuths at my port of embarkation, and I guess I shall run up hard against the British Legations in Scandinavia. By that time our Teutonic friends will have begun to wonder what has happened to John S., and to think that maybe they have been mistaken in that child. So, when I get to Germany they will be waiting for me with an open mind. Then I judge my conduct will surprise and encourage them. I will confide to them valuable secret information about British preparations, and I will show up the British lion as the meanest kind of cur. You may trust me to make a good impression. After that I'll move eastwards, to see the demolition of the British Empire in those parts. By the way, where is the rendezvous?'

'This is the 17th day of November. If we can't find out what we want in two months we may chuck the job. On the 17th of January we should forgather in Constantinople. Whoever gets there first waits for the others. If by that date we're not all present, it will be considered that the missing man has got into trouble and must be given up. If ever we get there we'll be coming from different points and in different characters, so we want a rendezvous where all kinds of odd folk assemble. Sandy, you know Constantinople. You fix the meeting-place.'

'I've already thought of that,' he said, and going to the writing-table he drew a little plan on a sheet of paper. 'That lane runs down from the Kurdish Bazaar in Galata to the ferry of Ratchik. Half-way down on the left-hand side is a cafe kept by a Greek called Kuprasso. Behind the cafe is a garden, surrounded by high walls which were parts of the old Byzantine Theatre. At the end of the garden is a shanty called the Garden-house of Suliman the Red. It has been in its time a dancing-hall and a gambling hell and God knows what else. It's not a place for respectable people, but the ends of the earth converge there and no questions are asked. That's the best spot I can think of for a meeting-place.'

The kettle was simmering by the fire, the night was raw, and it seemed the hour for whisky-punch. I made a brew for Sandy and myself and boiled some milk for Blenkiron.

'What about language?' I asked. 'You're all right, Sandy?'

'I know German fairly well; and I can pass anywhere as a Turk. The first will do for eavesdropping and the second for ordinary business.'

‘And you?’ I asked Blenkiron.

‘I was left out at Pentecost,’ he said. ‘I regret to confess I have no gift of tongues. But the part I have chosen for myself don’t require the polyglot. Never forget I’m plain John S. Blenkiron, a citizen of the great American Republic.’

‘You haven’t told us your own line, Dick,’ Sandy said.

‘I am going to the Bosphorus through Germany, and, not being a neutral, it won’t be a very cushioned journey.’

Sandy looked grave.

‘That sounds pretty desperate. Is your German good enough?’

‘Pretty fair; quite good enough to pass as a native. But officially I shall not understand one word. I shall be a Boer from Western Cape Colony: one of Maritz’s old lot who after a bit of trouble has got through Angola and reached Europe. I shall talk Dutch and nothing else. And, my hat! I shall be pretty bitter about the British. There’s a powerful lot of good swear-words in the taal. I shall know all about Africa, and be panting to get another whack at the *verdommt rooinek*. With luck they may send me to the Uganda show or to Egypt, and I shall take care to go by Constantinople. If I’m to deal with the Mohammedan natives they’re bound to show me what hand they hold. At least, that’s the way I look at it.’

We filled our glasses — two of punch and one of milk — and drank to our next merry meeting. Then Sandy began to laugh, and I joined in. The sense of hopeless folly again descended on me. The best plans we could make were like a few buckets of water to ease the drought of the Sahara or the old lady who would have stopped the Atlantic with a broom. I thought with sympathy of little Saint Teresa.



CHAPTER THREE

PETER PIENAAR

Our various departures were unassuming, all but the American's. Sandy spent a busy fortnight in his subterranean fashion, now in the British Museum, now running about the country to see old exploring companions, now at the War Office, now at the Foreign Office, but mostly in my flat, sunk in an arm-chair and meditating. He left finally on December 1st as a King's Messenger for Cairo. Once there I knew the King's Messenger would disappear, and some queer Oriental ruffian take his place. It would have been impertinence in me to inquire into his plans. He was the real professional, and I was only the dabbler.

Blenkiron was a different matter. Sir Walter told me to look out for squalls, and the twinkle in his eye gave me a notion of what was coming. The first thing the sportsman did was to write a letter to the papers signed with his name. There had been a debate in the House of Commons on foreign policy, and the speech of some idiot there gave him his cue. He declared that he had been heart and soul with the British at the start, but that he was reluctantly compelled to change his views. He said our blockade of Germany had broken all the laws of God and humanity, and he reckoned that Britain was now the worst exponent of Prussianism going. That letter made a fine racket, and the paper that printed it had a row with the Censor. But that was only the beginning of Mr Blenkiron's campaign. He got mixed up with some mountebanks called the League of Democrats against Aggression, gentlemen who thought that Germany was all right if we could only keep from hurting her feelings. He addressed a meeting under their auspices, which was broken up by the crowd, but not before John S. had got off his chest a lot of amazing stuff. I wasn't there, but a man who was told me that he never heard such clotted nonsense. He said that Germany was right in wanting the freedom of the seas, and that America would back her up, and that the British Navy was a bigger menace to the peace of the world than the Kaiser's army. He admitted that he had once thought differently, but he was an honest man and not afraid to face facts. The oration closed suddenly, when he got a brussels-sprout in the eye, at which my friend said he swore in a very unpacifist style.

After that he wrote other letters to the Press, saying that there was no more liberty of speech in England, and a lot of scallywags backed him up. Some Americans wanted to tar and feather him, and he got kicked out of the Savoy. There was an agitation to get him deported, and questions were asked in Parliament, and the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs said his department had the matter in hand. I was beginning to think that Blenkiron was carrying his tomfoolery too far, so I went to see Sir Walter, but he told me to keep my mind easy.

'Our friend's motto is "Thorough",' he said, 'and he knows very well what he is about. We have officially requested him to leave, and he sails from Newcastle on Monday. He will be shadowed wherever he goes, and we hope to provoke more outbreaks. He is a very capable fellow.'

The last I saw of him was on the Saturday afternoon when I met him in St James's Street and offered to shake hands. He told me that my uniform was a pollution, and made a speech to a small crowd about it. They hissed him and he had to get into a taxi. As he departed there was just the suspicion of a wink in his left eye. On Monday I read that he had gone off, and the papers observed that our shores were well quit of him.

I sailed on December 3rd from Liverpool in a boat bound for the Argentine that was due to put in at Lisbon. I had of course to get a Foreign Office passport to leave England, but after that my connection with the Government ceased. All the details of my journey were carefully thought out. Lisbon would be a good jumping-off place, for it was the rendezvous of scallywags from most parts of Africa. My kit was an old Gladstone bag, and my clothes were the relics of my South African wardrobe. I let my beard grow for some days before I sailed, and, since it grows fast, I went on board with the kind of hairy chin you will see on the young Boer. My name was now Brandt, Cornelis Brandt — at least so my passport said, and passports never lie.

There were just two other passengers on that beastly boat, and they never appeared till we were out of the Bay. I was pretty bad myself, but managed to move about all the time, for the frowst in my cabin would have sickened a hippo. The old tub took two days and a night to waddle from Ushant to Finisterre. Then the weather changed and we came out of snow-squalls into something very like summer. The hills of Portugal were all blue and yellow like the Kalahari, and before

we made the Tagus I was beginning to forget I had ever left Rhodesia. There was a Dutchman among the sailors with whom I used to patter the taal, and but for 'Good morning' and 'Good evening' in broken English to the captain, that was about all the talking I did on the cruise.

We dropped anchor off the quays of Lisbon on a shiny blue morning, pretty near warm enough to wear flannels. I had now got to be very wary. I did not leave the ship with the shore-going boat, but made a leisurely breakfast. Then I strolled on deck, and there, just casting anchor in the middle of the stream, was another ship with a blue and white funnel I knew so well. I calculated that a month before she had been smelling the mangrove swamps of Angola. Nothing could better answer my purpose. I proposed to board her, pretending I was looking for a friend, and come on shore from her, so that anyone in Lisbon who chose to be curious would think I had landed straight from Portuguese Africa.

I hailed one of the adjacent ruffians, and got into his rowboat, with my kit. We reached the vessel — they called her the *Henry the Navigator* — just as the first shore-boat was leaving. The crowd in it were all Portuguese, which suited my book.

But when I went up the ladder the first man I met was old Peter Pienaar.

Here was a piece of sheer monumental luck. Peter had opened his eyes and his mouth, and had got as far as '*Allemachtig*', when I shut him up.

'Brandt,' I said, 'Cornelis Brandt. That's my name now, and don't you forget it. Who is the captain here? Is it still old Sloggett?'

'Ja,' said Peter, pulling himself together. 'He was speaking about you yesterday.'

This was better and better. I sent Peter below to get hold of Sloggett, and presently I had a few words with that gentleman in his cabin with the door shut.

'You've got to enter my name in the ship's books. I came aboard at Mossamedes. And my name's Cornelis Brandt.'

At first Sloggett was for objecting. He said it was a felony. I told him that I dared say it was, but he had got to do it, for reasons which I couldn't give, but which were highly creditable to all parties. In the end he agreed, and I saw it done. I had a pull on old Sloggett, for I had known him ever since he owned a dissolute tug-boat at Delagoa Bay.

Then Peter and I went ashore and swaggered into Lisbon as if we owned De Beers. We put up at the big hotel opposite the railway station, and looked and behaved like a pair of lowbred South Africans home for a spree. It was a fine bright day, so I hired a motor-car and said I would drive it myself. We asked the name of some beauty-spot to visit, and were told Cintra and shown the road to it. I wanted a quiet place to talk, for I had a good deal to say to Peter Pienaar.

I christened that car the Lusitanian Terror, and it was a marvel that we did not smash ourselves up. There was something immortally wrong with its steering gear. Half a dozen times we slewed across the road, inviting destruction. But we got there in the end, and had luncheon in an hotel opposite the Moorish palace. There we left the car and wandered up the slopes of a hill, where, sitting among scrub very like the veld, I told Peter the situation of affairs.

But first a word must be said about Peter. He was the man that taught me all I ever knew of veld-craft, and a good deal about human nature besides. He was out of the Old Colony — Burgersdorp, I think — but he had come to the Transvaal when the Lydenburg goldfields started. He was prospector, transport-rider, and hunter in turns, but principally hunter. In those early days he was none too good a citizen. He was in Swaziland with Bob Macnab, and you know what that means. Then he took to working off bogus gold propositions on Kimberley and Johannesburg magnates, and what he didn't know about salting a mine wasn't knowledge. After that he was in the Kalahari, where he and Scotty Smith were familiar names. An era of comparative respectability dawned for him with the Matabele War, when he did uncommon good scouting and transport work. Cecil Rhodes wanted to establish him on a stock farm down Salisbury way, but Peter was an independent devil and would call no man master. He took to big-game hunting, which was what God intended him for, for he could track a tsessebe in thick bush, and was far the finest shot I have seen in my life. He took parties to the Pungwe flats, and Barotseland, and up to Tanganyika. Then he made a speciality of the Ngami region, where I once hunted with him, and he was with me when I went prospecting in Damaraland.

When the Boer War started, Peter, like many of the very great hunters, took the British side and did most of our intelligence work in the North Transvaal. Beyers would have hanged him if he could have caught him, and there was no love lost between Peter and his own people for many a day. When it was all over and things had calmed down a bit, he settled in Bulawayo and used to go with me when I went on trek. At the time when I left Africa two years before, I had lost sight of him for months, and heard that he was somewhere on the Congo poaching elephants. He had always a great idea of

making things hum so loud in Angola that the Union Government would have to step in and annex it. After Rhodes Peter had the biggest notions south of the Line.

He was a man of about five foot ten, very thin and active, and as strong as a buffalo. He had pale blue eyes, a face as gentle as a girl's, and a soft sleepy voice. From his present appearance it looked as if he had been living hard lately. His clothes were of the cut you might expect to get at Lobito Bay, he was as lean as a rake, deeply browned with the sun, and there was a lot of grey in his beard. He was fifty-six years old, and used to be taken for forty. Now he looked about his age.

I first asked him what he had been up to since the war began. He spat, in the Kaffir way he had, and said he had been having hell's time.

'I got hung up on the Kafue,' he said. 'When I heard from old Letsitela that the white men were fighting I had a bright idea that I might get into German South West from the north. You see I knew that Botha couldn't long keep out of the war. Well, I got into German territory all right, and then a *skellum* of an officer came along, and commandeered all my mules, and wanted to commandeer me with them for his fool army. He was a very ugly man with a yellow face.' Peter filled a deep pipe from a kudu-skin pouch.

'Were you commandeered?' I asked.

'No. I shot him — not so as to kill, but to wound badly. It was all right, for he fired first on me. Got me too in the left shoulder. But that was the beginning of bad trouble. I trekked east pretty fast, and got over the border among the Ovamba. I have made many journeys, but that was the worst. Four days I went without water, and six without food. Then by bad luck I fell in with 'Nkitla — you remember, the half-caste chief. He said I owed him money for cattle which I bought when I came there with Carowab. It was a lie, but he held to it, and would give me no transport. So I crossed the Kalahari on my feet. Ugh, it was as slow as a vrouw coming from *nachtmaal*. It took weeks and weeks, and when I came to Lechwe's kraal, I heard that the fighting was over and that Botha had conquered the Germans. That, too, was a lie, but it deceived me, and I went north into Rhodesia, where I learned the truth. But by then I judged the war had gone too far for me to make any profit out of it, so I went into Angola to look for German refugees. By that time I was hating Germans worse than hell.'

'But what did you propose to do with them?' I asked.

'I had a notion they would make trouble with the Government in those parts. I don't specially love the Portuguese, but I'm for him against the Germans every day. Well, there was trouble, and I had a merry time for a month or two. But by and by it petered out, and I thought I had better clear for Europe, for South Africa was settling down just as the big show was getting really interesting. So here I am, Cornelis, my old friend. If I shave my beard will they let me join the Flying Corps?'

I looked at Peter sitting there smoking, as imperturbable as if he had been growing mealies in Natal all his life and had run home for a month's holiday with his people in Peckham.

'You're coming with me, my lad,' I said. 'We're going into Germany.'

Peter showed no surprise. 'Keep in mind that I don't like the Germans,' was all he said. 'I'm a quiet Christian man, but I've the devil of a temper.'

Then I told him the story of our mission. 'You and I have got to be Maritz's men. We went into Angola, and now we're trekking for the Fatherland to get a bit of our own back from the infernal English. Neither of us knows any German — publicly. We'd better plan out the fighting we were in — Kakamas will do for one, and Schuit Drift. You were a Ngamiland hunter before the war. They won't have your *dossier*, so you can tell any lie you like. I'd better be an educated Afrikaner, one of Beyers's bright lads, and a pal of old Hertzog. We can let our imagination loose about that part, but we must stick to the same yarn about the fighting.'

'Ja, Cornelis,' said Peter. (He had called me Cornelis ever since I had told him my new name. He was a wonderful chap for catching on to any game.) 'But after we get into Germany, what then? There can't be much difficulty about the beginning. But once we're among the beer-swillers I don't quite see our line. We're to find out about something that's going on in Turkey? When I was a boy the predikant used to preach about Turkey. I wish I was better educated and remembered whereabouts in the map it was.'

'You leave that to me,' I said; 'I'll explain it all to you before we get there. We haven't got much of a spoor, but we'll cast about, and with luck will pick it up. I've seen you do it often enough when we hunted kudu on the Kafue.'

Peter nodded. 'Do we sit still in a German town?' he asked anxiously. 'I shouldn't like that, Cornelis.'

'We move gently eastward to Constantinople,' I said.

Peter grinned. 'We should cover a lot of new country. You can reckon on me, friend Cornelis. I've always had a hankering to see Europe.'

He rose to his feet and stretched his long arms.

'We'd better begin at once. God, I wonder what's happened to old Solly Maritz, with his bottle face? Yon was a fine battle at the drift when I was sitting up to my neck in the Orange praying that Brits' lads would take my head for a stone.'

Peter was as thorough a mountebank, when he got started, as Blenkiron himself. All the way back to Lisbon he yarned about Maritz and his adventures in German South West till I half believed they were true. He made a very good story of our doings, and by his constant harping on it I pretty soon got it into my memory. That was always Peter's way. He said if you were going to play a part, you must think yourself into it, convince yourself that you were it, till you really were it and didn't act but behaved naturally. The two men who had started that morning from the hotel door had been bogus enough, but the two men that returned were genuine desperadoes itching to get a shot at England.

We spent the evening piling up evidence in our favour. Some kind of republic had been started in Portugal, and ordinarily the cafes would have been full of politicians, but the war had quieted all these local squabbles, and the talk was of nothing but what was doing in France and Russia. The place we went to was a big, well-lighted show on a main street, and there were a lot of sharp-eyed fellows wandering about that I guessed were spies and police agents. I knew that Britain was the one country that doesn't bother about this kind of game, and that it would be safe enough to let ourselves go.

I talked Portuguese fairly well, and Peter spoke it like a Lourenco Marques bar-keeper, with a lot of Shangaan words to fill up. He started on curacao, which I reckoned was a new drink to him, and presently his tongue ran freely. Several neighbours pricked up their ears, and soon we had a small crowd round our table.

We talked to each other of Maritz and our doings. It didn't seem to be a popular subject in that cafe. One big blue-black fellow said that Maritz was a dirty swine who would soon be hanged. Peter quickly caught his knife-wrist with one hand and his throat with the other, and demanded an apology. He got it. The Lisbon *boulevardiers* have not lost any lions.

After that there was a bit of a squash in our corner. Those near to us were very quiet and polite, but the outer fringe made remarks. When Peter said that if Portugal, which he admitted he loved, was going to stick to England she was backing the wrong horse, there was a murmur of disapproval. One decent-looking old fellow, who had the air of a ship's captain, flushed all over his honest face, and stood up looking straight at Peter. I saw that we had struck an Englishman, and mentioned it to Peter in Dutch.

Peter played his part perfectly. He suddenly shut up, and, with furtive looks around him, began to jabber to me in a low voice. He was the very picture of the old stage conspirator.

The old fellow stood staring at us. 'I don't very well understand this damned lingo,' he said; 'but if so be you dirty Dutchmen are sayin' anything against England, I'll ask you to repeat it. And if so be as you repeats it I'll take either of you on and knock the face off him.'

He was a chap after my own heart, but I had to keep the game up. I said in Dutch to Peter that we mustn't get brawling in a public house. 'Remember the big thing,' I said darkly. Peter nodded, and the old fellow, after staring at us for a bit, spat scornfully, and walked out.

'The time is coming when the Englander will sing small,' I observed to the crowd. We stood drinks to one or two, and then swaggered into the street. At the door a hand touched my arm, and, looking down, I saw a little scrap of a man in a fur coat.

'Will the gentlemen walk a step with me and drink a glass of beer?' he said in very stiff Dutch.

'Who the devil are you?' I asked.

'*Gott strafe England!*' was his answer, and, turning back the lapel of his coat, he showed some kind of ribbon in his buttonhole.

'Amen,' said Peter. 'Lead on, friend. We don't mind if we do.'

He led us to a back street and then up two pairs of stairs to a very snug little flat. The place was filled with fine red lacquer, and I guessed that art-dealing was his nominal business. Portugal, since the republic broke up the convents and sold up the big royalist grandees, was full of bargains in the lacquer and curio line.

He filled us two long tankards of very good Munich beer.

‘*Prosit*,’ he said, raising his glass. ‘You are from South Africa. What make you in Europe?’

We both looked sullen and secretive.

‘That’s our own business,’ I answered. ‘You don’t expect to buy our confidence with a glass of beer.’

‘So?’ he said. ‘Then I will put it differently. From your speech in the cafe I judge you do not love the English.’

Peter said something about stamping on their grandmothers, a Kaffir phrase which sounded gruesome in Dutch.

The man laughed. ‘That is all I want to know. You are on the German side?’

‘That remains to be seen,’ I said. ‘If they treat me fair I’ll fight for them, or for anybody else that makes war on England. England has stolen my country and corrupted my people and made me an exile. We Afrikaners do not forget. We may be slow but we win in the end. We two are men worth a great price. Germany fights England in East Africa. We know the natives as no Englishmen can ever know them. They are too soft and easy and the Kaffirs laugh at them. But we can handle the blacks so that they will fight like devils for fear of us. What is the reward, little man, for our services? I will tell you. There will be no reward. We ask none. We fight for hate of England.’

Peter grunted a deep approval.

‘That is good talk,’ said our entertainer, and his close-set eyes flashed. ‘There is room in Germany for such men as you. Where are you going now, I beg to know.’

‘To Holland,’ I said. ‘Then maybe we will go to Germany. We are tired with travel and may rest a bit. This war will last long and our chance will come.’

‘But you may miss your market,’ he said significantly. ‘A ship sails tomorrow for Rotterdam. If you take my advice, you will go with her.’

This was what I wanted, for if we stayed in Lisbon some real soldier of Maritz might drop in any day and blow the gaff.

‘I recommend you to sail in the *Machado*,’ he repeated. ‘There is work for you in Germany — oh yes, much work; but if you delay the chance may pass. I will arrange your journey. It is my business to help the allies of my fatherland.’

He wrote down our names and an epitome of our doings contributed by Peter, who required two mugs of beer to help him through. He was a Bavarian, it seemed, and we drank to the health of Prince Rupprecht, the same blighter I was trying to do in at Loos. That was an irony which Peter unfortunately could not appreciate. If he could he would have enjoyed it.

The little chap saw us back to our hotel, and was with us the next morning after breakfast, bringing the steamer tickets. We got on board about two in the afternoon, but on my advice he did not see us off. I told him that, being British subjects and rebels at that, we did not want to run any risks on board, assuming a British cruiser caught us up and searched us. But Peter took twenty pounds off him for travelling expenses, it being his rule never to miss an opportunity of spoiling the Egyptians.

As we were dropping down the Tagus we passed the old *Henry the Navigator*.

‘I met Sloggett in the street this morning,’ said Peter, ‘and he told me a little German man had been off in a boat at daybreak looking up the passenger list. Yon was a right notion of yours, Cornelis. I am glad we are going among Germans. They are careful people whom it is a pleasure to meet.’



CHAPTER FOUR

ADVENTURES OF TWO DUTCHMEN ON THE LOOSE

The Germans, as Peter said, are a careful people. A man met us on the quay at Rotterdam. I was a bit afraid that something might have turned up in Lisbon to discredit us, and that our little friend might have warned his pals by telegram. But apparently all was serene.

Peter and I had made our plans pretty carefully on the voyage. We had talked nothing but Dutch, and had kept up between ourselves the role of Maritz's men, which Peter said was the only way to play a part well. Upon my soul, before we got to Holland I was not very clear in my own mind what my past had been. Indeed the danger was that the other side of my mind, which should be busy with the great problem, would get atrophied, and that I should soon be mentally on a par with the ordinary backveld desperado.

We had agreed that it would be best to get into Germany at once, and when the agent on the quay told us of a train at midday we decided to take it.

I had another fit of cold feet before we got over the frontier. At the station there was a King's Messenger whom I had seen in France, and a war correspondent who had been trotting round our part of the front before Loos. I heard a woman speaking pretty clean-cut English, which amid the hoarse Dutch jabber sounded like a lark among crows. There were copies of the English papers for sale, and English cheap editions. I felt pretty bad about the whole business, and wondered if I should ever see these homely sights again.

But the mood passed when the train started. It was a clear blowing day, and as we crawled through the flat pastures of Holland my time was taken up answering Peter's questions. He had never been in Europe before, and formed a high opinion of the farming. He said he reckoned that such land would carry four sheep a morgen. We were thick in talk when we reached the frontier station and jolted over a canal bridge into Germany.

I had expected a big barricade with barbed wire and entrenchments. But there was nothing to see on the German side but half a dozen sentries in the field-grey I had hunted at Loos. An under-officer, with the black-and-gold button of the Landsturm, hoicked us out of the train, and we were all shepherded into a big bare waiting-room where a large stove burned. They took us two at a time into an inner room for examination. I had explained to Peter all about this formality, but I was glad we went in together, for they made us strip to the skin, and I had to curse him pretty seriously to make him keep quiet. The men who did the job were fairly civil, but they were mighty thorough. They took down a list of all we had in our pockets and bags, and all the details from the passports the Rotterdam agent had given us.

We were dressing when a man in a lieutenant's uniform came in with a paper in his hand. He was a fresh-faced lad of about twenty, with short-sighted spectacled eyes.

'Herr Brandt,' he called out.

I nodded.

'And this is Herr Pienaar?' he asked in Dutch.

He saluted. 'Gentlemen, I apologize. I am late because of the slowness of the Herr Commandant's motor-car. Had I been in time you would not have been required to go through this ceremony. We have been advised of your coming, and I am instructed to attend you on your journey. The train for Berlin leaves in half an hour. Pray do me the honour to join me in a bock.'

With a feeling of distinction we stalked out of the ordinary ruck of passengers and followed the lieutenant to the station restaurant. He plunged at once into conversation, talking the Dutch of Holland, which Peter, who had forgotten his school-days, found a bit hard to follow. He was unfit for active service, because of his eyes and a weak heart, but he was a desperate fire-eater in that stuffy restaurant. By his way of it Germany could gobble up the French and the Russians whenever she cared, but she was aiming at getting all the Middle East in her hands first, so that she could come out conqueror with the practical control of half the world.

'Your friends the English,' he said grinning, 'will come last. When we have starved them and destroyed their commerce with our under-sea boats we will show them what our navy can do. For a year they have been wasting their time in brag

and politics, and we have been building great ships — oh, so many! My cousin at Kiel —’ and he looked over his shoulder.

But we never heard about that cousin at Kiel. A short sunburnt man came in and our friend sprang up and saluted, clicking his heels like a pair of tongs.

‘These are the South African Dutch, Herr Captain,’ he said.

The new-comer looked us over with bright intelligent eyes, and started questioning Peter in the taal. It was well that we had taken some pains with our story, for this man had been years in German South West, and knew every mile of the borders. Zorn was his name, and both Peter and I thought we remembered hearing him spoken of.

I am thankful to say that we both showed up pretty well. Peter told his story to perfection, not pitching it too high, and asking me now and then for a name or to verify some detail. Captain Zorn looked satisfied.

‘You seem the right kind of fellows,’ he said. ‘But remember’ — and he bent his brows on us — ‘we do not understand slimmess in this land. If you are honest you will be rewarded, but if you dare to play a double game you will be shot like dogs. Your race has produced over many traitors for my taste.’

‘I ask no reward,’ I said gruffly. ‘We are not Germans or Germany’s slaves. But so long as she fights against England we will fight for her.’

‘Bold words,’ he said; ‘but you must bow your stiff necks to discipline first. Discipline has been the weak point of you Boers, and you have suffered for it. You are no more a nation. In Germany we put discipline first and last, and therefore we will conquer the world. Off with you now. Your train starts in three minutes. We will see what von Stumm will make of you.’

That fellow gave me the best ‘feel’ of any German I had yet met. He was a white man and I could have worked with him. I liked his stiff chin and steady blue eyes.

My chief recollection of our journey to Berlin was its commonplaceness. The spectacled lieutenant fell asleep, and for the most part we had the carriage to ourselves. Now and again a soldier on leave would drop in, most of them tired men with heavy eyes. No wonder, poor devils, for they were coming back from the Yser or the Ypres salient. I would have liked to talk to them, but officially of course I knew no German, and the conversation I overheard did not signify much. It was mostly about regimental details, though one chap, who was in better spirits than the rest, observed that this was the last Christmas of misery, and that next year he would be holidaying at home with full pockets. The others assented, but without much conviction.

The winter day was short, and most of the journey was made in the dark. I could see from the window the lights of little villages, and now and then the blaze of ironworks and forges. We stopped at a town for dinner, where the platform was crowded with drafts waiting to go westward. We saw no signs of any scarcity of food, such as the English newspapers wrote about. We had an excellent dinner at the station restaurant, which, with a bottle of white wine, cost just three shillings apiece. The bread, to be sure, was poor, but I can put up with the absence of bread if I get a juicy fillet of beef and as good vegetables as you will see in the Savoy.

I was a little afraid of our giving ourselves away in our sleep, but I need have had no fear, for our escort slumbered like a hog with his mouth wide open. As we roared through the darkness I kept pinching myself to make myself feel that I was in the enemy’s land on a wild mission. The rain came on, and we passed through dripping towns, with the lights shining from the wet streets. As we went eastward the lighting seemed to grow more generous. After the murk of London it was queer to slip through garish stations with a hundred arc lights glowing, and to see long lines of lamps running to the horizon. Peter dropped off early, but I kept awake till midnight, trying to focus thoughts that persistently strayed. Then I, too, dozed and did not awake till about five in the morning, when we ran into a great busy terminus as bright as midday. It was the easiest and most unsuspicious journey I ever made.

The lieutenant stretched himself and smoothed his rumpled uniform. We carried our scanty luggage to a *droschke*, for there seemed to be no porters. Our escort gave the address of some hotel and we rumbled out into brightly lit empty streets.

‘A mighty dorp,’ said Peter. ‘Of a truth the Germans are a great people.’

The lieutenant nodded good-humouredly.

‘The greatest people on earth,’ he said, ‘as their enemies will soon bear witness.’

I would have given a lot for a bath, but I felt that it would be outside my part, and Peter was not of the washing persuasion. But we had a very good breakfast of coffee and eggs, and then the lieutenant started on the telephone. He began by being dictatorial, then he seemed to be switched on to higher authorities, for he grew more polite, and at the end he fairly crawled. He made some arrangements, for he informed us that in the afternoon we would see some fellow whose title he could not translate into Dutch. I judged he was a great swell, for his voice became reverential at the mention of him.

He took us for a walk that morning after Peter and I had attended to our toilets. We were an odd pair of scallywags to look at, but as South African as a wait-a-bit bush. Both of us had ready-made tweed suits, grey flannel shirts with flannel collars, and felt hats with broader brims than they like in Europe. I had strong-nailed brown boots, Peter a pair of those mustard-coloured abominations which the Portuguese affect and which made him hobble like a Chinese lady. He had a scarlet satin tie which you could hear a mile off. My beard had grown to quite a respectable length, and I trimmed it like General Smuts'. Peter's was the kind of loose flapping thing the *taakhaar* loves, which has scarcely ever been shaved, and is combed once in a blue moon. I must say we made a pretty solid pair. Any South African would have set us down as a Boer from the back-veld who had bought a suit of clothes in the nearest store, and his cousin from some one-horse dorp who had been to school and thought himself the devil of a fellow. We fairly reeked of the sub-continent, as the papers call it.

It was a fine morning after the rain, and we wandered about in the streets for a couple of hours. They were busy enough, and the shops looked rich and bright with their Christmas goods, and one big store where I went to buy a pocket-knife was packed with customers. One didn't see very many young men, and most of the women wore mourning. Uniforms were everywhere, but their wearers generally looked like dug-outs or office fellows. We had a glimpse of the squat building which housed the General Staff and took off our hats to it. Then we stared at the Marinamt, and I wondered what plots were hatching there behind old Tirpitz's whiskers. The capital gave one an impression of ugly cleanness and a sort of dreary effectiveness. And yet I found it depressing — more depressing than London. I don't know how to put it, but the whole big concern seemed to have no soul in it, to be like a big factory instead of a city. You won't make a factory look like a house, though you decorate its front and plant rose-bushes all round it. The place depressed and yet cheered me. It somehow made the German people seem smaller.

At three o'clock the lieutenant took us to a plain white building in a side street with sentries at the door. A young staff officer met us and made us wait for five minutes in an ante-room. Then we were ushered into a big room with a polished floor on which Peter nearly sat down. There was a log fire burning, and seated at a table was a little man in spectacles with his hair brushed back from his brow like a popular violinist. He was the boss, for the lieutenant saluted him and announced our names. Then he disappeared, and the man at the table motioned us to sit down in two chairs before him.

'Herr Brandt and Herr Pienaar?' he asked, looking over his glasses.

But it was the other man that caught my eye. He stood with his back to the fire leaning his elbows on the mantelpiece. He was a perfect mountain of a fellow, six and a half feet if he was an inch, with shoulders on him like a shorthorn bull. He was in uniform and the black-and-white ribbon of the Iron Cross showed at a buttonhole. His tunic was all wrinkled and strained as if it could scarcely contain his huge chest, and mighty hands were clasped over his stomach. That man must have had the length of reach of a gorilla. He had a great, lazy, smiling face, with a square cleft chin which stuck out beyond the rest. His brow retreated and the stubby back of his head ran forward to meet it, while his neck below bulged out over his collar. His head was exactly the shape of a pear with the sharp end topmost.

He stared at me with his small bright eyes and I stared back. I had struck something I had been looking for for a long time, and till that moment I wasn't sure that it existed. Here was the German of caricature, the real German, the fellow we were up against. He was as hideous as a hippopotamus, but effective. Every bristle on his odd head was effective.

The man at the table was speaking. I took him to be a civilian official of sorts, pretty high up from his surroundings, perhaps an Under-Secretary. His Dutch was slow and careful, but good — too good for Peter. He had a paper before him and was asking us questions from it. They did not amount to much, being pretty well a repetition of those Zorn had asked us at the frontier. I answered fluently, for I had all our lies by heart.

Then the man on the hearthrug broke in. 'I'll talk to them, Excellency,' he said in German. 'You are too academic for those outland swine.'

He began in the taal, with the thick guttural accent that you get in German South West. 'You have heard of me,' he

said. 'I am the Colonel von Stumm who fought the Hereros.'

Peter pricked up his ears. 'Ja, Baas, you cut off the chief Baviaan's head and sent it in pickle about the country. I have seen it.'

The big man laughed. 'You see I am not forgotten,' he said to his friend, and then to us: 'So I treat my enemies, and so will Germany treat hers. You, too, if you fail me by a fraction of an inch.' And he laughed loud again.

There was something horrible in that boisterousness. Peter was watching him from below his eyelids, as I have seen him watch a lion about to charge.

He flung himself on a chair, put his elbows on the table, and thrust his face forward.

'You have come from a damned muddled show. If I had Maritz in my power I would have him flogged at a wagon's end. Fools and pig-dogs, they had the game in their hands and they flung it away. We could have raised a fire that would have burned the English into the sea, and for lack of fuel they let it die down. Then they try to fan it when the ashes are cold.'

He rolled a paper pellet and flicked it into the air. 'That is what I think of your idiot general,' he said, 'and of all you Dutch. As slow as a fat vrouw and as greedy as an aasvogel.'

We looked very glum and sullen.

'A pair of dumb dogs,' he cried. 'A thousand Brandenburgers would have won in a fortnight. Seitz hadn't much to boast of, mostly clerks and farmers and half-castes, and no soldier worth the name to lead them, but it took Botha and Smuts and a dozen generals to hunt him down. But Maritz!' His scorn came like a gust of wind.

'Maritz did all the fighting there was,' said Peter sulkily. 'At any rate he wasn't afraid of the sight of the khaki like your lot.'

'Maybe he wasn't,' said the giant in a cooing voice; 'maybe he had his reasons for that. You Dutchmen have always a feather-bed to fall on. You can always turn traitor. Maritz now calls himself Robinson, and has a pension from his friend Botha.'

'That,' said Peter, 'is a very damned lie.'

'I asked for information,' said Stumm with a sudden politeness. 'But that is all past and done with. Maritz matters no more than your old Cronjes and Krugers. The show is over, and you are looking for safety. For a new master perhaps? But, man, what can you bring? What can you offer? You and your Dutch are lying in the dust with the yoke on your necks. The Pretoria lawyers have talked you round. You see that map,' and he pointed to a big one on the wall. 'South Africa is coloured green. Not red for the English, or yellow for the Germans. Some day it will be yellow, but for a little it will be green — the colour of neutrals, of nothings, of boys and young ladies and chicken-hearts.'

I kept wondering what he was playing at.

Then he fixed his eyes on Peter. 'What do you come here for? The game's up in your own country. What can you offer us Germans? If we gave you ten million marks and sent you back you could do nothing. Stir up a village row, perhaps, and shoot a policeman. South Africa is counted out in this war. Botha is a cleverish man and has beaten you calves'-heads of rebels. Can you deny it?'

Peter couldn't. He was terribly honest in some things, and these were for certain his opinions.

'No,' he said, 'that is true, Baas.'

'Then what in God's name can you do?' shouted Stumm.

Peter mumbled some foolishness about nobbling Angola for Germany and starting a revolution among the natives. Stumm flung up his arms and cursed, and the Under-Secretary laughed.

It was high time for me to chip in. I was beginning to see the kind of fellow this Stumm was, and as he talked I thought of my mission, which had got overlaid by my Boer past. It looked as if he might be useful.

'Let me speak,' I said. 'My friend is a great hunter, but he fights better than he talks. He is no politician. You speak truth. South Africa is a closed door for the present, and the key to it is elsewhere. Here in Europe, and in the east, and in other parts of Africa. We have come to help you to find the key.'

Stumm was listening. 'Go on, my little Boer. It will be a new thing to hear a *taakhaar* on world-politics.'

'You are fighting,' I said, 'in East Africa; and soon you may fight in Egypt. All the east coast north of the Zambesi will

be your battle-ground. The English run about the world with little expeditions. I do not know where the places are, though I read of them in the papers. But I know my Africa. You want to beat them here in Europe and on the seas. Therefore, like wise generals, you try to divide them and have them scattered throughout the globe while you stick at home. That is your plan?’

‘A second Falkenhayn,’ said Stumm, laughing.

‘Well, England will not let East Africa go. She fears for Egypt and she fears, too, for India. If you press her there she will send armies and more armies till she is so weak in Europe that a child can crush her. That is England’s way. She cares more for her Empire than for what may happen to her allies. So I say press and still press there, destroy the railway to the Lakes, burn her capital, pen up every Englishman in Mombasa island. At this moment it is worth for you a thousand Damaralands.’

The man was really interested and the Under-Secretary, too, pricked up his ears.

‘We can keep our territory,’ said the former; ‘but as for pressing, how the devil are we to press? The accursed English hold the sea. We cannot ship men or guns there. South are the Portuguese and west the Belgians. You cannot move a mass without a lever.’ ‘The lever is there, ready for you,’ I said.

‘Then for God’s sake show it me,’ he cried.

I looked at the door to see that it was shut, as if what I had to say was very secret.

‘You need men, and the men are waiting. They are black, but they are the stuff of warriors. All round your borders you have the remains of great fighting tribes, the Angoni, the Masai, the Manyumwezi, and above all the Somalis of the north, and the dwellers on the upper Nile. The British recruit their black regiments there, and so do you. But to get recruits is not enough. You must set whole nations moving, as the Zulu under Tchaka flowed over South Africa.’

‘It cannot be done,’ said the Under-Secretary.

‘It can be done,’ I said quietly. ‘We two are here to do it.’

This kind of talk was jolly difficult for me, chiefly because of Stumm’s asides in German to the official. I had, above all things, to get the credit of knowing no German, and, if you understand a language well, it is not very easy when you are interrupted not to show that you know it, either by a direct answer, or by referring to the interruption in what you say next. I had to be always on my guard, and yet it was up to me to be very persuasive and convince these fellows that I would be useful. Somehow or other I had to get into their confidence.

‘I have been for years up and down in Africa — Uganda and the Congo and the Upper Nile. I know the ways of the Kaffir as no Englishman does. We Afrikanders see into the black man’s heart, and though he may hate us he does our will. You Germans are like the English; you are too big folk to understand plain men. “Civilize,” you cry. “Educate,” say the English. The black man obeys and puts away his gods, but he worships them all the time in his soul. We must get his gods on our side, and then he will move mountains. We must do as John Laputa did with Sheba’s necklace.’

‘That’s all in the air,’ said Stumm, but he did not laugh.

‘It is sober common sense,’ I said. ‘But you must begin at the right end. First find the race that fears its priests. It is waiting for you — the Mussulmans of Somaliland and the Abyssinian border and the Blue and White Nile. They would be like dried grasses to catch fire if you used the flint and steel of their religion. Look what the English suffered from a crazy Mullah who ruled only a dozen villages. Once get the flames going and they will lick up the pagans of the west and south. This is the way of Africa. How many thousands, think you, were in the Mahdi’s army who never heard of the Prophet till they saw the black flags of the Emirs going into battle?’

Stumm was smiling. He turned his face to the official and spoke with his hand over his mouth, but I caught his words. They were: ‘This is the man for Hilda.’ The other pursed his lips and looked a little scared.

Stumm rang a bell and the lieutenant came in and clicked his heels. He nodded towards Peter. ‘Take this man away with you. We have done with him. The other fellow will follow presently.’

Peter went out with a puzzled face and Stumm turned to me.

‘You are a dreamer, Brandt,’ he said. ‘But I do not reject you on that account. Dreams sometimes come true, when an army follows the visionary. But who is going to kindle the flame?’

‘You,’ I said.

‘What the devil do you mean?’ he asked.

‘That is your part. You are the cleverest people in the world. You have already half the Mussulman lands in your power. It is for you to show us how to kindle a holy war, for clearly you have the secret of it. Never fear but we will carry out your order.’

‘We have no secret,’ he said shortly, and glanced at the official, who stared out of the window.

I dropped my jaw and looked the picture of disappointment. ‘I do not believe you,’ I said slowly. ‘You play a game with me. I have not come six thousand miles to be made a fool of.’

‘Discipline, by God,’ Stumm cried. ‘This is none of your ragged commandos.’ In two strides he was above me and had lifted me out of my seat. His great hands clutched my shoulders, and his thumbs gouged my armpits. I felt as if I were in the grip of a big ape. Then very slowly he shook me so that my teeth seemed loosened and my head swam. He let me go and I dropped limply back in the chair.

‘Now, go! *Futsack!* And remember that I am your master. I, Ulric von Stumm, who owns you as a Kaffir owns his mongrel. Germany may have some use for you, my friend, when you fear me as you never feared your God.’

As I walked dizzily away the big man was smiling in his horrible way, and that little official was blinking and smiling too. I had struck a dashed queer country, so queer that I had had no time to remember that for the first time in my life I had been bullied without hitting back. When I realized it I nearly choked with anger. But I thanked heaven I had shown no temper, for I remembered my mission. Luck seemed to have brought me into useful company.



CHAPTER FIVE

FURTHER ADVENTURES OF THE SAME

Next morning there was a touch of frost and a nip in the air which stirred my blood and put me in buoyant spirits. I forgot my precarious position and the long road I had still to travel. I came down to breakfast in great form, to find Peter's even temper badly ruffled. He had remembered Stumm in the night and disliked the memory; this he muttered to me as we rubbed shoulders at the dining-room door. Peter and I got no opportunity for private talk. The lieutenant was with us all the time, and at night we were locked in our rooms. Peter discovered this through trying to get out to find matches, for he had the bad habit of smoking in bed.

Our guide started on the telephone, and announced that we were to be taken to see a prisoners' camp. In the afternoon I was to go somewhere with Stumm, but the morning was for sight-seeing. 'You will see,' he told us, 'how merciful is a great people. You will also see some of the hated English in our power. That will delight you. They are the forerunners of all their nation.'

We drove in a taxi through the suburbs and then over a stretch of flat market-garden-like country to a low rise of wooded hills. After an hour's ride we entered the gate of what looked like a big reformatory or hospital. I believe it had been a home for destitute children. There were sentries at the gate and massive concentric circles of barbed wire through which we passed under an arch that was let down like a portcullis at nightfall. The lieutenant showed his permit, and we ran the car into a brick-paved yard and marched through a lot more sentries to the office of the commandant.

He was away from home, and we were welcomed by his deputy, a pale young man with a head nearly bald. There were introductions in German which our guide translated into Dutch, and a lot of elegant speeches about how Germany was foremost in humanity as well as martial valour. Then they stood us sandwiches and beer, and we formed a procession for a tour of inspection. There were two doctors, both mild-looking men in spectacles, and a couple of warders — under-officers of the good old burly, bullying sort I knew well. That was the cement which kept the German Army together. Her men were nothing to boast of on the average; no more were the officers, even in crack corps like the Guards and the Brandenburgers; but they seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of hard, competent N.C.O.s.

We marched round the wash-houses, the recreation-ground, the kitchens, the hospital — with nobody in it save one chap with the 'flu.' It didn't seem to be badly done. This place was entirely for officers, and I expect it was a show place where American visitors were taken. If half the stories one heard were true there were some pretty ghastly prisons away in South and East Germany.

I didn't half like the business. To be a prisoner has always seemed to me about the worst thing that could happen to a man. The sight of German prisoners used to give me a bad feeling inside, whereas I looked at dead Boches with nothing but satisfaction. Besides, there was the off-chance that I might be recognized. So I kept very much in the shadow whenever we passed anybody in the corridors. The few we met passed us incuriously. They saluted the deputy-commandant, but scarcely wasted a glance on us. No doubt they thought we were inquisitive Germans come to gloat over them. They looked fairly fit, but a little puffy about the eyes, like men who get too little exercise. They seemed thin, too. I expect the food, for all the commandant's talk, was nothing to boast of. In one room people were writing letters. It was a big place with only a tiny stove to warm it, and the windows were shut so that the atmosphere was a cold frowst. In another room a fellow was lecturing on something to a dozen hearers and drawing figures on a blackboard. Some were in ordinary khaki, others in any old thing they could pick up, and most wore greatcoats. Your blood gets thin when you have nothing to do but hope against hope and think of your pals and the old days.

I was moving along, listening with half an ear to the lieutenant's prattle and the loud explanations of the deputy-commandant, when I pitchforked into what might have been the end of my business. We were going through a sort of convalescent room, where people were sitting who had been in hospital. It was a big place, a little warmer than the rest of the building, but still abominably fuggy. There were about half a dozen men in the room, reading and playing games. They looked at us with lack-lustre eyes for a moment, and then returned to their occupations. Being convalescents I suppose they were not expected to get up and salute.

All but one, who was playing Patience at a little table by which we passed. I was feeling very bad about the thing, for I hated to see these good fellows locked away in this infernal German hole when they might have been giving the Boche his deserts at the front. The commandant went first with Peter, who had developed a great interest in prisons. Then came our lieutenant with one of the doctors; then a couple of warders; and then the second doctor and myself. I was absent-minded at the moment and was last in the queue.

The Patience-player suddenly looked up and I saw his face. I'm hanged if it wasn't Dolly Riddell, who was our brigade machine-gun officer at Loos. I had heard that the Germans had got him when they blew up a mine at the Quarries.

I had to act pretty quick, for his mouth was agape, and I saw he was going to speak. The doctor was a yard ahead of me.

I stumbled and spilt his cards on the floor. Then I kneeled to pick them up and gripped his knee. His head bent to help me and I spoke low in his ear.

'I'm Hannay all right. For God's sake don't wink an eye. I'm here on a secret job.'

The doctor had turned to see what was the matter. I got a few more words in. 'Cheer up, old man. We're winning hands down.'

Then I began to talk excited Dutch and finished the collection of the cards. Dolly was playing his part well, smiling as if he was amused by the antics of a monkey. The others were coming back, the deputy-commandant with an angry light in his dull eye. 'Speaking to the prisoners is forbidden,' he shouted.

I looked blankly at him till the lieutenant translated.

'What kind of fellow is he?' said Dolly in English to the doctor. 'He spoils my game and then jabbars High-Dutch at me.'

Officially I knew English, and that speech of Dolly's gave me my cue. I pretended to be very angry with the very damned Englishman, and went out of the room close by the deputy-commandant, grumbling like a sick jackal. After that I had to act a bit. The last place we visited was the close-confinement part where prisoners were kept as a punishment for some breach of the rules. They looked cheerless enough, but I pretended to gloat over the sight, and said so to the lieutenant, who passed it on to the others. I have rarely in my life felt such a cad.

On the way home the lieutenant discoursed a lot about prisoners and detention-camps, for at one time he had been on duty at Ruhleben. Peter, who had been in quod more than once in his life, was deeply interested and kept on questioning him. Among other things he told us was that they often put bogus prisoners among the rest, who acted as spies. If any plot to escape was hatched these fellows got into it and encouraged it. They never interfered till the attempt was actually made and then they had them on toast. There was nothing the Boche liked so much as an excuse for sending a poor devil to 'solitary'.

That afternoon Peter and I separated. He was left behind with the lieutenant and I was sent off to the station with my bag in the company of a Landsturm sergeant. Peter was very cross, and I didn't care for the look of things; but I brightened up when I heard I was going somewhere with Stumm. If he wanted to see me again he must think me of some use, and if he was going to use me he was bound to let me into his game. I liked Stumm about as much as a dog likes a scorpion, but I hankered for his society.

At the station platform, where the ornament of the Landsturm saved me all the trouble about tickets, I could not see my companion. I stood waiting, while a great crowd, mostly of soldiers, swayed past me and filled all the front carriages. An officer spoke to me gruffly and told me to stand aside behind a wooden rail. I obeyed, and suddenly found Stumm's eyes looking down at me.

'You know German?' he asked sharply.

'A dozen words,' I said carelessly. 'I've been to Windhuk and learned enough to ask for my dinner. Peter — my friend — speaks it a bit.'

'So,' said Stumm. 'Well, get into the carriage. Not that one! There, thickhead!'

I did as I was bid, he followed, and the door was locked behind us. The precaution was needless, for the sight of Stumm's profile at the platform end would have kept out the most brazen. I wondered if I had woken up his suspicions. I must be on my guard to show no signs of intelligence if he suddenly tried me in German, and that wouldn't be easy, for I

knew it as well as I knew Dutch.

We moved into the country, but the windows were blurred with frost, and I saw nothing of the landscape. Stumm was busy with papers and let me alone. I read on a notice that one was forbidden to smoke, so to show my ignorance of German I pulled out my pipe. Stumm raised his head, saw what I was doing, and gruffly bade me put it away, as if he were an old lady that disliked the smell of tobacco.

In half an hour I got very bored, for I had nothing to read and my pipe was *verboden*. People passed now and then in the corridors, but no one offered to enter. No doubt they saw the big figure in uniform and thought he was the deuce of a staff swell who wanted solitude. I thought of stretching my legs in the corridor, and was just getting up to do it when somebody slid the door back and a big figure blocked the light.

He was wearing a heavy ulster and a green felt hat. He saluted Stumm, who looked up angrily, and smiled pleasantly on us both.

'Say, gentlemen,' he said, 'have you room in here for a little one? I guess I'm about smoked out of my car by your brave soldiers. I've gotten a delicate stomach . . .'

Stumm had risen with a brow of wrath, and looked as if he were going to pitch the intruder off the train. Then he seemed to halt and collect himself, and the other's face broke into a friendly grin.

'Why, it's Colonel Stumm,' he cried. (He pronounced it like the first syllable in 'stomach'.) 'Very pleased to meet you again, Colonel. I had the honour of making your acquaintance at our Embassy. I reckon Ambassador Gerard didn't cotton to our conversation that night.' And the new-comer plumped himself down in the corner opposite me.

I had been pretty certain I would run across Blenkiron somewhere in Germany, but I didn't think it would be so soon. There he sat staring at me with his full, unseeing eyes, rolling out platitudes to Stumm, who was nearly bursting in his effort to keep civil. I looked moody and suspicious, which I took to be the right line.

'Things are getting a bit dead at Salonika,' said Mr Blenkiron, by way of a conversational opening.

Stumm pointed to a notice which warned officers to refrain from discussing military operations with mixed company in a railway carriage.

'Sorry,' said Blenkiron, 'I can't read that tombstone language of yours. But I reckon that that notice to trespassers, whatever it signifies, don't apply to you and me. I take it this gentleman is in your party.'

I sat and scowled, fixing the American with suspicious eyes.

'He is a Dutchman,' said Stumm; 'South African Dutch, and he is not happy, for he doesn't like to hear English spoken.'

'We'll shake on that,' said Blenkiron cordially. 'But who said I spoke English? It's good American. Cheer up, friend, for it isn't the call that makes the big wapiti, as they say out west in my country. I hate John Bull worse than a poison rattle. The Colonel can tell you that.'

I dare say he could, but at that moment, we slowed down at a station and Stumm got up to leave. 'Good day to you, Herr Blenkiron,' he cried over his shoulder. 'If you consider your comfort, don't talk English to strange travellers. They don't distinguish between the different brands.'

I followed him in a hurry, but was recalled by Blenkiron's voice.

'Say, friend,' he shouted, 'you've left your grip,' and he handed me my bag from the luggage rack. But he showed no sign of recognition, and the last I saw of him was sitting sunk in a corner with his head on his chest as if he were going to sleep. He was a man who kept up his parts well.

There was a motor-car waiting — one of the grey military kind — and we started at a terrific pace over bad forest roads. Stumm had put away his papers in a portfolio, and flung me a few sentences on the journey.

'I haven't made up my mind about you, Brandt,' he announced. 'You may be a fool or a knave or a good man. If you are a knave, we will shoot you.'

'And if I am a fool?' I asked.

'Send you to the Yser or the Dvina. You will be respectable cannon-fodder.'

'You cannot do that unless I consent,' I said.

'Can't we?' he said, smiling wickedly. 'Remember you are a citizen of nowhere. Technically, you are a rebel, and the

British, if you go to them, will hang you, supposing they have any sense. You are in our power, my friend, to do precisely what we like with you.'

He was silent for a second, and then he said, meditatively:

'But I don't think you are a fool. You may be a scoundrel. Some kinds of scoundrel are useful enough. Other kinds are strung up with a rope. Of that we shall know more soon.'

'And if I am a good man?'

'You will be given a chance to serve Germany, the proudest privilege a mortal man can have.' The strange man said this with a ringing sincerity in his voice that impressed me.

The car swung out from the trees into a park lined with saplings, and in the twilight I saw before me a biggish house like an overgrown Swiss chalet. There was a kind of archway, with a sham portcullis, and a terrace with battlements which looked as if they were made of stucco. We drew up at a Gothic front door, where a thin middle-aged man in a shooting-jacket was waiting.

As we moved into the lighted hall I got a good look at our host. He was very lean and brown, with the stoop in the shoulder that one gets from being constantly on horseback. He had untidy grizzled hair and a ragged beard, and a pair of pleasant, short-sighted brown eyes.

'Welcome, my Colonel,' he said. 'Is this the friend you spoke of?'

'This is the Dutchman,' said Stumm. 'His name is Brandt. Brandt, you see before you Herr Gaudian.'

I knew the name, of course; there weren't many in my profession that didn't. He was one of the biggest railway engineers in the world, the man who had built the Baghdad and Syrian railways, and the new lines in German East. I suppose he was about the greatest living authority on tropical construction. He knew the East and he knew Africa; clearly I had been brought down for him to put me through my paces.

A blonde maidservant took me to my room, which had a bare polished floor, a stove, and windows that, unlike most of the German kind I had sampled, seemed made to open. When I had washed I descended to the hall, which was hung round with trophies of travel, like Dervish jibbahs and Masai shields and one or two good buffalo heads. Presently a bell was rung. Stumm appeared with his host, and we went in to supper.

I was jolly hungry and would have made a good meal if I hadn't constantly had to keep jogging my wits. The other two talked in German, and when a question was put to me Stumm translated. The first thing I had to do was to pretend I didn't know German and look listlessly round the room while they were talking. The second was to miss not a word, for there lay my chance. The third was to be ready to answer questions at any moment, and to show in the answering that I had not followed the previous conversation. Likewise, I must not prove myself a fool in these answers, for I had to convince them that I was useful. It took some doing, and I felt like a witness in the box under a stiff cross-examination, or a man trying to play three games of chess at once.

I heard Stumm telling Gaudian the gist of my plan. The engineer shook his head.

'Too late,' he said. 'It should have been done at the beginning. We neglected Africa. You know the reason why.'

Stumm laughed. 'The von Einem! Perhaps, but her charm works well enough.'

Gaudian glanced towards me while I was busy with an orange salad. 'I have much to tell you of that. But it can wait. Your friend is right in one thing. Uganda is a vital spot for the English, and a blow there will make their whole fabric shiver. But how can we strike? They have still the coast, and our supplies grow daily smaller.'

'We can send no reinforcements, but have we used all the local resources? That is what I cannot satisfy myself about. Zimmerman says we have, but Tressler thinks differently, and now we have this fellow coming out of the void with a story which confirms my doubt. He seems to know his job. You try him.'

Thereupon Gaudian set about questioning me, and his questions were very thorough. I knew just enough and no more to get through, but I think I came out with credit. You see I have a capacious memory, and in my time I had met scores of hunters and pioneers and listened to their yarns, so I could pretend to knowledge of a place even when I hadn't been there. Besides, I had once been on the point of undertaking a job up Tanganyika way, and I had got up that country-side pretty accurately.

'You say that with our help you can make trouble for the British on the three borders?' Gaudian asked at length.

'I can spread the fire if some one else will kindle it,' I said.

'But there are thousands of tribes with no affinities.'

'They are all African. You can bear me out. All African peoples are alike in one thing — they can go mad, and the madness of one infects the others. The English know this well enough.'

'Where would you start the fire?' he asked.

'Where the fuel is dryest. Up in the North among the Mussulman peoples. But there you must help me. I know nothing about Islam, and I gather that you do.'

'Why?' he asked.

'Because of what you have done already,' I answered.

Stumm had translated all this time, and had given the sense of my words very fairly. But with my last answer he took liberties. What he gave was: 'Because the Dutchman thinks that we have some big card in dealing with the Moslem world.' Then, lowering his voice and raising his eyebrows, he said some word like 'uhnmantl'.

The other looked with a quick glance of apprehension at me. 'We had better continue our talk in private, Herr Colonel,' he said. 'If Herr Brandt will forgive us, we will leave him for a little to entertain himself.' He pushed the cigar-box towards me and the two got up and left the room.

I pulled my chair up to the stove, and would have liked to drop off to sleep. The tension of the talk at supper had made me very tired. I was accepted by these men for exactly what I professed to be. Stumm might suspect me of being a rascal, but it was a Dutch rascal. But all the same I was skating on thin ice. I could not sink myself utterly in the part, for if I did I would get no good out of being there. I had to keep my wits going all the time, and join the appearance and manners of a backveld Boer with the mentality of a British intelligence-officer. Any moment the two parts might clash and I would be faced with the most alert and deadly suspicion.

There would be no mercy from Stumm. That large man was beginning to fascinate me, even though I hated him. Gaudian was clearly a good fellow, a white man and a gentleman. I could have worked with him for he belonged to my own totem. But the other was an incarnation of all that makes Germany detested, and yet he wasn't altogether the ordinary German, and I couldn't help admiring him. I noticed he neither smoked nor drank. His grossness was apparently not in the way of fleshly appetites. Cruelty, from all I had heard of him in German South West, was his hobby; but there were other things in him, some of them good, and he had that kind of crazy patriotism which becomes a religion. I wondered why he had not some high command in the field, for he had had the name of a good soldier. But probably he was a big man in his own line, whatever it was, for the Under-Secretary fellow had talked small in his presence, and so great a man as Gaudian clearly respected him. There must be no lack of brains inside that funny pyramidal head.

As I sat beside the stove I was casting back to think if I had got the slightest clue to my real job. There seemed to be nothing so far. Stumm had talked of a von Einem woman who was interested in his department, perhaps the same woman as the Hilda he had mentioned the day before to the Under-Secretary. There was not much in that. She was probably some minister's or ambassador's wife who had a finger in high politics. If I could have caught the word Stumm had whispered to Gaudian which made him start and look askance at me! But I had only heard a gurgle of something like 'uhnmantl', which wasn't any German word that I knew.

The heat put me into a half-dozed and I began dreamily to wonder what other people were doing. Where had Blenkiron been posting to in that train, and what was he up to at this moment? He had been hobnobbing with ambassadors and swells — I wondered if he had found out anything. What was Peter doing? I fervently hoped he was behaving himself, for I doubted if Peter had really tumbled to the delicacy of our job. Where was Sandy, too? As like as not bucketing in the hold of some Greek coaster in the Aegean. Then I thought of my battalion somewhere on the line between Hulluch and La Basse, hammering at the Boche, while I was five hundred miles or so inside the Boche frontier.

It was a comic reflection, so comic that it woke me up. After trying in vain to find a way of stoking that stove, for it was a cold night, I got up and walked about the room. There were portraits of two decent old fellows, probably Gaudian's parents. There were enlarged photographs, too, of engineering works, and a good picture of Bismarck. And close to the stove there was a case of maps mounted on rollers.

I pulled out one at random. It was a geological map of Germany, and with some trouble I found out where I was. I was an enormous distance from my goal and moreover I was clean off the road to the East. To go there I must first go to

Bavaria and then into Austria. I noticed the Danube flowing eastwards and remembered that that was one way to Constantinople.

Then I tried another map. This one covered a big area, all Europe from the Rhine and as far east as Persia. I guessed that it was meant to show the Baghdad railway and the through routes from Germany to Mesopotamia. There were markings on it; and, as I looked closer, I saw that there were dates scribbled in blue pencil, as if to denote the stages of a journey. The dates began in Europe, and continued right on into Asia Minor and then south to Syria.

For a moment my heart jumped, for I thought I had fallen by accident on the clue I wanted. But I never got that map examined. I heard footsteps in the corridor, and very gently I let the map roll up and turned away. When the door opened I was bending over the stove trying to get a light for my pipe.

It was Gaudian, to bid me join him and Stumm in his study.

On our way there he put a kindly hand on my shoulder. I think he thought I was bullied by Stumm and wanted to tell me that he was my friend, and he had no other language than a pat on the back.

The soldier was in his old position with his elbows on the mantelpiece and his formidable great jaw stuck out.

‘Listen to me,’ he said. ‘Herr Gaudian and I are inclined to make use of you. You may be a charlatan, in which case you will be in the devil of a mess and have yourself to thank for it. If you are a rogue you will have little scope for roguery. We will see to that. If you are a fool, you will yourself suffer for it. But if you are a good man, you will have a fair chance, and if you succeed we will not forget it. Tomorrow I go home and you will come with me and get your orders.’

I made shift to stand at attention and salute.

Gaudian spoke in a pleasant voice, as if he wanted to atone for Stumm’s imperiousness. ‘We are men who love our Fatherland, Herr Brandt,’ he said. ‘You are not of that Fatherland, but at least you hate its enemies. Therefore we are allies, and trust each other like allies. Our victory is ordained by God, and we are none of us more than His instruments.’

Stumm translated in a sentence, and his voice was quite solemn. He held up his right hand and so did Gaudian, like a man taking an oath or a parson blessing his congregation.

Then I realized something of the might of Germany. She produced good and bad, cads and gentlemen, but she could put a bit of the fanatic into them all.



CHAPTER SIX

THE INDISCRETIONS OF THE SAME

I was standing stark naked next morning in that icy bedroom, trying to bathe in about a quart of water, when Stumm entered. He strode up to me and stared me in the face. I was half a head shorter than him to begin with, and a man does not feel his stoutest when he has no clothes, so he had the pull on me every way.

‘I have reason to believe that you are a liar,’ he growled.

I pulled the bed-cover round me, for I was shivering with cold, and the German idea of a towel is a pocket-handkerchief. I own I was in a pretty blue funk.

‘A liar!’ he repeated. ‘You and that swine Pienaar.’

With my best effort at surliness I asked what we had done.

‘You lied, because you said you know no German. Apparently your friend knows enough to talk treason and blasphemy.’

This gave me back some heart.

‘I told you I knew a dozen words. But I told you Peter could talk it a bit. I told you that yesterday at the station.’ Fervently I blessed my luck for that casual remark.

He evidently remembered, for his tone became a trifle more civil.

‘You are a precious pair. If one of you is a scoundrel, why not the other?’

‘I take no responsibility for Peter,’ I said. I felt I was a cad in saying it, but that was the bargain we had made at the start. ‘I have known him for years as a great hunter and a brave man. I knew he fought well against the English. But more I cannot tell you. You have to judge him for yourself. What has he done?’

I was told, for Stumm had got it that morning on the telephone. While telling it he was kind enough to allow me to put on my trousers.

It was just the sort of thing I might have foreseen. Peter, left alone, had become first bored and then reckless. He had persuaded the lieutenant to take him out to supper at a big Berlin restaurant. There, inspired by the lights and music — novel things for a backveld hunter — and no doubt bored stiff by his company, he had proceeded to get drunk. That had happened in my experience with Peter about once in every three years, and it always happened for the same reason. Peter, bored and solitary in a town, went on the spree. He had a head like a rock, but he got to the required condition by wild mixing. He was quite a gentleman in his cups, and not in the least violent, but he was apt to be very free with his tongue. And that was what occurred at the Franciscana.

He had begun by insulting the Emperor, it seemed. He drank his health, but said he reminded him of a wart-hog, and thereby scarified the lieutenant’s soul. Then an officer — some tremendous swell at an adjoining table had objected to his talking so loud, and Peter had replied insolently in respectable German. After that things became mixed. There was some kind of a fight, during which Peter calumniated the German army and all its female ancestry. How he wasn’t shot or run through I can’t imagine, except that the lieutenant loudly proclaimed that he was a crazy Boer. Anyhow the upshot was that Peter was marched off to gaol, and I was left in a pretty pickle.

‘I don’t believe a word of it,’ I said firmly. I had most of my clothes on now and felt more courageous. ‘It is all a plot to get him into disgrace and draft him off to the front.’

Stumm did not storm as I expected, but smiled.

‘That was always his destiny,’ he said, ‘ever since I saw him. He was no use to us except as a man with a rifle. Cannon-fodder, nothing else. Do you imagine, you fool, that this great Empire in the thick of a world-war is going to trouble its head to lay snares for an ignorant *taakhaar*?’

‘I wash my hands of him,’ I said. ‘If what you say of his folly is true I have no part in it. But he was my companion and I wish him well. What do you propose to do with him?’

‘We will keep him under our eye,’ he said, with a wicked twist of the mouth. ‘I have a notion that there is more at the

back of this than appears. We will investigate the antecedents of Herr Pienaar. And you, too, my friend. On you also we have our eye.'

I did the best thing I could have done, for what with anxiety and disgust I lost my temper.

'Look here, Sir,' I cried, 'I've had about enough of this. I came to Germany abominating the English and burning to strike a blow for you. But you haven't given me much cause to love you. For the last two days I've had nothing from you but suspicion and insult. The only decent man I've met is Herr Gaudian. It's because I believe that there are many in Germany like him that I'm prepared to go on with this business and do the best I can. But, by God, I wouldn't raise my little finger for your sake.'

He looked at me very steadily for a minute. 'That sounds like honesty,' he said at last in a civil voice. 'You had better come down and get your coffee.'

I was safe for the moment but in very low spirits. What on earth would happen to poor old Peter? I could do nothing even if I wanted, and, besides, my first duty was to my mission. I had made this very clear to him at Lisbon and he had agreed, but all the same it was a beastly reflection. Here was that ancient worthy left to the tender mercies of the people he most detested on earth. My only comfort was that they couldn't do very much with him. If they sent him to the front, which was the worst they could do, he would escape, for I would have backed him to get through any mortal lines. It wasn't much fun for me either. Only when I was to be deprived of it did I realize how much his company had meant to me. I was absolutely alone now, and I didn't like it. I seemed to have about as much chance of joining Blenkiron and Sandy as of flying to the moon.

After breakfast I was told to get ready. When I asked where I was going Stumm advised me to mind my own business, but I remembered that last night he had talked of taking me home with him and giving me my orders. I wondered where his home was.

Gaudian patted me on the back when we started and wrung my hand. He was a capital good fellow, and it made me feel sick to think that I was humbugging him. We got into the same big grey car, with Stumm's servant sitting beside the chauffeur. It was a morning of hard frost, the bare fields were white with rime, and the fir-trees powdered like a wedding-cake. We took a different road from the night before, and after a run of half a dozen miles came to a little town with a big railway station. It was a junction on some main line, and after five minutes' waiting we found our train. Once again we were alone in the carriage. Stumm must have had some colossal graft, for the train was crowded.

I had another three hours of complete boredom. I dared not smoke, and could do nothing but stare out of the window. We soon got into hilly country, where a good deal of snow was lying. It was the 23rd day of December, and even in war time one had a sort of feel of Christmas. You could see girls carrying evergreens, and when we stopped at a station the soldiers on leave had all the air of holiday making. The middle of Germany was a cheerier place than Berlin or the western parts. I liked the look of the old peasants, and the women in their neat Sunday best, but I noticed, too, how pinched they were. Here in the country, where no neutral tourists came, there was not the same stage-management as in the capital.

Stumm made an attempt to talk to me on the journey. I could see his aim. Before this he had cross-examined me, but now he wanted to draw me into ordinary conversation. He had no notion how to do it. He was either peremptory and provocative, like a drill-sergeant, or so obviously diplomatic that any fool would have been put on his guard. That is the weakness of the German. He has no gift for laying himself alongside different types of men. He is such a hard-shell being that he cannot put out feelers to his kind. He may have plenty of brains, as Stumm had, but he has the poorest notion of psychology of any of God's creatures. In Germany only the Jew can get outside himself, and that is why, if you look into the matter, you will find that the Jew is at the back of most German enterprises.

After midday we stopped at a station for luncheon. We had a very good meal in the restaurant, and when we were finishing two officers entered. Stumm got up and saluted and went aside to talk to them. Then he came back and made me follow him to a waiting-room, where he told me to stay till he fetched me. I noticed that he called a porter and had the door locked when he went out.

It was a chilly place with no fire, and I kicked my heels there for twenty minutes. I was living by the hour now, and did not trouble to worry about this strange behaviour. There was a volume of time-tables on a shelf, and I turned the pages idly till I struck a big railway map. Then it occurred to me to find out where we were going. I had heard Stumm take my ticket for a place called Schwandorf, and after a lot of searching I found it. It was away south in Bavaria, and so far as I could

make out less than fifty miles from the Danube. That cheered me enormously. If Stumm lived there he would most likely start me off on my travels by the railway which I saw running to Vienna and then on to the East. It looked as if I might get to Constantinople after all. But I feared it would be a useless achievement, for what could I do when I got there? I was being hustled out of Germany without picking up the slenderest clue.

The door opened and Stumm entered. He seemed to have got bigger in the interval and to carry his head higher. There was a proud light, too, in his eye.

‘Brandt,’ he said, ‘you are about to receive the greatest privilege that ever fell to one of your race. His Imperial Majesty is passing through here, and has halted for a few minutes. He has done me the honour to receive me, and when he heard my story he expressed a wish to see you. You will follow me to his presence. Do not be afraid. The All-Highest is merciful and gracious. Answer his questions like a man.’

I followed him with a quickened pulse. Here was a bit of luck I had never dreamed of. At the far side of the station a train had drawn up, a train consisting of three big coaches, chocolate-coloured and picked out with gold. On the platform beside it stood a small group of officers, tall men in long grey-blue cloaks. They seemed to be mostly elderly, and one or two of the faces I thought I remembered from photographs in the picture papers.

As we approached they drew apart, and left us face to face with one man. He was a little below middle height, and all muffled in a thick coat with a fur collar. He wore a silver helmet with an eagle atop of it, and kept his left hand resting on his sword. Below the helmet was a face the colour of grey paper, from which shone curious sombre restless eyes with dark pouches beneath them. There was no fear of my mistaking him. These were the features which, since Napoleon, have been best known to the world.

I stood as stiff as a ramrod and saluted. I was perfectly cool and most desperately interested. For such a moment I would have gone through fire and water.

‘Majesty, this is the Dutchman I spoke of,’ I heard Stumm say.

‘What language does he speak?’ the Emperor asked.

‘Dutch,’ was the reply; ‘but being a South African he also speaks English.’

A spasm of pain seemed to flit over the face before me. Then he addressed me in English.

‘You have come from a land which will yet be our ally to offer your sword to our service? I accept the gift and hail it as a good omen. I would have given your race its freedom, but there were fools and traitors among you who misjudged me. But that freedom I shall yet give you in spite of yourselves. Are there many like you in your country?’

‘There are thousands, sire,’ I said, lying cheerfully. ‘I am one of many who think that my race’s life lies in your victory. And I think that that victory must be won not in Europe alone. In South Africa for the moment there is no chance, so we look to other parts of the continent. You will win in Europe. You have won in the East, and it now remains to strike the English where they cannot fend the blow. If we take Uganda, Egypt will fall. By your permission I go there to make trouble for your enemies.’

A flicker of a smile passed over the worn face. It was the face of one who slept little and whose thoughts rode him like a nightmare. ‘That is well,’ he said. ‘Some Englishman once said that he would call in the New World to redress the balance of the Old. We Germans will summon the whole earth to suppress the infamies of England. Serve us well, and you will not be forgotten.’ Then he suddenly asked: ‘Did you fight in the last South African War?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ I said. ‘I was in the commando of that Smuts who has now been bought by England.’

‘What were your countrymen’s losses?’ he asked eagerly.

I did not know, but I hazarded a guess. ‘In the field some twenty thousand. But many more by sickness and in the accursed prison-camps of the English.’

Again a spasm of pain crossed his face.

‘Twenty thousand,’ he repeated huskily. ‘A mere handful. Today we lose as many in a skirmish in the Polish marshes.’

Then he broke out fiercely. ‘I did not seek the war . . . It was forced on me . . . I laboured for peace . . . The blood of millions is on the heads of England and Russia, but England most of all. God will yet avenge it. He that takes the sword will perish by the sword. Mine was forced from the scabbard in self-defence, and I am guiltless. Do they know that among your people?’

‘All the world knows it, sire,’ I said.

He gave his hand to Stumm and turned away. The last I saw of him was a figure moving like a sleep-walker, with no spring in his step, amid his tall suite. I felt that I was looking on at a far bigger tragedy than any I had seen in action. Here was one that had loosed Hell, and the furies of Hell had got hold of him. He was no common man, for in his presence I felt an attraction which was not merely the mastery of one used to command. That would not have impressed me, for I had never owned a master. But here was a human being who, unlike Stumm and his kind, had the power of laying himself alongside other men. That was the irony of it. Stumm would not have cared a tinker’s curse for all the massacres in history. But this man, the chief of a nation of Stumms, paid the price in war for the gifts that had made him successful in peace. He had imagination and nerves, and the one was white hot and the others were quivering. I would not have been in his shoes for the throne of the Universe . . .

All afternoon we sped southward, mostly in a country of hills and wooded valleys. Stumm, for him, was very pleasant. His imperial master must have been gracious to him, and he passed a bit of it on to me. But he was anxious to see that I had got the right impression.

‘The All–Highest is merciful, as I told you,’ he said.

I agreed with him.

‘Mercy is the prerogative of kings,’ he said sententiously, ‘but for us lesser folks it is a trimming we can well do without.’

I nodded my approval.

‘I am not merciful,’ he went on, as if I needed telling that. ‘If any man stands in my way I trample the life out of him. That is the German fashion. That is what has made us great. We do not make war with lavender gloves and fine phrases, but with hard steel and hard brains. We Germans will cure the green-sickness of the world. The nations rise against us. Pouf! They are soft flesh, and flesh cannot resist iron. The shining ploughshare will cut its way through acres of mud.’

I hastened to add that these were also my opinions.

‘What the hell do your opinions matter? You are a thick-headed boor of the veld . . . Not but what,’ he added, ‘there is metal in you slow Dutchmen once we Germans have had the forging of it!’

The winter evening closed in, and I saw that we had come out of the hills and were in flat country. Sometimes a big sweep of river showed, and, looking out at one station I saw a funny church with a thing like an onion on top of its spire. It might almost have been a mosque, judging from the pictures I remembered of mosques. I wished to heaven I had given geography more attention in my time.

Presently we stopped, and Stumm led the way out. The train must have been specially halted for him, for it was a one-horse little place whose name I could not make out. The station-master was waiting, bowing and saluting, and outside was a motor-car with big head-lights. Next minute we were sliding through dark woods where the snow lay far deeper than in the north. There was a mild frost in the air, and the tyres slipped and skidded at the corners.

We hadn’t far to go. We climbed a little hill and on the top of it stopped at the door of a big black castle. It looked enormous in the winter night, with not a light showing anywhere on its front. The door was opened by an old fellow who took a long time about it and got well cursed for his slowness. Inside the place was very noble and ancient. Stumm switched on the electric light, and there was a great hall with black tarnished portraits of men and women in old-fashioned clothes, and mighty horns of deer on the walls.

There seemed to be no superfluity of servants. The old fellow said that food was ready, and without more ado we went into the dining-room — another vast chamber with rough stone walls above the panelling — and found some cold meats on the table beside a big fire. The servant presently brought in a ham omelette, and on that and the cold stuff we dined. I remember there was nothing to drink but water. It puzzled me how Stumm kept his great body going on the very moderate amount of food he ate. He was the type you expect to swill beer by the bucket and put away a pie in a sitting.

When we had finished, he rang for the old man and told him that we should be in the study for the rest of the evening. ‘You can lock up and go to bed when you like,’ he said, ‘but see you have coffee ready at seven sharp in the morning.’

Ever since I entered that house I had the uncomfortable feeling of being in a prison. Here was I alone in this great place with a fellow who could, and would, wring my neck if he wanted. Berlin and all the rest of it had seemed comparatively open country; I had felt that I could move freely and at the worst make a bolt for it. But here I was trapped,

and I had to tell myself every minute that I was there as a friend and colleague. The fact is, I was afraid of Stumm, and I don't mind admitting it. He was a new thing in my experience and I didn't like it. If only he had drunk and guzzled a bit I should have been happier.

We went up a staircase to a room at the end of a long corridor. Stumm locked the door behind him and laid the key on the table. That room took my breath away, it was so unexpected. In place of the grim bareness of downstairs here was a place all luxury and colour and light. It was very large, but low in the ceiling, and the walls were full of little recesses with statues in them. A thick grey carpet of velvet pile covered the floor, and the chairs were low and soft and upholstered like a lady's boudoir. A pleasant fire burned on the hearth and there was a flavour of scent in the air, something like incense or burnt sandalwood. A French clock on the mantelpiece told me that it was ten minutes past eight. Everywhere on little tables and in cabinets was a profusion of knickknacks, and there was some beautiful embroidery framed on screens. At first sight you would have said it was a woman's drawing-room.

But it wasn't. I soon saw the difference. There had never been a woman's hand in that place. It was the room of a man who had a passion for frippery, who had a perverted taste for soft delicate things. It was the complement to his bluff brutality. I began to see the queer other side to my host, that evil side which gossip had spoken of as not unknown in the German army. The room seemed a horribly unwholesome place, and I was more than ever afraid of Stumm.

The hearthrug was a wonderful old Persian thing, all faint greens and pinks. As he stood on it he looked uncommonly like a bull in a china-shop. He seemed to bask in the comfort of it, and sniffed like a satisfied animal. Then he sat down at an escritoire, unlocked a drawer and took out some papers.

'We will now settle your business, friend Brandt,' he said. 'You will go to Egypt and there take your orders from one whose name and address are in this envelope. This card,' and he lifted a square piece of grey pasteboard with a big stamp at the corner and some code words stencilled on it, 'will be your passport. You will Show it to the man you seek. Keep it jealously, and never use it save under orders or in the last necessity. It is your badge as an accredited agent of the German Crown.'

I took the card and the envelope and put them in my pocket-book.

'Where do I go after Egypt?' I asked.

'That remains to be seen. Probably you will go up the Blue Nile. Riza, the man you will meet, will direct you. Egypt is a nest of our agents who work peacefully under the nose of the English Secret Service.'

'I am willing,' I said. 'But how do I reach Egypt?'

'You will travel by Holland and London. Here is your route,' and he took a paper from his pocket. 'Your passports are ready and will be given you at the frontier.'

This was a pretty kettle of fish. I was to be packed off to Cairo by sea, which would take weeks, and God knows how I would get from Egypt to Constantinople. I saw all my plans falling to pieces about my ears, and just when I thought they were shaping nicely.

Stumm must have interpreted the look on my face as fear.

'You have no cause to be afraid,' he said. 'We have passed the word to the English police to look out for a suspicious South African named Brandt, one of Maritz's rebels. It is not difficult to have that kind of a hint conveyed to the proper quarter. But the description will not be yours. Your name will be Van der Linden, a respectable Java merchant going home to his plantations after a visit to his native shores. You had better get your *dossier* by heart, but I guarantee you will be asked no questions. We manage these things well in Germany.'

I kept my eyes on the fire, while I did some savage thinking. I knew they would not let me out of their sight till they saw me in Holland, and, once there, there would be no possibility of getting back. When I left this house I would have no chance of giving them the slip. And yet I was well on my way to the East, the Danube could not be fifty miles off, and that way ran the road to Constantinople. It was a fairly desperate position. If I tried to get away Stumm would prevent me, and the odds were that I would go to join Peter in some infernal prison-camp.

Those moments were some of the worst I ever spent. I was absolutely and utterly baffled, like a rat in a trap. There seemed nothing for it but to go back to London and tell Sir Walter the game was up. And that was about as bitter as death.

He saw my face and laughed. 'Does your heart fail you, my little Dutchman? You funk the English? I will tell you one thing for your comfort. There is nothing in the world to be feared except me. Fail, and you have cause to shiver. Play me

false and you had far better never have been born.'

His ugly sneering face was close above mine. Then he put out his hands and gripped my shoulders as he had done the first afternoon.

I forget if I mentioned that part of the damage I got at Loos was a shrapnel bullet low down at the back of my neck. The wound had healed well enough, but I had pains there on a cold day. His fingers found the place and it hurt like hell.

There is a very narrow line between despair and black rage. I had about given up the game, but the sudden ache of my shoulders gave me purpose again. He must have seen the rage in my eyes, for his own became cruel.

'The weasel would like to bite,' he cried. 'But the poor weasel has found its master. Stand still, vermin. Smile, look pleasant, or I will make pulp of you. Do you dare to frown at me?'

I shut my teeth and said never a word. I was choking in my throat and could not have uttered a syllable if I had tried.

Then he let me go, grinning like an ape.

I stepped back a pace and gave him my left between the eyes.

For a second he did not realize what had happened, for I don't suppose anyone had dared to lift a hand to him since he was a child. He blinked at me mildly. Then his face grew as red as fire.

'God in heaven,' he said quietly. 'I am going to kill you,' and he flung himself on me like a mountain.

I was expecting him and dodged the attack. I was quite calm now, but pretty helpless. The man had a gorilla's reach and could give me at least a couple of stone. He wasn't soft either, but looked as hard as granite. I was only just from hospital and absurdly out of training. He would certainly kill me if he could, and I saw nothing to prevent him.

My only chance was to keep him from getting to grips, for he could have squeezed in my ribs in two seconds. I fancied I was lighter on my legs than him, and I had a good eye. Black Monty at Kimberley had taught me to fight a bit, but there is no art on earth which can prevent a big man in a narrow space from sooner or later cornering a lesser one. That was the danger.

Backwards and forwards we padded on the soft carpet. He had no notion of guarding himself, and I got in a good few blows.

Then I saw a queer thing. Every time I hit him he blinked and seemed to pause. I guessed the reason for that. He had gone through life keeping the crown of the causeway, and nobody had ever stood up to him. He wasn't a coward by a long chalk, but he was a bully, and had never been struck in his life. He was getting struck now in real earnest, and he didn't like it. He had lost his bearings and was growing as mad as a hatter.

I kept half an eye on the clock. I was hopeful now, and was looking for the right kind of chance. The risk was that I might tire sooner than him and be at his mercy.

Then I learned a truth I have never forgotten. If you are fighting a man who means to kill you, he will be apt to down you unless you mean to kill him too. Stumm did not know any rules to this game, and I forgot to allow for that. Suddenly, when I was watching his eyes, he launched a mighty kick at my stomach. If he had got me, this yarn would have had an abrupt ending. But by the mercy of God I was moving sideways when he let out, and his heavy boot just grazed my left thigh.

It was the place where most of the shrapnel had lodged, and for a second I was sick with pain and stumbled. Then I was on my feet again but with a new feeling in my blood. I had to smash Stumm or never sleep in my bed again.

I got a wonderful power from this new cold rage of mine. I felt I couldn't tire, and I danced round and dotted his face till it was streaming with blood. His bulky padded chest was no good to me, so I couldn't try for the mark.

He began to snort now and his breath came heavily. 'You infernal cad,' I said in good round English, 'I'm going to knock the stuffing out of you,' but he didn't know what I was saying.

Then at last he gave me my chance. He half tripped over a little table and his face stuck forward. I got him on the point of the chin, and put every ounce of weight I possessed behind the blow. He crumpled up in a heap and rolled over, upsetting a lamp and knocking a big china jar in two. His head, I remember, lay under the escritoire from which he had taken my passport.

I picked up the key and unlocked the door. In one of the gilded mirrors I smoothed my hair and tidied up my clothes. My anger had completely gone and I had no particular ill-will left against Stumm. He was a man of remarkable qualities,

which would have brought him to the highest distinction in the Stone Age. But for all that he and his kind were back numbers.

I stepped out of the room, locked the door behind me, and started out on the second stage of my travels.



CHAPTER SEVEN

CHRISTMASTIDE

Everything depended on whether the servant was in the hall. I had put Stumm to sleep for a bit, but I couldn't flatter myself he would long be quiet, and when he came to he would kick the locked door to matchwood. I must get out of the house without a minute's delay, and if the door was shut and the old man gone to bed I was done.

I met him at the foot of the stairs, carrying a candle.

'Your master wants me to send off an important telegram. Where is the nearest office? There's one in the village, isn't there?' I spoke in my best German, the first time I had used the tongue since I crossed the frontier.

'The village is five minutes off at the foot of the avenue,' he said. 'Will you be long, sir?'

'I'll be back in a quarter of an hour,' I said. 'Don't lock up till I get in.'

I put on my ulster and walked out into a clear starry night. My bag I left lying on a settle in the hall. There was nothing in it to compromise me, but I wished I could have got a toothbrush and some tobacco out of it.

So began one of the craziest escapades you can well imagine. I couldn't stop to think of the future yet, but must take one step at a time. I ran down the avenue, my feet cracking on the hard snow, planning hard my programme for the next hour.

I found the village — half a dozen houses with one biggish place that looked like an inn. The moon was rising, and as I approached I saw that there was some kind of a store. A funny little two-seated car was purring before the door, and I guessed this was also the telegraph office.

I marched in and told my story to a stout woman with spectacles on her nose who was talking to a young man.

'It is too late,' she shook her head. 'The Herr Burgrave knows that well. There is no connection from here after eight o'clock. If the matter is urgent you must go to Schwandorf.'

'How far is that?' I asked, looking for some excuse to get decently out of the shop.

'Seven miles,' she said, 'but here is Franz and the post-wagon. Franz, you will be glad to give the gentleman a seat beside you.'

The sheepish-looking youth muttered something which I took to be assent, and finished off a glass of beer. From his eyes and manner he looked as if he were half drunk.

I thanked the woman, and went out to the car, for I was in a fever to take advantage of this unexpected bit of luck. I could hear the post-mistress enjoining Franz not to keep the gentleman waiting, and presently he came out and flopped into the driver's seat. We started in a series of voluptuous curves, till his eyes got accustomed to the darkness.

At first we made good going along the straight, broad highway lined with woods on one side and on the other snowy fields melting into haze. Then he began to talk, and, as he talked, he slowed down. This by no means suited my book, and I seriously wondered whether I should pitch him out and take charge of the thing. He was obviously a weakling, left behind in the conscription, and I could have done it with one hand. But by a fortunate chance I left him alone.

'That is a fine hat of yours, mein Herr,' he said. He took off his own blue peaked cap, the uniform, I suppose, of the driver of the post-wagon, and laid it on his knee. The night air ruffled a shock of tow-coloured hair.

Then he calmly took my hat and clapped it on his head.

'With this thing I should be a gentleman,' he said.

I said nothing, but put on his cap and waited.

'That is a noble overcoat, mein Herr,' he went on. 'It goes well with the hat. It is the kind of garment I have always desired to own. In two days it will be the holy Christmas, when gifts are given. Would that the good God sent me such a coat as yours!'

'You can try it on to see how it looks,' I said good-humouredly.

He stopped the car with a jerk, and pulled off his blue coat. The exchange was soon effected. He was about my height, and my ulster fitted not so badly. I put on his overcoat, which had a big collar that buttoned round the neck.

The idiot preened himself like a girl. Drink and vanity had primed him for any folly. He drove so carelessly for a bit that he nearly put us into a ditch. We passed several cottages and at the last he slowed down.

‘A friend of mine lives here,’ he announced. ‘Gertrud would like to see me in the fine clothes which the most amiable Herr has given me. Wait for me, I will not be long.’ And he scrambled out of the car and lurched into the little garden.

I took his place and moved very slowly forward. I heard the door open and the sound of laughing and loud voices. Then it shut, and looking back I saw that my idiot had been absorbed into the dwelling of his Gertrud. I waited no longer, but sent the car forward at its best speed.

Five minutes later the infernal thing began to give trouble — a nut loose in the antiquated steering-gear. I unhooked a lamp, examined it, and put the mischief right, but I was a quarter of an hour doing it. The highway ran now in a thick forest and I noticed branches going off now and then to the right. I was just thinking of turning up one of them, for I had no anxiety to visit Schwandorf, when I heard behind me the sound of a great car driven furiously.

I drew in to the right side — thank goodness I remembered the rule of the road — and proceeded decorously, wondering what was going to happen. I could hear the brakes being clamped on and the car slowing down. Suddenly a big grey bonnet slipped past me and as I turned my head I heard a familiar voice.

It was Stumm, looking like something that has been run over. He had his jaw in a sling, so that I wondered if I had broken it, and his eyes were beautifully bunged up. It was that that saved me, that and his raging temper. The collar of the postman’s coat was round my chin, hiding my beard, and I had his cap pulled well down on my brow. I remembered what Blenkiron had said — that the only way to deal with the Germans was naked bluff. Mine was naked enough, for it was all that was left to me.

‘Where is the man you brought from Andersbach?’ he roared, as well as his jaw would allow him.

I pretended to be mortally scared, and spoke in the best imitation I could manage of the postman’s high cracked voice.

‘He got out a mile back, Herr Burgrave,’ I quavered. ‘He was a rude fellow who wanted to go to Schwandorf, and then changed his mind.’

‘Where, you fool? Say exactly where he got down or I will wring your neck.’

‘In the wood this side of Gertrud’s cottage . . . on the left hand. I left him running among the trees.’ I put all the terror I knew into my pipe, and it wasn’t all acting.

‘He means the Henrichs’ cottage, Herr Colonel,’ said the chauffeur. ‘This man is courting the daughter.’

Stumm gave an order and the great car backed, and, as I looked round, I saw it turning. Then as it gathered speed it shot forward, and presently was lost in the shadows. I had got over the first hurdle.

But there was no time to be lost. Stumm would meet the postman and would be tearing after me any minute. I took the first turning, and bucketed along a narrow woodland road. The hard ground would show very few tracks, I thought, and I hoped the pursuit would think I had gone on to Schwandorf. But it wouldn’t do to risk it, and I was determined very soon to get the car off the road, leave it, and take to the forest. I took out my watch and calculated I could give myself ten minutes.

I was very nearly caught. Presently I came on a bit of rough heath, with a slope away from the road and here and there a patch of black which I took to be a sandpit. Opposite one of these I slewed the car to the edge, got out, started it again and saw it pitch head-foremost into the darkness. There was a splash of water and then silence. Craning over I could see nothing but murk, and the marks at the lip where the wheels had passed. They would find my tracks in daylight but scarcely at this time of night.

Then I ran across the road to the forest. I was only just in time, for the echoes of the splash had hardly died away when I heard the sound of another car. I lay flat in a hollow below a tangle of snow-laden brambles and looked between the pine-trees at the moonlit road. It was Stumm’s car again and to my consternation it stopped just a little short of the sandpit.

I saw an electric torch flashed, and Stumm himself got out and examined the tracks on the highway. Thank God, they would be still there for him to find, but had he tried half a dozen yards on he would have seen them turn towards the sandpit. If that had happened he would have beaten the adjacent woods and most certainly found me. There was a third man in the car, with my hat and coat on him. That poor devil of a postman had paid dear for his vanity.

They took a long time before they started again, and I was jolly well relieved when they went scouring down the road. I

ran deeper into the woods till I found a track which — as I judged from the sky which I saw in a clearing — took me nearly due west. That wasn't the direction I wanted, so I bore off at right angles, and presently struck another road which I crossed in a hurry. After that I got entangled in some confounded kind of enclosure and had to climb paling after paling of rough stakes plaited with osiers. Then came a rise in the ground and I was on a low hill of pines which seemed to last for miles. All the time I was going at a good pace, and before I stopped to rest I calculated I had put six miles between me and the sandpit.

My mind was getting a little more active now; for the first part of the journey I had simply staggered from impulse to impulse. These impulses had been uncommon lucky, but I couldn't go on like that for ever. *Ek sal 'n plan maak*, says the old Boer when he gets into trouble, and it was up to me now to make a plan.

As soon as I began to think I saw the desperate business I was in for. Here was I, with nothing except what I stood up in — including a coat and cap that weren't mine — alone in mid-winter in the heart of South Germany. There was a man behind me looking for my blood, and soon there would be a hue-and-cry for me up and down the land. I had heard that the German police were pretty efficient, and I couldn't see that I stood the slimmest chance. If they caught me they would shoot me beyond doubt. I asked myself on what charge, and answered, 'For knocking about a German officer.' They couldn't have me up for espionage, for as far as I knew they had no evidence. I was simply a Dutchman that had got riled and had run amok. But if they cut down a cobbler for laughing at a second lieutenant — which is what happened at Zabern — I calculated that hanging would be too good for a man that had broken a colonel's jaw.

To make things worse my job was not to escape — though that would have been hard enough — but to get to Constantinople, more than a thousand miles off, and I reckoned I couldn't get there as a tramp. I had to be sent there, and now I had flung away my chance. If I had been a Catholic I would have said a prayer to St Teresa, for she would have understood my troubles.

My mother used to say that when you felt down on your luck it was a good cure to count your mercies. So I set about counting mine. The first was that I was well started on my journey, for I couldn't be above two score miles from the Danube. The second was that I had Stumm's pass. I didn't see how I could use it, but there it was. Lastly I had plenty of money — fifty-three English sovereigns and the equivalent of three pounds in German paper which I had changed at the hotel. Also I had squared accounts with old Stumm. That was the biggest mercy of all.

I thought I'd better get some sleep, so I found a dryish hole below an oak root and squeezed myself into it. The snow lay deep in these woods and I was sopping wet up to the knees. All the same I managed to sleep for some hours, and got up and shook myself just as the winter's dawn was breaking through the tree tops. Breakfast was the next thing, and I must find some sort of dwelling.

Almost at once I struck a road, a big highway running north and south. I trotted along in the bitter morning to get my circulation started, and presently I began to feel a little better. In a little I saw a church spire, which meant a village. Stumm wouldn't be likely to have got on my tracks yet, I calculated, but there was always the chance that he had warned all the villages round by telephone and that they might be on the look-out for me. But that risk had to be taken, for I must have food.

It was the day before Christmas, I remembered, and people would be holidaying. The village was quite a big place, but at this hour — just after eight o'clock — there was nobody in the street except a wandering dog. I chose the most unassuming shop I could find, where a little boy was taking down the shutters — one of those general stores where they sell everything. The boy fetched a very old woman, who hobbled in from the back, fitting on her spectacles.

'Gruss Gott,' she said in a friendly voice, and I took off my cap. I saw from my reflection in a saucepan that I looked moderately respectable in spite of my night in the woods.

I told her the story of how I was walking from Schwandorf to see my mother at an imaginary place called judenfeld, banking on the ignorance of villagers about any place five miles from their homes. I said my luggage had gone astray, and I hadn't time to wait for it, since my leave was short. The old lady was sympathetic and unsuspecting. She sold me a pound of chocolate, a box of biscuits, the better part of a ham, two tins of sardines and a rucksack to carry them. I also bought some soap, a comb and a cheap razor, and a small Tourists' Guide, published by a Leipzig firm. As I was leaving I saw what seemed like garments hanging up in the back shop, and turned to have a look at them. They were the kind of thing that Germans wear on their summer walking tours — long shooting capes made of a green stuff they call loden. I bought one,

and a green felt hat and an alpenstock to keep it company. Then wishing the old woman and her belongings a merry Christmas, I departed and took the shortest cut out of the village. There were one or two people about now, but they did not seem to notice me.

I went into the woods again and walked for two miles till I halted for breakfast. I was not feeling quite so fit now, and I did not make much of my provisions, beyond eating a biscuit and some chocolate. I felt very thirsty and longed for hot tea. In an icy pool I washed and with infinite agony shaved my beard. That razor was the worst of its species, and my eyes were running all the time with the pain of the operation. Then I took off the postman's coat and cap, and buried them below some bushes. I was now a clean-shaven German pedestrian with a green cape and hat, and an absurd walking-stick with an iron-shod end — the sort of person who roams in thousands over the Fatherland in summer, but is a rarish bird in mid-winter.

The Tourists' Guide was a fortunate purchase, for it contained a big map of Bavaria which gave me my bearings. I was certainly not forty miles from the Danube — more like thirty. The road through the village I had left would have taken me to it. I had only to walk due south and I would reach it before night. So far as I could make out there were long tongues of forest running down to the river, and I resolved to keep to the woodlands. At the worst I would meet a forester or two, and I had a good enough story for them. On the highroad there might be awkward questions.

When I started out again I felt very stiff and the cold seemed to be growing intense. This puzzled me, for I had not minded it much up to now, and, being warm-blooded by nature, it never used to worry me. A sharp winter night on the high-veld was a long sight chillier than anything I had struck so far in Europe. But now my teeth were chattering and the marrow seemed to be freezing in my bones.

The day had started bright and clear, but a wrack of grey clouds soon covered the sky, and a wind from the east began to whistle. As I stumbled along through the snowy undergrowth I kept longing for bright warm places. I thought of those long days on the veld when the earth was like a great yellow bowl, with white roads running to the horizon and a tiny white farm basking in the heart of it, with its blue dam and patches of bright green lucerne. I thought of those baking days on the east coast, when the sea was like mother-of-pearl and the sky one burning turquoise. But most of all I thought of warm scented noons on trek, when one dozed in the shadow of the wagon and sniffed the wood-smoke from the fire where the boys were cooking dinner.

From these pleasant pictures I returned to the beastly present — the thick snowy woods, the lowering sky, wet clothes, a hunted present, and a dismal future. I felt miserably depressed, and I couldn't think of any mercies to count. It struck me that I might be falling sick.

About midday I awoke with a start to the belief that I was being pursued. I cannot explain how or why the feeling came, except that it is a kind of instinct that men get who have lived much in wild countries. My senses, which had been numbed, suddenly grew keen, and my brain began to work double quick.

I asked myself what I would do if I were Stumm, with hatred in my heart, a broken jaw to avenge, and pretty well limitless powers. He must have found the car in the sandpit and seen my tracks in the wood opposite. I didn't know how good he and his men might be at following a spoor, but I knew that any ordinary Kaffir could have nosed it out easily. But he didn't need to do that. This was a civilized country full of roads and railways. I must some time and somewhere come out of the woods. He could have all the roads watched, and the telephone would set everyone on my track within a radius of fifty miles. Besides, he would soon pick up my trail in the village I had visited that morning. From the map I learned that it was called Greif, and it was likely to live up to that name with me.

Presently I came to a rocky knoll which rose out of the forest. Keeping well in shelter I climbed to the top and cautiously looked around me. Away to the east I saw the vale of a river with broad fields and church-spires. West and south the forest rolled unbroken in a wilderness of snowy tree-tops. There was no sign of life anywhere, not even a bird, but I knew very well that behind me in the woods were men moving swiftly on my track, and that it was pretty well impossible for me to get away.

There was nothing for it but to go on till I dropped or was taken. I shaped my course south with a shade of west in it, for the map showed me that in that direction I would soonest strike the Danube. What I was going to do when I got there I didn't trouble to think. I had fixed the river as my immediate goal and the future must take care of itself.

I was now certain that I had fever on me. It was still in my bones, as a legacy from Africa, and had come out once or

twice when I was with the battalion in Hampshire. The bouts had been short for I had known of their coming and dosed myself. But now I had no quinine, and it looked as if I were in for a heavy go. It made me feel desperately wretched and stupid, and I all but blundered into capture.

For suddenly I came on a road and was going to cross it blindly, when a man rode slowly past on a bicycle. Luckily I was in the shade of a clump of hollies and he was not looking my way, though he was not three yards off. I crawled forward to reconnoitre. I saw about half a mile of road running straight through the forest and every two hundred yards was a bicyclist. They wore uniform and appeared to be acting as sentries.

This could only have one meaning. Stumm had picketed all the roads and cut me off in an angle of the woods. There was no chance of getting across unobserved. As I lay there with my heart sinking, I had the horrible feeling that the pursuit might be following me from behind, and that at any moment I would be enclosed between two fires.

For more than an hour I stayed there with my chin in the snow. I didn't see any way out, and I was feeling so ill that I didn't seem to care. Then my chance came suddenly out of the skies.

The wind rose, and a great gust of snow blew from the east. In five minutes it was so thick that I couldn't see across the road. At first I thought it a new addition to my troubles, and then very slowly I saw the opportunity. I slipped down the bank and made ready to cross.

I almost blundered into one of the bicyclists. He cried out and fell off his machine, but I didn't wait to investigate. A sudden access of strength came to me and I darted into the woods on the farther side. I knew I would be soon swallowed from sight in the drift, and I knew that the falling snow would hide my tracks. So I put my best foot forward.

I must have run miles before the hot fit passed, and I stopped from sheer bodily weakness. There was no sound except the crush of falling snow, the wind seemed to have gone, and the place was very solemn and quiet. But Heavens! how the snow fell! It was partly screened by the branches, but all the same it was piling itself up deep everywhere. My legs seemed made of lead, my head burned, and there were fiery pains over all my body. I stumbled on blindly, without a notion of any direction, determined only to keep going to the last. For I knew that if I once lay down I would never rise again.

When I was a boy I was fond of fairy tales, and most of the stories I remembered had been about great German forests and snow and charcoal burners and woodmen's huts. Once I had longed to see these things, and now I was fairly in the thick of them. There had been wolves, too, and I wondered idly if I should fall in with a pack. I felt myself getting light-headed. I fell repeatedly and laughed sillily every time. Once I dropped into a hole and lay for some time at the bottom giggling. If anyone had found me then he would have taken me for a madman.

The twilight of the forest grew dimmer, but I scarcely noticed it. Evening was falling, and soon it would be night, a night without morning for me. My body was going on without the direction of my brain, for my mind was filled with craziness. I was like a drunk man who keeps running, for he knows that if he stops he will fall, and I had a sort of bet with myself not to lie down — not at any rate just yet. If I lay down I should feel the pain in my head worse. Once I had ridden for five days down country with fever on me and the flat bush trees had seemed to melt into one big mirage and dance quadrilles before my eyes. But then I had more or less kept my wits. Now I was fairly daft, and every minute growing dafter.

Then the trees seemed to stop and I was walking on flat ground. it was a clearing, and before me twinkled a little light. The change restored me to consciousness, and suddenly I felt with horrid intensity the fire in my head and bones and the weakness of my limbs. I longed to sleep, and I had a notion that a place to sleep was before me. I moved towards the light and presently saw through a screen of snow the outline of a cottage.

I had no fear, only an intolerable longing to lie down. Very slowly I made my way to the door and knocked. My weakness was so great that I could hardly lift my hand.

There were voices within, and a corner of the curtain was lifted from the window. Then the door opened and a woman stood before me, a woman with a thin, kindly face.

'Gruss Gott,' she said, while children peeped from behind her skirts.

'Gruss Gott,' I replied. I leaned against the door-post, and speech forsook me.

She saw my condition. 'Come in, Sir,' she said. 'You are sick and it is no weather for a sick man.'

I stumbled after her and stood dripping in the centre of the little kitchen, while three wondering children stared at me. It was a poor place, scantily furnished, but a good log-fire burned on the hearth. The shock of warmth gave me one of those

minutes of self-possession which comes sometimes in the middle of a fever.

‘I am sick, mother, and I have walked far in the storm and lost my way. I am from Africa, where the climate is hot, and your cold brings me fever. It will pass in a day or two if you can give me a bed.’

‘You are welcome,’ she said; ‘but first I will make you coffee.’

I took off my dripping cloak, and crouched close to the hearth. She gave me coffee — poor washy stuff, but blessedly hot. Poverty was spelled large in everything I saw. I felt the tides of fever beginning to overflow my brain again, and I made a great attempt to set my affairs straight before I was overtaken. With difficulty I took out Stumm’s pass from my pocket-book.

‘That is my warrant,’ I said. ‘I am a member of the Imperial Secret Service and for the sake of my work I must move in the dark. If you will permit it, mother, I will sleep till I am better, but no one must know that I am here. If anyone comes, you must deny my presence.’

She looked at the big seal as if it were a talisman.

‘Yes, yes,’ she said, ‘you will have the bed in the garret and be left in peace till you are well. We have no neighbours near, and the storm will shut the roads. I will be silent, I and the little ones.’

My head was beginning to swim, but I made one more effort.

‘There is food in my rucksack — biscuits and ham and chocolate. Pray take it for your use. And here is some money to buy Christmas fare for the little ones.’ And I gave her some of the German notes.

After that my recollection becomes dim. She helped me up a ladder to the garret, undressed me, and gave me a thick coarse nightgown. I seem to remember that she kissed my hand, and that she was crying. ‘The good Lord has sent you,’ she said. ‘Now the little ones will have their prayers answered and the Christkind will not pass by our door.’



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ESSEN BARGES

I lay for four days like a log in that garret bed. The storm died down, the thaw set in, and the snow melted. The children played about the doors and told stories at night round the fire. Stumm's myrmidons no doubt beset every road and troubled the lives of innocent wayfarers. But no one came near the cottage, and the fever worked itself out while I lay in peace.

It was a bad bout, but on the fifth day it left me, and I lay, as weak as a kitten, staring at the rafters and the little skylight. It was a leaky, draughty old place, but the woman of the cottage had heaped deerskins and blankets on my bed and kept me warm. She came in now and then, and once she brought me a brew of some bitter herbs which greatly refreshed me. A little thin porridge was all the food I could eat, and some chocolate made from the slabs in my rucksack.

I lay and dozed through the day, hearing the faint chatter of children below, and getting stronger hourly. Malaria passes as quickly as it comes and leaves a man little the worse, though this was one of the sharpest turns I ever had. As I lay I thought, and my thoughts followed curious lines. One queer thing was that Stumm and his doings seemed to have been shot back into a lumber-room of my brain and the door locked. He didn't seem to be a creature of the living present, but a distant memory on which I could look calmly. I thought a good deal about my battalion and the comedy of my present position. You see I was getting better, for I called it comedy now, not tragedy.

But chiefly I thought of my mission. All that wild day in the snow it had seemed the merest farce. The three words Harry Bullivant had scribbled had danced through my head in a crazy fandango. They were present to me now, but coolly and sanely in all their meagreness.

I remember that I took each one separately and chewed on it for hours. *Kasredin* — there was nothing to be got out of that. *Cancer* — there were too many meanings, all blind. *V. I.* — that was the worst gibberish of all.

Before this I had always taken the I as the letter of the alphabet. I had thought the v. must stand for von, and I had considered the German names beginning with I— Ingolstadt, Ingeburg, Ingenohl, and all the rest of them. I had made a list of about seventy at the British Museum before I left London.

Now I suddenly found myself taking the I as the numeral One. Idly, not thinking what I was doing, I put it into German.

Then I nearly fell out of the bed. Von Einem — the name I had heard at Gaudian's house, the name Stumm had spoken behind his hand, the name to which Hilda was probably the prefix. It was a tremendous discovery — the first real bit of light I had found. Harry Bullivant knew that some man or woman called von Einem was at the heart of the mystery. Stumm had spoken of the same personage with respect and in connection with the work I proposed to do in raising the Moslem Africans. If I found von Einem I would be getting very warm. What was the word that Stumm had whispered to Gaudian and scared that worthy? It had sounded like *uhnmantl*. If I could only get that clear, I would solve the riddle.

I think that discovery completed my cure. At any rate on the evening of the fifth day — it was Wednesday, the 29th of December — I was well enough to get up. When the dark had fallen and it was too late to fear a visitor, I came downstairs and, wrapped in my green cape, took a seat by the fire.

As we sat there in the firelight, with the three white-headed children staring at me with saucer eyes, and smiling when I looked their way, the woman talked. Her man had gone to the wars on the Eastern front, and the last she had heard from him he was in a Polish bog and longing for his dry native woodlands. The struggle meant little to her. It was an act of God, a thunderbolt out of the sky, which had taken a husband from her, and might soon make her a widow and her children fatherless. She knew nothing of its causes and purposes, and thought of the Russians as a gigantic nation of savages, heathens who had never been converted, and who would eat up German homes if the good Lord and the brave German soldiers did not stop them. I tried hard to find out if she had any notion of affairs in the West, but she hadn't, beyond the fact that there was trouble with the French. I doubt if she knew of England's share in it. She was a decent soul, with no bitterness against anybody, not even the Russians if they would spare her man.

That night I realized the crazy folly of war. When I saw the splintered shell of Ypres and heard hideous tales of German

doings, I used to want to see the whole land of the Boche given up to fire and sword. I thought we could never end the war properly without giving the Huns some of their own medicine. But that woodcutter's cottage cured me of such nightmares. I was for punishing the guilty but letting the innocent go free. It was our business to thank God and keep our hands clean from the ugly blunders to which Germany's madness had driven her. What good would it do Christian folk to burn poor little huts like this and leave children's bodies by the wayside? To be able to laugh and to be merciful are the only things that make man better than the beasts.

The place, as I have said, was desperately poor. The woman's face had the skin stretched tight over the bones and that transparency which means under-feeding; I fancied she did not have the liberal allowance that soldiers' wives get in England. The children looked better nourished, but it was by their mother's sacrifice. I did my best to cheer them up. I told them long yarns about Africa and lions and tigers, and I got some pieces of wood and whittled them into toys. I am fairly good with a knife, and I carved very presentable likenesses of a monkey, a springbok, and a rhinoceros. The children went to bed hugging the first toys, I expect, they ever possessed.

It was clear to me that I must leave as soon as possible. I had to get on with my business, and besides, it was not fair to the woman. Any moment I might be found here, and she would get into trouble for harbouring me. I asked her if she knew where the Danube was, and her answer surprised me. 'You will reach it in an hour's walk,' she said. 'The track through the wood runs straight to the ferry.'

Next morning after breakfast I took my departure. It was drizzling weather, and I was feeling very lean. Before going I presented my hostess and the children with two sovereigns apiece. 'It is English gold,' I said, 'for I have to travel among our enemies and use our enemies' money. But the gold is good, and if you go to any town they will change it for you. But I advise you to put it in your stocking-foot and use it only if all else fails. You must keep your home going, for some day there will be peace and your man will come back from the wars.'

I kissed the children, shook the woman's hand, and went off down the clearing. They had cried 'Auf Wiedersehen,' but it wasn't likely I would ever see them again.

The snow had all gone, except in patches in the deep hollows. The ground was like a full sponge, and a cold rain drifted in my eyes. After half an hour's steady trudge the trees thinned, and presently I came out on a knuckle of open ground cloaked in dwarf junipers. And there before me lay the plain, and a mile off a broad brimming river.

I sat down and looked dismally at the prospect. The exhilaration of my discovery the day before had gone. I had stumbled on a worthless piece of knowledge, for I could not use it. Hilda von Einem, if such a person existed and possessed the great secret, was probably living in some big house in Berlin, and I was about as likely to get anything out of her as to be asked to dine with the Kaiser. Blenkiron might do something, but where on earth was Blenkiron? I dared say Sir Walter would value the information, but I could not get to Sir Walter. I was to go on to Constantinople, running away from the people who really pulled the ropes. But if I stayed I could do nothing, and I could not stay. I must go on and I didn't see how I could go on. Every course seemed shut to me, and I was in as pretty a tangle as any man ever stumbled into.

For I was morally certain that Stumm would not let the thing drop. I knew too much, and besides I had outraged his pride. He would beat the countryside till he got me, and he undoubtedly would get me if I waited much longer. But how was I to get over the border? My passport would be no good, for the number of that pass would long ere this have been wired to every police-station in Germany, and to produce it would be to ask for trouble. Without it I could not cross the borders by any railway. My studies of the Tourists' Guide had suggested that once I was in Austria I might find things slacker and move about easier. I thought of having a try at the Tyrol and I also thought of Bohemia. But these places were a long way off, and there were several thousand chances each day that I would be caught on the road.

This was Thursday, the 30th of December, the second last day of the year. I was due in Constantinople on the 17th of January. Constantinople! I had thought myself a long way from it in Berlin, but now it seemed as distant as the moon.

But that big sullen river in front of me led to it. And as I looked my attention was caught by a curious sight. On the far eastern horizon, where the water slipped round a corner of hill, there was a long trail of smoke. The streamers thinned out, and seemed to come from some boat well round the corner, but I could see at least two boats in view. Therefore there must be a long train of barges, with a tug in tow.

I looked to the west and saw another such procession coming into sight. First went a big river steamer — it can't have been much less than 1,000 tons — and after came a string of barges. I counted no less than six besides the tug. They were

heavily loaded and their draught must have been considerable, but there was plenty of depth in the flooded river.

A moment's reflection told me what I was looking at. Once Sandy, in one of the discussions you have in hospital, had told us just how the Germans munitioned their Balkan campaign. They were pretty certain of dishing Serbia at the first go, and it was up to them to get through guns and shells to the old Turk, who was running pretty short in his first supply. Sandy said that they wanted the railway, but they wanted still more the river, and they could make certain of that in a week. He told us how endless strings of barges, loaded up at the big factories of Westphalia, were moving through the canals from the Rhine or the Elbe to the Danube. Once the first reached Turkey, there would be regular delivery, you see — as quick as the Turks could handle the stuff. And they didn't return empty, Sandy said, but came back full of Turkish cotton and Bulgarian beef and Rumanian corn. I don't know where Sandy got the knowledge, but there was the proof of it before my eyes.

It was a wonderful sight, and I could have gnashed my teeth to see those loads of munitions going snugly off to the enemy. I calculated they would give our poor chaps hell in Gallipoli. And then, as I looked, an idea came into my head and with it an eighth part of a hope.

There was only one way for me to get out of Germany, and that was to leave in such good company that I would be asked no questions. That was plain enough. If I travelled to Turkey, for instance, in the Kaiser's suite, I would be as safe as the mail; but if I went on my own I was done. I had, so to speak, to get my passport inside Germany, to join some caravan which had free marching powers. And there was the kind of caravan before me — the Essen barges.

It sounded lunacy, for I guessed that munitions of war would be as jealously guarded as old Hindenburg's health. All the safer, I replied to myself, once I get there. If you are looking for a deserter you don't seek him at the favourite regimental public-house. If you're after a thief, among the places you'd be apt to leave unsearched would be Scotland Yard.

It was sound reasoning, but how was I to get on board? Probably the beastly things did not stop once in a hundred miles, and Stumm would get me long before I struck a halting-place. And even if I did get a chance like that, how was I to get permission to travel?

One step was clearly indicated — to get down to the river bank at once. So I set off at a sharp walk across squelchy fields, till I struck a road where the ditches had overflowed so as almost to meet in the middle. The place was so bad that I hoped travellers might be few. And as I trudged, my thoughts were busy with my prospects as a stowaway. If I bought food, I might get a chance to lie snug on one of the barges. They would not break bulk till they got to their journey's end.

Suddenly I noticed that the steamer, which was now abreast me, began to move towards the shore, and as I came over a low rise, I saw on my left a straggling village with a church, and a small landing-stage. The houses stood about a quarter of a mile from the stream, and between them was a straight, poplar-fringed road.

Soon there could be no doubt about it. The procession was coming to a standstill. The big tug nosed her way in and lay up alongside the pier, where in that season of flood there was enough depth of water. She signalled to the barges and they also started to drop anchors, which showed that there must be at least two men aboard each. Some of them dragged a bit and it was rather a cock-eyed train that lay in mid-stream. The tug got out a gangway, and from where I lay I saw half a dozen men leave it, carrying something on their shoulders.

It could be only one thing — a dead body. Someone of the crew must have died, and this halt was to bury him. I watched the procession move towards the village and I reckoned they would take some time there, though they might have wired ahead for a grave to be dug. Anyhow, they would be long enough to give me a chance.

For I had decided upon the brazen course. Blenkiron had said you couldn't cheat the Boche, but you could bluff him. I was going to put up the most monstrous bluff. If the whole countryside was hunting for Richard Hannay, Richard Hannay would walk through as a pal of the hunters. For I remembered the pass Stumm had given me. If that was worth a tinker's curse it should be good enough to impress a ship's captain.

Of course there were a thousand risks. They might have heard of me in the village and told the ship's party the story. For that reason I resolved not to go there but to meet the sailors when they were returning to the boat. Or the captain might have been warned and got the number of my pass, in which case Stumm would have his hands on me pretty soon. Or the captain might be an ignorant fellow who had never seen a Secret Service pass and did not know what it meant, and would refuse me transport by the letter of his instructions. In that case I might wait on another convoy.

I had shaved and made myself a fairly respectable figure before I left the cottage. It was my cue to wait for the men

when they left the church, wait on that quarter-mile of straight highway. I judged the captain must be in the party. The village, I was glad to observe, seemed very empty. I have my own notions about the Bavarians as fighting men, but I am bound to say that, judging by my observations, very few of them stayed at home.

That funeral took hours. They must have had to dig the grave, for I waited near the road in a clump of cherry-trees, with my feet in two inches of mud and water, till I felt chilled to the bone. I prayed to God it would not bring back my fever, for I was only one day out of bed. I had very little tobacco left in my pouch, but I stood myself one pipe, and I ate one of the three cakes of chocolate I still carried.

At last, well after midday, I could see the ship's party returning. They marched two by two and I was thankful to see that they had no villagers with them. I walked to the road, turned up it, and met the vanguard, carrying my head as high as I knew how.

'Where's your captain?' I asked, and a man jerked his thumb over his shoulder. The others wore thick jerseys and knitted caps, but there was one man at the rear in uniform.

He was a short, broad man with a weather-beaten face and an anxious eye.

'May I have a word with you, Herr Captain?' I said, with what I hoped was a judicious blend of authority and conciliation.

He nodded to his companion, who walked on.

'Yes?' he asked rather impatiently.

I proffered him my pass. Thank Heaven he had seen the kind of thing before, for his face at once took on that curious look which one person in authority always wears when he is confronted with another. He studied it closely and then raised his eyes.

'Well, Sir?' he said. 'I observe your credentials. What can I do for you?'

'I take it you are bound for Constantinople?' I asked.

'The boats go as far as Rustchuk,' he replied. 'There the stuff is transferred to the railway.'

'And you reach Rustchuk when?'

'In ten days, bar accidents. Let us say twelve to be safe.'

'I want to accompany you,' I said. 'In my profession, Herr Captain, it is necessary sometimes to make journeys by other than the common route. That is now my desire. I have the right to call upon some other branch of our country's service to help me. Hence my request.'

Very plainly he did not like it.

'I must telegraph about it. My instructions are to let no one aboard, not even a man like you. I am sorry, Sir, but I must get authority first before I can fall in with your desire. Besides, my boat is ill-found. You had better wait for the next batch and ask Dreyser to take you. I lost Walter today. He was ill when he came aboard — a disease of the heart — but he would not be persuaded. And last night he died.'

'Was that him you have been burying?' I asked.

'Even so. He was a good man and my wife's cousin, and now I have no engineer. Only a fool of a boy from Hamburg. I have just come from wiring to my owners for a fresh man, but even if he comes by the quickest train he will scarcely overtake us before Vienna or even Buda.'

I saw light at last.

'We will go together,' I said, 'and cancel that wire. For behold, Herr Captain, I am an engineer, and will gladly keep an eye on your boilers till we get to Rustchuk.'

He looked at me doubtfully.

'I am speaking truth,' I said. 'Before the war I was an engineer in Damaraland. Mining was my branch, but I had a good general training, and I know enough to run a river-boat. Have no fear. I promise you I will earn my passage.'

His face cleared, and he looked what he was, an honest, good-humoured North German seaman.

'Come then in God's name,' he cried, 'and we will make a bargain. I will let the telegraph sleep. I require authority from the Government to take a passenger, but I need none to engage a new engineer.'

He sent one of the hands back to the village to cancel his wire. In ten minutes I found myself on board, and ten minutes later we were out in mid-stream and our tows were lumbering into line. Coffee was being made ready in the cabin, and while I waited for it I picked up the captain's binoculars and scanned the place I had left.

I saw some curious things. On the first road I had struck on leaving the cottage there were men on bicycles moving rapidly. They seemed to wear uniform. On the next parallel road, the one that ran through the village, I could see others. I noticed, too, that several figures appeared to be beating the intervening fields.

Stumm's cordon had got busy at last, and I thanked my stars that not one of the villagers had seen me. I had not got away much too soon, for in another half-hour he would have had me.



CHAPTER NINE

THE RETURN OF THE STRAGGLER

Before I turned in that evening I had done some good hours' work in the engine-room. The boat was oil-fired, and in very fair order, so my duties did not look as if they would be heavy. There was nobody who could be properly called an engineer; only, besides the furnace-men, a couple of lads from Hamburg who had been a year ago apprentices in a ship-building yard. They were civil fellows, both of them consumptive, who did what I told them and said little. By bedtime, if you had seen me in my blue jumper, a pair of carpet slippers, and a flat cap — all the property of the deceased Walter — you would have sworn I had been bred to the firing of river-boats, whereas I had acquired most of my knowledge on one run down the Zambesi, when the proper engineer got drunk and fell overboard among the crocodiles.

The captain — they called him Schenk — was out of his bearings in the job. He was a Frisian and a first-class deep-water seaman, but, since he knew the Rhine delta, and because the German mercantile marine was laid on the ice till the end of war, they had turned him on to this show. He was bored by the business, and didn't understand it very well. The river charts puzzled him, and though it was pretty plain going for hundreds of miles, yet he was in a perpetual fidget about the pilotage. You could see that he would have been far more in his element smelling his way through the shoals of the Ems mouth, or beating against a northeaster in the shallow Baltic. He had six barges in tow, but the heavy flood of the Danube made it an easy job except when it came to going slow. There were two men on each barge, who came aboard every morning to draw rations. That was a funny business, for we never lay to if we could help it. There was a dinghy belonging to each barge, and the men used to row to the next and get a lift in that barge's dinghy, and so forth. Six men would appear in the dinghy of the barge nearest us and carry off supplies for the rest. The men were mostly Frisians, slow-spoken, sandy-haired lads, very like the breed you strike on the Essex coast.

It was the fact that Schenk was really a deep-water sailor, and so a novice to the job, that made me get on with him. He was a good fellow and quite willing to take a hint, so before I had been twenty-four hours on board he was telling me all his difficulties, and I was doing my best to cheer him. And difficulties came thick, because the next night was New Year's Eve.

I knew that that night was a season of gaiety in Scotland, but Scotland wasn't in it with the Fatherland. Even Schenk, though he was in charge of valuable stores and was voyaging against time, was quite clear that the men must have permission for some kind of beano. Just before darkness we came abreast a fair-sized town, whose name I never discovered, and decided to lie to for the night. The arrangement was that one man should be left on guard in each barge, and the other get four hours' leave ashore. Then he would return and relieve his friend, who should proceed to do the same thing. I foresaw that there would be some fun when the first batch returned, but I did not dare to protest. I was desperately anxious to get past the Austrian frontier, for I had a half-notion we might be searched there, but Schenk took his *Sylvestrabend* business so seriously that I would have risked a row if I had tried to argue.

The upshot was what I expected. We got the first batch aboard about midnight, blind to the world, and the others straggled in at all hours next morning. I stuck to the boat for obvious reasons, but next day it became too serious, and I had to go ashore with the captain to try and round up the stragglers. We got them all in but two, and I am inclined to think these two had never meant to come back. If I had a soft job like a river-boat I shouldn't be inclined to run away in the middle of Germany with the certainty that my best fate would be to be scooped up for the trenches, but your Frisian has no more imagination than a haddock. The absentees were both watchmen from the barges, and I fancy the monotony of the life had got on their nerves.

The captain was in a raging temper, for he was short-handed to begin with. He would have started a press-gang, but there was no superfluity of men in that township: nothing but boys and grandfathers. As I was helping to run the trip I was pretty annoyed also, and I sluiced down the drunkards with icy Danube water, using all the worst language I knew in Dutch and German. It was a raw morning, and as we raged through the river-side streets I remember I heard the dry crackle of wild geese going overhead, and wished I could get a shot at them. I told one fellow — he was the most troublesome — that he was a disgrace to a great Empire, and was only fit to fight with the filthy English.

'God in Heaven!' said the captain, 'we can delay no longer. We must make shift the best we can. I can spare one man

from the deck hands, and you must give up one from the engine-room.'

That was arranged, and we were tearing back rather short in the wind when I espied a figure sitting on a bench beside the booking-office on the pier. It was a slim figure, in an old suit of khaki: some cast-off duds which had long lost the semblance of a uniform. It had a gentle face, and was smoking peacefully, looking out upon the river and the boats and us noisy fellows with meek philosophical eyes. If I had seen General French sitting there and looking like nothing on earth I couldn't have been more surprised.

The man stared at me without recognition. He was waiting for his cue.

I spoke rapidly in Sesutu, for I was afraid the captain might know Dutch.

'Where have you come from?' I asked.

'They shut me up in *tronk*,' said Peter, 'and I ran away. I am tired, Cornelis, and want to continue the journey by boat.'

'Remember you have worked for me in Africa,' I said. 'You are just home from Damaraland. You are a German who has lived thirty years away from home. You can tend a furnace and have worked in mines.'

Then I spoke to the captain.

'Here is a fellow who used to be in my employ, Captain Schenk. It's almighty luck we've struck him. He's old, and not very strong in the head, but I'll go bail he's a good worker. He says he'll come with us and I can use him in the engine-room.'

'Stand up,' said the Captain.

Peter stood up, light and slim and wiry as a leopard. A sailor does not judge men by girth and weight.

'He'll do,' said Schenk, and the next minute he was readjusting his crews and giving the strayed revellers the rough side of his tongue. As it chanced, I couldn't keep Peter with me, but had to send him to one of the barges, and I had time for no more than five words with him, when I told him to hold his tongue and live up to his reputation as a half-wit. That accursed *Sylvesterabend* had played havoc with the whole outfit, and the captain and I were weary men before we got things straight.

In one way it turned out well. That afternoon we passed the frontier and I never knew it till I saw a man in a strange uniform come aboard, who copied some figures on a schedule, and brought us a mail. With my dirty face and general air of absorption in duty, I must have been an unsuspecting figure. He took down the names of the men in the barges, and Peter's name was given as it appeared on the ship's roll — Anton Blum.

'You must feel it strange, Herr Brandt,' said the captain, 'to be scrutinized by a policeman, you who give orders, I doubt not, to many policemen.'

I shrugged my shoulders. 'It is my profession. It is my business to go unrecognized often by my own servants.' I could see that I was becoming rather a figure in the captain's eyes. He liked the way I kept the men up to their work, for I hadn't been a nigger-driver for nothing.

Late on that Sunday night we passed through a great city which the captain told me was Vienna. It seemed to last for miles and miles, and to be as brightly lit as a circus. After that, we were in big plains and the air grew perishing cold. Peter had come aboard once for his rations, but usually he left it to his partner, for he was lying very low. But one morning — I think it was the 5th of January, when we had passed Buda and were moving through great sodden flats just sprinkled with snow — the captain took it into his head to get me to overhaul the barge loads. Armed with a mighty type-written list, I made a tour of the barges, beginning with the hindmost. There was a fine old stock of deadly weapons — mostly machine-guns and some field-pieces, and enough shells to blow up the Gallipoli peninsula. All kinds of shell were there, from the big 14-inch crumps to rifle grenades and trench-mortars. It made me fairly sick to see all these good things preparing for our own fellows, and I wondered whether I would not be doing my best service if I engineered a big explosion. Happily I had the common sense to remember my job and my duty and to stick to it.

Peter was in the middle of the convoy, and I found him pretty unhappy, principally through not being allowed to smoke. His companion was an ox-eyed lad, whom I ordered to the look-out while Peter and I went over the lists.

'Cornelis, my old friend,' he said, 'there are some pretty toys here. With a spanner and a couple of clear hours I could make these maxims about as deadly as bicycles. What do you say to a try?'

'I've considered that,' I said, 'but it won't do. We're on a bigger business than wrecking munition convoys. I want to

know how you got here.'

He smiled with that extraordinary Sunday-school docility of his.

'It was very simple, Cornelis. I was foolish in the cafe — but they have told you of that. You see I was angry and did not reflect. They had separated us, and I could see would treat me as dirt. Therefore, my bad temper came out, for, as I have told you, I do not like Germans.'

Peter gazed lovingly at the little bleak farms which dotted the Hungarian plain.

'All night I lay in *tronk* with no food. In the morning they fed me, and took me hundreds of miles in a train to a place which I think is called Neuburg. It was a great prison, full of English officers . . . I asked myself many times on the journey what was the reason of this treatment, for I could see no sense in it. If they wanted to punish me for insulting them they had the chance to send me off to the trenches. No one could have objected. If they thought me useless they could have turned me back to Holland. I could not have stopped them. But they treated me as if I were a dangerous man, whereas all their conduct hitherto had shown that they thought me a fool. I could not understand it.

'But I had not been one night in that Neuburg place before I thought of the reason. They wanted to keep me under observation as a check upon you, Cornelis. I figured it out this way. They had given you some very important work which required them to let you into some big secret. So far, good. They evidently thought much of you, even yon Stumm man, though he was as rude as a buffalo. But they did not know you fully, and they wanted to check on you. That check they found in Peter Pienaar. Peter was a fool, and if there was anything to blab, sooner or later Peter would blab it. Then they would stretch out a long arm and nip you short, wherever you were. Therefore they must keep old Peter under their eye.'

'That sounds likely enough,' I said.

'It was God's truth,' said Peter. 'And when it was all clear to me I settled that I must escape. Partly because I am a free man and do not like to be in prison, but mostly because I was not sure of myself. Some day my temper would go again, and I might say foolish things for which Cornelis would suffer. So it was very certain that I must escape.

'Now, Cornelis, I noticed pretty soon that there were two kinds among the prisoners. There were the real prisoners, mostly English and French, and there were humbugs. The humbugs were treated, apparently, like the others, but not really, as I soon perceived. There was one man who passed as an English officer, another as a French Canadian, and the others called themselves Russians. None of the honest men suspected them, but they were there as spies to hatch plots for escape and get the poor devils caught in the act, and to worm out confidences which might be of value. That is the German notion of good business. I am not a British soldier to think all men are gentlemen. I know that amongst men there are desperate *skellums*, so I soon picked up this game. It made me very angry, but it was a good thing for my plan. I made my resolution to escape the day I arrived at Neuburg, and on Christmas Day I had a plan made.'

'Peter, you're an old marvel. Do you mean to say you were quite certain of getting away whenever you wanted?'

'Quite certain, Cornelis. You see, I have been wicked in my time and know something about the inside of prisons. You may build them like great castles, or they may be like a backveld *tronk*, only mud and corrugated iron, but there is always a key and a man who keeps it, and that man can be bested. I knew I could get away, but I did not think it would be so easy. That was due to the bogus prisoners, my friends, the spies.

'I made great pals with them. On Christmas night we were very jolly together. I think I spotted every one of them the first day. I bragged about my past and all I had done, and I told them I was going to escape. They backed me up and promised to help. Next morning I had a plan. In the afternoon, just after dinner, I had to go to the commandant's room. They treated me a little differently from the others, for I was not a prisoner of war, and I went there to be asked questions and to be cursed as a stupid Dutchman. There was no strict guard kept there, for the place was on the second floor, and distant by many yards from any staircase. In the corridor outside the commandant's room there was a window which had no bars, and four feet from the window the limb of a great tree. A man might reach that limb, and if he were active as a monkey might descend to the ground. Beyond that I knew nothing, but I am a good climber, Cornelis.

'I told the others of my plan. They said it was good, but no one offered to come with me. They were very noble; they declared that the scheme was mine and I should have the fruit of it, for if more than one tried, detection was certain. I agreed and thanked them — thanked them with tears in my eyes. Then one of them very secretly produced a map. We planned out my road, for I was going straight to Holland. It was a long road, and I had no money, for they had taken all my sovereigns when I was arrested, but they promised to get a subscription up among themselves to start me. Again I wept

tears of gratitude. This was on Sunday, the day after Christmas, and I settled to make the attempt on the Wednesday afternoon.

'Now, Cornelis, when the lieutenant took us to see the British prisoners, you remember, he told us many things about the ways of prisons. He told us how they loved to catch a man in the act of escape, so that they could use him harshly with a clear conscience. I thought of that, and calculated that now my friends would have told everything to the commandant, and that they would be waiting to bottle me on the Wednesday. Till then I reckoned I would be slackly guarded, for they would look on me as safe in the net . . .

'So I went out of the window next day. It was the Monday afternoon . . .'

'That was a bold stroke,' I said admiringly.

'The plan was bold, but it was not skilful,' said Peter modestly. 'I had no money beyond seven marks, and I had but one stick of chocolate. I had no overcoat, and it was snowing hard. Further, I could not get down the tree, which had a trunk as smooth and branchless as a blue gum. For a little I thought I should be compelled to give in, and I was not happy.

'But I had leisure, for I did not think I would be missed before nightfall, and given time a man can do most things. By and by I found a branch which led beyond the outer wall of the yard and hung above the river. This I followed, and then dropped from it into the stream. It was a drop of some yards, and the water was very swift, so that I nearly drowned. I would rather swim the Limpopo, Cornelis, among all the crocodiles than that icy river. Yet I managed to reach the shore and get my breath lying in the bushes . . .

'After that it was plain going, though I was very cold. I knew that I would be sought on the northern roads, as I had told my friends, for no one could dream of an ignorant Dutchman going south away from his kinsfolk. But I had learned enough from the map to know that our road lay south-east, and I had marked this big river.'

'Did you hope to pick me up?' I asked. 'No, Cornelis. I thought you would be travelling in first-class carriages while I should be plodding on foot. But I was set on getting to the place you spoke of (how do you call it? Constant Nople?), where our big business lay. I thought I might be in time for that.'

'You're an old Trojan, Peter,' I said; 'but go on. How did you get to that landing-stage where I found you?'

'It was a hard journey,' he said meditatively. 'It was not easy to get beyond the barbed-wire entanglements which surrounded Neuburg — yes, even across the river. But in time I reached the woods and was safe, for I did not think any German could equal me in wild country. The best of them, even their foresters, are but babes in veldcraft compared with such as me . . . My troubles came only from hunger and cold. Then I met a Peruvian smouse, and sold him my clothes and bought from him these. [Peter meant a Polish-Jew pedlar.] I did not want to part with my own, which were better, but he gave me ten marks on the deal. After that I went into a village and ate heavily.'

'Were you pursued?' I asked.

'I do not think so. They had gone north, as I expected, and were looking for me at the railway stations which my friends had marked for me. I walked happily and put a bold face on it. If I saw a man or woman look at me suspiciously I went up to them at once and talked. I told a sad tale, and all believed it. I was a poor Dutchman travelling home on foot to see a dying mother, and I had been told that by the Danube I should find the main railway to take me to Holland. There were kind people who gave me food, and one woman gave me half a mark, and wished me God speed . . . Then on the last day of the year I came to the river and found many drunkards.'

'Was that when you resolved to get on one of the river-boats?'

'Ja, Cornelis. As soon as I heard of the boats I saw where my chance lay. But you might have knocked me over with a straw when I saw you come on shore. That was good fortune, my friend . . . I have been thinking much about the Germans, and I will tell you the truth. It is only boldness that can baffle them. They are a most diligent people. They will think of all likely difficulties, but not of all possible ones. They have not much imagination. They are like steam engines which must keep to prepared tracks. There they will hunt any man down, but let him trek for open country and they will be at a loss. Therefore boldness, my friend; for ever boldness. Remember as a nation they wear spectacles, which means that they are always peering.'

Peter broke off to gloat over the wedges of geese and the strings of wild swans that were always winging across those plains. His tale had bucked me up wonderfully. Our luck had held beyond all belief, and I had a kind of hope in the business now which had been wanting before. That afternoon, too, I got another fillip. I came on deck for a breath of air

and found it pretty cold after the heat of the engine-room. So I called to one of the deck hands to fetch me up my cloak from the cabin — the same I had bought that first morning in the Greif village.

'Der grune mantel?' the man shouted up, and I cried, 'Yes'. But the words seemed to echo in my ears, and long after he had given me the garment I stood staring abstractedly over the bulwarks.

His tone had awakened a chord of memory, or, to be accurate, they had given emphasis to what before had been only blurred and vague. For he had spoken the words which Stumm had uttered behind his hand to Gaudian. I had heard something like 'Uhnmantl,' and could make nothing of it. Now I was as certain of those words as of my own existence. They had been '*Grune mantel*'. *Grune mantel*, whatever it might be, was the name which Stumm had not meant me to hear, which was some talisman for the task I had proposed, and which was connected in some way with the mysterious von Einem.

This discovery put me in high fettle. I told myself that, considering the difficulties, I had managed to find out a wonderful amount in a very few days. It only shows what a man can do with the slenderest evidence if he keeps chewing and chewing on it . . .

Two mornings later we lay alongside the quays at Belgrade, and I took the opportunity of stretching my legs. Peter had come ashore for a smoke, and we wandered among the battered riverside streets, and looked at the broken arches of the great railway bridge which the Germans were working at like beavers. There was a big temporary pontoon affair to take the railway across, but I calculated that the main bridge would be ready inside a month. It was a clear, cold, blue day, and as one looked south one saw ridge after ridge of snowy hills. The upper streets of the city were still fairly whole, and there were shops open where food could be got. I remember hearing English spoken, and seeing some Red Cross nurses in the custody of Austrian soldiers coming from the railway station.

It would have done me a lot of good to have had a word with them. I thought of the gallant people whose capital this had been, how three times they had flung the Austrians back over the Danube, and then had only been beaten by the black treachery of their so-called allies. Somehow that morning in Belgrade gave both Peter and me a new purpose in our task. It was our business to put a spoke in the wheel of this monstrous bloody juggernaut that was crushing the life out of the little heroic nations.

We were just getting ready to cast off when a distinguished party arrived at the quay. There were all kinds of uniforms — German, Austrian, and Bulgarian, and amid them one stout gentleman in a fur coat and a black felt hat. They watched the barges up-anchor, and before we began to jerk into line I could hear their conversation. The fur coat was talking English.

'I reckon that's pretty good noos, General,' it said; 'if the English have run away from Gally-poly we can use these noo consignments for the bigger game. I guess it won't be long before we see the British lion moving out of Egypt with sore paws.'

They all laughed. 'The privilege of that spectacle may soon be ours,' was the reply.

I did not pay much attention to the talk; indeed I did not realize till weeks later that that was the first tidings of the great evacuation of Cape Helles. What rejoiced me was the sight of Blenkiron, as bland as a barber among those swells. Here were two of the missionaries within reasonable distance of their goal.



CHAPTER TEN

THE GARDEN—HOUSE OF SULIMAN THE RED

We reached Rustchuk on January 10th, but by no means landed on that day. Something had gone wrong with the unloading arrangements, or more likely with the railway behind them, and we were kept swinging all day well out in the turbid river. On the top of this Captain Schenk got an ague, and by that evening was a blue and shivering wreck. He had done me well, and I reckoned I would stand by him. So I got his ship's papers, and the manifests of cargo, and undertook to see to the trans-shipment. It wasn't the first time I had tackled that kind of business, and I hadn't much to learn about steam cranes. I told him I was going on to Constantinople and would take Peter with me, and he was agreeable. He would have to wait at Rustchuk to get his return cargo, and could easily inspan a fresh engineer.

I worked about the hardest twenty-four hours of my life getting the stuff ashore. The landing officer was a Bulgarian, quite a competent man if he could have made the railways give him the trucks he needed. There was a collection of hungry German transport officers always putting in their oars, and being infernally insolent to everybody. I took the high and mighty line with them; and, as I had the Bulgarian commandant on my side, after about two hours' blasphemy got them quieted.

But the big trouble came the next morning when I had got nearly all the stuff aboard the trucks.

A young officer in what I took to be a Turkish uniform rode up with an aide-de-camp. I noticed the German guards saluting him, so I judged he was rather a swell. He came up to me and asked me very civilly in German for the way-bills. I gave him them and he looked carefully through them, marking certain items with a blue pencil. Then he coolly handed them to his aide-de-camp and spoke to him in Turkish.

'Look here, I want these back,' I said. 'I can't do without them, and we've no time to waste.'

'Presently,' he said, smiling, and went off.

I said nothing, reflecting that the stuff was for the Turks and they naturally had to have some say in its handling. The loading was practically finished when my gentleman returned. He handed me a neatly typed new set of way-bills. One glance at them showed that some of the big items had been left out.

'Here, this won't do,' I cried. 'Give me back the right set. This thing's no good to me.'

For answer he winked gently, smiled like a dusky seraph, and held out his hand. In it I saw a roll of money.

'For yourself,' he said. 'It is the usual custom.'

It was the first time anyone had ever tried to bribe me, and it made me boil up like a geyser. I saw his game clearly enough. Turkey would pay for the lot to Germany: probably had already paid the bill: but she would pay double for the things not on the way-bills, and pay to this fellow and his friends. This struck me as rather steep even for Oriental methods of doing business.

'Now look here, Sir,' I said, 'I don't stir from this place till I get the correct way-bills. If you won't give me them, I will have every item out of the trucks and make a new list. But a correct list I have, or the stuff stays here till Doomsday.'

He was a slim, foppish fellow, and he looked more puzzled than angry.

'I offer you enough,' he said, again stretching out his hand.

At that I fairly roared. 'If you try to bribe me, you infernal little haberdasher, I'll have you off that horse and chuck you in the river.'

He no longer misunderstood me. He began to curse and threaten, but I cut him short.

'Come along to the commandant, my boy,' I said, and I marched away, tearing up his typewritten sheets as I went and strewing them behind me like a paper chase.

We had a fine old racket in the commandant's office. I said it was my business, as representing the German Government, to see the stuff delivered to the consignee at Constantinople ship-shape and Bristol-fashion. I told him it wasn't my habit to proceed with cooked documents. He couldn't but agree with me, but there was that wrathful Oriental with his face as fixed as a Buddha.

'I am sorry, Rasta Bey,' he said; 'but this man is in the right.' 'I have authority from the Committee to receive the stores,' he said sullenly.

'Those are not my instructions,' was the answer. 'They are consigned to the Artillery commandant at Chataldja, General von Oesterzee.'

The man shrugged his shoulders. 'Very well. I will have a word to say to General von Oesterzee, and many to this fellow who flouts the Committee.' And he strode away like an impudent boy.

The harassed commandant grinned. 'You've offended his Lordship, and he is a bad enemy. All those damned Comitadjis are. You would be well advised not to go on to Constantinople.' 'And have that blighter in the red hat loot the trucks on the road? No, thank you. I am going to see them safe at Chataldja, or whatever they call the artillery depot.'

I said a good deal more, but that is an abbreviated translation of my remarks. My word for 'blighter' was *trottel*, but I used some other expressions which would have ravished my Young Turk friend to hear. Looking back, it seems pretty ridiculous to have made all this fuss about guns which were going to be used against my own people. But I didn't see that at the time. My professional pride was up in arms, and I couldn't bear to have a hand in a crooked deal.

'Well, I advise you to go armed,' said the commandant. 'You will have a guard for the trucks, of course, and I will pick you good men. They may hold you up all the same. I can't help you once you are past the frontier, but I'll send a wire to Oesterzee and he'll make trouble if anything goes wrong. I still think you would have been wiser to humour Rasta Bey.'

As I was leaving he gave me a telegram. 'Here's a wire for your Captain Schenk.' I slipped the envelope in my pocket and went Out.

Schenk was pretty sick, so I left a note for him. At one o'clock I got the train started, with a couple of German Landwehr in each truck and Peter and I in a horse-box. Presently I remembered Schenk's telegram, which still reposed in my pocket. I took it out and opened it, meaning to wire it from the first station we stopped at. But I changed my mind when I read it. It was from some official at Regensburg, asking him to put under arrest and send back by the first boat a man called Brandt, who was believed to have come aboard at Absthafen on the 30th of December.

I whistled and showed it to Peter. The sooner we were at Constantinople the better, and I prayed we would get there before the fellow who sent this wire repeated it and got the commandant to send on the message and have us held up at Chataldja. For my back had fairly got stiffened about these munitions, and I was going to take any risk to see them safely delivered to their proper owner. Peter couldn't understand me at all. He still hankered after a grand destruction of the lot somewhere down the railway. But then, this wasn't the line of Peter's profession, and his pride was not at stake. We had a mortally slow journey. It was bad enough in Bulgaria, but when we crossed the frontier at a place called Mustafa Pasha we struck the real supineness of the East. Happily I found a German officer there who had some notion of hustling, and, after all, it was his interest to get the stuff moved. It was the morning of the 16th, after Peter and I had been living like pigs on black bread and condemned tin stuff, that we came in sight of a blue sea on our right hand and knew we couldn't be very far from the end.

It was jolly near the end in another sense. We stopped at a station and were stretching our legs on the platform when I saw a familiar figure approaching. It was Rasta, with half a dozen Turkish gendarmes.

I called Peter, and we clambered into the truck next our horse-box. I had been half expecting some move like this and had made a plan.

The Turk swaggered up and addressed us. 'You can get back to Rustchuk,' he said. 'I take over from you here. Hand me the papers.'

'Is this Chataldja?' I asked innocently.

'It is the end of your affair,' he said haughtily. 'Quick, or it will be the worse for you.'

'Now, look here, my son,' I said; 'you're a kid and know nothing. I hand over to General von Oesterzee and to no one else.'

'You are in Turkey,' he cried, 'and will obey the Turkish Government.'

'I'll obey the Government right enough,' I said; 'but if you're the Government I could make a better one with a bib and a rattle.'

He said something to his men, who unslung their rifles.

‘Please don’t begin shooting,’ I said. ‘There are twelve armed guards in this train who will take their orders from me. Besides, I and my friend can shoot a bit.’

‘Fool!’ he cried, getting very angry. ‘I can order up a regiment in five minutes.’

‘Maybe you can,’ I said; ‘but observe the situation. I am sitting on enough toluol to blow up this countryside. If you dare to come aboard I will shoot you. If you call in your regiment I will tell you what I’ll do. I’ll fire this stuff, and I reckon they’ll be picking up the bits of you and your regiment off the Gallipoli Peninsula.’

He had put up a bluff — a poor one — and I had called it. He saw I meant what I said, and became silken.

‘Good-bye, Sir,’ he said. ‘You have had a fair chance and rejected it. We shall meet again soon, and you will be sorry for your insolence.’

He strutted away and it was all I could do to keep from running after him. I wanted to lay him over my knee and spank him.

We got safely to Chataldja, and were received by von Oesterzee like long-lost brothers. He was the regular gunner-officer, not thinking about anything except his guns and shells. I had to wait about three hours while he was checking the stuff with the invoices, and then he gave me a receipt which I still possess. I told him about Rasta, and he agreed that I had done right. It didn’t make him as mad as I expected, because, you see, he got his stuff safe in any case. It was only that the wretched Turks had to pay twice for the lot of it.

He gave Peter and me luncheon, and was altogether very civil and inclined to talk about the war. I would have liked to hear what he had to say, for it would have been something to get the inside view of Germany’s Eastern campaign, but I did not dare to wait. Any moment there might arrive an incriminating wire from Rustchuk. Finally he lent us a car to take us the few miles to the city.

So it came about that at five past three on the 16th day of January, with only the clothes we stood up in, Peter and I entered Constantinople.

I was in considerable spirits, for I had got the final lap successfully over, and I was looking forward madly to meeting my friends; but, all the same, the first sight was a mighty disappointment. I don’t quite know what I had expected — a sort of fairyland Eastern city, all white marble and blue water, and stately Turks in surplices, and veiled houris, and roses and nightingales, and some sort of string band discoursing sweet music. I had forgotten that winter is pretty much the same everywhere. It was a drizzling day, with a south-east wind blowing, and the streets were long troughs of mud. The first part I struck looked like a dingy colonial suburb — wooden houses and corrugated iron roofs, and endless dirty, sallow children. There was a cemetery, I remember, with Turks’ caps stuck at the head of each grave. Then we got into narrow steep streets which descended to a kind of big canal. I saw what I took to be mosques and minarets, and they were about as impressive as factory chimneys. By and by we crossed a bridge, and paid a penny for the privilege. If I had known it was the famous Golden Horn I would have looked at it with more interest, but I saw nothing save a lot of moth-eaten barges and some queer little boats like gondolas. Then we came into busier streets, where ramshackle cabs drawn by lean horses spluttered through the mud. I saw one old fellow who looked like my notion of a Turk, but most of the population had the appearance of London old-clothes men. All but the soldiers, Turk and German, who seemed well-set-up fellows.

Peter had paddled along at my side like a faithful dog, not saying a word, but clearly not approving of this wet and dirty metropolis.

‘Do you know that we are being followed, Cornelis?’ he said suddenly, ‘ever since we came into this evil-smelling dorp.’

Peter was infallible in a thing like that. The news scared me badly, for I feared that the telegram had come to Chataldja. Then I thought it couldn’t be that, for if von Oesterzee had wanted me he wouldn’t have taken the trouble to stalk me. It was more likely my friend Rasta.

I found the ferry of Ratchik by asking a soldier and a German sailor there told me where the Kurdish Bazaar was. He pointed up a steep street which ran past a high block of warehouses with every window broken. Sandy had said the left-hand side coming down, so it must be the right-hand side going up. We plunged into it, and it was the filthiest place of all. The wind whistled up it and stirred the garbage. It seemed densely inhabited, for at all the doors there were groups of people squatting, with their heads covered, though scarcely a window showed in the blank walls.

The street corkscrewed endlessly. Sometimes it seemed to stop; then it found a hole in the opposing masonry and edged its way in. Often it was almost pitch dark; then would come a greyish twilight where it opened out to the width of a

decent lane. To find a house in that murk was no easy job, and by the time we had gone a quarter of a mile I began to fear we had missed it. It was no good asking any of the crowd we met. They didn't look as if they understood any civilized tongue.

At last we stumbled on it — a tumble-down coffee house, with A. Kuprasso above the door in queer amateur lettering. There was a lamp burning inside, and two or three men smoking at small wooden tables.

We ordered coffee, thick black stuff like treacle, which Peter anathematized. A negro brought it, and I told him in German I wanted to speak to Mr Kuprasso. He paid no attention, so I shouted louder at him, and the noise brought a man out of the back parts.

He was a fat, oldish fellow with a long nose, very like the Greek traders you see on the Zanzibar coast. I beckoned to him and he waddled forward, smiling oilily. Then I asked him what he would take, and he replied, in very halting German, that he would have a sirop.

'You are Mr Kuprasso,' I said. 'I wanted to show this place to my friend. He has heard of your garden-house and the fun there.'

'The Signor is mistaken. I have no garden-house.'

'Rot,' I said; 'I've been here before, my boy. I recall your shanty at the back and many merry nights there. What was it you called it? Oh, I remember — the Garden-House of Suliman the Red.'

He put his finger to his lip and looked incredibly sly. 'The Signor remembers that. But that was in the old happy days before war came. The place is long since shut. The people here are too poor to dance and sing.'

'All the same I would like to have another look at it,' I said, and I slipped an English sovereign into his hand.

He glanced at it in surprise and his manner changed. 'The Signor is a Prince, and I will do his will.' He clapped his hands and the negro appeared, and at his nod took his place behind a little side-counter.

'Follow me,' he said, and led us through a long, noisome passage, which was pitch dark and very unevenly paved. Then he unlocked a door and with a swirl the wind caught it and blew it back on us.

We were looking into a mean little yard, with on one side a high curving wall, evidently of great age, with bushes growing in the cracks of it. Some scraggy myrtles stood in broken pots, and nettles flourished in a corner. At one end was a wooden building like a dissenting chapel, but painted a dingy scarlet. Its windows and skylights were black with dirt, and its door, tied up with rope, flapped in the wind.

'Behold the Pavilion,' Kuprasso said proudly.

'That is the old place,' I observed with feeling. 'What times I've seen there! Tell me, Mr Kuprasso, do you ever open it now?'

He put his thick lips to my ear.

'If the Signor will be silent I will tell him. It is sometimes open — not often. Men must amuse themselves even in war. Some of the German officers come here for their pleasure, and but last week we had the ballet of Mademoiselle Cici. The police approve — but not often, for this is no time for too much gaiety. I will tell you a secret. Tomorrow afternoon there will be dancing — wonderful dancing! Only a few of my patrons know. Who, think you, will be here?'

He bent his head closer and said in a whisper —

'The Compagnie des Heures Roses.'

'Oh, indeed,' I said with a proper tone of respect, though I hadn't a notion what he meant.

'Will the Signor wish to come?'

'Sure,' I said. 'Both of us. We're all for the rosy hours.'

'Then the fourth hour after midday. Walk straight through the cafe and one will be there to unlock the door. You are new-comers here? Take the advice of Angelo Kuprasso and avoid the streets after nightfall. Stamboul is no safe place nowadays for quiet men.' I asked him to name a hotel, and he rattled off a list from which I chose one that sounded modest and in keeping with our get-up. It was not far off, only a hundred yards to the right at the top of the hill.

When we left his door the night had begun to drop. We hadn't gone twenty yards before Peter drew very near to me and kept turning his head like a hunted stag.

'We are being followed close, Cornelis,' he said calmly.

Another ten yards and we were at a cross-roads, where a little *place* faced a biggish mosque. I could see in the waning light a crowd of people who seemed to be moving towards us. I heard a high-pitched voice cry out a jabber of excited words, and it seemed to me that I had heard the voice before.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE COMPANIONS OF THE ROSY HOURS

We battled to a corner, where a jut of building stood out into the street. It was our only chance to protect our backs, to stand up with the rib of stone between us. It was only the work of seconds. One instant we were groping our solitary way in the darkness, the next we were pinned against a wall with a throaty mob surging round us.

It took me a moment or two to realize that we were attacked. Every man has one special funk in the back of his head, and mine was to be the quarry of an angry crowd. I hated the thought of it — the mess, the blind struggle, the sense of unleashed passions different from those of any single blackguard. It was a dark world to me, and I don't like darkness. But in my nightmares I had never imagined anything just like this. The narrow, fetid street, with the icy winds fanning the filth, the unknown tongue, the hoarse savage murmur, and my utter ignorance as to what it might all be about, made me cold in the pit of my stomach.

'We've got it in the neck this time, old man,' I said to Peter, who had out the pistol the commandant at Rustchuk had given him. These pistols were our only weapons. The crowd saw them and hung back, but if they chose to rush us it wasn't much of a barrier two pistols would make.

Rasta's voice had stopped. He had done his work, and had retired to the background. There were shouts from the crowd — '*Alleman*' and a word '*Khafiyeh*' constantly repeated. I didn't know what it meant at the time, but now I know that they were after us because we were Boches and spies. There was no love lost between the Constantinople scum and their new masters. It seemed an ironical end for Peter and me to be done in because we were Boches. And done in we should be. I had heard of the East as a good place for people to disappear in; there were no inquisitive newspapers or incorruptible police.

I wished to Heaven I had a word of Turkish. But I made my voice heard for a second in a pause of the din, and shouted that we were German sailors who had brought down big guns for Turkey, and were going home next day. I asked them what the devil they thought we had done? I don't know if any fellow there understood German; anyhow, it only brought a pandemonium of cries in which that ominous word *Khafiyeh* was predominant.

Then Peter fired over their heads. He had to, for a chap was pawing at his throat. The answer was a clatter of bullets on the wall above us. It looked as if they meant to take us alive, and that I was very clear should not happen. Better a bloody end in a street scrap than the tender mercies of that bandbox bravo.

I don't quite know what happened next. A press drove down at me and I fired. Someone squealed, and I looked the next moment to be strangled. And then, suddenly, the scrimmage ceased, and there was a wavering splash of light in that pit of darkness.

I never went through many worse minutes than these. When I had been hunted in the past weeks there had been mystery enough, but no immediate peril to face. When I had been up against a real, urgent, physical risk, like Loos, the danger at any rate had been clear. One knew what one was in for. But here was a threat I couldn't put a name to, and it wasn't in the future, but pressing hard at our throats.

And yet I couldn't feel it was quite real. The patter of the pistol bullets against the wall, like so many crackers, the faces felt rather than seen in the dark, the clamour which to me was pure gibberish, had all the madness of a nightmare. Only Peter, cursing steadily in Dutch by my side, was real. And then the light came, and made the scene more eerie!

It came from one or two torches carried by wild fellows with long staves who drove their way into the heart of the mob. The flickering glare ran up the steep walls and made monstrous shadows. The wind swung the flame into long streamers, dying away in a fan of sparks.

And now a new word was heard in the crowd. It was *Chinganeh*, shouted not in anger but in fear.

At first I could not see the newcomers. They were hidden in the deep darkness under their canopy of light, for they were holding their torches high at the full stretch of their arms. They were shouting, too, wild shrill cries ending sometimes in a gush of rapid speech. Their words did not seem to be directed against us, but against the crowd. A sudden hope came

to me that for some unknown reason they were on our side.

The press was no longer heavy against us. It was thinning rapidly and I could hear the scuffle as men made off down the side streets. My first notion was that these were the Turkish police. But I changed my mind when the leader came out into a patch of light. He carried no torch, but a long stave with which he belaboured the heads of those who were too tightly packed to flee.

It was the most eldritch apparition you can conceive. A tall man dressed in skins, with bare legs and sandal-shod feet. A wisp of scarlet cloth clung to his shoulders, and, drawn over his head down close to his eyes, was a skull-cap of some kind of pelt with the tail waving behind it. He capered like a wild animal, keeping up a strange high monotone that fairly gave me the creeps.

I was suddenly aware that the crowd had gone. Before us was only this figure and his half-dozen companions, some carrying torches and all wearing clothes of skin. But only the one who seemed to be their leader wore the skull-cap; the rest had bare heads and long tangled hair.

The fellow was shouting gibberish at me. His eyes were glassy, like a man who smokes hemp, and his legs were never still for a second. You would think such a figure no better than a mountebank, and yet there was nothing comic in it. Fearful and sinister and uncanny it was; and I wanted to do anything but laugh.

As he shouted he kept pointing with his stave up the street which climbed the hillside.

‘He means us to move,’ said Peter. ‘For God’s sake let us get away from this witch-doctor.’

I couldn’t make sense of it, but one thing was clear. These maniacs had delivered us for the moment from Rasta and his friends.

Then I did a dashed silly thing. I pulled out a sovereign and offered it to the leader. I had some kind of notion of showing gratitude, and as I had no words I had to show it by deed.

He brought his stick down on my wrist and sent the coin spinning in the gutter. His eyes blazed, and he made his weapon sing round my head. He cursed me — oh, I could tell cursing well enough, though I didn’t follow a word; and he cried to his followers and they cursed me too. I had offered him a mortal insult and stirred up a worse hornet’s nest than Rasta’s push.

Peter and I, with a common impulse, took to our heels. We were not looking for any trouble with demoniacs. Up the steep, narrow lane we ran with that bedlamite crowd at our heels. The torches seemed to have gone out, for the place was black as pitch, and we tumbled over heaps of offal and splashed through running drains. The men were close behind us, and more than once I felt a stick on my shoulder. But fear lent us wings, and suddenly before us was a blaze of light and we saw the debouchment of our street in a main thoroughfare. The others saw it, too, for they slackened off. Just before we reached the light we stopped and looked round. There was no sound or sight behind us in the dark lane which dipped to the harbour.

‘This is a queer country, Cornelis,’ said Peter, feeling his limbs for bruises. ‘Too many things happen in too short a time. I am breathless.’

The big street we had struck seemed to run along the crest of the hill. There were lamps in it, and crawling cabs, and quite civilized-looking shops. We soon found the hotel to which Kuprasso had directed us, a big place in a courtyard with a very tumble-down-looking portico, and green sun-shutters which rattled drearily in the winter’s wind. It proved, as I had feared, to be packed to the door, mostly with German officers. With some trouble I got an interview with the proprietor, the usual Greek, and told him that we had been sent there by Mr Kuprasso. That didn’t affect him in the least, and we would have been shot into the street if I hadn’t remembered about Stumm’s pass.

So I explained that we had come from Germany with munitions and only wanted rooms for one night. I showed him the pass and blustered a good deal, till he became civil and said he would do the best he could for us.

That best was pretty poor. Peter and I were doubled up in a small room which contained two camp-beds and little else, and had broken windows through which the wind whistled. We had a Wretched dinner of stringy mutton, boiled with vegetables, and a white cheese strong enough to raise the dead. But I got a bottle of whisky, for which I paid a sovereign, and we managed to light the stove in our room, fasten the shutters, and warm our hearts with a brew of toddy. After that we went to bed and slept like logs for twelve hours. On the road from Rustchuk we had had uneasy slumbers.

I woke next morning and, looking out from the broken window, saw that it was snowing. With a lot of trouble I got

hold of a servant and made him bring us some of the treachy Turkish coffee. We were both in pretty low spirits. 'Europe is a poor cold place,' said Peter, 'not worth fighting for. There is only one white man's land, and that is South Africa.' At the time I heartily agreed with him.

I remember that, sitting on the edge of my bed, I took stock of our position. It was not very cheering. We seemed to have been amassing enemies at a furious pace. First of all, there was Rasta, whom I had insulted and who wouldn't forget it in a hurry. He had his crowd of Turkish riff-raff and was bound to get us sooner or later. Then there was the maniac in the skin hat. He didn't like Rasta, and I made a guess that he and his weird friends were of some party hostile to the Young Turks. But, on the other hand, he didn't like us, and there would be bad trouble the next time we met him. Finally, there was Stumm and the German Government. It could only be a matter of hours at the best before he got the Rustchuk authorities on our trail. It would be easy to trace us from Chataldja, and once they had us we were absolutely done. There was a big black *dossier* against us, which by no conceivable piece of luck could be upset.

It was very clear to me that, unless we could find sanctuary and shed all our various pursuers during this day, we should be done in for good and all. But where on earth were we to find sanctuary? We had neither of us a word of the language, and there was no way I could see of taking on new characters. For that we wanted friends and help, and I could think of none anywhere. Somewhere, to be sure, there was Blenkiron, but how could we get in touch with him? As for Sandy, I had pretty well given him up. I always thought his enterprise the craziest of the lot and bound to fail. He was probably somewhere in Asia Minor, and a month or two later would get to Constantinople and hear in some pot-house the yarn of the two wretched Dutchmen who had disappeared so soon from men's sight.

That rendezvous at Kuprasso's was no good. It would have been all right if we had got here unsuspected, and could have gone on quietly frequenting the place till Blenkiron picked us up. But to do that we wanted leisure and secrecy, and here we were with a pack of hounds at our heels. The place was horribly dangerous already. If we showed ourselves there we should be gathered in by Rasta, or by the German military police, or by the madman in the skin cap. It was a stark impossibility to hang about on the off-chance of meeting Blenkiron.

I reflected with some bitterness that this was the 17th day of January, the day of our assignation. I had had high hopes all the way down the Danube of meeting with Blenkiron — for I knew he would be in time — of giving him the information I had had the good fortune to collect, of piecing it together with what he had found out, and of getting the whole story which Sir Walter hungered for. After that, I thought it wouldn't be hard to get away by Rumania, and to get home through Russia. I had hoped to be back with my battalion in February, having done as good a bit of work as anybody in the war. As it was, it looked as if my information would die with me, unless I could find Blenkiron before the evening.

I talked the thing over with Peter, and he agreed that we were fairly up against it. We decided to go to Kuprasso's that afternoon, and to trust to luck for the rest. It wouldn't do to wander about the streets, so we sat tight in our room all morning, and swopped old hunting yarns to keep our minds from the beastly present. We got some food at midday — cold mutton and the same cheese, and finished our whisky. Then I paid the bill, for I didn't dare to stay there another night. About half-past three we went into the street, without the foggiest notion where we would find our next quarters.

It was snowing heavily, which was a piece of luck for us. Poor old Peter had no greatcoat, so we went into a Jew's shop and bought a ready-made abomination, which looked as if it might have been meant for a dissenting parson. It was no good saving my money when the future was so black. The snow made the streets deserted, and we turned down the long lane which led to Ratchik ferry, and found it perfectly quiet. I do not think we met a soul till we got to Kuprasso's shop.

We walked straight through the cafe, which was empty, and down the dark passage, till we were stopped by the garden door. I knocked and it swung open. There was the bleak yard, now puddled with snow, and a blaze of light from the pavilion at the other end. There was a scraping of fiddles, too, and the sound of human talk. We paid the negro at the door, and passed from the bitter afternoon into a garish saloon.

There were forty or fifty people there, drinking coffee and sirops and filling the air with the fumes of *latakia*. Most of them were Turks in European clothes and the fez, but there were some German officers and what looked like German civilians — Army Service Corps clerks, probably, and mechanics from the Arsenal. A woman in cheap finery was tinkling at the piano, and there were several shrill females with the officers. Peter and I sat down modestly in the nearest corner, where old Kuprasso saw us and sent us coffee. A girl who looked like a Jewess came over to us and talked French, but I shook my head and she went off again.

Presently a girl came on the stage and danced, a silly affair, all a clashing of tambourines and wriggling. I have seen native women do the same thing better in a Mozambique kraal. Another sang a German song, a simple, sentimental thing about golden hair and rainbows, and the Germans present applauded. The place was so tinselly and common that, coming to it from weeks of rough travelling, it made me impatient. I forgot that, while for the others it might be a vulgar little dancing-hall, for us it was as perilous as a brigands' den.

Peter did not share my mood. He was quite interested in it, as he was interested in everything new. He had a genius for living in the moment.

I remember there was a drop-scene on which was daubed a blue lake with very green hills in the distance. As the tobacco smoke grew thicker and the fiddles went on squealing, this tawdry picture began to mesmerize me. I seemed to be looking out of a window at a lovely summer landscape where there were no wars or danger. I seemed to feel the warm sun and to smell the fragrance of blossom from the islands. And then I became aware that a queer scent had stolen into the atmosphere.

There were braziers burning at both ends to warm the room, and the thin smoke from these smelt like incense. Somebody had been putting a powder in the flames, for suddenly the place became very quiet. The fiddles still sounded, but far away like an echo. The lights went down, all but a circle on the stage, and into that circle stepped my enemy of the skin cap.

He had three others with him. I heard a whisper behind me, and the words were those which Kuprasso had used the day before. These bedlamites were called the Companions of the Rosy Hours, and Kuprasso had promised great dancing.

I hoped to goodness they would not see us, for they had fairly given me the horrors. Peter felt the same, and we both made ourselves very small in that dark corner. But the newcomers had no eyes for us.

In a twinkling the pavilion changed from a common saloon, which might have been in Chicago or Paris, to a place of mystery — yes, and of beauty. It became the Garden-House of Suliman the Red, whoever that sportsman may have been. Sandy had said that the ends of the earth converged there, and he had been right. I lost all consciousness of my neighbours — stout German, frock-coated Turk, frowsy Jewess — and saw only strange figures leaping in a circle of light, figures that came out of the deepest darkness to make a big magic.

The leader flung some stuff into the brazier, and a great fan of blue light flared up. He was weaving circles, and he was singing something shrill and high, whilst his companions made a chorus with their deep monotone. I can't tell you what the dance was. I had seen the Russian ballet just before the war, and one of the men in it reminded me of this man. But the dancing was the least part of it. It was neither sound nor movement nor scent that wrought the spell, but something far more potent. In an instant I found myself reft away from the present with its dull dangers, and looking at a world all young and fresh and beautiful. The gaudy drop-scene had vanished. It was a window I was looking from, and I was gazing at the finest landscape on earth, lit by the pure clean light of morning.

It seemed to be part of the veld, but like no veld I had ever seen. It was wider and wilder and more gracious. Indeed, I was looking at my first youth. I was feeling the kind of immortal light-heartedness which only a boy knows in the dawning of his days. I had no longer any fear of these magic-makers. They were kindly wizards, who had brought me into fairyland.

Then slowly from the silence there distilled drops of music. They came like water falling a long way into a cup, each the essential quality of pure sound. We, with our elaborate harmonies, have forgotten the charm of single notes. The African natives know it, and I remember a learned man once telling me that the Greeks had the same art. Those silver bells broke out of infinite space, so exquisite and perfect that no mortal words could have been fitted to them. That was the music, I expect, that the morning stars made when they sang together.

Slowly, very slowly, it changed. The glow passed from blue to purple, and then to an angry red. Bit by bit the notes spun together till they had made a harmony — a fierce, restless harmony. And I was conscious again of the skin-clad dancers beckoning out of their circle.

There was no mistake about the meaning now. All the daintiness and youth had fled, and passion was beating the air — terrible, savage passion, which belonged neither to day nor night, life nor death, but to the half-world between them. I suddenly felt the dancers as monstrous, inhuman, devilish. The thick scents that floated from the brazier seemed to have a tang of new-shed blood. Cries broke from the hearers — cries of anger and lust and terror. I heard a woman sob, and Peter, who is as tough as any mortal, took tight hold of my arm.

I now realized that these Companions of the Rosy Hours were the only thing in the world to fear. Rasta and Stumm seemed feeble simpletons by contrast. The window I had been looking out of was changed to a prison wall — I could see the mortar between the massive blocks. In a second these devils would be smelling out their enemies like some foul witch-doctors. I felt the burning eyes of their leader looking for me in the gloom. Peter was praying audibly beside me, and I could have choked him. His infernal chatter would reveal us, for it seemed to me that there was no one in the place except us and the magic-workers.

Then suddenly the spell was broken. The door was flung open and a great gust of icy wind swirled through the hall, driving clouds of ashes from the braziers. I heard loud voices without, and a hubbub began inside. For a moment it was quite dark, and then someone lit one of the flare lamps by the stage. It revealed nothing but the common squalor of a low saloon — white faces, sleepy eyes, and frowsy heads. The drop-piece was there in all its tawdriness.

The Companions of the Rosy Hours had gone. But at the door stood men in uniform, I heard a German a long way off murmur, 'Enver's bodyguards,' and I heard him distinctly; for, though I could not see clearly, my hearing was desperately acute. That is often the way when you suddenly come out of a swoon.

The place emptied like magic. Turk and German tumbled over each other, while Kuprasso wailed and wept. No one seemed to stop them, and then I saw the reason. Those Guards had come for us. This must be Stumm at last. The authorities had tracked us down, and it was all up with Peter and me.

A sudden revulsion leaves a man with a low vitality. I didn't seem to care greatly. We were done, and there was an end of it. It was Kismet, the act of God, and there was nothing for it but to submit. I hadn't a flicker of a thought of escape or resistance. The game was utterly and absolutely over.

A man who seemed to be a sergeant pointed to us and said something to Kuprasso, who nodded. We got heavily to our feet and stumbled towards them. With one on each side of us we crossed the yard, walked through the dark passage and the empty shop, and out into the snowy street. There was a closed carriage waiting which they motioned us to get into. It looked exactly like the Black Maria.

Both of us sat still, like truant schoolboys, with our hands on our knees. I didn't know where I was going and I didn't care. We seemed to be rumbling up the hill, and then I caught the glare of lighted streets.

'This is the end of it, Peter,' I said.

'Ja, Cornelis,' he replied, and that was all our talk.

By and by — hours later it seemed — we stopped. Someone opened the door and we got out, to find ourselves in a courtyard with a huge dark building around. The prison, I guessed, and I wondered if they would give us blankets, for it was perishing cold.

We entered a door, and found ourselves in a big stone hall. It was quite warm, which made me more hopeful about our cells. A man in some kind of uniform pointed to the staircase, up which we plodded wearily. My mind was too blank to take clear impressions, or in any way to forecast the future. Another warder met us and took us down a passage till we halted at a door. He stood aside and motioned us to enter.

I guessed that this was the governor's room, and we should be put through our first examination. My head was too stupid to think, and I made up my mind to keep perfectly mum. Yes, even if they tried thumbscrews. I had no kind of story, but I resolved not to give anything away. As I turned the handle I wondered idly what kind of sallow Turk or bulging-necked German we should find inside.

It was a pleasant room, with a polished wood floor and a big fire burning on the hearth. Beside the fire a man lay on a couch, with a little table drawn up beside him. On that table was a small glass of milk and a number of Patience cards spread in rows.

I stared blankly at the spectacle, till I saw a second figure. It was the man in the skin-cap, the leader of the dancing maniacs. Both Peter and I backed sharply at the sight and then stood stock still.

For the dancer crossed the room in two strides and gripped both of my hands.

'Dick, old man,' he cried, 'I'm most awfully glad to see you again!'



CHAPTER TWELVE

FOUR MISSIONARIES SEE LIGHT IN THEIR MISSION

A spasm of incredulity, a vast relief, and that sharp joy which comes of reaction chased each other across my mind. I had come suddenly out of very black waters into an unbelievable calm. I dropped into the nearest chair and tried to grapple with something far beyond words.

‘Sandy,’ I said, as soon as I got my breath, ‘you’re an incarnate devil. You’ve given Peter and me the fright of our lives.’

‘It was the only way, Dick. If I hadn’t come mewing like a tom-cat at your heels yesterday, Rasta would have had you long before you got to your hotel. You two have given me a pretty anxious time, and it took some doing to get you safe here. However, that is all over now. Make yourselves at home, my children.’

‘Over!’ I cried incredulously, for my wits were still wool-gathering. ‘What place is this?’

‘You may call it my humble home’ — it was Blenkiron’s sleek voice that spoke. ‘We’ve been preparing for you, Major, but it was only yesterday I heard of your friend.’

I introduced Peter.

‘Mr Pienaar,’ said Blenkiron, ‘pleased to meet you. Well, as I was observing, you’re safe enough here, but you’ve cut it mighty fine. Officially, a Dutchman called Brandt was to be arrested this afternoon and handed over to the German authorities. When Germany begins to trouble about that Dutchman she will find difficulty in getting the body; but such are the languid ways of an Oriental despotism. Meantime the Dutchman will be no more. He will have ceased upon the midnight without pain, as your poet sings.’

‘But I don’t understand,’ I stammered. ‘Who arrested us?’

‘My men,’ said Sandy. ‘We have a bit of a graft here, and it wasn’t difficult to manage it. Old Moellendorff will be nosing after the business tomorrow, but he will find the mystery too deep for him. That is the advantage of a Government run by a pack of adventurers. But, by Jove, Dick, we hadn’t any time to spare. If Rasta had got you, or the Germans had had the job of lifting you, your goose would have been jolly well cooked. I had some unquiet hours this morning.’

The thing was too deep for me. I looked at Blenkiron, shuffling his Patience cards with his old sleepy smile, and Sandy, dressed like some bandit in melodrama, his lean face as brown as a nut, his bare arms all tattooed with crimson rings, and the fox pelt drawn tight over brow and ears. It was still a nightmare world, but the dream was getting pleasanter. Peter said not a word, but I could see his eyes heavy with his own thoughts.

Blenkiron hove himself from the sofa and waddled to a cupboard.

‘You boys must be hungry,’ he said. ‘My duo-denum has been giving me hell as usual, and I don’t eat no more than a squirrel. But I laid in some stores, for I guessed you would want to stoke up some after your travels.’

He brought out a couple of Strassburg pies, a cheese, a cold chicken, a loaf, and three bottles of champagne.

‘Fizz,’ said Sandy rapturously. ‘And a dry Heidsieck too! We’re in luck, Dick, old man.’

I never ate a more welcome meal, for we had starved in that dirty hotel. But I had still the old feeling of the hunted, and before I began I asked about the door.

‘That’s all right,’ said Sandy. ‘My fellows are on the stair and at the gate. If the *Metreb* are in possession, you may bet that other people will keep off. Your past is blotted out, clean vanished away, and you begin tomorrow morning with a new sheet. Blenkiron’s the man you’ve got to thank for that. He was pretty certain you’d get here, but he was also certain that you’d arrive in a hurry with a good many inquirers behind you. So he arranged that you should leak away and start fresh.’

‘Your name is Richard Hanau,’ Blenkiron said, ‘born in Cleveland, Ohio, of German parentage on both sides. One of our brightest mining-engineers, and the apple of Guggenheim’s eye. You arrived this afternoon from Constanza, and I met you at the packet. The clothes for the part are in your bedroom next door. But I guess all that can wait, for I’m anxious to get to business. We’re not here on a joy-ride, Major, so I reckon we’ll leave out the dime-novel adventures. I’m just dying to hear them, but they’ll keep. I want to know how our mutual inquiries have prospered.’

He gave Peter and me cigars, and we sat ourselves in armchairs in front of the blaze. Sandy squatted cross-legged on

the hearthrug and lit a foul old briar pipe, which he extricated from some pouch among his skins. And so began that conversation which had never been out of my thoughts for four hectic weeks.

‘If I presume to begin,’ said Blenkiron, ‘it’s because I reckon my story is the shortest. I have to confess to you, gentlemen, that I have failed.’

He drew down the corners of his mouth till he looked a cross between a music-hall comedian and a sick child.

‘If you were looking for something in the root of the hedge, you wouldn’t want to scour the road in a high-speed automobile. And still less would you want to get a bird’s-eye view in an aeroplane. That parable about fits my case. I have been in the clouds and I’ve been scorching on the pikes, but what I was wanting was in the ditch all the time, and I naturally missed it . . . I had the wrong stunt, Major. I was too high up and refined. I’ve been processing through Europe like Barnum’s Circus, and living with generals and transparencies. Not that I haven’t picked up a lot of noos, and got some very interesting sidelights on high politics. But the thing I was after wasn’t to be found on my beat, for those that knew it weren’t going to tell. In that kind of society they don’t get drunk and blab after their tenth cocktail. So I guess I’ve no contribution to make to quieting Sir Walter Bullivant’s mind, except that he’s dead right. Yes, Sir, he has hit the spot and rung the bell. There is a mighty miracle-working proposition being floated in these parts, but the promoters are keeping it to themselves. They aren’t taking in more than they can help on the ground-floor.’

Blenkiron stopped to light a fresh cigar. He was leaner than when he left London and there were pouches below his eyes. I fancy his journey had not been as fur-lined as he made out. ‘I’ve found out one thing, and that is, that the last dream Germany will part with is the control of the Near East. That is what your statesmen don’t figure enough on. She’ll give up Belgium and Alsace–Lorraine and Poland, but by God! she’ll never give up the road to Mesopotamia till you have her by the throat and make her drop it. Sir Walter is a pretty bright-eyed citizen, and he sees it right enough. If the worst happens, Kaiser will fling overboard a lot of ballast in Europe, and it will look like a big victory for the Allies, but he won’t be beaten if he has the road to the East safe. Germany’s like a scorpion: her sting’s in her tail, and that tail stretches way down into Asia.

‘I got that clear, and I also made out that it wasn’t going to be dead easy for her to keep that tail healthy. Turkey’s a bit of an anxiety, as you’ll soon discover. But Germany thinks she can manage it, and I won’t say she can’t. It depends on the hand she holds, and she reckons it a good one. I tried to find out, but they gave me nothing but eyewash. I had to pretend to be satisfied, for the position of John S. wasn’t so strong as to allow him to take liberties. If I asked one of the highbrows he looked wise and spoke of the might of German arms and German organization and German staff-work. I used to nod my head and get enthusiastic about these stunts, but it was all soft soap. She has a trick in hand — that much I know, but I’m darned if I can put a name to it. I pray to God you boys have been cleverer.’

His tone was quite melancholy, and I was mean enough to feel rather glad. He had been the professional with the best chance. It would be a good joke if the amateur succeeded where the expert failed.

I looked at Sandy. He filled his pipe again, and pushed back his skin cap from his brows. What with his long dishevelled hair, his high-boned face, and stained eyebrows he had the appearance of some mad mullah.

‘I went straight to Smyrna,’ he said. ‘It wasn’t difficult, for you see I had laid down a good many lines in former travels. I reached the town as a Greek money-lender from the Fayum, but I had friends there I could count on, and the same evening I was a Turkish gipsy, a member of the most famous fraternity in Western Asia. I had long been a member, and I’m blood-brother of the chief boss, so I stepped into the part ready made. But I found out that the Company of the Rosy Hours was not what I had known it in 1910. Then it had been all for the Young Turks and reform; now it hankered after the old regime and was the last hope of the Orthodox. It had no use for Enver and his friends, and it did not regard with pleasure the *beaux yeux* of the Teuton. It stood for Islam and the old ways, and might be described as a Conservative–Nationalist caucus. But it was uncommon powerful in the provinces, and Enver and Talaat daren’t meddle with it. The dangerous thing about it was that it said nothing and apparently did nothing. It just bided its time and took notes.

‘You can imagine that this was the very kind of crowd for my purpose. I knew of old its little ways, for with all its orthodoxy it dabbled a good deal in magic, and owed half its power to its atmosphere of the uncanny. The Companions could dance the heart out of the ordinary Turk. You saw a bit of one of our dances this afternoon, Dick — pretty good, wasn’t it? They could go anywhere, and no questions asked. They knew what the ordinary man was thinking, for they were the best intelligence department in the Ottoman Empire — far better than Enver’s *Khafiyeh*. And they were popular, too,

for they had never bowed the knee to the *Nemseh* — the Germans who are squeezing out the life-blood of the Osmanli for their own ends. It would have been as much as the life of the Committee or its German masters was worth to lay a hand on us, for we clung together like leeches and we were not in the habit of sticking at trifles.

‘Well, you may imagine it wasn’t difficult for me to move where I wanted. My dress and the pass-word franked me anywhere. I travelled from Smyrna by the new railway to Panderma on the Marmora, and got there just before Christmas. That was after Anzac and Suvla had been evacuated, but I could hear the guns going hard at Cape Helles. From Panderma I started to cross to Thrace in a coasting steamer. And there an uncommon funny thing happened — I got torpedoed.

‘It must have been about the last effort of a British submarine in those waters. But she got us all right. She gave us ten minutes to take to the boats, and then sent the blighted old packet and a fine cargo of 6-inch shells to the bottom. There weren’t many passengers, so it was easy enough to get ashore in the ship’s boats. The submarine sat on the surface watching us, as we wailed and howled in the true Oriental way, and I saw the captain quite close in the conning-tower. Who do you think it was? Tommy Elliot, who lives on the other side of the hill from me at home.

‘I gave Tommy the surprise of his life. As we bumped past him, I started the “Flowers of the Forest” — the old version — on the antique stringed instrument I carried, and I sang the words very plain. Tommy’s eyes bulged out of his head, and he shouted at me in English to know who the devil I was. I replied in the broadest Scots, which no man in the submarine or in our boat could have understood a word of. “Maister Tammy,” I cried, “what for wad ye skail a dacent tinkler lad intil a cauld sea? I’ll gie ye your kail through the reek for this ploy the next time I forgather wi’ ye on the tap o’ Caerdon.”

‘Tommy spotted me in a second. He laughed till he cried, and as we moved off shouted to me in the same language to “pit a stoot hert tae a stey brae”. I hope to Heaven he had the sense not to tell my father, or the old man will have had a fit. He never much approved of my wanderings, and thought I was safely anchored in the battalion.

‘Well, to make a long story short, I got to Constantinople, and pretty soon found touch with Blenkiron. The rest you know. And now for business. I have been fairly lucky — but no more, for I haven’t got to the bottom of the thing nor anything like it. But I’ve solved the first of Harry Bullivant’s riddles. I know the meaning of *Kasredin*.

‘Sir Walter was right, as Blenkiron has told us. There’s a great stirring in Islam, something moving on the face of the waters. They make no secret of it. Those religious revivals come in cycles, and one was due about now. And they are quite clear about the details. A seer has arisen of the blood of the Prophet, who will restore the Khalifate to its old glories and Islam to its old purity. His sayings are everywhere in the Moslem world. All the orthodox believers have them by heart. That is why they are enduring grinding poverty and preposterous taxation, and that is why their young men are rolling up to the armies and dying without complaint in Gallipoli and Transcaucasia. They believe they are on the eve of a great deliverance.

‘Now the first thing I found out was that the Young Turks had nothing to do with this. They are unpopular and unorthodox, and no true Turks. But Germany has. How, I don’t know, but I could see quite plainly that in some subtle way Germany was regarded as a collaborator in the movement. It is that belief that is keeping the present regime going. The ordinary Turk loathes the Committee, but he has some queer perverted expectation from Germany. It is not a case of Enver and the rest carrying on their shoulders the unpopular Teuton; it is a case of the Teuton carrying the unpopular Committee. And Germany’s graft is just this and nothing more — that she has some hand in the coming of the new deliverer.

‘They talk about the thing quite openly. It is called the *Kaaba-i-hurriyeh*, the Palladium of Liberty. The prophet himself is known as Zimrud — “the Emerald” — and his four ministers are called also after jewels — Sapphire, Ruby, Pearl, and Topaz. You will hear their names as often in the talk of the towns and villages as you will hear the names of generals in England. But no one knew where Zimrud was or when he would reveal himself, though every week came his messages to the faithful. All that I could learn was that he and his followers were coming from the West.

‘You will say, what about *Kasredin*? That puzzled me dreadfully, for no one used the phrase. The Home of the Spirit! It is an obvious cliché, just as in England some new sect might call itself the Church of Christ. Only no one seemed to use it.

‘But by and by I discovered that there was an inner and an outer circle in this mystery. Every creed has an esoteric side which is kept from the common herd. I struck this side in Constantinople. Now there is a very famous Turkish *shaka* called *Kasredin*, one of those old half-comic miracle plays with an allegorical meaning which they call *orta oyun*, and which take a week to read. That tale tells of the coming of a prophet, and I found that the select of the faith spoke of the new revelation

in terms of it. The curious thing is that in that tale the prophet is aided by one of the few women who play much part in the hagiology of Islam. That is the point of the tale, and it is partly a jest, but mainly a religious mystery. The prophet, too, is not called Emerald.'

'I know,' I said; 'he is called Greenmantle.'

Sandy scrambled to his feet, letting his pipe drop in the fireplace.

'Now how on earth did you find out that?' he cried.

Then I told them of Stumm and Gaudian and the whispered words I had not been meant to hear. Blenkiron was giving me the benefit of a steady stare, unusual from one who seemed always to have his eyes abstracted, and Sandy had taken to ranging up and down the room.

'Germany's in the heart of the plan. That is what I always thought. If we're to find the *Kaaba-i-hurriyeh* it is no good fossicking among the Committee or in the Turkish provinces. The secret's in Germany. Dick, you should not have crossed the Danube.'

'That's what I half feared,' I said. 'But on the other hand it is obvious that the thing must come east, and sooner rather than later. I take it they can't afford to delay too long before they deliver the goods. If we can stick it out here we must hit the trail . . . I've got another bit of evidence. I have solved Harry Bullivant's third puzzle.'

Sandy's eyes were very bright and I had an audience on wires.

'Did you say that in the tale of *Kasredin* a woman is the ally of the prophet?'

'Yes,' said Sandy; 'what of that?'

'Only that the same thing is true of Greenmantle. I can give you her name.'

I fetched a piece of paper and a pencil from Blenkiron's desk and handed it to Sandy.

'Write down Harry Bullivant's third word.'

He promptly wrote down '*v. I.*'

Then I told them of the other name Stumm and Gaudian had spoken. I told of my discovery as I lay in the woodman's cottage.

'The "I" is not the letter of the alphabet, but the numeral. The name is Von Einem — Hilda von Einem.'

'Good old Harry,' said Sandy softly. 'He was a dashed clever chap. Hilda von Einem? Who and where is she? for if we find her we have done the trick.'

Then Blenkiron spoke. 'I reckon I can put you wise on that, gentlemen,' he said. 'I saw her no later than yesterday. She is a lovely lady. She happens also to be the owner of this house.'

Both Sandy and I began to laugh. It was too comic to have stumbled across Europe and lighted on the very headquarters of the puzzle we had set out to unriddle.

But Blenkiron did not laugh. At the mention of Hilda von Einem he had suddenly become very solemn, and the sight of his face pulled me up short.

'I don't like it, gentlemen,' he said. 'I would rather you had mentioned any other name on God's earth. I haven't been long in this city, but I have been long enough to size up the various political bosses. They haven't much to them. I reckon they wouldn't stand up against what we could show them in the U-nited States. But I have met the Frau von Einem, and that lady's a very different proposition. The man that will understand her has got to take a biggish size in hats.'

'Who is she?' I asked.

'Why, that is just what I can't tell you. She was a great excavator of Babylonish and Hittite ruins, and she married a diplomat who went to glory three years back. It isn't what she has been, but what she is, and that's a mighty clever woman.'

Blenkiron's respect did not depress me. I felt as if at last we had got our job narrowed to a decent compass, for I had hated casting about in the dark. I asked where she lived.

'That I don't know,' said Blenkiron. 'You won't find people unduly anxious to gratify your natural curiosity about Frau von Einem.'

'I can find that out,' said Sandy. 'That's the advantage of having a push like mine. Meantime, I've got to clear, for my day's work isn't finished. Dick, you and Peter must go to bed at once.' 'Why?' I asked in amazement. Sandy spoke like a

medical adviser.

‘Because I want your clothes — the things you’ve got on now. I’ll take them off with me and you’ll never see them again.’

‘You’ve a queer taste in souvenirs,’ I said.

‘Say rather the Turkish police. The current in the Bosphorus is pretty strong, and these sad relics of two misguided Dutchmen will be washed up tomorrow about Seraglio Point. In this game you must drop the curtain neat and pat at the end of each Scene, if you don’t want trouble later with the missing heir and the family lawyer.’



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I MOVE IN GOOD SOCIETY

I walked out of that house next morning with Blenkiron's arm in mine, a different being from the friendless creature who had looked vainly the day before for sanctuary. To begin with, I was splendidly dressed. I had a navy-blue suit with square padded shoulders, a neat black bow-tie, shoes with a hump at the toe, and a brown bowler. Over that I wore a greatcoat lined with wolf fur. I had a smart malacca cane, and one of Blenkiron's cigars in my mouth. Peter had been made to trim his beard, and, dressed in unassuming pepper-and-salt, looked with his docile eyes and quiet voice a very respectable servant. Old Blenkiron had done the job in style, for, if you'll believe it, he had brought the clothes all the way from London. I realized now why he and Sandy had been fossicking in my wardrobe. Peter's suit had been of Sandy's procuring, and it was not the fit of mine. I had no difficulty about the accent. Any man brought up in the colonies can get his tongue round American, and I flattered myself I made a very fair shape at the lingo of the Middle West.

The wind had gone to the south and the snow was melting fast. There was a blue sky above Asia, and away to the north masses of white cloud drifting over the Black Sea. What had seemed the day before the dingiest of cities now took on a strange beauty, the beauty of unexpected horizons and tongues of grey water winding below cypress-studded shores. A man's temper has a lot to do with his appreciation of scenery. I felt a free man once more, and could use my eyes.

That street was a jumble of every nationality on earth. There were Turkish regulars in their queer conical khaki helmets, and wild-looking levies who had no kin with Europe. There were squads of Germans in flat forage-caps, staring vacantly at novel sights, and quick to salute any officer on the side-walk. Turks in closed carriages passed, and Turks on good Arab horses, and Turks who looked as if they had come out of the Ark. But it was the rabble that caught the eye — very wild, pinched, miserable rabble. I never in my life saw such swarms of beggars, and you walked down that street to the accompaniment of entreaties for alms in all the tongues of the Tower of Babel. Blenkiron and I behaved as if we were interested tourists. We would stop and laugh at one fellow and give a penny to a second, passing comments in high-pitched Western voices.

We went into a cafe and had a cup of coffee. A beggar came in and asked alms. Hitherto Blenkiron's purse had been closed, but now he took out some small nickels and planked five down on the table. The man cried down blessings and picked up three. Blenkiron very swiftly swept the other two into his pocket.

That seemed to me queer, and I remarked that I had never before seen a beggar who gave change. Blenkiron said nothing, and presently we moved on and came to the harbour-side.

There were a number of small tugs moored alongside, and one or two bigger craft — fruit boats, I judged, which used to ply in the Aegean. They looked pretty well moth-eaten from disuse. We stopped at one of them and watched a fellow in a blue nightcap splicing ropes. He raised his eyes once and looked at us, and then kept on with his business.

Blenkiron asked him where he came from, but he shook his head, not understanding the tongue. A Turkish policeman came up and stared at us suspiciously, till Blenkiron opened his coat, as if by accident, and displayed a tiny square of ribbon, at which he saluted.

Failing to make conversation with the sailor, Blenkiron flung him three of his black cigars.

'I guess you can smoke, friend, if you can't talk,' he said.

The man turned and caught the three neatly in the air. Then to my amazement he tossed one of them back.

The donor regarded it quizzically as it lay on the pavement.

'That boy's a connoisseur of tobacco,' he said. As we moved away I saw the Turkish policeman pick it up and put it inside his cap.

We returned by the long street on the crest of the hill. There was a man selling oranges on a tray, and Blenkiron stopped to look at them. I noticed that the man shuffled fifteen into a cluster. Blenkiron felt the oranges, as if to see that they were sound, and pushed two aside. The man instantly restored them to the group, never raising his eyes.

'This ain't the time of year to buy fruit,' said Blenkiron as we passed on. 'Those oranges are rotten as medlars.'

We were almost on our own doorstep before I guessed the meaning of the business.

'Is your morning's work finished?' I said.

'Our morning's walk?' he asked innocently.

'I said "work".'

He smiled blandly. 'I reckoned you'd tumble to it. Why, yes, except that I've some figuring still to do. Give me half an hour and I'll be at your service, Major.'

That afternoon, after Peter had cooked a wonderfully good luncheon, I had a heart-to-heart talk with Blenkiron.

'My business is to get noos,' he said; 'and before I start on a stunt I make considerable preparations. All the time in London when I was yelping at the British Government, I was busy with Sir Walter arranging things ahead. We used to meet in queer places and at all hours of the night. I fixed up a lot of connections in this city before I arrived, and especially a noos service with your Foreign Office by way of Rumania and Russia. In a day or two I guess our friends will know all about our discoveries.'

At that I opened my eyes very wide.

'Why, yes. You Britishers haven't any notion how wide-awake your Intelligence Service is. I reckon it's easy the best of all the belligerents. You never talked about it in peace time, and you shunned the theatrical ways of the Teuton. But you had the wires laid good and sure. I calculate there isn't much that happens in any corner of the earth that you don't know within twenty-four hours. I don't say your highbrows use the noos well. I don't take much stock in your political push. They're a lot of silver-tongues, no doubt, but it ain't oratory that is wanted in this racket. The William Jennings Bryan stunt languishes in war-time. Politics is like a chicken-coop, and those inside get to behave as if their little run were all the world. But if the politicians make mistakes it isn't from lack of good instruction to guide their steps. If I had a big proposition to handle and could have my pick of helpers I'd plump for the Intelligence Department of the British Admiralty. Yes, Sir, I take off my hat to your Government sleuths.'

'Did they provide you with ready-made spies here?' I asked in astonishment.

'Why, no,' he said. 'But they gave me the key, and I could make my own arrangements. In Germany I buried myself deep in the local atmosphere and never peeped out. That was my game, for I was looking for something in Germany itself, and didn't want any foreign cross-bearings. As you know, I failed where you succeeded. But so soon as I crossed the Danube I set about opening up my lines of communication, and I hadn't been two days in this metropolis before I had got my telephone exchange buzzing. Sometime I'll explain the thing to you, for it's a pretty little business. I've got the cutest cypher . . . No, it ain't my invention. It's your Government's. Any one, babe, imbecile, or dotard, can carry my messages — you saw some of them today — but it takes some mind to set the piece, and it takes a lot of figuring at my end to work out the results. Some day you shall hear it all, for I guess it would please you.'

'How do you use it?' I asked.

'Well, I get early noos of what is going on in this cabbage-patch. Likewise I get authentic noos of the rest of Europe, and I can send a message to Mr X. in Petrograd and Mr Y. in London, or, if I wish, to Mr Z. in Noo York. What's the matter with that for a post-office? I'm the best informed man in Constantinople, for old General Liman only hears one side, and mostly lies at that, and Enver prefers not to listen at all. Also, I could give them points on what is happening at their very door, for our friend Sandy is a big boss in the best-run crowd of mountebanks that ever fiddled secrets out of men's hearts. Without their help I wouldn't have cut much ice in this city.'

'I want you to tell me one thing, Blenkiron,' I said. 'I've been playing a part for the past month, and it wears my nerves to tatters. Is this job very tiring, for if it is, I doubt I may buckle up.'

He looked thoughtful. 'I can't call our business an absolute rest-cure any time. You've got to keep your eyes skinned, and there's always the risk of the little packet of dynamite going off unexpected. But as these things go, I rate this stunt as easy. We've only got to be natural. We wear our natural clothes, and talk English, and sport a Teddy Roosevelt smile, and there isn't any call for theatrical talent. Where I've found the job tight was when I had got to be natural, and my naturalness was the same brand as that of everybody round about, and all the time I had to do unnatural things. It isn't easy to be going down town to business and taking cocktails with Mr Carl Rosenheim, and next hour being engaged trying to blow Mr Rosenheim's friends sky — high. And it isn't easy to keep up a part which is clean outside your ordinary life. I've never tried that. My line has always been to keep my normal personality. But you have, Major, and I guess you found it

wearing.'

'Wearing's a mild word,' I said. 'But I want to know another thing. It seems to me that the line you've picked is as good as could be. But it's a cast-iron line. It commits us pretty deep and it won't be a simple job to drop it.'

'Why, that's just the point I was coming to,' he said. 'I was going to put you wise about that very thing. When I started out I figured on some situation like this. I argued that unless I had a very clear part with a big bluff in it I wouldn't get the confidences which I needed. We've got to be at the heart of the show, taking a real hand and not just looking on. So I settled I would be a big engineer — there was a time when there weren't many bigger in the United States than John S. Blenkiron. I talked large about what might be done in Mesopotamia in the way of washing the British down the river. Well, that talk caught on. They knew of my reputation as an hydraulic expert, and they were tickled to death to rope me in. I told them I wanted a helper, and I told them about my friend Richard Hanau, as good a German as ever supped sauerkraut, who was coming through Russia and Rumania as a benevolent neutral; but when he got to Constantinople would drop his neutrality and double his benevolence. They got reports on you by wire from the States — I arranged that before I left London. So you're going to be welcomed and taken to their bosoms just like John S. was. We've both got jobs we can hold down, and now you're in these pretty clothes you're the dead ringer of the brightest kind of American engineer . . . But we can't go back on our tracks. If we wanted to leave for Constanza next week they'd be very polite, but they'd never let us. We've got to go on with this adventure and nose our way down into Mesopotamia, hoping that our luck will hold . . . God knows how we will get out of it; but it's no good going out to meet trouble. As I observed before, I believe in an all-wise and beneficent Providence, but you've got to give him a chance.'

I am bound to confess the prospect staggered me. We might be let in for fighting — and worse than fighting — against our own side. I wondered if it wouldn't be better to make a bolt for it, and said SO.

He shook his head. 'I reckon not. In the first place we haven't finished our inquiries. We've got Greenmantle located right enough, thanks to you, but we still know mighty little about that holy man. In the second place it won't be as bad as you think. This show lacks cohesion, Sir. It is not going to last for ever. I calculate that before you and I strike the site of the garden that Adam and Eve frequented there will be a queer turn of affairs. Anyhow, it's good enough to gamble on.'

Then he got some sheets of paper and drew me a plan of the dispositions of the Turkish forces. I had no notion he was such a close student of war, for his exposition was as good as a staff lecture. He made out that the situation was none too bright anywhere. The troops released from Gallipoli wanted a lot of refitment, and would be slow in reaching the Transcaucasian frontier, where the Russians were threatening. The Army of Syria was pretty nearly a rabble under the lunatic Djemal. There wasn't the foggiest chance of a serious invasion of Egypt being undertaken. Only in Mesopotamia did things look fairly cheerful, owing to the blunders of British strategy. 'And you may take it from me,' he said, 'that if the old Turk mobilized a total of a million men, he has lost 40 per cent of them already. And if I'm anything of a prophet he's going pretty soon to lose more.'

He tore up the papers and enlarged on politics. 'I reckon I've got the measure of the Young Turks and their precious Committee. Those boys aren't any good. Enver's bright enough, and for sure he's got sand. He'll stick out a fight like a Vermont game-chicken, but he lacks the larger vision, Sir. He doesn't understand the intricacies of the job no more than a sucking-child, so the Germans play with him, till his temper goes and he bucks like a mule. Talaat is a sulky dog who wants to batter mankind with a club. Both these boys would have made good cow-punchers in the old days, and they might have got a living out West as the gun-men of a Labour Union. They're about the class of Jesse James or Bill the Kid, excepting that they're college-reared and can patter languages. But they haven't the organizing power to manage the Irish vote in a ward election. Their one notion is to get busy with their firearms, and people are getting tired of the Black Hand stunt. Their hold on the country is just the hold that a man with a Browning has over a crowd with walking-sticks. The cooler heads in the Committee are growing shy of them, and an old fox like David is lying low till his time comes. Now it doesn't want arguing that a gang of that kind has got to hang close together or they may hang separately. They've got no grip on the ordinary Turk, barring the fact that they are active and he is sleepy, and that they've got their guns loaded.'

'What about the Germans here?' I asked.

Blenkiron laughed. 'It is no sort of a happy family. But the Young Turks know that without the German boost they'll be strung up like Haman, and the Germans can't afford to neglect an ally. Consider what would happen if Turkey got sick of the game and made a separate peace. The road would be open for Russia to the Aegean. Ferdy of Bulgaria would take his

depreciated goods to the other market, and not waste a day thinking about it. You'd have Rumania coming in on the Allies' side. Things would look pretty black for that control of the Near East on which Germany has banked her winnings. Kaiser says that's got to be prevented at all costs, but how is it going to be done?"

Blenkiron's face had become very solemn again. 'It won't be done unless Germany's got a trump card to play. Her game's mighty near bust, but it's still got a chance. And that chance is a woman and an old man. I reckon our landlady has a bigger brain than Enver and Liman. She's the real boss of the show. When I came here, I reported to her, and presently you've got to do the same. I am curious as to how she'll strike you, for I'm free to admit that she impressed me considerable.'

'It looks as if our job were a long way from the end,' I said.

'It's scarcely begun,' said Blenkiron.

That talk did a lot to cheer my spirits, for I realized that it was the biggest of big game we were hunting this time. I'm an economical soul, and if I'm going to be hanged I want a good stake for my neck.

Then began some varied experiences. I used to wake up in the morning, wondering where I should be at night, and yet quite pleased at the uncertainty. Greenmantle became a sort of myth with me. Somehow I couldn't fix any idea in my head of what he was like. The nearest I got was a picture of an old man in a turban coming out of a bottle in a cloud of smoke, which I remembered from a child's edition of the *Arabian Nights*. But if he was dim, the lady was dimmer. Sometimes I thought of her as a fat old German crone, sometimes as a harsh-featured woman like a schoolmistress with thin lips and eyeglasses. But I had to fit the East into the picture, so I made her young and gave her a touch of the languid houri in a veil. I was always wanting to pump Blenkiron on the subject, but he shut up like a rat-trap. He was looking for bad trouble in that direction, and was disinclined to speak about it beforehand.

We led a peaceful existence. Our servants were two of Sandy's lot, for Blenkiron had very rightly cleared out the Turkish caretakers, and they worked like beavers under Peter's eye, till I reflected I had never been so well looked after in my life. I walked about the city with Blenkiron, keeping my eyes open, and speaking very civil. The third night we were bidden to dinner at Moellendorff's, so we put on our best clothes and set out in an ancient cab. Blenkiron had fetched a dress suit of mine, from which my own tailor's label had been cut and a New York one substituted.

General Liman and Metternich the Ambassador had gone up the line to Nish to meet the Kaiser, who was touring in those parts, so Moellendorff was the biggest German in the city. He was a thin, foxy-faced fellow, cleverish but monstrously vain, and he was not very popular either with the Germans or the Turks. He was polite to both of us, but I am bound to say that I got a bad fright when I entered the room, for the first man I saw was Gaudian. I doubt if he would have recognized me even in the clothes I had worn in Stumm's company, for his eyesight was wretched. As it was, I ran no risk in dress-clothes, with my hair brushed back and a fine American accent. I paid him high compliments as a fellow engineer, and translated part of a very technical conversation between him and Blenkiron. Gaudian was in uniform, and I liked the look of his honest face better than ever.

But the great event was the sight of Enver. He was a slim fellow of Rasta's build, very foppish and precise in his dress, with a smooth oval face like a girl's, and rather fine straight black eyebrows. He spoke perfect German, and had the best kind of manners, neither pert nor overbearing. He had a pleasant trick, too, of appealing all round the table for confirmation, and so bringing everybody into the talk. Not that he spoke a great deal, but all he said was good sense, and he had a smiling way of saying it. Once or twice he ran counter to Moellendorff, and I could see there was no love lost between these two. I didn't think I wanted him as a friend — he was too cold-blooded and artificial; and I was pretty certain that I didn't want those steady black eyes as an enemy. But it was no good denying his quality. The little fellow was all cold courage, like the fine polished blue steel of a sword.

I fancy I was rather a success at that dinner. For one thing I could speak German, and so had a pull on Blenkiron. For another I was in a good temper, and really enjoyed putting my back into my part. They talked very high-flown stuff about what they had done and were going to do, and Enver was great on Gallipoli. I remember he said that he could have destroyed the whole British Army if it hadn't been for somebody's cold feet — at which Moellendorff looked daggers. They were so bitter about Britain and all her works that I gathered they were getting pretty panicky, and that made me as jolly as a sandboy. I'm afraid I was not free from bitterness myself on that subject. I said things about my own country that I sometimes wake in the night and sweat to think of.

Gaudian got on to the use of water power in war, and that gave me a chance.

‘In my country,’ I said, ‘when we want to get rid of a mountain we wash it away. There’s nothing on earth that will stand against water. Now, speaking with all respect, gentlemen, and as an absolute novice in the military art, I sometimes ask why this God-given weapon isn’t more used in the present war. I haven’t been to any of the fronts, but I’ve studied them some from maps and the newspapers. Take your German position in Flanders, where you’ve got the high ground. If I were a British general I reckon I would very soon make it no sort of position.’

Moellendorff asked, ‘How?’

‘Why, I’d wash it away. Wash away the fourteen feet of soil down to the stone. There’s a heap of coalpits behind the British front where they could generate power, and I judge there’s ample water supply from the rivers and canals. I’d guarantee to wash you away in twenty-four hours — yes, in spite of all your big guns. It beats me why the British haven’t got on to this notion. They used to have some bright engineers.’

Enver was on the point like a knife, far quicker than Gaudian. He cross-examined me in a way that showed he knew how to approach a technical subject, though he mightn’t have much technical knowledge. He was just giving me a sketch of the flooding in Mesopotamia when an aide-de-camp brought in a chit which fetched him to his feet.

‘I have gossiped long enough,’ he said. ‘My kind host, I must leave you. Gentlemen all, my apologies and farewells.’

Before he left he asked my name and wrote it down. ‘This is an unhealthy city for strangers, Mr Hanau,’ he said in very good English. ‘I have some small power of protecting a friend, and what I have is at your disposal.’ This with the condescension of a king promising his favour to a subject.

The little fellow amused me tremendously, and rather impressed me too. I said so to Gaudian after he had left, but that decent soul didn’t agree.

‘I do not love him,’ he said. ‘We are allies — yes; but friends — no. He is no true son of Islam, which is a noble faith and despises liars and boasters and betrayers of their salt.’

That was the verdict of one honest man on this ruler in Israel. The next night I got another from Blenkiron on a greater than Enver. He had been out alone and had come back pretty late, with his face grey and drawn with pain. The food we ate — not at all bad of its kind — and the cold east wind played havoc with his dyspepsia. I can see him yet, boiling milk on a spirit-lamp, while Peter worked at a Primus stove to get him a hot-water bottle. He was using horrid language about his inside.

‘My God, Major, if I were you with a sound stomach I’d fairly conquer the world. As it is, I’ve got to do my work with half my mind, while the other half is dwelling in my intestines. I’m like the child in the Bible that had a fox gnawing at its vitals.’

He got his milk boiling and began to sip it.

‘I’ve been to see our pretty landlady,’ he said. ‘She sent for me and I hobbled off with a grip full of plans, for she’s mighty set on Mesopotamy.’

‘Anything about Greenmantle?’ I asked eagerly.

‘Why, no, but I have reached one conclusion. I opine that the hapless prophet has no sort of time with that lady. I opine that he will soon wish himself in Paradise. For if Almighty God ever created a female devil it’s Madame von Einem.’

He sipped a little more milk with a grave face.

‘That isn’t my duodenal dyspepsia, Major. It’s the verdict of a ripe experience, for I have a cool and penetrating judgement, even if I’ve a deranged stomach. And I give it as my considered conclusion that that woman’s mad and bad — but principally bad.’



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE LADY OF THE MANTILLA

Since that first night I had never clapped eyes on Sandy. He had gone clean out of the world, and Blenkiron and I waited anxiously for a word of news. Our own business was in good trim, for we were presently going east towards Mesopotamia, but unless we learned more about Greenmantle our journey would be a grotesque failure. And learn about Greenmantle we could not, for nobody by word or deed suggested his existence, and it was impossible of course for us to ask questions. Our only hope was Sandy, for what we wanted to know was the prophet's whereabouts and his plans. I suggested to Blenkiron that we might do more to cultivate Frau von Einem, but he shut his jaw like a rat-trap.

'There's nothing doing for us in that quarter,' he said. 'That's the most dangerous woman on earth; and if she got any kind of notion that we were wise about her pet schemes I reckon you and I would very soon be in the Bosphorus.'

This was all very well; but what was going to happen if the two of us were bundled off to Baghdad with instructions to wash away the British? Our time was getting pretty short, and I doubted if we could spin out more than three days more in Constantinople. I felt just as I had felt with Stumm that last night when I was about to be packed off to Cairo and saw no way of avoiding it. Even Blenkiron was getting anxious. He played Patience incessantly, and was disinclined to talk. I tried to find out something from the servants, but they either knew nothing or wouldn't speak — the former, I think. I kept my eyes lifting, too, as I walked about the streets, but there was no sign anywhere of the skin coats or the weird stringed instruments. The whole Company of the Rosy Hours seemed to have melted into the air, and I began to wonder if they had ever existed.

Anxiety made me restless, and restlessness made me want exercise. It was no good walking about the city. The weather had become foul again, and I was sick of the smells and the squalor and the flea-bitten crowds. So Blenkiron and I got horses, Turkish cavalry mounts with heads like trees, and went out through the suburbs into the open country.

It was a grey drizzling afternoon, with the beginnings of a sea fog which hid the Asiatic shores of the straits. It wasn't easy to find open ground for a gallop, for there were endless small patches of cultivation and the gardens of country houses. We kept on the high land above the sea, and when we reached a bit of downland came on squads of Turkish soldiers digging trenches. Whenever we let the horses go we had to pull up sharp for a digging party or a stretch of barbed wire. Coils of the beastly thing were lying loose everywhere, and Blenkiron nearly took a nasty toss over one. Then we were always being stopped by sentries and having to show our passes. Still the ride did us good and shook up our livers, and by the time we turned for home I was feeling more like a white man.

We jogged back in the short winter twilight, past the wooded grounds of white villas, held up every few minutes by transport-wagons and companies of soldiers. The rain had come on in real earnest, and it was two very bedraggled horsemen that crawled along the muddy lanes. As we passed one villa, shut in by a high white wall, a pleasant smell of wood smoke was wafted towards us, which made me sick for the burning veld. My ear, too, caught the twanging of a zither, which somehow reminded me of the afternoon in Kuprasso's garden-house.

I pulled up and proposed to investigate, but Blenkiron very testily declined.

'Zithers are as common here as fleas,' he said. 'You don't want to be fossicking around somebody's stables and find a horse-boy entertaining his friends. They don't like visitors in this country; and you'll be asking for trouble if you go inside those walls. I guess it's some old Buzzard's harem.' Buzzard was his own private peculiar name for the Turk, for he said he had had as a boy a natural history book with a picture of a bird called the turkey-buzzard, and couldn't get out of the habit of applying it to the Ottoman people.

I wasn't convinced, so I tried to mark down the place. It seemed to be about three miles out from the city, at the end of a steep lane on the inland side of the hill coming from the Bosphorus. I fancied somebody of distinction lived there, for a little farther on we met a big empty motor-car snorting its way up, and I had a notion that the car belonged to the walled villa.

Next day Blenkiron was in grievous trouble with his dyspepsia. About midday he was compelled to lie down, and having nothing better to do I had out the horses again and took Peter with me. It was funny to see Peter in a Turkish army-

saddle, riding with the long Boer stirrup and the slouch of the backveld.

That afternoon was unfortunate from the start. It was not the mist and drizzle of the day before, but a stiff northern gale which blew sheets of rain in our faces and numbed our bridle hands. We took the same road, but pushed west of the trench-digging parties and got to a shallow valley with a white village among the cypresses. Beyond that there was a very respectable road which brought us to the top of a crest that in clear weather must have given a fine prospect. Then we turned our horses, and I shaped our course so as to strike the top of the long lane that abutted on the down. I wanted to investigate the white villa.

But we hadn't gone far on our road back before we got into trouble. It arose out of a sheep-dog, a yellow mongrel brute that came at us like a thunderbolt. It took a special fancy to Peter, and bit savagely at his horse's heels and sent it capering off the road. I should have warned him, but I did not realize what was happening, till too late. For Peter, being accustomed to mongrels in Kaffir kraals, took a summary way with the pest. Since it despised his whip, he out with his pistol and put a bullet through its head.

The echoes of the shot had scarcely died away when the row began. A big fellow appeared running towards us, shouting wildly. I guessed he was the dog's owner, and proposed to pay no attention. But his cries summoned two other fellows — soldiers by the look of them — who closed in on us, unslinging their rifles as they ran. My first idea was to show them our heels, but I had no desire to be shot in the back, and they looked like men who wouldn't stop short of shooting. So we slowed down and faced them.

They made as savage-looking a trio as you would want to avoid. The shepherd looked as if he had been dug up, a dirty ruffian with matted hair and a beard like a bird's nest. The two soldiers stood staring with sullen faces, fingering their guns, while the other chap raved and stormed and kept pointing at Peter, whose mild eyes stared unwinkingly at his assailant.

The mischief was that neither of us had a word of Turkish. I tried German, but it had no effect. We sat looking at them and they stood storming at us, and it was fast getting dark. Once I turned my horse round as if to proceed, and the two soldiers jumped in front of me.

They jabbered among themselves, and then one said very slowly: 'He . . . want . . . pounds,' and he held up five fingers. They evidently saw by the cut of our jib that we weren't Germans.

'I'll be hanged if he gets a penny,' I said angrily, and the conversation languished.

The situation was getting serious, so I spoke a word to Peter. The soldiers had their rifles loose in their hands, and before they could lift them we had the pair covered with our pistols.

'If you move,' I said, 'you are dead.' They understood that all right and stood stock still, while the shepherd stopped his raving and took to muttering like a gramophone when the record is finished.

'Drop your guns,' I said sharply. 'Quick, or we shoot.'

The tone, if not the words, conveyed my meaning. Still staring at us, they let the rifles slide to the ground. The next second we had forced our horses on the top of them, and the three were off like rabbits. I sent a shot over their heads to encourage them. Peter dismounted and tossed the guns into a bit of scrub where they would take some finding.

This hold-up had wasted time. By now it was getting very dark, and we hadn't ridden a mile before it was black night. It was an annoying predicament, for I had completely lost my bearings and at the best I had only a foggy notion of the lie of the land. The best plan seemed to be to try and get to the top of a rise in the hope of seeing the lights of the city, but all the countryside was so pockety that it was hard to strike the right kind of rise.

We had to trust to Peter's instinct. I asked him where our line lay, and he sat very still for a minute sniffing the air. Then he pointed the direction. It wasn't what I would have taken myself, but on a point like that he was pretty near infallible.

Presently we came to a long slope which cheered me. But at the top there was no light visible anywhere — only a black void like the inside of a shell. As I stared into the gloom it seemed to me that there were patches of deeper darkness that might be woods.

'There is a house half-left in front of us,' said Peter.

I peered till my eyes ached and saw nothing.

‘Well, for heaven’s sake, guide me to it,’ I said, and with Peter in front we set off down the hill.

It was a wild journey, for darkness clung as close to us as a vest. Twice we stepped into patches of bog, and once my horse saved himself by a hair from going head forward into a gravel pit. We got tangled up in strands of wire, and often found ourselves rubbing our noses against tree trunks. Several times I had to get down and make a gap in barricades of loose stones. But after a ridiculous amount of slipping and stumbling we finally struck what seemed the level of a road, and a piece of special darkness in front which turned out to be a high wall.

I argued that all mortal walls had doors, so we set to groping along it, and presently found a gap. There was an old iron gate on broken hinges, which we easily pushed open, and found ourselves on a back path to some house. It was clearly disused, for masses of rotting leaves covered it, and by the feel of it underfoot it was grass-grown.

We dismounted now, leading our horses, and after about fifty yards the path ceased and came out on a well-made carriage drive. So, at least, we guessed, for the place was as black as pitch. Evidently the house couldn’t be far off, but in which direction I hadn’t a notion.

Now, I didn’t want to be paying calls on any Turk at that time of day. Our job was to find where the road opened into the lane, for after that our way to Constantinople was clear. One side the lane lay, and the other the house, and it didn’t seem wise to take the risk of tramping up with horses to the front door. So I told Peter to wait for me at the end of the back-road, while I would prospect a bit. I turned to the right, my intention being if I saw the light of a house to return, and with Peter take the other direction.

I walked like a blind man in that nether-pit of darkness. The road seemed well kept, and the soft wet gravel muffled the sounds of my feet. Great trees overhung it, and several times I wandered into dripping bushes. And then I stopped short in my tracks, for I heard the sound of whistling.

It was quite close, about ten yards away. And the strange thing was that it was a tune I knew, about the last tune you would expect to hear in this part of the world. It was the Scots air: ‘Ca’ the yowes to the knowes,’ which was a favourite of my father’s.

The whistler must have felt my presence, for the air suddenly stopped in the middle of a bar. An unbounded curiosity seized me to know who the fellow could be. So I started in and finished it myself.

There was silence for a second, and then the unknown began again and stopped. Once more I chipped in and finished it. Then it seemed to me that he was coming nearer. The air in that dank tunnel was very still, and I thought I heard a light foot. I think I took a step backward. Suddenly there was a flash of an electric torch from a yard off, so quick that I could see nothing of the man who held it.

Then a low voice spoke out of the darkness — a voice I knew well — and, following it, a hand was laid on my arm. ‘What the devil are you doing here, Dick?’ it said, and there was something like consternation in the tone.

I told him in a hectic sentence, for I was beginning to feel badly rattled myself.

‘You’ve never been in greater danger in your life,’ said the voice. ‘Great God, man, what brought you wandering here today of all days?’

You can imagine that I was pretty scared, for Sandy was the last man to put a case too high. And the next second I felt worse, for he clutched my arm and dragged me in a bound to the side of the road. I could see nothing, but I felt that his head was screwed round, and mine followed suit. And there, a dozen yards off, were the acetylene lights of a big motor-car.

It came along very slowly, purring like a great cat, while we pressed into the bushes. The headlights seemed to spread a fan far to either side, showing the full width of the drive and its borders, and about half the height of the over-arching trees. There was a figure in uniform sitting beside the chauffeur, whom I saw dimly in the reflex glow, but the body of the car was dark.

It crept towards us, passed, and my mind was just getting easy again when it stopped. A switch was snapped within, and the limousine was brightly lit up. Inside I saw a woman’s figure.

The servant had got out and opened the door and a voice came from within — a clear soft voice speaking in some tongue I didn’t understand. Sandy had started forward at the sound of it, and I followed him. It would never do for me to be caught skulking in the bushes.

I was so dazzled by the suddenness of the glare that at first I blinked and saw nothing. Then my eyes cleared and I

found myself looking at the inside of a car upholstered in some soft dove-coloured fabric, and beautifully finished off in ivory and silver. The woman who sat in it had a mantilla of black lace over her head and shoulders, and with one slender jewelled hand she kept its fold over the greater part of her face. I saw only a pair of pale grey-blue eyes — these and the slim fingers.

I remember that Sandy was standing very upright with his hands on his hips, by no means like a servant in the presence of his mistress. He was a fine figure of a man at all times, but in those wild clothes, with his head thrown back and his dark brows drawn below his skull-cap, he looked like some savage king out of an older world. He was speaking Turkish, and glancing at me now and then as if angry and perplexed. I took the hint that he was not supposed to know any other tongue, and that he was asking who the devil I might be.

Then they both looked at me, Sandy with the slow unwinking stare of the gipsy, the lady with those curious, beautiful pale eyes. They ran over my clothes, my brand-new riding-breeches, my splashed boots, my wide-brimmed hat. I took off the last and made my best bow.

‘Madam,’ I said, ‘I have to ask pardon for trespassing in your garden. The fact is, I and my servant — he’s down the road with the horses and I guess you noticed him — the two of us went for a ride this afternoon, and got good and well lost. We came in by your back gate, and I was prospecting for your front door to find someone to direct us, when I bumped into this brigand-chief who didn’t understand my talk. I’m American, and I’m here on a big Government proposition. I hate to trouble you, but if you’d send a man to show us how to strike the city I’d be very much in your debt.’

Her eyes never left my face. ‘Will you come into the car?’ she said in English. ‘At the house I will give you a servant to direct you.’

She drew in the skirts of her fur cloak to make room for me, and in my muddy boots and sopping clothes I took the seat she pointed out. She said a word in Turkish to Sandy, switched off the light, and the car moved on.

Women had never come much my way, and I knew about as much of their ways as I knew about the Chinese language. All my life I had lived with men only, and rather a rough crowd at that. When I made my pile and came home I looked to see a little society, but I had first the business of the Black Stone on my hands, and then the war, so my education languished. I had never been in a motor-car with a lady before, and I felt like a fish on a dry sandbank. The soft cushions and the subtle scents filled me with acute uneasiness. I wasn’t thinking now about Sandy’s grave words, or about Blenkiron’s warning, or about my job and the part this woman must play in it. I was thinking only that I felt mortally shy. The darkness made it worse. I was sure that my companion was looking at me all the time and laughing at me for a clown.

The car stopped and a tall servant opened the door. The lady was over the threshold before I was at the step. I followed her heavily, the wet squelching from my field-boots. At that moment I noticed that she was very tall.

She led me through a long corridor to a room where two pillars held lamps in the shape of torches. The place was dark but for their glow, and it was as warm as a hothouse from invisible stoves. I felt soft carpets underfoot, and on the walls hung some tapestry or rug of an amazingly intricate geometrical pattern, but with every strand as rich as jewels. There, between the pillars, she turned and faced me. Her furs were thrown back, and the black mantilla had slipped down to her shoulders.

‘I have heard of you,’ she said. ‘You are called Richard Hanau, the American. Why have you come to this land?’

‘To have a share in the campaign,’ I said. ‘I’m an engineer, and I thought I could help out with some business like Mesopotamia.’

‘You are on Germany’s side?’ she asked.

‘Why, yes,’ I replied. ‘We Americans are supposed to be nootrals, and that means we’re free to choose any side we fancy. I’m for the Kaiser.’

Her cool eyes searched me, but not in suspicion. I could see she wasn’t troubling with the question whether I was speaking the truth. She was sizing me up as a man. I cannot describe that calm appraising look. There was no sex in it, nothing even of that implicit sympathy with which one human being explores the existence of another. I was a chattel, a thing infinitely removed from intimacy. Even so I have myself looked at a horse which I thought of buying, scanning his shoulders and hocks and paces. Even so must the old lords of Constantinople have looked at the slaves which the chances of war brought to their markets, assessing their usefulness for some task or other with no thought of a humanity common to purchased and purchaser. And yet — not quite. This woman’s eyes were weighing me, not for any special duty, but for

my essential qualities. I felt that I was under the scrutiny of one who was a connoisseur in human nature.

I see I have written that I knew nothing about women. But every man has in his bones a consciousness of sex. I was shy and perturbed, but horribly fascinated. This slim woman, poised exquisitely like some statue between the pillared lights, with her fair cloud of hair, her long delicate face, and her pale bright eyes, had the glamour of a wild dream. I hated her instinctively, hated her intensely, but I longed to arouse her interest. To be valued coldly by those eyes was an offence to my manhood, and I felt antagonism rising within me. I am a strong fellow, well set up, and rather above the average height, and my irritation stiffened me from heel to crown. I flung my head back and gave her cool glance for cool glance, pride against pride.

Once, I remember, a doctor on board ship who dabbled in hypnotism told me that I was the most unsympathetic person he had ever struck. He said I was about as good a mesmeric subject as Table Mountain. Suddenly I began to realize that this woman was trying to cast some spell over me. The eyes grew large and luminous, and I was conscious for just an instant of some will battling to subject mine. I was aware, too, in the same moment of a strange scent which recalled that wild hour in Kuprasso's garden-house. It passed quickly, and for a second her eyes drooped. I seemed to read in them failure, and yet a kind of satisfaction, too, as if they had found more in me than they expected.

'What life have you led?' the soft voice was saying.

I was able to answer quite naturally, rather to my surprise. 'I have been a mining engineer up and down the world.'

'You have faced danger many times?'

'I have faced danger.'

'You have fought with men in battles?'

'I have fought in battles.'

Her bosom rose and fell in a kind of sigh. A smile — a very beautiful thing — flitted over her face. She gave me her hand. 'The horses are at the door now,' she said, 'and your servant is with them. One of my people will guide you to the city.'

She turned away and passed out of the circle of light into the darkness beyond . . .

Peter and I jogged home in the rain with one of Sandy's skin-clad Companions loping at our side. We did not speak a word, for my thoughts were running like hounds on the track of the past hours. I had seen the mysterious Hilda von Einem, I had spoken to her, I had held her hand. She had insulted me with the subtlest of insults and yet I was not angry. Suddenly the game I was playing became invested with a tremendous solemnity. My old antagonists, Stumm and Rasta and the whole German Empire, seemed to shrink into the background, leaving only the slim woman with her inscrutable smile and devouring eyes. 'Mad and bad,' Blenkiron had called her, 'but principally bad.' I did not think they were the proper terms, for they belonged to the narrow world of our common experience. This was something beyond and above it, as a cyclone or an earthquake is outside the decent routine of nature. Mad and bad she might be, but she was also great.

Before we arrived our guide had plucked my knee and spoken some words which he had obviously got by heart. 'The Master says,' ran the message, 'expect him at midnight.'



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AN EMBARRASSED TOILET

I was soaked to the bone, and while Peter set off to look for dinner I went to my room to change. I had a rubdown and then got into pyjamas for some dumb-bell exercises with two chairs, for that long wet ride had stiffened my arm and shoulder muscles. They were a vulgar suit of primitive blue, which Blenkiron had looted from my London wardrobe. As Cornelis Brandt I had sported a flannel nightgown.

My bedroom opened off the sitting-room, and while I was busy with my gymnastics I heard the door open. I thought at first it was Blenkiron, but the briskness of the tread was unlike his measured gait. I had left the light burning there, and the visitor, whoever he was, had made himself at home. I slipped on a green dressing-gown Blenkiron had lent me, and sallied forth to investigate.

My friend Rasta was standing by the table, on which he had laid an envelope. He looked round at my entrance and saluted.

'I come from the Minister of War, sir,' he said, 'and bring you your passports for tomorrow. You will travel by . . . ' And then his voice tailed away and his black eyes narrowed to slits. He had seen something which switched him off the metals.

At that moment I saw it too. There was a mirror on the wall behind him, and as I faced him I could not help seeing my reflection. It was the exact image of the engineer on the Danube boat — blue jeans, loden cloak, and all. The accursed mischance of my costume had given him the clue to an identity which was otherwise buried deep in the Bosphorus.

I am bound to say for Rasta that he was a man of quick action. In a trice he had whipped round to the other side of the table between me and the door, where he stood regarding me wickedly.

By this time I was at the table and stretched out a hand for the envelope. My one hope was nonchalance.

'Sit down, sir,' I said, 'and have a drink. It's a filthy night to move about in.'

'Thank you, no, Herr Brandt,' he said. 'You may burn these passports for they will not be used.'

'Whatever's the matter with you?' I cried. 'You've mistaken the house, my lad. I'm called Hanau — Richard Hanau — and my partner's Mr John S. Blenkiron. He'll be here presently. Never knew anyone of the name of Brandt, barring a tobacconist in Denver City.'

'You have never been to Rustchuk?' he said with a sneer.

'Not that I know of. But, pardon me, Sir, if I ask your name and your business here. I'm darned if I'm accustomed to be called by Dutch names or have my word doubted. In my country we consider that impolite as between gentlemen.'

I could see that my bluff was having its effect. His stare began to waver, and when he next spoke it was in a more civil tone.

'I will ask pardon if I'm mistaken, Sir, but you're the image of a man who a week ago was at Rustchuk, a man much wanted by the Imperial Government.'

'A week ago I was tossing in a dirty little hooker coming from Constanza. Unless Rustchuk's in the middle of the Black Sea I've never visited the township. I guess you're barking up the wrong tree. Come to think of it, I was expecting passports. Say, do you come from Enver Damad?'

'I have that honour,' he said.

'Well, Enver is a very good friend of mine. He's the brightest citizen I've struck this side of the Atlantic.'

The man was calming down, and in another minute his suspicions would have gone. But at that moment, by the crookedest kind of luck, Peter entered with a tray of dishes. He did not notice Rasta, and walked straight to the table and plumped down his burden on it. The Turk had stepped aside at his entrance, and I saw by the look in his eyes that his suspicions had become a certainty. For Peter, stripped to shirt and breeches, was the identical shabby little companion of the Rustchuk meeting.

I had never doubted Rasta's pluck. He jumped for the door and had a pistol out in a trice pointing at my head.

'*Bonne fortune*,' he cried. 'Both the birds at one shot.' His hand was on the latch, and his mouth was open to cry. I

guessed there was an orderly waiting on the stairs.

He had what you call the strategic advantage, for he was at the door while I was at the other end of the table and Peter at the side of it at least two yards from him. The road was clear before him, and neither of us was armed. I made a despairing step forward, not knowing what I meant to do, for I saw no light. But Peter was before me.

He had never let go of the tray, and now, as a boy skims a stone on a pond, he skimmed it with its contents at Rasta's head. The man was opening the door with one hand while he kept me covered with the other, and he got the contrivance fairly in the face. A pistol shot cracked out, and the bullet went through the tray, but the noise was drowned in the crash of glasses and crockery. The next second Peter had wrenched the pistol from Rasta's hand and had gripped his throat.

A dandified Young Turk, brought up in Paris and finished in Berlin, may be as brave as a lion, but he cannot stand in a rough-and-tumble against a backveld hunter, though more than double his age. There was no need for me to help him. Peter had his own way, learned in a wild school, of knocking the sense out of a foe. He gagged him scientifically, and trussed him up with his own belt and two straps from a trunk in my bedroom.

'This man is too dangerous to let go,' he said, as if his procedure were the most ordinary thing in the world. 'He will be quiet now till we have time to make a plan.'

At that moment there came a knocking at the door. That is the sort of thing that happens in melodrama, just when the villain has finished off his job neatly. The correct thing to do is to pale to the teeth, and with a rolling, conscience-stricken eye glare round the horizon. But that was not Peter's way.

'We'd better tidy up if we're to have visitors,' he said calmly.

Now there was one of those big oak German cupboards against the wall which must have been brought in in sections, for complete it would never have got through the door. It was empty now, but for Blenkiron's hatbox. In it he deposited the unconscious Rasta, and turned the key. 'There's enough ventilation through the top,' he observed, 'to keep the air good.' Then he opened the door. A magnificent kavass in blue and silver stood outside. He saluted and proffered a card on which was written in pencil, 'Hilda von Einem'.

I would have begged for time to change my clothes, but the lady was behind him. I saw the black mantilla and the rich sable furs. Peter vanished through my bedroom and I was left to receive my guest in a room littered with broken glass and a senseless man in the cupboard.

There are some situations so crazily extravagant that they key up the spirit to meet them. I was almost laughing when that stately lady stepped over my threshold.

'Madam,' I said, with a bow that shamed my old dressing-gown and strident pyjamas. 'You find me at a disadvantage. I came home soaking from my ride, and was in the act of changing. My servant has just upset a tray of crockery, and I fear this room's no fit place for a lady. Allow me three minutes to make myself presentable.'

She inclined her head gravely and took a seat by the fire. I went into my bedroom, and as I expected found Peter lurking by the other door. In a hectic sentence I bade him get Rasta's orderly out of the place on any pretext, and tell him his master would return later. Then I hurried into decent garments, and came out to find my visitor in a brown study.

At the sound of my entrance she started from her dream and stood up on the hearthrug, slipping the long robe of fur from her slim body.

'We are alone?' she said. 'We will not be disturbed?'

Then an inspiration came to me. I remembered that Frau von Einem, according to Blenkiron, did not see eye to eye with the Young Turks; and I had a queer instinct that Rasta could not be to her liking. So I spoke the truth.

'I must tell you that there's another guest here tonight. I reckon he's feeling pretty uncomfortable. At present he's trussed up on a shelf in that cupboard.'

She did not trouble to look round.

'Is he dead?' she asked calmly.

'By no means,' I said, 'but he's fixed so he can't speak, and I guess he can't hear much.'

'He was the man who brought you this?' she asked, pointing to the envelope on the table which bore the big blue stamp of the Ministry of War.

'The same,' I said. 'I'm not perfectly sure of his name, but I think they call him Rasta.'

Not a flicker of a smile crossed her face, but I had a feeling that the news pleased her.

'Did he thwart you?' she asked.

'Why, yes. He thwarted me some. His head is a bit swelled, and an hour or two on the shelf will do him good.'

'He is a powerful man,' she said, 'a jackal of Enver's. You have made a dangerous enemy.'

'I don't value him at two cents,' said I, though I thought grimly that as far as I could see the value of him was likely to be about the price of my neck.

'Perhaps you are right,' she said with serious eyes. 'In these days no enemy is dangerous to a bold man. I have come tonight, Mr Hanau, to talk business with you, as they say in your country. I have heard well of you, and today I have seen you. I may have need of you, and you assuredly will have need of me. . . .'

She broke off, and again her strange potent eyes fell on my face. They were like a burning searchlight which showed up every cranny and crack of the soul. I felt it was going to be horribly difficult to act a part under that compelling gaze. She could not mesmerize me, but she could strip me of my fancy dress and set me naked in the masquerade.

'What came you forth to seek?' she asked. 'You are not like the stout American Blenkiron, a lover of shoddy power and a devotee of a feeble science. There is something more than that in your face. You are on our side, but you are not of the Germans with their hankerings for a rococo Empire. You come from America, the land of pious follies, where men worship gold and words. I ask, what came you forth to seek?'

As she spoke I seemed to get a vision of a figure, like one of the old gods looking down on human nature from a great height, a figure disdainful and passionless, but with its own magnificence. It kindled my imagination, and I answered with the stuff I had often cogitated when I had tried to explain to myself just how a case could be made out against the Allied cause.

'I will tell you, Madam,' I said. 'I am a man who has followed a science, but I have followed it in wild places, and I have gone through it and come out at the other side. The world, as I see it, had become too easy and cushioned. Men had forgotten their manhood in soft speech, and imagined that the rules of their smug civilization were the laws of the universe. But that is not the teaching of science, and it is not the teaching of life. We have forgotten the greater virtues, and we were becoming emasculated humbugs whose gods were our own weaknesses. Then came war, and the air was cleared. Germany, in spite of her blunders and her grossness, stood forth as the scourge of cant. She had the courage to cut through the bonds of humbug and to laugh at the fetishes of the herd. Therefore I am on Germany's side. But I came here for another reason. I know nothing of the East, but as I read history it is from the desert that the purification comes. When mankind is smothered with shams and phrases and painted idols a wind blows out of the wild to cleanse and simplify life. The world needs space and fresh air. The civilization we have boasted of is a toy-shop and a blind alley, and I hanker for the open country.'

This confounded nonsense was well received. Her pale eyes had the cold light of the fanatic. With her bright hair and the long exquisite oval of her face she looked like some destroying fury of a Norse legend. At that moment I think I first really feared her; before I had half-hated and half-admired. Thank Heaven, in her absorption she did not notice that I had forgotten the speech of Cleveland, Ohio.

'You are of the Household of Faith,' she said. 'You will presently learn many things, for the Faith marches to victory. Meantime I have one word for you. You and your companion travel eastward.'

'We go to Mesopotamia,' I said. 'I reckon these are our passports,' and I pointed to the envelope.

She picked it up, opened it, and then tore it in pieces and tossed it in the fire.

'The orders are countermanded,' she said. 'I have need of you and you go with me. Not to the flats of the Tigris, but to the great hills. Tomorrow you will receive new passports.'

She gave me her hand and turned to go. At the threshold she paused, and looked towards the oak cupboard. 'Tomorrow I will relieve you of your prisoner. He will be safer in my hands.'

She left me in a condition of pretty blank bewilderment. We were to be tied to the chariot-wheels of this fury, and started on an enterprise compared to which fighting against our friends at Kut seemed tame and reasonable. On the other hand, I had been spotted by Rasta, and had got the envoy of the most powerful man in Constantinople locked in a cupboard. At all costs we had to keep Rasta safe, but I was very determined that he should not be handed over to the lady. I

was going to be no party to cold-blooded murder, which I judged to be her expedient. It was a pretty kettle of fish, but in the meantime I must have food, for I had eaten nothing for nine hours. So I went in search of Peter.

I had scarcely begun my long deferred meal when Sandy entered. He was before his time, and he looked as solemn as a sick owl. I seized on him as a drowning man clutches a spar.

He heard my story of Rasta with a lengthening face.

'That's bad,' he said. 'You say he spotted you, and your subsequent doings of course would not disillusion him. It's an infernal nuisance, but there's only one way out of it. I must put him in charge of my own people. They will keep him safe and sound till he's wanted. Only he mustn't see me.' And he went out in a hurry.

I fetched Rasta from his prison. He had come to his senses by this time, and lay regarding me with stony, malevolent eyes.

'I'm very sorry, Sir,' I said, 'for what has happened. But you left me no alternative. I've got a big job on hand and I can't have it interfered with by you or anyone. You're paying the price of a suspicious nature. When you know a little more you'll want to apologize to me. I'm going to see that you are kept quiet and comfortable for a day or two. You've no cause to worry, for you'll suffer no harm. I give you my word of honour as an American citizen.'

Two of Sandy's miscreants came in and bore him off, and presently Sandy himself returned. When I asked him where he was being taken, Sandy said he didn't know. 'They've got their orders, and they'll carry them out to the letter. There's a big unknown area in Constantinople to hide a man, into which the *Khafiye* never enter.'

Then he flung himself in a chair and lit his old pipe.

'Dick,' he said, 'this job is getting very difficult and very dark. But my knowledge has grown in the last few days. I've found out the meaning of the second word that Harry Bullivant scribbled.'

'*Cancer*?' I asked.

'Yes. It means just what it reads and no more. Greenmantle is dying — has been dying for months. This afternoon they brought a German doctor to see him, and the man gave him a few hours of life. By now he may be dead.'

The news was a staggerer. For a moment I thought it cleared up things. 'Then that busts the show,' I said. 'You can't have a crusade without a prophet.'

'I wish I thought it did. It's the end of one stage, but the start of a new and blacker one. Do you think that woman will be beaten by such a small thing as the death of her prophet? She'll find a substitute — one of the four Ministers, or someone else. She's a devil incarnate, but she has the soul of a Napoleon. The big danger is only beginning.'

Then he told me the story of his recent doings. He had found out the house of Frau von Einem without much trouble, and had performed with his ragamuffins in the servants' quarters. The prophet had a large retinue, and the fame of his minstrels — for the Companions were known far and wide in the land of Islam — came speedily to the ears of the Holy Ones. Sandy, a leader in this most orthodox coterie, was taken into favour and brought to the notice of the four Ministers. He and his half-dozen retainers became inmates of the villa, and Sandy, from his knowledge of Islamic lore and his ostentatious piety, was admitted to the confidence of the household. Frau von Einem welcomed him as an ally, for the Companions had been the most devoted propagandists of the new revelation.

As he described it, it was a strange business. Greenmantle was dying and often in great pain, but he struggled to meet the demands of his protectress. The four Ministers, as Sandy saw them, were unworldly ascetics; the prophet himself was a saint, though a practical saint with some notions of policy; but the controlling brain and will were those of the lady. Sandy seemed to have won his favour, even his affection. He spoke of him with a kind of desperate pity.

'I never saw such a man. He is the greatest gentleman you can picture, with a dignity like a high mountain. He is a dreamer and a poet, too — a genius if I can judge these things. I think I can assess him rightly, for I know something of the soul of the East, but it would be too long a story to tell now. The West knows nothing of the true Oriental. It pictures him as lapped in colour and idleness and luxury and gorgeous dreams. But it is all wrong. The *Kaf* he yearns for is an austere thing. It is the austerity of the East that is its beauty and its terror . . . It always wants the same things at the back of its head. The Turk and the Arab came out of big spaces, and they have the desire of them in their bones. They settle down and stagnate, and by the by they degenerate into that appalling subtlety which is their ruling passion gone crooked. And then comes a new revelation and a great simplifying. They want to live face to face with God without a screen of ritual and images and priestcraft. They want to prune life of its foolish fringes and get back to the noble bareness of the desert.'

Remember, it is always the empty desert and the empty sky that cast their spell over them — these, and the hot, strong, antiseptic sunlight which burns up all rot and decay. It isn't inhuman. It's the humanity of one part of the human race. It isn't ours, it isn't as good as ours, but it's jolly good all the same. There are times when it grips me so hard that I'm inclined to forswear the gods of my fathers!

'Well, Greenmantle is the prophet of this great simplicity. He speaks straight to the heart of Islam, and it's an honourable message. But for our sins it's been twisted into part of that damned German propaganda. His unworldliness has been used for a cunning political move, and his creed of space and simplicity for the furtherance of the last word in human degeneracy. My God, Dick, it's like seeing St Francis run by Messalina.'

'The woman has been here tonight,' I said. 'She asked me what I stood for, and I invented some infernal nonsense which she approved of. But I can see one thing. She and her prophet may run for different stakes, but it's the same course.'

Sandy started. 'She has been here!' he cried. 'Tell me, Dick, what do you think of her?'

'I thought she was about two parts mad, but the third part was uncommon like inspiration.'

'That's about right,' he said. 'I was wrong in comparing her to Messalina. She's something a dashed sight more complicated. She runs the prophet just because she shares his belief. Only what in him is sane and fine, in her is mad and horrible. You see, Germany also wants to simplify life.'

'I know,' I said. 'I told her that an hour ago, when I talked more rot to the second than any normal man ever achieved. It will come between me and my sleep for the rest of my days.'

'Germany's simplicity is that of the neurotic, not the primitive. It is megalomania and egotism and the pride of the man in the Bible that waxed fat and kicked. But the results are the same. She wants to destroy and simplify; but it isn't the simplicity of the ascetic, which is of the spirit, but the simplicity of the madman that grinds down all the contrivances of civilization to a featureless monotony. The prophet wants to save the souls of his people; Germany wants to rule the inanimate corpse of the world. But you can get the same language to cover both. And so you have the partnership of St Francis and Messalina. Dick, did you ever hear of a thing called the Superman?'

'There was a time when the papers were full of nothing else,' I answered. 'I gather it was invented by a sportsman called Nietzsche.'

'Maybe,' said Sandy. 'Old Nietzsche has been blamed for a great deal of rubbish he would have died rather than acknowledge. But it's a craze of the new, fatted Germany. It's a fancy type which could never really exist, any more than the Economic Man of the politicians. Mankind has a sense of humour which stops short of the final absurdity. There never has been, and there never could be a real Superman . . . But there might be a Superwoman.'

'You'll get into trouble, my lad, if you talk like that,' I said.

'It's true all the same. Women have got a perilous logic which we never have, and some of the best of them don't see the joke of life like the ordinary man. They can be far greater than men, for they can go straight to the heart of things. There never was a man so near the divine as Joan of Arc. But I think, too, they can be more entirely damnable than anything that ever was breeched, for they don't stop still now and then and laugh at themselves . . . There is no Superman. The poor old donkeys that fancy themselves in the part are either crackbrained professors who couldn't rule a Sunday-school class, or bristling soldiers with pint-pot heads who imagine that the shooting of a Duc d'Enghien made a Napoleon. But there is a Superwoman, and her name's Hilda von Einem.'

'I thought our job was nearly over,' I groaned, 'and now it looks as if it hadn't well started. Bullivant said that all we had to do was to find out the truth.'

'Bullivant didn't know. No man knows except you and me. I tell you, the woman has immense power. The Germans have trusted her with their trump card, and she's going to play it for all she is worth. There's no crime that will stand in her way. She has set the ball rolling, and if need be she'll cut all her prophets' throats and run the show herself . . . I don't know about your job, for honestly I can't quite see what you and Blenkiron are going to do. But I'm very clear about my own duty. She's let me into the business, and I'm going to stick to it in the hope that I'll find a chance of wrecking it . . . We're moving eastward tomorrow — with a new prophet if the old one is dead.'

'Where are you going?' I asked.

'I don't know. But I gather it's a long journey, judging by the preparations. And it must be to a cold country, judging by the clothes provided.'

‘Well, wherever it is, we’re going with you. You haven’t heard the end of our yarn. Blenkiron and I have been moving in the best circles as skilled American engineers who are going to play Old Harry with the British on the Tigris. I’m a pal of Enver’s now, and he has offered me his protection. The lamented Rasta brought our passports for the journey to Mesopotamia tomorrow, but an hour ago your lady tore them up and put them in the fire. We are going with her, and she vouchsafed the information that it was towards the great hills.’

Sandy whistled long and low. ‘I wonder what the deuce she wants with you? This thing is getting dashed complicated, Dick . . . Where, more by token, is Blenkiron? He’s the fellow to know about high politics.’

The missing Blenkiron, as Sandy spoke, entered the room with his slow, quiet step. I could see by his carriage that for once he had no dyspepsia, and by his eyes that he was excited.

‘Say, boys,’ he said, ‘I’ve got something pretty considerable in the way of noos. There’s been big fighting on the Eastern border, and the Buzzards have taken a bad knock.’

His hands were full of papers, from which he selected a map and spread it on the table.

‘They keep mum about this thing in the capital, but I’ve been piecing the story together these last days and I think I’ve got it straight. A fortnight ago old man Nicholas descended from his mountains and scuppered his enemies there — at Kuprikeui, where the main road eastwards crosses the Araxes. That was only the beginning of the stunt, for he pressed on on a broad front, and the gentleman called Kiamil, who commands in those parts, was not up to the job of holding him. The Buzzards were shepherded in from north and east and south, and now the Muscovite is sitting down outside the forts of Erzerum. I can tell you they’re pretty miserable about the situation in the highest quarters . . . Enver is sweating blood to get fresh divisions to Erzerum from Gally-poly, but it’s a long road and it looks as if they would be too late for the fair . . . You and I, Major, start for Mesopotamy tomorrow, and that’s about the meanest bit of bad luck that ever happened to John S. We’re missing the chance of seeing the goriest fight of this campaign.’

I picked up the map and pocketed it. Maps were my business, and I had been looking for one.

‘We’re not going to Mesopotamia,’ I said. ‘Our orders have been cancelled.’

‘But I’ve just seen Enver, and he said he had sent round our passports.’

‘They’re in the fire,’ I said. ‘The right ones will come along tomorrow morning.’

Sandy broke in, his eyes bright with excitement.

‘The great hills! . . . We’re going to Erzerum . . . Don’t you see that the Germans are playing their big card? They’re sending Greenmantle to the point of danger in the hope that his coming will rally the Turkish defence. Things are beginning to move, Dick, old man. No more kicking the heels for us. We’re going to be in it up to the neck, and Heaven help the best man . . . I must be off now, for I’ve a lot to do. *Au revoir*. We meet some time in the hills.’

Blenkiron still looked puzzled, till I told him the story of that night’s doings. As he listened, all the satisfaction went out of his face, and that funny, childish air of bewilderment crept in.

‘It’s not for me to complain, for it’s in the straight line of our dooty, but I reckon there’s going to be big trouble ahead of this caravan. It’s Kismet, and we’ve got to bow. But I won’t pretend that I’m not considerable scared at the prospect.’

‘Oh, so am I,’ I said. ‘The woman frightens me into fits. We’re up against it this time all right. All the same I’m glad we’re to be let into the real star metropolitan performance. I didn’t relish the idea of touring the provinces.’

‘I guess that’s correct. But I could wish that the good God would see fit to take that lovely lady to Himself. She’s too much for a quiet man at my time of life. When she invites us to go in on the ground-floor I feel like taking the elevator to the roof-garden.’



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE BATTERED CARAVANSERAI

Two days later, in the evening, we came to Angora, the first stage in our journey.

The passports had arrived next morning, as Frau von Einem had promised, and with them a plan of our journey. More, one of the Companions, who spoke a little English, was detailed to accompany us — a wise precaution, for no one of us had a word of Turkish. These were the sum of our instructions. I heard nothing more of Sandy or Greenmantle or the lady. We were meant to travel in our own party.

We had the railway to Angora, a very comfortable German *Schlafwagen*, tacked to the end of a troop-train. There wasn't much to be seen of the country, for after we left the Bosphorus we ran into scuds of snow, and except that we seemed to be climbing on to a big plateau I had no notion of the landscape. It was a marvel that we made such good time, for that line was congested beyond anything I have ever seen. The place was crawling with the Gallipoli troops, and every siding was packed with supply trucks. When we stopped — which we did on an average about once an hour — you could see vast camps on both sides of the line, and often we struck regiments on the march along the railway track. They looked a fine, hardy lot of ruffians, but many were deplorably ragged, and I didn't think much of their boots. I wondered how they would do the five hundred miles of road to Erzerum.

Blenkiron played Patience, and Peter and I took a hand at picquet, but mostly we smoked and yarned. Getting away from that infernal city had cheered us up wonderfully. Now we were out on the open road, moving to the sound of the guns. At the worst, we should not perish like rats in a sewer. We would be all together, too, and that was a comfort. I think we felt the relief which a man who has been on a lonely outpost feels when he is brought back to his battalion. Besides, the thing had gone clean beyond our power to direct. It was no good planning and scheming, for none of us had a notion what the next step might be. We were fatalists now, believing in Kismet, and that is a comfortable faith.

All but Blenkiron. The coming of Hilda von Einem into the business had put a very ugly complexion on it for him. It was curious to see how she affected the different members of our gang. Peter did not care a rush: man, woman, and hippogriff were the same to him; he met it all as calmly as if he were making plans to round up an old lion in a patch of bush, taking the facts as they came and working at them as if they were a sum in arithmetic. Sandy and I were impressed — it's no good denying it: horribly impressed — but we were too interested to be scared, and we weren't a bit fascinated. We hated her too much for that. But she fairly struck Blenkiron dumb. He said himself it was just like a rattlesnake and a bird.

I made him talk about her, for if he sat and brooded he would get worse. It was a strange thing that this man, the most imperturbable and, I think, about the most courageous I have ever met, should be paralysed by a slim woman. There was no doubt about it. The thought of her made the future to him as black as a thunder cloud. It took the power out of his joints, and if she was going to be much around, it looked as if Blenkiron might be counted out.

I suggested that he was in love with her, but this he vehemently denied.

'No, Sir; I haven't got no sort of affection for the lady. My trouble is that she puts me out of countenance, and I can't fit her in as an antagonist. I guess we Americans haven't got the right poise for dealing with that kind of female. We've exalted our womenfolk into little tin gods, and at the same time left them out of the real business of life. Consequently, when we strike one playing the biggest kind of man's game we can't place her. We aren't used to regarding them as anything except angels and children. I wish I had had you boys' upbringing.'

Angora was like my notion of some place such as Amiens in the retreat from Mons. It was one mass of troops and transport — the neck of the bottle, for more arrived every hour, and the only outlet was the single eastern road. The town was pandemonium into which distracted German officers were trying to introduce some order. They didn't worry much about us, for the heart of Anatolia wasn't a likely hunting-ground for suspicious characters. We took our passport to the commandant, who visaed them readily, and told us he'd do his best to get us transport. We spent the night in a sort of hotel, where all four crowded into one little bedroom, and next morning I had my work cut out getting a motor-car. It took four hours, and the use of every great name in the Turkish Empire, to raise a dingy sort of Studebaker, and another two to get the petrol and spare tyres. As for a chauffeur, love or money couldn't find him, and I was compelled to drive the thing

myself.

We left just after midday and swung out into bare bleak downs patched with scrubby woodlands. There was no snow here, but a wind was blowing from the east which searched the marrow. Presently we climbed up into hills, and the road, though not badly engineered to begin with, grew as rough as the channel of a stream. No wonder, for the traffic was like what one saw on that awful stretch between Cassel and Ypres, and there were no gangs of Belgian roadmakers to mend it up. We found troops by the thousands striding along with their impassive Turkish faces, ox convoys, mule convoys, wagons drawn by sturdy little Anatolian horses, and, coming in the contrary direction, many shabby Red Crescent cars and wagons of the wounded. We had to crawl for hours on end, till we got past a block. Just before the darkening we seemed to outstrip the first press, and had a clear run for about ten miles over a low pass in the hills. I began to get anxious about the car, for it was a poor one at the best, and the road was guaranteed sooner or later to knock even a Rolls-Royce into scrap iron.

All the same it was glorious to be out in the open again. Peter's face wore a new look, and he sniffed the bitter air like a stag. There floated up from little wayside camps the odour of wood-smoke and dung-fires. That, and the curious acrid winter smell of great wind-blown spaces, will always come to my memory as I think of that day. Every hour brought me peace of mind and resolution. I felt as I had felt when the battalion first marched from Aire towards the firing-line, a kind of keying-up and wild expectation. I'm not used to cities, and lounging about Constantinople had slackened my fibre. Now, as the sharp wind buffeted us, I felt braced to any kind of risk. We were on the great road to the east and the border hills, and soon we should stand upon the farthest battle-front of the war. This was no commonplace intelligence job. That was all over, and we were going into the firing-zone, going to take part in what might be the downfall of our enemies. I didn't reflect that we were among those enemies, and would probably share their downfall if we were not shot earlier. The truth is, I had got out of the way of regarding the thing as a struggle between armies and nations. I hardly bothered to think where my sympathies lay. First and foremost it was a contest between the four of us and a crazy woman, and this personal antagonism made the strife of armies only a dimly-felt background.

We slept that night like logs on the floor of a dirty khan, and started next morning in a powder of snow. We were getting very high up now, and it was perishing cold. The Companion — his name sounded like Hussin — had travelled the road before and told me what the places were, but they conveyed nothing to me. All morning we wriggled through a big lot of troops, a brigade at least, who swung along at a great pace with a fine free stride that I don't think I have ever seen bettered. I must say I took a fancy to the Turkish fighting man: I remembered the testimonial our fellows gave him as a clean fighter, and I felt very bitter that Germany should have lugged him into this dirty business. They halted for a meal, and we stopped, too, and lunched off some brown bread and dried figs and a flask of very sour wine. I had a few words with one of the officers who spoke a little German. He told me they were marching straight for Russia, since there had been a great Turkish victory in the Caucasus. 'We have beaten the French and the British, and now it is Russia's turn,' he said stolidly, as if repeating a lesson. But he added that he was mortally sick of war.

In the afternoon we cleared the column and had an open road for some hours. The land now had a tilt eastward, as if we were moving towards the valley of a great river. Soon we began to meet little parties of men coming from the east with a new look in their faces. The first lots of wounded had been the ordinary thing you see on every front, and there had been some pretence at organization. But these new lots were very weary and broken; they were often barefoot, and they seemed to have lost their transport and to be starving. You would find a group stretched by the roadside in the last stages of exhaustion. Then would come a party limping along, so tired that they never turned their heads to look at us. Almost all were wounded, some badly, and most were horribly thin. I wondered how my Turkish friend behind would explain the sight to his men, if he believed in a great victory. They had not the air of the backwash of a conquering army.

Even Blenkiron, who was no soldier, noticed it.

'These boys look mighty bad,' he observed. 'We've got to hustle, Major, if we're going to get seats for the last act.'

That was my own feeling. The sight made me mad to get on faster, for I saw that big things were happening in the East. I had reckoned that four days would take us from Angora to Erzerum, but here was the second nearly over and we were not yet a third of the way. I pressed on recklessly, and that hurry was our undoing.

I have said that the Studebaker was a rotten old car. Its steering-gear was pretty dicky, and the bad surface and continual hairpin bends of the road didn't improve it. Soon we came into snow lying fairly deep, frozen hard and rutted by the big transport-wagons. We bumped and bounced horribly, and were shaken about like peas in a bladder. I began to be

acutely anxious about the old boneshaker, the more as we seemed a long way short of the village I had proposed to spend the night in. Twilight was falling and we were still in an unfeatured waste, crossing the shallow glen of a stream. There was a bridge at the bottom of a slope — a bridge of logs and earth which had apparently been freshly strengthened for heavy traffic. As we approached it at a good pace the car ceased to answer to the wheel.

I struggled desperately to keep it straight, but it swerved to the left and we plunged over a bank into a marshy hollow. There was a sickening bump as we struck the lower ground, and the whole party were shot out into the frozen slush. I don't yet know how I escaped, for the car turned over and by rights I should have had my back broken. But no one was hurt. Peter was laughing, and Blenkiron, after shaking the snow out of his hair, joined him. For myself I was feverishly examining the machine. It was about as ugly as it could be, for the front axle was broken.

Here was a piece of hopeless bad luck. We were stuck in the middle of Asia Minor with no means of conveyance, for to get a new axle there was as likely as to find snowballs on the Congo. It was all but dark and there was no time to lose. I got out the petrol tins and spare tyres and cached them among some rocks on the hillside. Then we collected our scanty baggage from the derelict Studebaker. Our only hope was Hussin. He had got to find us some lodging for the night, and next day we would have a try for horses or a lift in some passing wagon. I had no hope of another car. Every automobile in Anatolia would now be at a premium.

It was so disgusting a mishap that we all took it quietly. It was too bad to be helped by hard swearing. Hussin and Peter set off on different sides of the road to prospect for a house, and Blenkiron and I sheltered under the nearest rock and smoked savagely.

Hussin was the first to strike oil. He came back in twenty minutes with news of some kind of dwelling a couple of miles up the stream. He went off to collect Peter, and, humping our baggage, Blenkiron and I plodded up the waterside. Darkness had fallen thick by this time, and we took some bad tosses among the bogs. When Hussin and Peter overtook us they found a better road, and presently we saw a light twinkle in the hollow ahead.

It proved to be a wretched tumble-down farm in a grove of poplars — a foul-smelling, muddy yard, a two-roomed hovel of a house, and a barn which was tolerably dry and which we selected for our sleeping-place. The owner was a broken old fellow whose sons were all at the war, and he received us with the profound calm of one who expects nothing but unpleasantness from life.

By this time we had recovered our tempers, and I was trying hard to put my new Kismet philosophy into practice. I reckoned that if risks were foreordained, so were difficulties, and both must be taken as part of the day's work. With the remains of our provisions and some curdled milk we satisfied our hunger and curled ourselves up among the pease straw of the barn. Blenkiron announced with a happy sigh that he had now been for two days quit of his dyspepsia.

That night, I remember, I had a queer dream. I seemed to be in a wild place among mountains, and I was being hunted, though who was after me I couldn't tell. I remember sweating with fright, for I seemed to be quite alone and the terror that was pursuing me was more than human. The place was horribly quiet and still, and there was deep snow lying everywhere, so that each step I took was heavy as lead. A very ordinary sort of nightmare, you will say. Yes, but there was one strange feature in this one. The night was pitch dark, but ahead of me in the throat of the pass there was one patch of light, and it showed a rum little hill with a rocky top: what we call in South Africa a *castrol* or saucepan. I had a notion that if I could get to that *castrol* I should be safe, and I panted through the drifts towards it with the avenger of blood at my heels. I woke, gasping, to find the winter morning struggling through the cracked rafters, and to hear Blenkiron say cheerily that his duodenum had behaved all night like a gentleman. I lay still for a bit trying to fix the dream, but it all dissolved into haze except the picture of the little hill, which was quite clear in every detail. I told myself it was a reminiscence of the veld, some spot down in the Wakkerstroom country, though for the life of me I couldn't place it.

I pass over the next three days, for they were one uninterrupted series of heart-breaks. Hussin and Peter scoured the country for horses, Blenkiron sat in the barn and played Patience, while I haunted the roadside near the bridge in the hope of picking up some kind of conveyance. My task was perfectly futile. The columns passed, casting wondering eyes on the wrecked car among the frozen rushes, but they could offer no help. My friend the Turkish officer promised to wire to Angora from some place or other for a fresh car, but, remembering the state of affairs at Angora, I had no hope from that quarter. Cars passed, plenty of them, packed with staff-officers, Turkish and German, but they were in far too big a hurry even to stop and speak. The only conclusion I reached from my roadside vigil was that things were getting very warm in the

neighbourhood of Erzerum. Everybody on that road seemed to be in mad haste either to get there or to get away.

Hussin was the best chance, for, as I have said, the Companions had a very special and peculiar graft throughout the Turkish Empire. But the first day he came back empty-handed. All the horses had been commandeered for the war, he said; and though he was certain that some had been kept back and hidden away, he could not get on their track. The second day he returned with two — miserable screws and deplorably short in the wind from a diet of beans. There was no decent corn or hay left in the countryside. The third day he picked up a nice little Arab stallion: in poor condition, it is true, but perfectly sound. For these beasts we paid good money, for Blenkiron was well supplied and we had no time to spare for the interminable Oriental bargaining.

Hussin said he had cleaned up the countryside, and I believed him. I dared not delay another day, even though it meant leaving him behind. But he had no notion of doing anything of the kind. He was a good runner, he said, and could keep up with such horses as ours for ever. If this was the manner of our progress, I reckoned we would be weeks in getting to Erzerum.

We started at dawn on the morning of the fourth day, after the old farmer had blessed us and sold us some stale rye-bread. Blenkiron bestrode the Arab, being the heaviest, and Peter and I had the screws. My worst forebodings were soon realized, and Hussin, loping along at my side, had an easy job to keep up with us. We were about as slow as an ox-wagon. The brutes were unshod, and with the rough roads I saw that their feet would very soon go to pieces. We jogged along like a tinker's caravan, about five miles to the hour, as feckless a party as ever disgraced a highroad.

The weather was now a drizzle, which increased my depression. Cars passed us and disappeared in the mist, going at thirty miles an hour to mock our slowness. None of us spoke, for the futility of the business clogged our spirits. I bit hard on my lip to curb my restlessness, and I think I would have sold my soul there and then for anything that could move fast. I don't know any sorer trial than to be mad for speed and have to crawl at a snail's pace. I was getting ripe for any kind of desperate venture.

About midday we descended on a wide plain full of the marks of rich cultivation. Villages became frequent, and the land was studded with olive groves and scarred with water furrows. From what I remembered of the map I judged that we were coming to that champagne country near Siwas, which is the granary of Turkey, and the home of the true Osmanli stock.

Then at the turning of the road we came to the caravanserai.

It was a dingy, battered place, with the pink plaster falling in patches from its walls. There was a courtyard abutting on the road, and a flat-topped house with a big hole in its side. It was a long way from any battle-ground, and I guessed that some explosion had wrought the damage. Behind it, a few hundred yards off, a detachment of cavalry were encamped beside a stream, with their horses tied up in long lines of pickets.

And by the roadside, quite alone and deserted, stood a large new motor-car.

In all the road before and behind there was no man to be seen except the troops by the stream. The owners, whoever they were, must be inside the caravanserai.

I have said I was in the mood for some desperate deed, and lo and behold providence had given me the chance! I coveted that car as I have never coveted anything on earth. At the moment all my plans had narrowed down to a feverish passion to get to the battle-field. We had to find Greenmantle at Erzerum, and once there we should have Hilda von Einem's protection. It was a time of war, and a front of brass was the surest safety. But, indeed, I could not figure out any plan worth speaking of. I saw only one thing — a fast car which might be ours.

I said a word to the others, and we dismounted and tethered our horses at the near end of the courtyard. I heard the low hum of voices from the cavalymen by the stream, but they were three hundred yards off and could not see us. Peter was sent forward to scout in the courtyard. In the building itself there was but one window looking on the road, and that was in the upper floor.

Meantime I crawled along beside the wall to where the car stood, and had a look at it. It was a splendid six-cylinder affair, brand new, with the tyres little worn. There were seven tins of petrol stacked behind as well as spare tyres, and, looking in, I saw map-cases and field-glasses strewn on the seats as if the owners had only got out for a minute to stretch their legs.

Peter came back and reported that the courtyard was empty.

‘There are men in the upper room,’ he said; ‘more than one, for I heard their voices. They are moving about restlessly, and may soon be coming out.’

I reckoned that there was no time to be lost, so I told the others to slip down the road fifty yards beyond the caravanserai and be ready to climb in as I passed. I had to start the infernal thing, and there might be shooting.

I waited by the car till I saw them reach the right distance. I could hear voices from the second floor of the house and footsteps moving up and down. I was in a fever of anxiety, for any moment a man might come to the window. Then I flung myself on the starting handle and worked like a demon.

The cold made the job difficult, and my heart was in my mouth, for the noise in that quiet place must have woke the dead. Then, by the mercy of Heaven, the engine started, and I sprang to the driving seat, released the clutch, and opened the throttle. The great car shot forward, and I seemed to hear behind me shrill voices. A pistol bullet bored through my hat, and another buried itself in a cushion beside me.

In a second I was clear of the place and the rest of the party were embarking. Blenkiron got on the step and rolled himself like a sack of coals into the tonneau. Peter nipped up beside me, and Hussin scrambled in from the back over the folds of the hood. We had our baggage in our pockets and had nothing to carry.

Bullets dropped round us, but did no harm. Then I heard a report at my ear, and out of a corner of my eye saw Peter lower his pistol. Presently we were out of range, and, looking back, I saw three men gesticulating in the middle of the road.

‘May the devil fly away with this pistol,’ said Peter ruefully. ‘I never could make good shooting with a little gun. Had I had my rifle . . .’

‘What did you shoot for?’ I asked in amazement. ‘We’ve got the fellows’ car, and we don’t want to do them any harm.’

‘It would have saved trouble had I had my rifle,’ said Peter, quietly. ‘The little man you call Rasta was there, and he knew you. I heard him cry your name. He is an angry little man, and I observe that on this road there is a telegraph.’



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TROUBLE BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

From that moment I date the beginning of my madness. Suddenly I forgot all cares and difficulties of the present and future and became foolishly light-hearted. We were rushing towards the great battle where men were busy at my proper trade. I realized how much I had loathed the lonely days in Germany, and still more the dawdling week in Constantinople. Now I was clear of it all, and bound for the clash of armies. It didn't trouble me that we were on the wrong side of the battle line. I had a sort of instinct that the darker and wilder things grew the better chance for us.

'Seems to me,' said Blenkiron, bending over me, 'that this joy-ride is going to come to an untimely end pretty soon. Peter's right. That young man will set the telegraph going, and we'll be held up at the next township.'

'He's got to get to a telegraph office first,' I answered. 'That's where we have the pull on him. He's welcome to the screws we left behind, and if he finds an operator before the evening I'm the worst kind of a Dutchman. I'm going to break all the rules and bucket this car for what she's worth. Don't you see that the nearer we get to Erzerum the safer we are?'

'I don't follow,' he said slowly. 'At Erzerum I reckon they'll be waiting for us with the handcuffs. Why in thunder couldn't those hairy ragamuffins keep the little cuss safe? Your record's a bit too precipitous, Major, for the most innocent-minded military boss.'

'Do you remember what you said about the Germans being open to bluff? Well, I'm going to put up the steepest sort of bluff. Of course they'll stop us. Rasta will do his damndest. But remember that he and his friends are not very popular with the Germans, and Madame von Einem is. We're her proteges, and the bigger the German swell I get before the safer I'll feel. We've got our passports and our orders, and he'll be a bold man that will stop us once we get into the German zone. Therefore I'm going to hurry as fast as God will let me.'

It was a ride that deserved to have an epic written about it. The car was good, and I handled her well, though I say it who shouldn't. The road in that big central plain was fair, and often I knocked fifty miles an hour out of her. We passed troops by a circuit over the veld, where we took some awful risks, and once we skidded by some transport with our off wheels almost over the lip of a ravine. We went through the narrow streets of Siwas like a fire-engine, while I shouted out in German that we carried despatches for headquarters. We shot out of drizzling rain into brief spells of winter sunshine, and then into a snow blizzard which all but whipped the skin from our faces. And always before us the long road unrolled, with somewhere at the end of it two armies clinched in a death-grapple.

That night we looked for no lodging. We ate a sort of meal in the car with the hood up, and felt our way on in the darkness, for the headlights were in perfect order. Then we turned off the road for four hours' sleep, and I had a go at the map. Before dawn we started again, and came over a pass into the vale of a big river. The winter dawn showed its gleaming stretches, ice-bound among the sprinkled meadows. I called to Blenkiron:

'I believe that river is the Euphrates,' I said. 'So,' he said, acutely interested. 'Then that's the waters of Babylon. Great snakes, that I should have lived to see the fields where King Nebuchadnezzar grazed! Do you know the name of that big hill, Major?'

'Ararat, as like as not,' I cried, and he believed me.

We were among the hills now, great, rocky, black slopes, and, seen through side glens, a hinterland of snowy peaks. I remember I kept looking for the *castral* I had seen in my dream. The thing had never left off haunting me, and I was pretty clear now that it did not belong to my South African memories. I am not a superstitious man, but the way that little *kranz* clung to my mind made me think it was a warning sent by Providence. I was pretty certain that when I clapped eyes on it I would be in for bad trouble.

All morning we travelled up that broad vale, and just before noon it spread out wider, the road dipped to the water's edge, and I saw before me the white roofs of a town. The snow was deep now, and lay down to the riverside, but the sky had cleared, and against a space of blue heaven some peaks to the south rose glittering like jewels. The arches of a bridge, spanning two forks of the stream, showed in front, and as I slowed down at the bend a sentry's challenge rang out from a block-house. We had reached the fortress of Erzingjan, the headquarters of a Turkish corps and the gate of Armenia.

I showed the man our passports, but he did not salute and let us move on. He called another fellow from the guardhouse, who motioned us to keep pace with him as he stumped down a side lane. At the other end was a big barracks with sentries outside. The man spoke to us in Turkish, which Hussin interpreted. There was somebody in that barracks who wanted badly to see us.

‘By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,’ quoted Blenkiron softly. ‘I fear, Major, we’ll soon be remembering Zion.’

I tried to persuade myself that this was merely the red tape of a frontier fortress, but I had an instinct that difficulties were in store for us. If Rasta had started wiring I was prepared to put up the brazenest bluff, for we were still eighty miles from Erzerum, and at all costs we were going to be landed there before night.

A fussy staff-officer met us at the door. At the sight of us he cried to a friend to come and look.

‘Here are the birds safe. A fat man and two lean ones and a savage who looks like a Kurd. Call the guard and march them off. There’s no doubt about their identity.’

‘Pardon me, Sir,’ I said, ‘but we have no time to spare and we’d like to be in Erzerum before the dark. I would beg you to get through any formalities as soon as possible. This man,’ and I pointed to the sentry, ‘has our passports.’

‘Compose yourself,’ he said impudently; ‘you’re not going on just yet, and when you do it won’t be in a stolen car.’ He took the passports and fingered them casually. Then something he saw there made him cock his eyebrows.

‘Where did you steal these?’ he asked, but with less assurance in his tone.

I spoke very gently. ‘You seem to be the victim of a mistake, sir. These are our papers. We are under orders to report ourselves at Erzerum without an hour’s delay. Whoever hinders us will have to answer to General von Liman. We will be obliged if you will conduct us at once to the Governor.’

‘You can’t see General Posselt,’ he said; ‘this is my business. I have a wire from Siwas that four men stole a car belonging to one of Enver Damad’s staff. It describes you all, and says that two of you are notorious spies wanted by the Imperial Government. What have you to say to that?’

‘Only that it is rubbish. My good Sir, you have seen our passes. Our errand is not to be cried on the housetops, but five minutes with General Posselt will make things clear. You will be exceedingly sorry for it if you delay another minute.’

He was impressed in spite of himself, and after pulling his moustache turned on his heel and left us. Presently he came back and said very gruffly that the Governor would see us. We followed him along a corridor into a big room looking out on the river, where an oldish fellow sat in an arm-chair by a stove, writing letters with a fountain pen.

This was Posselt, who had been Governor of Erzerum till he fell sick and Ahmed Fevzi took his place. He had a peevish mouth and big blue pouches below his eyes. He was supposed to be a good engineer and to have made Erzerum impregnable, but the look on his face gave me the impression that his reputation at the moment was a bit unstable.

The staff-officer spoke to him in an undertone.

‘Yes, yes, I know,’ he said testily. ‘Are these the men? They look a pretty lot of scoundrels. What’s that you say? They deny it. But they’ve got the car. They can’t deny that. Here, you,’ and he fixed on Blenkiron, ‘who the devil are you?’

Blenkiron smiled sleepily at him, not understanding one word, and I took up the parable.

‘Our passports, Sir, give our credentials,’ I said. He glanced through them, and his face lengthened.

‘They’re right enough. But what about this story of stealing a car?’

‘It is quite true,’ I said, ‘but I would prefer to use a pleasanter word. You will see from our papers that every authority on the road is directed to give us the best transport. Our own car broke down, and after a long delay we got some wretched horses. It is vitally important that we should be in Erzerum without delay, so I took the liberty of appropriating an empty car we found outside an inn. I am sorry for the discomfort of the owners, but our business was too grave to wait.’

‘But the telegram says you are notorious spies!’

I smiled. ‘Who sent the telegram?’

‘I see no reason why I shouldn’t give you his name. It was Rasta Bey. You’ve picked an awkward fellow to make an enemy of.’

I did not smile but laughed. ‘Rasta!’ I cried. ‘He’s one of Enver’s satellites. That explains many things. I should like a word with you alone, Sir.’

He nodded to the staff-officer, and when he had gone I put on my most Bible face and looked as important as a provincial mayor at a royal visit.

'I can speak freely,' I said, 'for I am speaking to a soldier of Germany. There is no love lost between Enver and those I serve. I need not tell you that. This Rasta thought he had found a chance of delaying us, so he invents this trash about spies. Those Comitadjis have spies on the brain . . . Especially he hates Frau von Einem.'

He jumped at the name.

'You have orders from her?' he asked, in a respectful tone.

'Why, yes,' I answered, 'and those orders will not wait.'

He got up and walked to a table, whence he turned a puzzled face on me. 'I'm torn in two between the Turks and my own countrymen. If I please one I offend the other, and the result is a damnable confusion. You can go on to Erzerum, but I shall send a man with you to see that you report to headquarters there. I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I'm obliged to take no chances in this business. Rasta's got a grievance against you, but you can easily hide behind the lady's skirts. She passed through this town two days ago.'

Ten minutes later we were coasting through the slush of the narrow streets with a stolid German lieutenant sitting beside Me.

The afternoon was one of those rare days when in the pauses of snow you have a spell of weather as mild as May. I remembered several like it during our winter's training in Hampshire. The road was a fine one, well engineered, and well kept too, considering the amount of traffic. We were little delayed, for it was sufficiently broad to let us pass troops and transport without slackening pace. The fellow at my side was good-humoured enough, but his presence naturally put the lid on our conversation. I didn't want to talk, however. I was trying to piece together a plan, and making very little of it, for I had nothing to go upon. We must find Hilda von Einem and Sandy, and between us we must wreck the Greenmantle business. That done, it didn't matter so much what happened to us. As I reasoned it out, the Turks must be in a bad way, and, unless they got a filip from Greenmantle, would crumple up before the Russians. In the rout I hoped we might get a chance to change our sides. But it was no good looking so far forward; the first thing was to get to Sandy.

Now I was still in the mood of reckless bravado which I had got from bagging the car. I did not realize how thin our story was, and how easily Rasta might have a big graft at headquarters. If I had, I would have shot out the German lieutenant long before we got to Erzerum, and found some way of getting mixed up in the ruck of the population. Hussin could have helped me to that. I was getting so confident since our interview with Posselt that I thought I could bluff the whole outfit.

But my main business that afternoon was pure nonsense. I was trying to find my little hill. At every turn of the road I expected to see the *castrol* before us. You must know that ever since I could stand I have been crazy about high mountains. My father took me to Basutoland when I was a boy, and I reckon I have scrambled over almost every bit of upland south of the Zambesi, from the Hottentots Holland to the Zoutpansberg, and from the ugly yellow kopjes of Damaraland to the noble cliffs of Mont aux Sources. One of the things I had looked forward to in coming home was the chance of climbing the Alps. But now I was among peaks that I fancied were bigger than the Alps, and I could hardly keep my eyes on the road. I was pretty certain that my *castrol* was among them, for that dream had taken an almighty hold on my mind. Funnily enough, I was ceasing to think it a place of evil omen, for one soon forgets the atmosphere of nightmare. But I was convinced that it was a thing I was destined to see, and to see pretty soon.

Darkness fell when we were some miles short of the city, and the last part was difficult driving. On both sides of the road transport and engineers' stores were parked, and some of it strayed into the highway. I noticed lots of small details — machine-gun detachments, signalling parties, squads of stretcher-bearers — which mean the fringe of an army, and as soon as the night began the white fingers of searchlights began to grope in the skies.

And then, above the hum of the roadside, rose the voice of the great guns. The shells were bursting four or five miles away, and the guns must have been as many more distant. But in that upland pocket of plain in the frosty night they sounded most intimately near. They kept up their solemn litany, with a minute's interval between each — no *rafale* which rumbles like a drum, but the steady persistence of artillery exactly ranged on a target. I judged they must be bombarding the outer forts, and once there came a loud explosion and a red glare as if a magazine had suffered.

It was a sound I had not heard for five months, and it fairly crazed me. I remembered how I had first heard it on the

ridge before Laventie. Then I had been half-afraid, half-solemnized, but every nerve had been quickened. Then it had been the new thing in my life that held me breathless with anticipation; now it was the old thing, the thing I had shared with so many good fellows, my proper work, and the only task for a man. At the sound of the guns I felt that I was moving in natural air once more. I felt that I was coming home.

We were stopped at a long line of ramparts, and a German sergeant stared at us till he saw the lieutenant beside me, when he saluted and we passed on. Almost at once we dipped into narrow twisting streets, choked with soldiers, where it was hard business to steer. There were few lights — only now and then the flare of a torch which showed the grey stone houses, with every window latticed and shuttered. I had put out my headlights and had only side lamps, so we had to pick our way gingerly through the labyrinth. I hoped we would strike Sandy's quarters soon, for we were all pretty empty, and a frost had set in which made our thick coats seem as thin as paper.

The lieutenant did the guiding. We had to present our passports, and I anticipated no more difficulty than in landing from the boat at Boulogne. But I wanted to get it over, for my hunger pinched me and it was fearsome cold. Still the guns went on, like hounds baying before a quarry. The city was out of range, but there were strange lights on the ridge to the east.

At last we reached our goal and marched through a fine old carved archway into a courtyard, and thence into a draughty hall.

'You must see the *Sektionschef*,' said our guide. I looked round to see if we were all there, and noticed that Hussin had disappeared. It did not matter, for he was not on the passports.

We followed as we were directed through an open door. There was a man standing with his back towards us looking at a wall map, a very big man with a neck that bulged over his collar. I would have known that neck among a million. At the sight of it I made a half-turn to bolt back. It was too late, for the door had closed behind us and there were two armed sentries beside it.

The man slewed round and looked into my eyes. I had a despairing hope that I might bluff it out, for I was in different clothes and had shaved my beard. But you cannot spend ten minutes in a death-grapple without your adversary getting to know you.

He went very pale, then recollected himself and twisted his features into the old grin.

'So,' he said, 'the little Dutchmen! We meet after many days.'

It was no good lying or saying anything. I shut my teeth and waited.

'And you, Herr Blenkiron? I never liked the look of you. You babbled too much, like all your damned Americans.'

'I guess your personal dislikes haven't got anything to do with the matter,' said Blenkiron, calmly. 'If you're the boss here, I'll thank you to cast your eye over these passports, for we can't stand waiting for ever.'

This fairly angered him. 'I'll teach you manners,' he cried, and took a step forward to reach for Blenkiron's shoulder — the game he had twice played with me.

Blenkiron never took his hands from his coat pockets. 'Keep your distance,' he drawled in a new voice. 'I've got you covered, and I'll make a hole in your bullet head if you lay a hand on me.'

With an effort Stumm recovered himself. He rang a bell and fell to smiling. An orderly appeared to whom he spoke in Turkish, and presently a file of soldiers entered the room.

'I'm going to have you disarmed, gentlemen,' he said. 'We can conduct our conversation more pleasantly without pistols.'

It was idle to resist. We surrendered our arms, Peter almost in tears with vexation. Stumm swung his legs over a chair, rested his chin on the back and looked at me.

'Your game is up, you know,' he said. 'These fools of Turkish police said the Dutchmen were dead, but I had the happier inspiration. I believed the good God had spared them for me. When I got Rasta's telegram I was certain, for your doings reminded me of a little trick you once played me on the Schwandorf road. But I didn't think to find this plump old partridge,' and he smiled at Blenkiron. 'Two eminent American engineers and their servant bound for Mesopotamia on business of high Government importance! It was a good lie; but if I had been in Constantinople it would have had a short life. Rasta and his friends are no concern of mine. You can trick them as you please. But you have attempted to win the

confidence of a certain lady, and her interests are mine. Likewise you have offended me, and I do not forgive. By God,' he cried, his voice growing shrill with passion, 'by the time I have done with you your mothers in their graves will weep that they ever bore you!'

It was Blenkiron who spoke. His voice was as level as the chairman's of a bogus company, and it fell on that turbid atmosphere like acid on grease.

'I don't take no stock in high-falutin'. If you're trying to scare me by that dime-novel talk I guess you've hit the wrong man. You're like the sweep that stuck in the chimney, a bit too big for your job. I reckon you've a talent for romance that's just wasted in soldiering. But if you're going to play any ugly games on me I'd like you to know that I'm an American citizen, and pretty well considered in my own country and in yours, and you'll sweat blood for it later. That's a fair warning, Colonel Stumm.'

I don't know what Stumm's plans were, but that speech of Blenkiron's put into his mind just the needed amount of uncertainty. You see, he had Peter and me right enough, but he hadn't properly connected Blenkiron with us, and was afraid either to hit out at all three, or to let Blenkiron go. It was lucky for us that the American had cut such a dash in the Fatherland.

'There is no hurry,' he said blandly. 'We shall have long happy hours together. I'm going to take you all home with me, for I am a hospitable soul. You will be safer with me than in the town gaol, for it's a trifle draughty. It lets things in, and it might let things out.'

Again he gave an order, and we were marched out, each with a soldier at his elbow. The three of us were bundled into the back seat of the car, while two men sat before us with their rifles between their knees, one got up behind on the baggage rack, and one sat beside Stumm's chauffeur. Packed like sardines we moved into the bleak streets, above which the stars twinkled in ribbons of sky.

Hussin had disappeared from the face of the earth, and quite right too. He was a good fellow, but he had no call to mix himself up in our troubles.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SPARROWS ON THE ROOFTOPS

‘I’ve often regretted,’ said Blenkiron, ‘that miracles have left off happening.’

He got no answer, for I was feeling the walls for something in the nature of a window.

‘For I reckon,’ he went on, ‘that it wants a good old-fashioned copper-bottomed miracle to get us out of this fix. It’s plumb against all my principles. I’ve spent my life using the talents God gave me to keep things from getting to the point of rude violence, and so far I’ve succeeded. But now you come along, Major, and you hustle a respectable middle-aged citizen into an aboriginal mix-up. It’s mighty indelicate. I reckon the next move is up to you, for I’m no good at the housebreaking stunt.’

‘No more am I,’ I answered; ‘but I’m hanged if I’ll chuck up the sponge. Sandy’s somewhere outside, and he’s got a hefty crowd at his heels.’

I simply could not feel the despair which by every law of common sense was due to the case. The guns had intoxicated me. I could still hear their deep voices, though yards of wood and stone separated us from the upper air.

What vexed us most was our hunger. Barring a few mouthfuls on the road we had eaten nothing since the morning, and as our diet for the past days had not been generous we had some leeway to make up. Stumm had never looked near us since we were shoved into the car. We had been brought to some kind of house and bundled into a place like a wine-cellar. It was pitch dark, and after feeling round the walls, first on my feet and then on Peter’s back, I decided that there were no windows. It must have been lit and ventilated by some lattice in the ceiling. There was not a stick of furniture in the place: nothing but a damp earth floor and bare stone sides. The door was a relic of the Iron Age, and I could hear the paces of a sentry outside it.

When things get to the pass that nothing you can do can better them, the only thing is to live for the moment. All three of us sought in sleep a refuge from our empty stomachs. The floor was the poorest kind of bed, but we rolled up our coats for pillows and made the best of it. Soon I knew by Peter’s regular breathing that he was asleep, and I presently followed him . . .

I was awakened by a pressure below my left ear. I thought it was Peter, for it is the old hunter’s trick of waking a man so that he makes no noise. But another voice spoke. It told me that there was no time to lose and to rise and follow, and the voice was the voice of Hussin.

Peter was awake, and we stirred Blenkiron out of heavy slumber. We were bidden take off our boots and hang them by their laces round our necks as country boys do when they want to go barefoot. Then we tiptoed to the door, which was ajar.

Outside was a passage with a flight of steps at one end which led to the open air. On these steps lay a faint shine of starlight, and by its help I saw a man huddled up at the foot of them. It was our sentry, neatly and scientifically gagged and tied up.

The steps brought us to a little courtyard about which the walls of the houses rose like cliffs. We halted while Hussin listened intently. Apparently the coast was clear and our guide led us to one side, which was clothed by a stout wooden trellis. Once it may have supported fig-trees, but now the plants were dead and only withered tendrils and rotten stumps remained.

It was child’s play for Peter and me to go up that trellis, but it was the deuce and all for Blenkiron. He was in poor condition and puffed like a grampus, and he seemed to have no sort of head for heights. But he was as game as a buffalo, and started in gallantly till his arms gave out and he fairly stuck. So Peter and I went up on each side of him, taking an arm apiece, as I had once seen done to a man with vertigo in the Kloof Chimney on Table Mountain. I was mighty thankful when I got him panting on the top and Hussin had shinned up beside us.

We crawled along a broadish wall, with an inch or two of powdery snow on it, and then up a sloping buttress on to the flat roof of the house. It was a miserable business for Blenkiron, who would certainly have fallen if he could have seen what was below him, and Peter and I had to stand to attention all the time. Then began a more difficult job. Hussin pointed out a ledge which took us past a stack of chimneys to another building slightly lower, this being the route he fancied. At that I sat

down resolutely and put on my boots, and the others followed. Frost-bitten feet would be a poor asset in this kind of travelling.

It was a bad step for Blenkiron, and we only got him past it by Peter and I spread-eagling ourselves against the wall and passing him in front of us with his face towards us. We had no grip, and if he had stumbled we should all three have been in the courtyard. But we got it over, and dropped as softly as possible on to the roof of the next house. Hussin had his finger on his lips, and I soon saw why. For there was a lighted window in the wall we had descended.

Some imp prompted me to wait behind and explore. The others followed Hussin and were soon at the far end of the roof, where a kind of wooden pavilion broke the line, while I tried to get a look inside. The window was curtained, and had two folding sashes which clasped in the middle. Through a gap in the curtain I saw a little lamp-lit room and a big man sitting at a table littered with papers.

I watched him, fascinated, as he turned to consult some document and made a marking on the map before him. Then he suddenly rose, stretched himself, cast a glance at the window, and went out of the room, making a great clatter in descending the wooden staircase. He left the door ajar and the lamp burning.

I guessed he had gone to have a look at his prisoners, in which case the show was up. But what filled my mind was an insane desire to get a sight of his map. It was one of those mad impulses which utterly cloud right reason, a thing independent of any plan, a crazy leap in the dark. But it was so strong that I would have pulled that window out by its frame, if need be, to get to that table.

There was no need, for the flimsy clasp gave at the first pull, and the sashes swung open. I scrambled in, after listening for steps on the stairs. I crumpled up the map and stuck it in my pocket, as well as the paper from which I had seen him copying. Very carefully I removed all marks of my entry, brushed away the snow from the boards, pulled back the curtain, got out and refastened the window. Still there was no sound of his return. Then I started off to catch up the others.

I found them shivering in the roof pavilion. 'We've got to move pretty fast,' I said, 'for I've just been burgling old Stumm's private cabinet. Hussin, my lad, d'you hear that? They may be after us any moment, so I pray Heaven we soon strike better going.'

Hussin understood. He led us at a smart pace from one roof to another, for here they were all of the same height, and only low parapets and screens divided them. We never saw a soul, for a winter's night is not the time you choose to saunter on your housetop. I kept my ears open for trouble behind us, and in about five minutes I heard it. A riot of voices broke out, with one louder than the rest, and, looking back, I saw lanterns waving. Stumm had realized his loss and found the tracks of the thief.

Hussin gave one glance behind and then hurried us on at break-neck pace, with old Blenkiron gasping and stumbling. The shouts behind us grew louder, as if some eye quicker than the rest had caught our movement in the starlit darkness. It was very evident that if they kept up the chase we should be caught, for Blenkiron was about as useful on a roof as a hippo.

Presently we came to a big drop, with a kind of ladder down it, and at the foot a shallow ledge running to the left into a pit of darkness. Hussin gripped my arm and pointed down it. 'Follow it,' he whispered, 'and you will reach a roof which spans a street. Cross it, and on the other side is a mosque. Turn to the right there and you will find easy going for fifty metres, well screened from the higher roofs. For Allah's sake keep in the shelter of the screen. Somewhere there I will join you.'

He hurried us along the ledge for a bit and then went back, and with snow from the corners covered up our tracks. After that he went straight on himself, taking strange short steps like a bird. I saw his game. He wanted to lead our pursuers after him, and he had to multiply the tracks and trust to Stumm's fellows not spotting that they all were made by one man.

But I had quite enough to think of in getting Blenkiron along that ledge. He was pretty nearly foundered, he was in a sweat of terror, and as a matter of fact he was taking one of the biggest risks of his life, for we had no rope and his neck depended on himself. I could hear him invoking some unknown deity called Holy Mike. But he ventured gallantly, and we got to the roof which ran across the street. That was easier, though ticklish enough, but it was no joke skirting the cupola of that infernal mosque. At last we found the parapet and breathed more freely, for we were now under shelter from the direction of danger. I spared a moment to look round, and thirty yards off, across the street, I saw a weird spectacle.

The hunt was proceeding along the roofs parallel to the one we were lodged on. I saw the flicker of the lanterns, waved

up and down as the bearers slipped in the snow, and I heard their cries like hounds on a trail. Stumm was not among them: he had not the shape for that sort of business. They passed us and continued to our left, now hid by a jutting chimney, now clear to view against the sky line. The roofs they were on were perhaps six feet higher than ours, so even from our shelter we could mark their course. If Hussin were going to be hunted across Erzerum it was a bad look-out for us, for I hadn't the foggiest notion where we were or where we were going to.

But as we watched we saw something more. The wavering lanterns were now three or four hundred yards away, but on the roofs just opposite us across the street there appeared a man's figure. I thought it was one of the hunters, and we all crouched lower, and then I recognized the lean agility of Hussin. He must have doubled back, keeping in the dusk to the left of the pursuit, and taking big risks in the open places. But there he was now, exactly in front of us, and separated only by the width of the narrow street.

He took a step backward, gathered himself for a spring, and leaped clean over the gap. Like a cat he lighted on the parapet above us, and stumbled forward with the impetus right on our heads.

'We are safe for the moment,' he whispered, 'but when they miss me they will return. We must make good haste.'

The next half-hour was a maze of twists and turns, slipping down icy roofs and climbing icier chimney-stacks. The stir of the city had gone, and from the black streets below came scarcely a sound. But always the great tattoo of guns beat in the east. Gradually we descended to a lower level, till we emerged on the top of a shed in a courtyard. Hussin gave an odd sort of cry, like a demented owl, and something began to stir below us.

It was a big covered wagon, full of bundles of forage, and drawn by four mules. As we descended from the shed into the frozen litter of the yard, a man came out of the shade and spoke low to Hussin. Peter and I lifted Blenkiron into the cart, and scrambled in beside him, and I never felt anything more blessed than the warmth and softness of that place after the frosty roofs. I had forgotten all about my hunger, and only yearned for sleep. Presently the wagon moved out of the courtyard into the dark streets.

Then Blenkiron began to laugh, a deep internal rumble which shook him violently and brought down a heap of forage on his head. I thought it was hysterics, the relief from the tension of the past hour. But it wasn't. His body might be out of training, but there was never anything the matter with his nerves. He was consumed with honest merriment.

'Say, Major,' he gasped, 'I don't usually cherish dislikes for my fellow men, but somehow I didn't cotton to Colonel Stumm. But now I almost love him. You hit his jaw very bad in Germany, and now you've annexed his private file, and I guess it's important or he wouldn't have been so mighty set on steeple-chasing over those roofs. I haven't done such a thing since I broke into neighbour Brown's woodshed to steal his tame 'possum, and that's forty years back. It's the first piece of genuine amusement I've struck in this game, and I haven't laughed so much since old Jim Hooker told the tale of "Cousin Sally Dillard" when we were hunting ducks in Michigan and his wife's brother had an apoplexy in the night and died of it.'

To the accompaniment of Blenkiron's chuckles I did what Peter had done in the first minute, and fell asleep.

When I woke it was still dark. The wagon had stopped in a courtyard which seemed to be shaded by great trees. The snow lay deeper here, and by the feel of the air we had left the city and climbed to higher ground. There were big buildings on one side, and on the other what looked like the lift of a hill. No lights were shown, the place was in profound gloom, but I felt the presence near me of others besides Hussin and the driver.

We were hurried, Blenkiron only half awake, into an outbuilding, and then down some steps to a roomy cellar. There Hussin lit a lantern, which showed what had once been a storehouse for fruit. Old husks still strewed the floor and the place smelt of apples. Straw had been piled in corners for beds, and there was a rude table and a divan of boards covered with sheepskins.

'Where are we?' I asked Hussin.

'In the house of the Master,' he said. 'You will be safe here, but you must keep still till the Master comes.'

'Is the Frankish lady here?' I asked.

Hussin nodded, and from a wallet brought out some food — raisins and cold meat and a loaf of bread. We fell on it like vultures, and as we ate Hussin disappeared. I noticed that he locked the door behind him.

As soon as the meal was ended the others returned to their interrupted sleep. But I was wakeful now and my mind was sharp-set on many things. I got Blenkiron's electric torch and lay down on the divan to study Stumm's map.

The first glance showed me that I had lit on a treasure. It was the staff map of the Erzerum defences, showing the forts and the field trenches, with little notes scribbled in Stumm's neat small handwriting. I got out the big map which I had taken from Blenkiron, and made out the general lie of the land. I saw the horseshoe of Deve Boyun to the east which the Russian guns were battering. Stumm's was just like the kind of squared artillery map we used in France, 1 in 10,000, with spidery red lines showing the trenches, but with the difference that it was the Turkish trenches that were shown in detail and the Russian only roughly indicated. The thing was really a confidential plan of the whole Erzerum *enceinte*, and would be worth untold gold to the enemy. No wonder Stumm had been in a wax at its loss.

The Deve Boyun lines seemed to me monstrously strong, and I remembered the merits of the Turk as a fighter behind strong defences. It looked as if Russia were up against a second Plevna or a new Gallipoli.

Then I took to studying the flanks. South lay the Palantuken range of mountains, with forts defending the passes, where ran the roads to Mush and Lake Van. That side, too, looked pretty strong. North in the valley of the Euphrates I made out two big forts, Tafta and Kara Gubek, defending the road from Olti. On this part of the map Stumm's notes were plentiful, and I gave them all my attention. I remembered Blenkiron's news about the Russians advancing on a broad front, for it was clear that Stumm was taking pains about the flank of the fortress.

Kara Gubek was the point of interest. It stood on a rib of land between two peaks, which from the contour lines rose very steep. So long as it was held it was clear that no invader could move down the Euphrates glen. Stumm had appended a note to the peaks — '*not fortified*'; and about two miles to the north-east there was a red cross and the name '*Prjevalsky*'. I assumed that to be the farthest point yet reached by the right wing of the Russian attack.

Then I turned to the paper from which Stumm had copied the jottings on to his map. It was typewritten, and consisted of notes on different points. One was headed '*Kara Gubek*' and read: '*No time to fortify adjacent peaks. Difficult for enemy to get batteries there, but not impossible. This the real point of danger, for if Prjevalsky wins the Peaks Kara Gubek and Tafta must fall, and enemy will be on left rear of Deve Boyun main position.*'

I was soldier enough to see the tremendous importance of this note. On Kara Gubek depended the defence of Erzerum, and it was a broken reed if one knew where the weakness lay. Yet, searching the map again, I could not believe that any mortal commander would see any chance in the adjacent peaks, even if he thought them unfortified. That was information confined to the Turkish and German staff. But if it could be conveyed to the Grand Duke he would have Erzerum in his power in a day. Otherwise he would go on battering at the Deve Boyun ridge for weeks, and long ere he won it the Gallipoli divisions would arrive, he would be out-numbered by two to one, and his chance would have vanished.

My discovery set me pacing up and down that cellar in a perfect fever of excitement. I longed for wireless, a carrier pigeon, an aeroplane — anything to bridge over that space of half a dozen miles between me and the Russian lines. It was maddening to have stumbled on vital news and to be wholly unable to use it. How could three fugitives in a cellar, with the whole hornet's nest of Turkey and Germany stirred up against them, hope to send this message of life and death?

I went back to the map and examined the nearest Russian positions. They were carefully marked. Prjevalsky in the north, the main force beyond Deve Boyun, and the southern columns up to the passes of the Palantuken but not yet across them. I could not know which was nearest to us till I discovered where we were. And as I thought of this I began to see the rudiments of a desperate plan. It depended on Peter, now slumbering like a tired dog on a couch of straw.

Hussin had locked the door and I must wait for information till he came back. But suddenly I noticed a trap in the roof, which had evidently been used for raising and lowering the cellar's stores. It looked ill-fitting and might be unbarred, so I pulled the table below it, and found that with a little effort I could raise the flap. I knew I was taking immense risks, but I was so keen on my plan that I disregarded them. After some trouble I got the thing prised open, and catching the edges of the hole with my fingers raised my body and got my knees on the edge.

It was the outbuilding of which our refuge was the cellar, and it was half filled with light. Not a soul was there, and I hunted about till I found what I wanted. This was a ladder leading to a sort of loft, which in turn gave access to the roof. Here I had to be very careful, for I might be overlooked from the high buildings. But by good luck there was a trellis for grape vines across the place, which gave a kind of shelter. Lying flat on my face I stared over a great expanse of country.

Looking north I saw the city in a haze of morning smoke, and, beyond, the plain of the Euphrates and the opening of the glen where the river left the hills. Up there, among the snowy heights, were Tafta and Kara Gubek. To the east was the ridge of Deve Boyun, where the mist was breaking before the winter's sun. On the roads up to it I saw transport moving, I

saw the circle of the inner forts, but for a moment the guns were silent. South rose a great wall of white mountain, which I took to be the Palantuken. I could see the roads running to the passes, and the smoke of camps and horse-lines right under the cliffs.

I had learned what I needed. We were in the outbuildings of a big country house two or three miles south of the city. The nearest point of the Russian front was somewhere in the foothills of the Palantuken.

As I descended I heard, thin and faint and beautiful, like the cry of a wild bird, the muezzin from the minarets of Erzerum.

When I dropped through the trap the others were awake. Hussin was setting food on the table, and viewing my descent with anxious disapproval.

‘It’s all right,’ I said; ‘I won’t do it again, for I’ve found out all I wanted. Peter, old man, the biggest job of your life is before you!’



CHAPTER NINETEEN

GREENMANTLE

Peter scarcely looked up from his breakfast.

'I'm willing, Dick,' he said. 'But you mustn't ask me to be friends with Stumm. He makes my stomach cold, that one.'

For the first time he had stopped calling me 'Cornelis'. The day of make-believe was over for all of us.

'Not to be friends with him,' I said, 'but to bust him and all his kind.'

'Then I'm ready,' said Peter cheerfully. 'What is it?'

I spread out the maps on the divan. There was no light in the place but Blenkiron's electric torch, for Hussin had put out the lantern. Peter got his nose into the things at once, for his intelligence work in the Boer War had made him handy with maps. It didn't want much telling from me to explain to him the importance of the one I had looted.

'That news is worth many a million pounds,' said he, wrinkling his brows, and scratching delicately the tip of his left ear. It was a way he had when he was startled.

'How can we get it to our friends?'

Peter cogitated. 'There is but one way. A man must take it. Once, I remember, when we fought the Matabele it was necessary to find out whether the chief Makapan was living. Some said he had died, others that he'd gone over the Portuguese border, but I believed he lived. No native could tell us, and since his kraal was well defended no runner could get through. So it was necessary to send a man.'

Peter lifted up his head and laughed. 'The man found the chief Makapan. He was very much alive, and made good shooting with a shot-gun. But the man brought the chief Makapan out of his kraal and handed him over to the Mounted Police. You remember Captain Arcoll, Dick — Jim Arcoll? Well, Jim laughed so much that he broke open a wound in his head, and had to have a doctor.'

'You were that man, Peter,' I said.

'Ja. I was the man. There are more ways of getting into kraals than there are ways of keeping people out.'

'Will you take this chance?'

'For certain, Dick. I am getting stiff with doing nothing, and if I sit in houses much longer I shall grow old. A man bet me five pounds on the ship that I could not get through a trench-line, and if there had been a trench-line handy I would have taken him on. I will be very happy, Dick, but I do not say I will succeed. It is new country to me, and I will be hurried, and hurry makes bad stalking.'

I showed him what I thought the likeliest place — in the spurs of the Palantuken mountains. Peter's way of doing things was all his own. He scraped earth and plaster out of a corner and sat down to make a little model of the landscape on the table, following the contours of the map. He did it extraordinarily neatly, for, like all great hunters, he was as deft as a weaver bird. He puzzled over it for a long time, and conned the map till he must have got it by heart. Then he took his field-glasses — a very good single Zeiss which was part of the spoils from Rasta's motor-car — and announced that he was going to follow my example and get on to the house-top. Presently his legs disappeared through the trap, and Blenkiron and I were left to our reflections.

Peter must have found something uncommon interesting, for he stayed on the roof the better part of the day. It was a dull job for us, since there was no light, and Blenkiron had not even the consolation of a game of Patience. But for all that he was in good spirits, for he had had no dyspepsia since we left Constantinople, and announced that he believed he was at last getting even with his darned duodenum. As for me I was pretty restless, for I could not imagine what was detaining Sandy. It was clear that our presence must have been kept secret from Hilda von Einem, for she was a pal of Stumm's, and he must by now have blown the gaff on Peter and me. How long could this secrecy last, I asked myself. We had now no sort of protection in the whole outfit. Rasta and the Turks wanted our blood: so did Stumm and the Germans; and once the lady found we were deceiving her she would want it most of all. Our only hope was Sandy, and he gave no sign of his existence. I

began to fear that with him, too, things had miscarried.

And yet I wasn't really depressed, only impatient. I could never again get back to the beastly stagnation of that Constantinople week. The guns kept me cheerful. There was the devil of a bombardment all day, and the thought that our Allies were thundering there half a dozen miles off gave me a perfectly groundless hope. If they burst through the defence Hilda von Einem and her prophet and all our enemies would be overwhelmed in the deluge. And that blessed chance depended very much on old Peter, now brooding like a pigeon on the house-tops.

It was not till the late afternoon that Hussin appeared again. He took no notice of Peter's absence, but lit a lantern and set it on the table. Then he went to the door and waited. Presently a light step fell on the stairs, and Hussin drew back to let someone enter. He promptly departed and I heard the key turn in the lock behind him.

Sandy stood there, but a new Sandy who made Blenkiron and me jump to our feet. The pelts and skin-cap had gone, and he wore instead a long linen tunic clasped at the waist by a broad girdle. A strange green turban adorned his head, and as he pushed it back I saw that his hair had been shaved. He looked like some acolyte — a weary acolyte, for there was no spring in his walk or nerve in his carriage. He dropped numbly on the divan and laid his head in his hands. The lantern showed his haggard eyes with dark lines beneath them.

'Good God, old man, have you been sick?' I cried.

'Not sick,' he said hoarsely. 'My body is right enough, but the last few days I have been living in hell.'

Blenkiron nodded sympathetically. That was how he himself would have described the company of the lady.

I marched across to him and gripped both his wrists.

'Look at me,' I said, 'straight in the eyes.'

His eyes were like a sleep-walker's, unwinking, unseeing. 'Great heavens, man, you've been drugged!' I said.

'Drugged,' he cried, with a weary laugh. 'Yes, I have been drugged, but not by any physic. No one has been doctoring my food. But you can't go through hell without getting your eyes red-hot.'

I kept my grip on his wrists. 'Take your time, old chap, and tell us about it. Blenkiron and I are here, and old Peter's on the roof not far off. We'll look after you.'

'It does me good to hear your voice, Dick,' he said. 'It reminds me of clean, honest things.'

'They'll come back, never fear. We're at the last lap now. One more spurt and it's over. You've got to tell me what the new snag is. Is it that woman?'

He shivered like a frightened colt. 'Woman!' he cried. 'Does a woman drag a man through the nether-pit? She's a she-devil. Oh, it isn't madness that's wrong with her. She's as sane as you and as cool as Blenkiron. Her life is an infernal game of chess, and she plays with souls for pawns. She is evil — evil — evil.' And once more he buried his head in his hands.

It was Blenkiron who brought sense into this hectic atmosphere. His slow, beloved drawl was an antiseptic against nerves.

'Say, boy,' he said, 'I feel just like you about the lady. But our job is not to investigate her character. Her Maker will do that good and sure some day. We've got to figure how to circumvent her, and for that you've got to tell us what exactly's been occurring since we parted company.'

Sandy pulled himself together with a great effort.

'Greenmantle died that night I saw you. We buried him secretly by her order in the garden of the villa. Then came the trouble about his successor . . . The four Ministers would be no party to a swindle. They were honest men, and vowed that their task now was to make a tomb for their master and pray for the rest of their days at his shrine. They were as immovable as a granite hill and she knew it. . . . Then they, too, died.'

'Murdered?' I gasped.

'Murdered . . . all four in one morning. I do not know how, but I helped to bury them. Oh, she had Germans and Kurds to do her foul work, but their hands were clean compared to hers. Pity me, Dick, for I have seen honesty and virtue put to the shambles and have abetted the deed when it was done. It will haunt me to my dying day.'

I did not stop to console him, for my mind was on fire with his news.

'Then the prophet is gone, and the humbug is over,' I cried.

'The prophet still lives. She has found a successor.'

He stood up in his linen tunic.

'Why do I wear these clothes? Because I am Greenmantle. I am the *Kaaba-i-hurriyeh* for all Islam. In three days' time I will reveal myself to my people and wear on my breast the green ephod of the prophet.'

He broke off with an hysterical laugh. 'Only you see, I won't. I will cut my throat first.'

'Cheer up!' said Blenkiron soothingly. 'We'll find some prettier way than that.'

'There is no way,' he said; 'no way but death. We're done for, all of us. Hussin got you out of Stumm's clutches, but you're in danger every moment. At the best you have three days, and then you, too, will be dead.'

I had no words to reply. This change in the bold and unshakeable Sandy took my breath away.

'She made me her accomplice,' he went on. 'I should have killed her on the graves of those innocent men. But instead I did all she asked and joined in her game . . . She was very candid, you know . . . She cares no more than Enver for the faith of Islam. She can laugh at it. But she has her own dreams, and they consume her as a saint is consumed by his devotion. She has told me them, and if the day in the garden was hell, the days since have been the innermost fires of Tophet. I think — it is horrible to say it — that she has got some kind of crazy liking for me. When we have reclaimed the East I am to be by her side when she rides on her milk-white horse into Jerusalem . . . And there have been moments — only moments, I swear to God — when I have been fired myself by her madness . . .'

Sandy's figure seemed to shrink and his voice grew shrill and wild. It was too much for Blenkiron. He indulged in a torrent of blasphemy such as I believe had never before passed his lips.

'I'm blessed if I'll listen to this God-darned stuff. It isn't delicate. You get busy, Major, and pump some sense into your afflicted friend.'

I was beginning to see what had happened. Sandy was a man of genius — as much as anybody I ever struck — but he had the defects of such high-strung, fanciful souls. He would take more than mortal risks, and you couldn't scare him by any ordinary terror. But let his old conscience get cross-eyed, let him find himself in some situation which in his eyes involved his honour, and he might go stark crazy. The woman, who roused in me and Blenkiron only hatred, could catch his imagination and stir in him — for the moment only — an unwilling response. And then came bitter and morbid repentance, and the last desperation.

It was no time to mince matters. 'Sandy, you old fool,' I cried, 'be thankful you have friends to keep you from playing the fool. You saved my life at Loos, and I'm jolly well going to get you through this show. I'm bossing the outfit now, and for all your confounded prophetic manners, you've got to take your orders from me. You aren't going to reveal yourself to your people, and still less are you going to cut your throat. Greenmantle will avenge the murder of his ministers, and make that bedlamite woman sorry she was born. We're going to get clear away, and inside of a week we'll be having tea with the Grand Duke Nicholas.'

I wasn't bluffing. Puzzled as I was about ways and means I had still the blind belief that we should win out. And as I spoke two legs dangled through the trap and a dusty and blinking Peter descended in our midst.

I took the maps from him and spread them on the table.

'First, you must know that we've had an almighty piece of luck. Last night Hussin took us for a walk over the roofs of Erzerum, and by the blessing of Providence I got into Stumm's room, and bagged his staff map . . . Look there . . . d'you see his notes? That's the danger-point of the whole defence. Once the Russians get that fort, Kara Gubek, they've turned the main position. And it can be got; Stumm knows it can; for these two adjacent hills are not held . . . It looks a mad enterprise on paper, but Stumm knows that it is possible enough. The question is: Will the Russians guess that? I say no, not unless someone tells them. Therefore, by hook or by crook, we've got to get that information through to them.'

Sandy's interest in ordinary things was beginning to flicker up again. He studied the map and began to measure distances.

'Peter's going to have a try for it. He thinks there's a sporting chance of his getting through the lines. If he does — if he gets this map to the Grand Duke's staff — then Stumm's goose is cooked. In three days the Cossacks will be in the streets of Erzerum.'

'What are the chances?' Sandy asked.

I glanced at Peter. 'We're hard-bitten fellows and can face the truth. I think the chances against success are about five

to one.'

'Two to one,' said Peter modestly. 'Not worse than that. I don't think you're fair to me, Dick, my old friend.'

I looked at that lean, tight figure and the gentle, resolute face, and I changed my mind. 'I'm hanged if I think there are any odds,' I said. 'With anybody else it would want a miracle, but with Peter I believe the chances are level.'

'Two to one,' Peter persisted. 'If it was evens I wouldn't be interested.'

'Let me go,' Sandy cried. 'I talk the lingo, and can pass as a Turk, and I'm a million times likelier to get through. For God's sake, Dick, let me go.'

'Not you. You're wanted here. If you disappear the whole show's busted too soon, and the three of us left behind will be strung up before morning . . . No, my son. You're going to escape, but it will be in company with Blenkiron and me. We've got to blow the whole Greenmantle business so high that the bits of it will never come to earth again . . . First, tell me how many of your fellows will stick by you? I mean the Companions.'

'The whole half-dozen. They are very worried already about what has happened. She made me sound them in her presence, and they were quite ready to accept me as Greenmantle's successor. But they have their suspicions about what happened at the villa, and they've no love for the woman . . . They'd follow me through hell if I bade them, but they would rather it was my own show.'

'That's all right,' I cried. 'It is the one thing I've been doubtful about. Now observe this map. Erzerum isn't invested by a long chalk. The Russians are round it in a broad half-moon. That means that all the west, south-west, and north-west is open and undefended by trench lines. There are flanks far away to the north and south in the hills which can be turned, and once we get round a flank there's nothing between us and our friends . . . I've figured out our road,' and I traced it on the map. 'If we can make that big circuit to the west and get over that pass unobserved we're bound to strike a Russian column the next day. It'll be a rough road, but I fancy we've all ridden as bad in our time. But one thing we must have, and that's horses. Can we and your six ruffians slip off in the darkness on the best beasts in this township? If you can manage that, we'll do the trick.'

Sandy sat down and pondered. Thank heaven, he was thinking now of action and not of his own conscience.

'It must be done,' he said at last, 'but it won't be easy. Hussin's a great fellow, but as you know well, Dick, horses right up at the battle-front are not easy to come by. Tomorrow I've got some kind of infernal fast to observe, and the next day that woman will be coaching me for my part. We'll have to give Hussin time . . . I wish to heaven it could be tonight.' He was silent again for a bit, and then he said: 'I believe the best time would be the third night, the eve of the Revelation. She's bound to leave me alone that night.'

'Right-o,' I said. 'It won't be much fun sitting waiting in this cold sepulchre; but we must keep our heads and risk nothing by being in a hurry. Besides, if Peter wins through, the Turk will be a busy man by the day after tomorrow.'

The key turned in the door and Hussin stole in like a shade. It was the signal for Sandy to leave.

'You fellows have given me a new lease of life,' he said. 'I've got a plan now, and I can set my teeth and stick it out.'

He went up to Peter and gripped his hand. 'Good luck. You're the bravest man I've ever met, and I've seen a few.' Then he turned abruptly and went out, followed by an exhortation from Blenkiron to 'Get busy about the quadrupeds.'

Then we set about equipping Peter for his crusade. It was a simple job, for we were not rich in properties. His get-up, with his thick fur-collared greatcoat, was not unlike the ordinary Turkish officer seen in a dim light. But Peter had no intention of passing for a Turk, or indeed of giving anybody the chance of seeing him, and he was more concerned to fit in with the landscape. So he stripped off the greatcoat and pulled a grey sweater of mine over his jacket, and put on his head a woollen helmet of the same colour. He had no need of the map for he had long since got his route by heart, and what was once fixed in that mind stuck like wax; but I made him take Stumm's plan and paper, hidden below his shirt. The big difficulty, I saw, would be getting to the Russians without getting shot, assuming he passed the Turkish trenches. He could only hope that he would strike someone with a smattering of English or German. Twice he ascended to the roof and came back cheerful, for there was promise of wild weather.

Hussin brought in our supper, and Peter made up a parcel of food. Blenkiron and I had both small flasks of brandy and I gave him mine.

Then he held out his hand quite simply, like a good child who is going off to bed. It was too much for Blenkiron. With

large tears rolling down his face he announced that, if we all came through, he was going to fit him into the softest berth that money could buy. I don't think he was understood, for old Peter's eyes had now the faraway absorption of the hunter who has found game. He was thinking only of his job.

Two legs and a pair of very shabby boots vanished through the trap, and suddenly I felt utterly lonely and desperately sad. The guns were beginning to roar again in the east, and in the intervals came the whistle of the rising storm.



CHAPTER TWENTY

PETER PIENAAR GOES TO THE WARS

This chapter is the tale that Peter told me — long after, sitting beside a stove in the hotel at Bergen, where we were waiting for our boat.

He climbed on the roof and shinned down the broken bricks of the outer wall. The outbuilding we were lodged in abutted on a road, and was outside the proper *enceinte* of the house. At ordinary times I have no doubt there were sentries, but Sandy and Hussin had probably managed to clear them off this end for a little. Anyhow he saw nobody as he crossed the road and dived into the snowy fields.

He knew very well that he must do the job in the twelve hours of darkness ahead of him. The immediate front of a battle is a bit too public for anyone to lie hidden in by day, especially when two or three feet of snow make everything kenspeckle. Now hurry in a job of this kind was abhorrent to Peter's soul, for, like all Boers, his tastes were for slowness and sureness, though he could hustle fast enough when haste was needed. As he pushed through the winter fields he reckoned up the things in his favour, and found the only one the dirty weather. There was a high, gusty wind, blowing scuds of snow but never coming to any great fall. The frost had gone, and the lying snow was as soft as butter. That was all to the good, he thought, for a clear, hard night would have been the devil.

The first bit was through farmlands, which were seamed with little snow-filled water-furrows. Now and then would come a house and a patch of fruit trees, but there was nobody abroad. The roads were crowded enough, but Peter had no use for roads. I can picture him swinging along with his bent back, stopping every now and then to sniff and listen, alert for the foreknowledge of danger. When he chose he could cover country like an antelope.

Soon he struck a big road full of transport. It was the road from Erzerum to the Palantuken pass, and he waited his chance and crossed it. After that the ground grew rough with boulders and patches of thorn-trees, splendid cover where he could move fast without worrying. Then he was pulled up suddenly on the bank of a river. The map had warned him of it, but not that it would be so big.

It was a torrent swollen with melting snow and rains in the hills, and it was running fifty yards wide. Peter thought he could have swum it, but he was very averse to a drenching. 'A wet man makes too much noise,' he said, and besides, there was the off-chance that the current would be too much for him. So he moved up stream to look for a bridge.

In ten minutes he found one, a new-made thing of trestles, broad enough to take transport wagons. It was guarded, for he heard the tramp of a sentry, and as he pulled himself up the bank he observed a couple of long wooden huts, obviously some kind of billets. These were on the near side of the stream, about a dozen yards from the bridge. A door stood open and a light showed in it, and from within came the sound of voices. . . . Peter had a sense of hearing like a wild animal, and he could detect even from the confused gabble that the voices were German.

As he lay and listened someone came over the bridge. It was an officer, for the sentry saluted. The man disappeared in one of the huts. Peter had struck the billets and repairing shop of a squad of German sappers.

He was just going ruefully to retrace his steps and try to find a good place to swim the stream when it struck him that the officer who had passed him wore clothes very like his own. He, too, had had a grey sweater and a Balaclava helmet, for even a German officer ceases to be dressy on a mid-winter's night in Anatolia. The idea came to Peter to walk boldly across the bridge and trust to the sentry not seeing the difference.

He slipped round a corner of the hut and marched down the road. The sentry was now at the far end, which was lucky, for if the worst came to the worst he could throttle him. Peter, mimicking the stiff German walk, swung past him, his head down as if to protect him from the wind.

The man saluted. He did more, for he offered conversation. The officer must have been a genial soul.

'It's a rough night, Captain,' he said in German. 'The wagons are late. Pray God, Michael hasn't got a shell in his lot. They've begun putting over some big ones.'

Peter grunted good night in German and strode on. He was just leaving the road when he heard a great halloo behind him.

The real officer must have appeared on his heels, and the sentry's doubts had been stirred. A whistle was blown, and, looking back, Peter saw lanterns waving in the gale. They were coming out to look for the duplicate.

He stood still for a second, and noticed the lights spreading out south of the road. He was just about to dive off it on the north side when he was aware of a difficulty. On that side a steep bank fell to a ditch, and the bank beyond bounded a big flood. He could see the dull ruffle of the water under the wind.

On the road itself he would soon be caught; south of it the search was beginning; and the ditch itself was no place to hide, for he saw a lantern moving up it. Peter dropped into it all the same and made a plan. The side below the road was a little undercut and very steep. He resolved to plaster himself against it, for he would be hidden from the road, and a searcher in the ditch would not be likely to explore the unbroken sides. It was always a maxim of Peter's that the best hiding-place was the worst, the least obvious to the minds of those who were looking for you.

He waited until the lights both in the road and the ditch came nearer, and then he gripped the edge with his left hand, where some stones gave him purchase, dug the toes of his boots into the wet soil and stuck like a limpet. It needed some strength to keep the position for long, but the muscles of his arms and legs were like whipcord.

The searcher in the ditch soon got tired, for the place was very wet, and joined his comrades on the road. They came along, running, flashing the lanterns into the trench, and exploring all the immediate countryside.

Then rose a noise of wheels and horses from the opposite direction. Michael and the delayed wagons were approaching. They dashed up at a great pace, driven wildly, and for one horrid second Peter thought they were going to spill into the ditch at the very spot where he was concealed. The wheels passed so close to the edge that they almost grazed his fingers. Somebody shouted an order and they pulled up a yard or two nearer the bridge. The others came up and there was a consultation.

Michael swore he had passed no one on the road.

'That fool Hannus has seen a ghost,' said the officer testily. 'It's too cold for this child's play.'

Hannus, almost in tears, repeated his tale. 'The man spoke to me in good German,' he cried.

'Ghost or no ghost he is safe enough up the road,' said the officer. 'Kind God, that was a big one!' He stopped and stared at a shell-burst, for the bombardment from the east was growing fiercer.

They stood discussing the fire for a minute and presently moved off. Peter gave them two minutes' law and then clambered back to the highway and set off along it at a run. The noise of the shelling and the wind, together with the thick darkness, made it safe to hurry.

He left the road at the first chance and took to the broken country. The ground was now rising towards a spur of the Palantuken, on the far slope of which were the Turkish trenches. The night had begun by being pretty nearly as black as pitch; even the smoke from the shell explosions, which is often visible in darkness, could not be seen. But as the wind blew the snow-clouds athwart the sky patches of stars came out. Peter had a compass, but he didn't need to use it, for he had a kind of 'feel' for landscape, a special sense which is born in savages and can only be acquired after long experience by the white man. I believe he could smell where the north lay. He had settled roughly which part of the line he would try, merely because of its nearness to the enemy. But he might see reason to vary this, and as he moved he began to think that the safest place was where the shelling was hottest. He didn't like the notion, but it sounded sense.

Suddenly he began to puzzle over queer things in the ground, and, as he had never seen big guns before, it took him a moment to fix them. Presently one went off at his elbow with a roar like the Last Day. These were Austrian howitzers — nothing over eight-inch, I fancy, but to Peter they looked like leviathans. Here, too, he saw for the first time a big and quite recent shell-hole, for the Russian guns were searching out the position. He was so interested in it all that he poked his nose where he shouldn't have been, and dropped plump into the pit behind a gun-emplacement.

Gunners all the world over are the same — shy people, who hide themselves in holes and hibernate and mortally dislike being detected.

A gruff voice cried '*Wer da?*' and a heavy hand seized his neck.

Peter was ready with his story. He belonged to Michael's wagon-team and had been left behind. He wanted to be told the way to the sappers' camp. He was very apologetic, not to say obsequious.

'It is one of those Prussian swine from the Marta bridge,' said a gunner. 'Land him a kick to teach him sense. Bear to

your right, manikin, and you will find a road. And have a care when you get there, for the Russkoes are registering on it.'

Peter thanked them and bore off to the right. After that he kept a wary eye on the howitzers, and was thankful when he got out of their area on to the slopes up the hill. Here was the type of country that was familiar to him, and he defied any Turk or Boche to spot him among the scrub and boulders. He was getting on very well, when once more, close to his ear, came a sound like the crack of doom.

It was the field-guns now, and the sound of a field-gun close at hand is bad for the nerves if you aren't expecting it. Peter thought he had been hit, and lay flat for a little to consider. Then he found the right explanation, and crawled forward very warily.

Presently he saw his first Russian shell. It dropped half a dozen yards to his right, making a great hole in the snow and sending up a mass of mixed earth, snow, and broken stones. Peter spat out the dirt and felt very solemn. You must remember that never in his life had he seen big shelling, and was now being landed in the thick of a first-class show without any preparation. He said he felt cold in his stomach, and very wishful to run away, if there had been anywhere to run to. But he kept on to the crest of the ridge, over which a big glow was broadening like sunrise. He tripped once over a wire, which he took for some kind of snare, and after that went very warily. By and by he got his face between two boulders and looked over into the true battle-field.

He told me it was exactly what the predikant used to say that Hell would be like. About fifty yards down the slope lay the Turkish trenches — they were dark against the snow, and now and then a black figure like a devil showed for an instant and disappeared. The Turks clearly expected an infantry attack, for they were sending up calcium rockets and Very flares. The Russians were battering their line and spraying all the hinterland, not with shrapnel, but with good, solid high-explosives. The place would be as bright as day for a moment, all smothered in a scurry of smoke and snow and debris, and then a black pall would fall on it, when only the thunder of the guns told of the battle.

Peter felt very sick. He had not believed there could be so much noise in the world, and the drums of his ears were splitting. Now, for a man to whom courage is habitual, the taste of fear — naked, utter fear — is a horrible thing. It seems to wash away all his manhood. Peter lay on the crest, watching the shells burst, and confident that any moment he might be a shattered remnant. He lay and reasoned with himself, calling himself every name he could think of, but conscious that nothing would get rid of that lump of ice below his heart.

Then he could stand it no longer. He got up and ran for his life.

But he ran forward.

It was the craziest performance. He went hell-for-leather over a piece of ground which was being watered with H.E., but by the mercy of heaven nothing hit him. He took some fearsome tosses in shell-holes, but partly erect and partly on all fours he did the fifty yards and tumbled into a Turkish trench right on top of a dead man.

The contact with that body brought him to his senses. That men could die at all seemed a comforting, homely thing after that unnatural pandemonium. The next moment a crump took the parapet of the trench some yards to his left, and he was half buried in an avalanche.

He crawled out of that, pretty badly cut about the head. He was quite cool now and thinking hard about his next step. There were men all around him, sullen dark faces as he saw them when the flares went up. They were manning the parapets and waiting tensely for something else than the shelling. They paid no attention to him, for I fancy in that trench units were pretty well mixed up, and under a bad bombardment no one bothers about his neighbour. He found himself free to move as he pleased. The ground of the trench was littered with empty cartridge-cases, and there were many dead bodies.

The last shell, as I have said, had played havoc with the parapet. In the next spell of darkness Peter crawled through the gap and twisted among some snowy hillocks. He was no longer afraid of shells, any more than he was afraid of a veld thunderstorm. But he was wondering very hard how he should ever get to the Russians. The Turks were behind him now, but there was the biggest danger in front.

Then the artillery ceased. It was so sudden that he thought he had gone deaf, and could hardly realize the blessed relief of it. The wind, too, seemed to have fallen, or perhaps he was sheltered by the lee of the hill. There were a lot of dead here also, and that he couldn't understand, for they were new dead. Had the Turks attacked and been driven back? When he had gone about thirty yards he stopped to take his bearings. On the right were the ruins of a large building set on fire by the guns. There was a blur of woods and the debris of walls round it. Away to the left another hill ran out farther to the east,

and the place he was in seemed to be a kind of cup between the spurs. Just before him was a little ruined building, with the sky seen through its rafters, for the smouldering ruin on the right gave a certain light. He wondered if the Russian firing-line lay there.

just then he heard voices — smothered voices — not a yard away and apparently below the ground. He instantly jumped to what this must mean. It was a Turkish trench — a communication trench. Peter didn't know much about modern warfare, but he had read in the papers, or heard from me, enough to make him draw the right moral. The fresh dead pointed to the same conclusion. What he had got through were the Turkish support trenches, not their firing-line. That was still before him.

He didn't despair, for the rebound from panic had made him extra courageous. He crawled forward, an inch at a time, taking no sort of risk, and presently found himself looking at the parados of a trench. Then he lay quiet to think out the next step.

The shelling had stopped, and there was that queer kind of peace which falls sometimes on two armies not a quarter of a mile distant. Peter said he could hear nothing but the far-off sighing of the wind. There seemed to be no movement of any kind in the trench before him, which ran through the ruined building. The light of the burning was dying, and he could just make out the mound of earth a yard in front. He began to feel hungry, and got out his packet of food and had a swig at the brandy flask. That comforted him, and he felt a master of his fate again. But the next step was not so easy. He must find out what lay behind that mound of earth.

Suddenly a curious sound fell on his ears. It was so faint that at first he doubted the evidence of his senses. Then as the wind fell it came louder. It was exactly like some hollow piece of metal being struck by a stick, musical and oddly resonant.

He concluded it was the wind blowing a branch of a tree against an old boiler in the ruin before him. The trouble was that there was scarcely enough wind now for that in this sheltered cup.

But as he listened he caught the note again. It was a bell, a fallen bell, and the place before him must have been a chapel. He remembered that an Armenian monastery had been marked on the big map, and he guessed it was the burned building on his right.

The thought of a chapel and a bell gave him the notion of some human agency. And then suddenly the notion was confirmed. The sound was regular and concerted — dot, dash, dot — dash, dot, dot. The branch of a tree and the wind may play strange pranks, but they do not produce the longs and shorts of the Morse Code.

This was where Peter's intelligence work in the Boer War helped him. He knew the Morse, he could read it, but he could make nothing of the signalling. It was either in some special code or in a strange language.

He lay still and did some calm thinking. There was a man in front of him, a Turkish soldier, who was in the enemy's pay. Therefore he could fraternize with him, for they were on the same side. But how was he to approach him without getting shot in the process? Again, how could a man send signals to the enemy from a firing-line without being detected? Peter found an answer in the strange configuration of the ground. He had not heard a sound until he was a few yards from the place, and they would be inaudible to men in the reserve trenches and even in the communication trenches. If somebody moving up the latter caught the noise, it would be easy to explain it naturally. But the wind blowing down the cup would carry it far in the enemy's direction.

There remained the risk of being heard by those parallel with the bell in the firing trenches. Peter concluded that that trench must be very thinly held, probably only by a few observers, and the nearest might be a dozen yards off. He had read about that being the French fashion under a big bombardment.

The next thing was to find out how to make himself known to this ally. He decided that the only way was to surprise him. He might get shot, but he trusted to his strength and agility against a man who was almost certainly wearied. When he had got him safe, explanations might follow.

Peter was now enjoying himself hugely. If only those infernal guns kept silent he would play out the game in the sober, decorous way he loved. So very delicately he began to wriggle forward to where the sound was.

The night was now as black as ink around him, and very quiet, too, except for soughings of the dying gale. The snow had drifted a little in the lee of the ruined walls, and Peter's progress was naturally very slow. He could not afford to dislodge one ounce of snow. Still the tinkling went on, now in greater volume. Peter was in terror lest it should cease before he got his man.

Presently his hand clutched at empty space. He was on the lip of the front trench. The sound was now a yard to his right, and with infinite care he shifted his position. Now the bell was just below him, and he felt the big rafter of the woodwork from which it had fallen. He felt something else — a stretch of wire fixed in the ground with the far end hanging in the void. That would be the spy's explanation if anyone heard the sound and came seeking the cause.

Somewhere in the darkness before him and below was the man, not a yard off. Peter remained very still, studying the situation. He could not see, but he could feel the presence, and he was trying to decide the relative position of the man and bell and their exact distance from him. The thing was not so easy as it looked, for if he jumped for where he believed the figure was, he might miss it and get a bullet in the stomach. A man who played so risky a game was probably handy with his firearms. Besides, if he should hit the bell, he would make a hideous row and alarm the whole front.

Fate suddenly gave him the right chance. The unseen figure stood up and moved a step, till his back was against the parados. He actually brushed against Peter's elbow, who held his breath.

There is a catch that the Kaffirs have which would need several diagrams to explain. It is partly a neck hold, and partly a paralysing backward twist of the right arm, but if it is practised on a man from behind, it locks him as sure as if he were handcuffed. Peter slowly got his body raised and his knees drawn under him, and reached for his prey.

He got him. A head was pulled backward over the edge of the trench, and he felt in the air the motion of the left arm pawing feebly but unable to reach behind.

'Be still,' whispered Peter in German; 'I mean you no harm. We are friends of the same purpose. Do you speak German?' 'Nein,' said a muffled voice.

'English?'

'Yes,' said the voice.

'Thank God,' said Peter. 'Then we can understand each other. I've watched your notion of signalling, and a very good one it is. I've got to get through to the Russian lines somehow before morning, and I want you to help me. I'm English — a kind of English, so we're on the same side. If I let go your neck, will you be good and talk reasonably?'

The voice assented. Peter let go, and in the same instant slipped to the side. The man wheeled round and flung out an arm but gripped vacancy.

'Steady, friend,' said Peter; 'you mustn't play tricks with me or I'll be angry.'

'Who are you? Who sent you?' asked the puzzled voice.

Peter had a happy thought. 'The Companions of the Rosy Hours,' he said.

'Then are we friends indeed,' said the voice. 'Come out of the darkness, friend, and I will do you no harm. I am a good Turk, and I fought beside the English in Kordofan and learned their tongue. I live only to see the ruin of Enver, who has beggared my family and slain my twin brother. Therefore I serve the *Muscov ghiaours*.'

'I don't know what the Musky jaws are, but if you mean the Russians I'm with you. I've got news for them which will make Enver green. The question is, how I'm to get to them, and that is where you shall help me, my friend.'

'How?'

'By playing that little tune of yours again. Tell them to expect within the next half-hour a deserter with an important message. Tell them, for God's sake, not to fire at anybody till they've made certain it isn't me.'

The man took the blunt end of his bayonet and squatted beside the bell. The first stroke brought out a clear, searching note which floated down the valley. He struck three notes at slow intervals. For all the world, Peter said, he was like a telegraph operator calling up a station.

'Send the message in English,' said Peter.

'They may not understand it,' said the man.

'Then send it any way you like. I trust you, for we are brothers.'

After ten minutes the man ceased and listened. From far away came the sound of a trench-gong, the kind of thing they used on the Western Front to give the gas-alarm.

'They say they will be ready,' he said. 'I cannot take down messages in the darkness, but they have given me the signal which means "Consent".'

'Come, that is pretty good,' said Peter. 'And now I must be moving. You take a hint from me. When you hear big firing

up to the north get ready to beat a quick retreat, for it will be all up with that city of yours. And tell your folk, too, that they're making a bad mistake letting those fool Germans rule their land. Let them hang Enver and his little friends, and we'll be happy once more.'

'May Satan receive his soul!' said the Turk. 'There is wire before us, but I will show you a way through. The guns this evening made many rents in it. But haste, for a working party may be here presently to repair it. Remember there is much wire before the other lines.'

Peter, with certain directions, found it pretty easy to make his way through the entanglement. There was one bit which scraped a hole in his back, but very soon he had come to the last posts and found himself in open country. The place, he said, was a graveyard of the unburied dead that smelt horribly as he crawled among them. He had no inducements to delay, for he thought he could hear behind him the movement of the Turkish working party, and was in terror that a flare might reveal him and a volley accompany his retreat.

From one shell-hole to another he wormed his way, till he struck an old ruinous communication trench which led in the right direction. The Turks must have been forced back in the past week, and the Russians were now in the evacuated trenches. The thing was half full of water, but it gave Peter a feeling of safety, for it enabled him to get his head below the level of the ground. Then it came to an end and he found before him a forest of wire.

The Turk in his signal had mentioned half an hour, but Peter thought it was nearer two hours before he got through that noxious entanglement. Shelling had made little difference to it. The uprights were all there, and the barbed strands seemed to touch the ground. Remember, he had no wire-cutter; nothing but his bare hands. Once again fear got hold of him. He felt caught in a net, with monstrous vultures waiting to pounce on him from above. At any moment a flare might go up and a dozen rifles find their mark. He had altogether forgotten about the message which had been sent, for no message could dissuade the ever-present death he felt around him. It was, he said, like following an old lion into bush when there was but one narrow way in, and no road out.

The guns began again — the Turkish guns from behind the ridge — and a shell tore up the wire a short way before him. Under cover of the burst he made good a few yards, leaving large portions of his clothing in the strands. Then, quite suddenly, when hope had almost died in his heart, he felt the ground rise steeply. He lay very still, a star-rocket from the Turkish side lit up the place, and there in front was a rampart with the points of bayonets showing beyond it. It was the Russian hour for stand-to.

He raised his cramped limbs from the ground and shouted 'Friend! English!'

A face looked down at him, and then the darkness again descended.

'Friend,' he said hoarsely. 'English.'

He heard speech behind the parapet. An electric torch was flashed on him for a second. A voice spoke, a friendly voice, and the sound of it seemed to be telling him to come over.

He was now standing up, and as he got his hands on the parapet he seemed to feel bayonets very near him. But the voice that spoke was kindly, so with a heave he scrambled over and flopped into the trench. Once more the electric torch was flashed, and revealed to the eyes of the onlookers an indescribably dirty, lean, middle-aged man with a bloody head, and scarcely a rag of shirt on his back. The said man, seeing friendly faces around him, grinned cheerfully.

'That was a rough trek, friends,' he said; 'I want to see your general pretty quick, for I've got a present for him.'

He was taken to an officer in a dug-out, who addressed him in French, which he did not understand. But the sight of Stumm's plan worked wonders. After that he was fairly bundled down communication trenches and then over swampy fields to a farm among trees. There he found staff officers, who looked at him and looked at his map, and then put him on a horse and hurried him eastwards. At last he came to a big ruined house, and was taken into a room which seemed to be full of maps and generals.

The conclusion must be told in Peter's words.

'There was a big man sitting at a table drinking coffee, and when I saw him my heart jumped out of my skin. For it was the man I hunted with on the Pungwe in '98 — him whom the Kaffirs called "Buck's Horn", because of his long curled moustaches. He was a prince even then, and now he is a very great general. When I saw him, I ran forward and gripped his hand and cried, "*Hoe gat het, Mynheer?*" and he knew me and shouted in Dutch, "Damn, if it isn't old Peter Pienaar!" Then he gave me coffee and ham and good bread, and he looked at my map.'

“What is this?” he cried, growing red in the face.

“It is the staff-map of one Stumm, a German *skellum* who commands in yon city,” I said.

‘He looked at it close and read the markings, and then he read the other paper which you gave me, Dick. And then he flung up his arms and laughed. He took a loaf and tossed it into the air so that it fell on the head of another general. He spoke to them in their own tongue, and they, too, laughed, and one or two ran out as if on some errand. I have never seen such merrymaking. They were clever men, and knew the worth of what you gave me.

Then he got to his feet and hugged me, all dirty as I was, and kissed me on both cheeks.

“Before God, Peter,” he said, “you’re the mightiest hunter since Nimrod. You’ve often found me game, but never game so big as this!”



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE LITTLE HILL

It was a wise man who said that the biggest kind of courage was to be able to sit still. I used to feel that when we were getting shelled in the reserve trenches outside Vermelles. I felt it before we went over the parapets at Loos, but I never felt it so much as on the last two days in that cellar. I had simply to set my teeth and take a pull on myself. Peter had gone on a crazy errand which I scarcely believed could come off. There were no signs of Sandy; somewhere within a hundred yards he was fighting his own battles, and I was tormented by the thought that he might get jumpy again and wreck everything. A strange Companion brought us food, a man who spoke only Turkish and could tell us nothing; Hussin, I judged, was busy about the horses. If I could only have done something to help on matters I could have scotched my anxiety, but there was nothing to be done, nothing but wait and brood. I tell you I began to sympathize with the general behind the lines in a battle, the fellow who makes the plan which others execute. Leading a charge can be nothing like so nerve-shaking a business as sitting in an easy-chair and waiting on the news of it.

It was bitter cold, and we spent most of the day wrapped in our greatcoats and buried deep in the straw. Blenkiron was a marvel. There was no light for him to play Patience by, but he never complained. He slept a lot of the time, and when he was awake talked as cheerily as if he were starting out on a holiday. He had one great comfort, his dyspepsia was gone. He sang hymns constantly to the benign Providence that had squared his duodenum.

My only occupation was to listen for the guns. The first day after Peter left they were very quiet on the front nearest us, but in the late evening they started a terrific racket. The next day they never stopped from dawn to dusk, so that it reminded me of that tremendous forty-eight hours before Loos. I tried to read into this some proof that Peter had got through, but it would not work. It looked more like the opposite, for this desperate hammering must mean that the frontal assault was still the Russian game.

Two or three times I climbed on the housetop for fresh air. The day was foggy and damp, and I could see very little of the countryside. Transport was still bumping southward along the road to the Palantuken, and the slow wagon-loads of wounded returning. One thing I noticed, however; there was a perpetual coming and going between the house and the city. Motors and mounted messengers were constantly arriving and departing, and I concluded that Hilda von Einem was getting ready for her part in the defence of Erzerum.

These ascents were all on the first day after Peter's going. The second day, when I tried the trap, I found it closed and heavily weighted. This must have been done by our friends, and very right, too. If the house were becoming a place of public resort, it would never do for me to be journeying roof-ward.

Late on the second night Hussin reappeared. It was after supper, when Blenkiron had gone peacefully to sleep and I was beginning to count the hours till the morning. I could not close an eye during these days and not much at night.

Hussin did not light a lantern. I heard his key in the lock, and then his light step close to where we lay.

'Are you asleep?' he said, and when I answered he sat down beside me.

'The horses are found,' he said, 'and the Master bids me tell you that we start in the morning three hours before dawn.'

It was welcome news. 'Tell me what is happening,' I begged; 'we have been lying in this tomb for three days and heard nothing.'

'The guns are busy,' he said. 'The Allemans come to this place every hour, I know not for what. Also there has been a great search for you. The searchers have been here, but they were sent away empty. . . . Sleep, my lord, for there is wild work before us.'

I did not sleep much, for I was strung too high with expectation, and I envied Blenkiron his now eupeptic slumbers. But for an hour or so I dropped off, and my old nightmare came back. Once again I was in the throat of a pass, hotly pursued, straining for some sanctuary which I knew I must reach. But I was no longer alone. Others were with me: how many I could not tell, for when I tried to see their faces they dissolved in mist. Deep snow was underfoot, a grey sky was over us, black peaks were on all sides, but ahead in the mist of the pass was that curious *castrol* which I had first seen in my dream on the Erzerum road.

I saw it distinct in every detail. It rose to the left of the road through the pass, above a hollow where great boulders stood out in the snow. Its sides were steep, so that the snow had slipped off in patches, leaving stretches of glistening black shale. The *kranz* at the top did not rise sheer, but sloped at an angle of forty-five, and on the very summit there seemed a hollow, as if the earth within the rock-rim had been beaten by weather into a cup.

That is often the way with a South African *castrol*, and I knew it was so with this. We were straining for it, but the snow clogged us, and our enemies were very close behind.

Then I was awakened by a figure at my side. 'Get ready, my lord,' it said; 'it is the hour to ride.'

Like sleep-walkers we moved into the sharp air. Hussin led us out of an old postern and then through a place like an orchard to the shelter of some tall evergreen trees. There horses stood, champing quietly from their nosebags. 'Good,' I thought; 'a feed of oats before a big effort.'

There were nine beasts for nine riders. We mounted without a word and filed through a grove of trees to where a broken paling marked the beginning of cultivated land. There for the matter of twenty minutes Hussin chose to guide us through deep, clogging snow. He wanted to avoid any sound till we were well beyond earshot of the house. Then we struck a by-path which presently merged in a hard highway, running, as I judged, south-west by west. There we delayed no longer, but galloped furiously into the dark.

I had got back all my exhilaration. Indeed I was intoxicated with the movement, and could have laughed out loud and sung. Under the black canopy of the night perils are either forgotten or terribly alive. Mine were forgotten. The darkness I galloped into led me to freedom and friends. Yes, and success, which I had not dared to hope and scarcely even to dream of.

Hussin rode first, with me at his side. I turned my head and saw Blenkiron behind me, evidently mortally unhappy about the pace we set and the mount he sat. He used to say that horse-exercise was good for his liver, but it was a gentle amble and a short gallop that he liked, and not this mad helter-skelter. His thighs were too round to fit a saddle leather. We passed a fire in a hollow, the bivouac of some Turkish unit, and all the horses shied violently. I knew by Blenkiron's oaths that he had lost his stirrups and was sitting on his horse's neck.

Beside him rode a tall figure swathed to the eyes in wrappings, and wearing round his neck some kind of shawl whose ends floated behind him. Sandy, of course, had no European ulster, for it was months since he had worn proper clothes. I wanted to speak to him, but somehow I did not dare. His stillness forbade me. He was a wonderful fine horseman, with his firm English hunting seat, and it was as well, for he paid no attention to his beast. His head was still full of unquiet thoughts.

Then the air around me began to smell acrid and raw, and I saw that a fog was winding up from the hollows.

'Here's the devil's own luck,' I cried to Hussin. 'Can you guide us in a mist?'

'I do not know.' He shook his head. 'I had counted on seeing the shape of the hills.'

'We've a map and compass, anyhow. But these make slow travelling. Pray God it lifts!'

Presently the black vapour changed to grey, and the day broke. It was little comfort. The fog rolled in waves to the horses' ears, and riding at the head of the party I could but dimly see the next rank.

'It is time to leave the road,' said Hussin, 'or we may meet inquisitive folk.'

We struck to the left, over ground which was for all the world like a Scotch moor. There were pools of rain on it, and masses of tangled snow-laden junipers, and long reefs of wet slaty stone. It was bad going, and the fog made it hopeless to steer a good course. I had out the map and the compass, and tried to fix our route so as to round the flank of a spur of the mountains which separated us from the valley we were aiming at.

'There's a stream ahead of us,' I said to Hussin. 'Is it fordable?'

'It is only a trickle,' he said, coughing. 'This accursed mist is from Eblis.' But I knew long before we reached it that it was no trickle. It was a hill stream coming down in spate, and, as I soon guessed, in a deep ravine. Presently we were at its edge, one long whirl of yeasty falls and brown rapids. We could as soon get horses over it as to the topmost cliffs of the Palantuken.

Hussin stared at it in consternation. 'May Allah forgive my folly, for I should have known. We must return to the highway and find a bridge. My sorrow, that I should have led my lords so ill.'

Back over that moor we went with my spirits badly damped. We had none too long a start, and Hilda von Einem would rouse heaven and earth to catch us up. Hussin was forcing the pace, for his anxiety was as great as mine.

Before we reached the road the mist blew back and revealed a wedge of country right across to the hills beyond the river. It was a clear view, every object standing out wet and sharp in the light of morning. It showed the bridge with horsemen drawn up across it, and it showed, too, cavalry pickets moving along the road.

They saw us at the same instant. A word was passed down the road, a shrill whistle blew, and the pickets put their horses at the bank and started across the moor.

‘Did I not say this mist was from Eblis?’ growled Hussin, as we swung round and galloped back on our tracks. ‘These cursed Zaptiehs have seen us, and our road is cut.’

I was for trying the stream at all costs, but Hussin pointed out that it would do us no good. The cavalry beyond the bridge was moving up the other bank. ‘There is a path through the hills that I know, but it must be travelled on foot. If we can increase our lead and the mist cloaks us, there is yet a chance.’

It was a weary business plodding up to the skirts of the hills. We had the pursuit behind us now, and that put an edge on every difficulty. There were long banks of broken scree, I remember, where the snow slipped in wreaths from under our feet. Great boulders had to be circumvented, and patches of bog, where the streams from the snows first made contact with the plains, mired us to our girths. Happily the mist was down again, but this, though it hindered the chase, lessened the chances of Hussin finding the path.

He found it nevertheless. There was the gully and the rough mule-track leading upwards. But there also had been a landslip, quite recent from the marks. A large scar of raw earth had broken across the hillside, which with the snow above it looked like a slice cut out of an iced chocolate-cake.

We stared blankly for a second, till we recognized its hopelessness.

‘I’m trying for the crags,’ I said. ‘Where there once was a way another can be found.’

‘And be picked off at their leisure by these marksmen,’ said Hussin grimly. ‘Look!’

The mist had opened again, and a glance behind showed me the pursuit closing up on us. They were now less than three hundred yards off. We turned our horses and made off east-ward along the skirts of the cliffs.

Then Sandy spoke for the first time. ‘I don’t know how you fellows feel, but I’m not going to be taken. There’s nothing much to do except to find a place and put up a fight. We can sell our lives dearly.’

‘That’s about all,’ said Blenkiron cheerfully. He had suffered such tortures on that gallop that he welcomed any kind of stationary fight.

‘Serve out the arms,’ said Sandy.

The Companions all carried rifles slung across their shoulders. Hussin, from a deep saddle-bag, brought out rifles and bandoliers for the rest of us. As I laid mine across my saddle-bow I saw it was a German Mauser of the latest pattern.

‘It’s hell-for-leather till we find a place for a stand,’ said Sandy. ‘The game’s against us this time.’

Once more we entered the mist, and presently found better going on a long stretch of even slope. Then came a rise, and on the crest of it I saw the sun. Presently we dipped into bright daylight and looked down on a broad glen, with a road winding up it to a pass in the range. I had expected this. It was one way to the Palantuken pass, some miles south of the house where we had been lodged.

And then, as I looked southward, I saw what I had been watching for for days. A little hill split the valley, and on its top was a *kranz* of rocks. It was the *castrol* of my persistent dream.

On that I promptly took charge. ‘There’s our fort,’ I cried. ‘If we once get there we can hold it for a week. Sit down and ride for it.’

We bucketed down that hillside like men possessed, even Blenkiron sticking on manfully among the twists and turns and slithers. Presently we were on the road and were racing past marching infantry and gun teams and empty wagons. I noted that most seemed to be moving downward and few going up. Hussin screamed some words in Turkish that secured us a passage, but indeed our crazy speed left them staring. Out of a corner of my eye I saw that Sandy had flung off most of his wrappings and seemed to be all a dazzle of rich colour. But I had thought for nothing except the little hill, now almost fronting us across the shallow glen.

No horses could breast that steep. We urged them into the hollow, and then hastily dismounted, humped the packs, and began to struggle up the side of the *castrol*. It was strewn with great boulders, which gave a kind of cover that very soon was needed. For, snatching a glance back, I saw that our pursuers were on the road above us and were getting ready to shoot.

At normal times we would have been easy marks, but, fortunately, wisps and streamers of mist now clung about that hollow. The rest could fend for themselves, so I stuck to Blenkiron and dragged him, wholly breathless, by the least exposed route. Bullets spattered now and then against the rocks, and one sang unpleasantly near my head. In this way we covered three-fourths of the distance, and had only the bare dozen yards where the gradient eased off up to the edge of the *kranz*.

Blenkiron got hit in the leg, our only casualty. There was nothing for it but to carry him, so I swung him on my shoulders, and with a bursting heart did that last lap. It was hottish work, and the bullets were pretty thick about us, but we all got safely to the *kranz*, and a short scramble took us over the edge. I laid Blenkiron inside the *castrol* and started to prepare our defence.

We had little time to do it. Out of the thin fog figures were coming, crouching in cover. The place we were in was a natural redoubt, except that there were no loopholes or sandbags. We had to show our heads over the rim to shoot, but the danger was lessened by the superb field of fire given by those last dozen yards of glacis. I posted the men and waited, and Blenkiron, with a white face, insisted on taking his share, announcing that he used to be handy with a gun.

I gave the order that no man was to shoot till the enemy had come out of the rocks on to the glacis. The thing ran right round the top, and we had to watch all sides to prevent them getting us in flank or rear. Hussin's rifle cracked out presently from the back, so my precautions had not been needless.

We were all three fair shots, though none of us up to Peter's miraculous standard, and the Companions, too, made good practice. The Mauser was the weapon I knew best, and I didn't miss much. The attackers never had a chance, for their only hope was to rush us by numbers, and, the whole party being not above two dozen, they were far too few. I think we killed three, for their bodies were left lying, and wounded at least six, while the rest fell back towards the road. In a quarter of an hour it was all over.

'They are dogs of Kurds,' I heard Hussin say fiercely. 'Only a Kurdish *giaour* would fire on the livery of the Kaaba.'

Then I had a good look at Sandy. He had discarded shawls and wrappings, and stood up in the strangest costume man ever wore in battle. Somehow he had procured field-boots and an old pair of riding-breeches. Above these, reaching well below his middle, he had a wonderful silken jibbah or ephod of a bright emerald. I call it silk, but it was like no silk I have ever known, so exquisite in the mesh, with such a sheen and depth in it. Some strange pattern was woven on the breast, which in the dim light I could not trace. I'll warrant no rarer or costlier garment was ever exposed to lead on a bleak winter hill.

Sandy seemed unconscious of his garb. His eye, listless no more, scanned the hollow. 'That's only the overture,' he cried. 'The opera will soon begin. We must put a breastwork up in these gaps or they'll pick us off from a thousand yards.'

I had meantime roughly dressed Blenkiron's wound with a linen rag which Hussin provided. It was from a ricochet bullet which had chipped into his left shin. Then I took a hand with the others in getting up earthworks to complete the circuit of the defence. It was no easy job, for we wrought only with our knives and had to dig deep down below the snowy gravel. As we worked I took stock of our refuge.

The *castrol* was a rough circle about ten yards in diameter, its interior filled with boulders and loose stones, and its parapet about four feet high. The mist had cleared for a considerable space, and I could see the immediate surroundings. West, beyond the hollow, was the road we had come, where now the remnants of the pursuit were clustered. North, the hill fell steeply to the valley bottom, but to the south, after a dip there was a ridge which shut the view. East lay another fork of the stream, the chief fork I guessed, and it was evidently followed by the main road to the pass, for I saw it crowded with transport. The two roads seemed to converge somewhere farther south of my sight.

I guessed we could not be very far from the front, for the noise of guns sounded very near, both the sharp crack of the field-pieces, and the deeper boom of the howitzers. More, I could hear the chatter of the machine-guns, a magpie note among the baying of hounds. I even saw the bursting of Russian shells, evidently trying to reach the main road. One big fellow — an eight-inch — landed not ten yards from a convoy to the east of us, and another in the hollow through which we

had come. These were clearly ranging shots, and I wondered if the Russians had observation-posts on the heights to mark them. If so, they might soon try a curtain, and we should be very near its edge. It would be an odd irony if we were the target of friendly shells.

‘By the Lord Harry,’ I heard Sandy say, ‘if we had a brace of machine-guns we could hold this place against a division.’

‘What price shells?’ I asked. ‘If they get a gun up they can blow us to atoms in ten minutes.’

‘Please God the Russians keep them too busy for that,’ was his answer.

With anxious eyes I watched our enemies on the road. They seemed to have grown in numbers. They were signalling, too, for a white flag fluttered. Then the mist rolled down on us again, and our prospect was limited to ten yards of vapour.

‘Steady,’ I cried; ‘they may try to rush us at any moment. Every man keep his eye on the edge of the fog, and shoot at the first sign.’

For nearly half an hour by my watch we waited in that queer white world, our eyes smarting with the strain of peering. The sound of the guns seemed to be hushed, and everything grown deathly quiet. Blenkiron’s squeal, as he knocked his wounded leg against a rock, made every man start.

Then out of the mist there came a voice.

It was a woman’s voice, high, penetrating, and sweet, but it spoke in no tongue I knew. Only Sandy understood. He made a sudden movement as if to defend himself against a blow.

The speaker came into clear sight on the glacis a yard or two away. Mine was the first face she saw.

‘I come to offer terms,’ she said in English. ‘Will you permit me to enter?’

I could do nothing except take off my cap and say, ‘Yes, ma’am.’

Blenkiron, snuggled up against the parapet, was cursing furiously below his breath.

She climbed up the *kranz* and stepped over the edge as lightly as a deer. Her clothes were strange — spurred boots and breeches over which fell a short green kirtle. A little cap skewered with a jewelled pin was on her head, and a cape of some coarse country cloth hung from her shoulders. She had rough gauntlets on her hands, and she carried for weapon a riding-whip. The fog-crystals clung to her hair, I remember, and a silvery film of fog lay on her garments.

I had never before thought of her as beautiful. Strange, uncanny, wonderful, if you like, but the word beauty had too kindly and human a sound for such a face. But as she stood with heightened colour, her eyes like stars, her poise like a wild bird’s, I had to confess that she had her own loveliness. She might be a devil, but she was also a queen. I considered that there might be merits in the prospect of riding by her side into Jerusalem.

Sandy stood rigid, his face very grave and set. She held out both hands to him, speaking softly in Turkish. I noticed that the six Companions had disappeared from the *castrol* and were somewhere out of sight on the farther side.

I do not know what she said, but from her tone, and above all from her eyes, I judged that she was pleading — pleading for his return, for his partnership in her great adventure; pleading, for all I knew, for his love.

His expression was like a death-mask, his brows drawn tight in a little frown and his jaw rigid.

‘Madam,’ he said, ‘I ask you to tell your business quick and to tell it in English. My friends must hear it as well as me.’

‘Your friends!’ she cried. ‘What has a prince to do with these hirelings? Your slaves, perhaps, but not your friends.’

‘My friends,’ Sandy repeated grimly. ‘You must know, Madam, that I am a British officer.’

That was beyond doubt a clean staggering stroke. What she had thought of his origin God knows, but she had never dreamed of this. Her eyes grew larger and more lustrous, her lips parted as if to speak, but her voice failed her. Then by an effort she recovered herself, and out of that strange face went all the glow of youth and ardour. It was again the unholy mask I had first known.

‘And these others?’ she asked in a level voice.

‘One is a brother officer of my regiment. The other is an American friend. But all three of us are on the same errand. We came east to destroy Greenmantle and your devilish ambitions. You have yourself destroyed your prophets, and now it is your turn to fail and disappear. Make no mistake, Madam; that folly is over. I will tear this sacred garment into a thousand pieces and scatter them on the wind. The people wait today for the revelation, but none will come. You may kill us if you can, but we have at least crushed a lie and done service to our country.’

I would not have taken my eyes from her face for a king's ransom. I have written that she was a queen, and of that there is no manner of doubt. She had the soul of a conqueror, for not a flicker of weakness or disappointment marred her air. Only pride and the stateliest resolution looked out of her eyes.

'I said I came to offer terms. I will still offer them, though they are other than I thought. For the fat American, I will send him home safely to his own country. I do not make war on such as he. He is Germany's foe, not mine. You,' she said, turning fiercely on me, 'I will hang before dusk.'

Never in my life had I been so pleased. I had got my revenge at last. This woman had singled me out above the others as the object of her wrath, and I almost loved her for it.

She turned to Sandy, and the fierceness went out of her face.

'You seek the truth,' she said. 'So also do I, and if we use a lie it is only to break down a greater. You are of my household in spirit, and you alone of all men I have seen are fit to ride with me on my mission. Germany may fail, but I shall not fail. I offer you the greatest career that mortal has known. I offer you a task which will need every atom of brain and sinew and courage. Will you refuse that destiny?'

I do not know what effect this vapouring might have had in hot scented rooms, or in the languor of some rich garden; but up on that cold hill-top it was as unsubstantial as the mist around us. It sounded not even impressive, only crazy.

'I stay with my friends,' said Sandy.

'Then I will offer more. I will save your friends. They, too, shall share in my triumph.'

This was too much for Blenkiron. He scrambled to his feet to speak the protest that had been wrung from his soul, forgot his game leg, and rolled back on the ground with a groan.

Then she seemed to make a last appeal. She spoke in Turkish now, and I do not know what she said, but I judged it was the plea of a woman to her lover. Once more she was the proud beauty, but there was a tremor in her pride — I had almost written tenderness. To listen to her was like horrid treachery, like eavesdropping on something pitiful. I know my cheeks grew scarlet and Blenkiron turned away his head.

Sandy's face did not move. He spoke in English.

'You can offer me nothing that I desire,' he said. 'I am the servant of my country, and her enemies are mine. I can have neither part nor lot with you. That is my answer, Madam von Einem.'

Then her steely restraint broke. It was like a dam giving before a pent-up mass of icy water. She tore off one of her gauntlets and hurled it in his face. Implacable hate looked out of her eyes.

'I have done with you,' she cried. 'You have scorned me, but you have dug your own grave.'

She leaped on the parapet and the next second was on the glacis. Once more the mist had fled, and across the hollow I saw a field-gun in place and men around it who were not Turkish. She waved her hand to them, and hastened down the hillside.

But at that moment I heard the whistle of a long-range Russian shell. Among the boulders there was the dull shock of an explosion and a mushroom of red earth. It all passed in an instant of time: I saw the gunners on the road point their hands and I heard them cry; I heard too, a kind of sob from Blenkiron — all this before I realized myself what had happened. The next thing I saw was Sandy, already beyond the glacis, leaping with great bounds down the hill. They were shooting at him, but he heeded them not. For the space of a minute he was out of sight, and his whereabouts was shown only by the patter of bullets.

Then he came back — walking quite slowly up the last slope, and he was carrying something in his arms. The enemy fired no more; they realized what had happened.

He laid his burden down gently in a corner of the *castrol*. The cap had fallen off, and the hair was breaking loose. The face was very white but there was no wound or bruise on it.

'She was killed at once,' I heard him saying. 'Her back was broken by a shell-fragment. Dick, we must bury her here . . . You see, she . . . she liked me. I can make her no return but this.'

We set the Companions to guard, and with infinite slowness, using our hands and our knives, we made a shallow grave below the eastern parapet. When it was done we covered her face with the linen cloak which Sandy had worn that morning. He lifted the body and laid it reverently in its place.

‘I did not know that anything could be so light,’ he said.

It wasn’t for me to look on at that kind of scene. I went to the parapet with Blenkiron’s field-glasses and had a stare at our friends on the road. There was no Turk there, and I guessed why, for it would not be easy to use the men of Islam against the wearer of the green ephod. The enemy were German or Austrian, and they had a field-gun. They seemed to have got it laid on our fort; but they were waiting. As I looked I saw behind them a massive figure I seemed to recognize. Stumm had come to see the destruction of his enemies.

To the east I saw another gun in the fields just below the main road. They had got us on both sides, and there was no way of escape. Hilda von Einem was to have a noble pyre and goodly company for the dark journey.

Dusk was falling now, a clear bright dusk where the stars pricked through a sheen of amethyst. The artillery were busy all around the horizon, and towards the pass on the other road, where Fort Palantuken stood, there was the dust and smoke of a furious bombardment. It seemed to me, too, that the guns on the other fronts had come nearer. Deve Boyun was hidden by a spur of hill, but up in the north, white clouds, like the streamers of evening, were hanging over the Euphrates glen. The whole firmament hummed and twanged like a taut string that has been struck . . .

As I looked, the gun to the west fired — the gun where Stumm was. The shell dropped ten yards to our right. A second later another fell behind us.

Blenkiron had dragged himself to the parapet. I don’t suppose he had ever been shelled before, but his face showed curiosity rather than fear.

‘Pretty poor shooting, I reckon,’ he said.

‘On the contrary,’ I said, ‘they know their business. They’re bracketing . . .’

The words were not out of my mouth when one fell right among us. It struck the far rim of the *castrol*, shattering the rock, but bursting mainly outside. We all ducked, and barring some small scratches no one was a penny the worse. I remember that much of the debris fell on Hilda von Einem’s grave.

I pulled Blenkiron over the far parapet, and called on the rest to follow, meaning to take cover on the rough side of the hill. But as we showed ourselves shots rang out from our front, shots fired from a range of a few hundred yards. It was easy to see what had happened. Riflemen had been sent to hold us in rear. They would not assault so long as we remained in the *castrol*, but they would block any attempt to find safety outside it. Stumm and his gun had us at their mercy.

We crouched below the parapet again. ‘We may as well toss for it,’ I said. ‘There’s only two ways — to stay here and be shelled or try to break through those fellows behind. Either’s pretty unhealthy.’

But I knew there was no choice. With Blenkiron crippled we were pinned to the *castrol*. Our numbers were up all right.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE GUNS OF THE NORTH

But no more shells fell.

The night grew dark and showed a field of glittering stars, for the air was sharpening again towards frost. We waited for an hour, crouching just behind the far parapets, but never came that ominous familiar whistle.

Then Sandy rose and stretched himself. 'I'm hungry,' he said. 'Let's have out the food, Hussin. We've eaten nothing since before daybreak. I wonder what is the meaning of this respite?'

I fancied I knew.

'It's Stumm's way,' I said. 'He wants to torture us. He'll keep us hours on tenterhooks, while he sits over yonder exulting in what he thinks we're enduring. He has just enough imagination for that . . . He would rush us if he had the men. As it is, he's going to blow us to pieces, but do it slowly and smack his lips over it.'

Sandy yawned. 'We'll disappoint him, for we won't be worried, old man. We three are beyond that kind of fear.'

'Meanwhile we're going to do the best we can,' I said. 'He's got the exact range for his whizz-bangs. We've got to find a hole somewhere just outside the *castrol*, and some sort of head-cover. We're bound to get damaged whatever happens, but we'll stick it out to the end. When they think they have finished with us and rush the place, there may be one of us alive to put a bullet through old Stumm. What do you say?'

They agreed, and after our meal Sandy and I crawled out to prospect, leaving the others on guard in case there should be an attack. We found a hollow in the glacis a little south of the *castrol*, and, working very quietly, managed to enlarge it and cut a kind of shallow cave in the hill. It would be no use against a direct hit, but it would give some cover from flying fragments. As I read the situation, Stumm could land as many shells as he pleased in the *castrol* and wouldn't bother to attend to the flanks. When the bad shelling began there would be shelter for one or two in the cave.

Our enemies were watchful. The riflemen on the east burnt Very flares at intervals, and Stumm's lot sent up a great star-rocket. I remember that just before midnight hell broke loose round Fort Palantuken. No more Russian shells came into our hollow, but all the road to the east was under fire, and at the Fort itself there was a shattering explosion and a queer scarlet glow which looked as if a magazine had been hit. For about two hours the firing was intense, and then it died down. But it was towards the north that I kept turning my head. There seemed to be something different in the sound there, something sharper in the report of the guns, as if shells were dropping in a narrow valley whose rock walls doubled the echo. Had the Russians by any blessed chance worked round that flank?

I got Sandy to listen, but he shook his head. 'Those guns are a dozen miles off,' he said. 'They're no nearer than three days ago. But it looks as if the sportsmen on the south might have a chance. When they break through and stream down the valley, they'll be puzzled to account for what remains of us . . . We're no longer three adventurers in the enemy's country. We're the advance guard of the Allies. Our pals don't know about us, and we're going to be cut off, which has happened to advance guards before now. But all the same, we're in our own battle-line again. Doesn't that cheer you, Dick?'

It cheered me wonderfully, for I knew now what had been the weight on my heart ever since I accepted Sir Walter's mission. It was the loneliness of it. I was fighting far away from my friends, far away from the true fronts of battle. It was a side-show which, whatever its importance, had none of the exhilaration of the main effort. But now we had come back to familiar ground. We were like the Highlanders cut off at Cite St Auguste on the first day of Loos, or those Scots Guards at Festubert of whom I had heard. Only, the others did not know of it, would never hear of it. If Peter succeeded he might tell the tale, but most likely he was lying dead somewhere in the no-man's-land between the lines. We should never be heard of again any more, but our work remained. Sir Walter would know that, and he would tell our few belongings that we had gone out in our country's service.

We were in the *castrol* again, sitting under the parapets. The same thoughts must have been in Sandy's mind, for he suddenly laughed.

'It's a queer ending, Dick. We simply vanish into the infinite. If the Russians get through they will never recognize

what is left of us among so much of the wreckage of battle. The snow will soon cover us, and when the spring comes there will only be a few bleached bones. Upon my soul it is the kind of death I always wanted.' And he quoted softly to himself a verse of an old Scots ballad:

'Mony's the ane for him maks mane,
But nane sall ken whar he is gane.
Ower his white banes, when they are bare,
The wind sall blaw for evermair.'

'But our work lives,' I cried, with a sudden great gasp of happiness. 'It's the job that matters, not the men that do it. And our job's done. We have won, old chap — won hands down — and there is no going back on that. We have won anyway; and if Peter has had a slice of luck, we've scooped the pool . . . After all, we never expected to come out of this thing with our lives.'

Blenkiron, with his leg stuck out stiffly before him, was humming quietly to himself, as he often did when he felt cheerful. He had only one song, 'John Brown's Body'; usually only a line at a time, but now he got as far as the whole verse:

'He captured Harper's Ferry, with his nineteen men so true,
And he frightened old Virginny till she trembled through and through.
They hung him for a traitor, themselves the traitor crew,
But his soul goes marching along.'

'Feeling good?' I asked.

'Fine. I'm about the luckiest man on God's earth, Major. I've always wanted to get into a big show, but I didn't see how it would come the way of a homely citizen like me, living in a steam-warmed house and going down town to my office every morning. I used to envy my old dad that fought at Chattanooga, and never forgot to tell you about it. But I guess Chattanooga was like a scrap in a Bowery bar compared to this. When I meet the old man in Glory he'll have to listen some to me.'

It was just after Blenkiron spoke that we got a reminder of Stumm's presence. The gun was well laid, for a shell plumped on the near edge of the castró. It made an end of one of the Companions who was on guard there, badly wounded another, and a fragment gashed my thigh. We took refuge in the shallow cave, but some wild shooting from the east side brought us back to the parapets, for we feared an attack. None came, nor any more shells, and once again the night was quiet.

I asked Blenkiron if he had any near relatives.

'Why, no, except a sister's son, a college-boy who has no need of his uncle. It's fortunate that we three have no wives. I haven't any regrets, neither, for I've had a mighty deal out of life. I was thinking this morning that it was a pity I was going out when I had just got my duo-denum to listen to reason. But I reckon that's another of my mercies. The good God took away the pain in my stomach so that I might go to Him with a clear head and a thankful heart.'

'We're lucky fellows,' said Sandy; 'we've all had our whack. When I remember the good times I've had I could sing a hymn of praise. We've lived long enough to know ourselves, and to shape ourselves into some kind of decency. But think of those boys who have given their lives freely when they scarcely knew what life meant. They were just at the beginning of the road, and they didn't know what dreary bits lay before them. It was all sunshiny and bright-coloured, and yet they gave it up without a moment's doubt. And think of the men with wives and children and homes that were the biggest things in life to them. For fellows like us to shirk would be black cowardice. It's small credit for us to stick it out. But when those others shut their teeth and went forward, they were blessed heroes. . . .'

After that we fell silent. A man's thoughts at a time like that seem to be double-powered, and the memory becomes very sharp and clear. I don't know what was in the others' minds, but I know what filled my own . . .

I fancy it isn't the men who get most out of the world and are always buoyant and cheerful that most fear to die. Rather it is the weak-engined souls who go about with dull eyes, that cling most fiercely to life. They have not the joy of being alive which is a kind of earnest of immortality . . . I know that my thoughts were chiefly about the jolly things that I had seen and done; not regret, but gratitude. The panorama of blue noons on the veld unrolled itself before me, and hunter's nights in

the bush, the taste of food and sleep, the bitter stimulus of dawn, the joy of wild adventure, the voices of old staunch friends. Hitherto the war had seemed to make a break with all that had gone before, but now the war was only part of the picture. I thought of my battalion, and the good fellows there, many of whom had fallen on the Loos parapets. I had never looked to come out of that myself. But I had been spared, and given the chance of a greater business, and I had succeeded. That was the tremendous fact, and my mood was humble gratitude to God and exultant pride. Death was a small price to pay for it. As Blenkiron would have said, I had got good value in the deal.

The night was getting bitter cold, as happens before dawn. It was frost again, and the sharpness of it woke our hunger. I got out the remnants of the food and wine and we had a last meal. I remember we pledged each other as we drank.

‘We have eaten our Passover Feast,’ said Sandy. ‘When do you look for the end?’

‘After dawn,’ I said. ‘Stumm wants daylight to get the full savour of his revenge.’

Slowly the sky passed from ebony to grey, and black shapes of hill outlined themselves against it. A wind blew down the valley, bringing the acrid smell of burning, but something too of the freshness of morn. It stirred strange thoughts in me, and woke the old morning vigour of the blood which was never to be mine again. For the first time in that long vigil I was torn with a sudden regret.

‘We must get into the cave before it is full light,’ I said. ‘We had better draw lots for the two to go.’

The choice fell on one of the Companions and Blenkiron. ‘You can count me out,’ said the latter. ‘If it’s your wish to find a man to be alive when our friends come up to count their spoil, I guess I’m the worst of the lot. I’d prefer, if you don’t mind, to stay here. I’ve made my peace with my Maker, and I’d like to wait quietly on His call. I’ll play a game of Patience to pass the time.’

He would take no denial, so we drew again, and the lot fell to Sandy.

‘If I’m the last to go,’ he said, ‘I promise I don’t miss. Stumm won’t be long in following me.’

He shook hands with his cheery smile, and he and the Companion slipped over the parapet in the final shadows before dawn.

Blenkiron spread his Patience cards on a flat rock, and dealt out the Double Napoleon. He was perfectly calm, and hummed to himself his only tune. For myself I was drinking in my last draught of the hill air. My contentment was going. I suddenly felt bitterly loath to die.

Something of the same kind must have passed through Blenkiron’s head. He suddenly looked up and asked, ‘Sister Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anybody coming?’

I stood close to the parapet, watching every detail of the landscape as shown by the revealing daybreak. Up on the shoulders of the Palantuken, snowdrifts lipped over the edges of the cliffs. I wondered when they would come down as avalanches. There was a kind of croft on one hillside, and from a hut the smoke of breakfast was beginning to curl. Stumm’s gunners were awake and apparently holding council. Far down on the main road a convoy was moving — I heard the creak of the wheels two miles away, for the air was deathly still.

Then, as if a spring had been loosed, the world suddenly leaped to a hideous life. With a growl the guns opened round all the horizon. They were especially fierce to the south, where a *rafale* beat as I had never heard it before. The one glance I cast behind me showed the gap in the hills choked with fumes and dust.

But my eyes were on the north. From Erzerum city tall tongues of flame leaped from a dozen quarters. Beyond, towards the opening of the Euphrates glen, there was the sharp crack of field-guns. I strained eyes and ears, mad with impatience, and I read the riddle.

‘Sandy,’ I yelled, ‘Peter has got through. The Russians are round the flank. The town is burning. Glory to God, we’ve won, we’ve won!’

And as I spoke the earth seemed to split beside me, and I was flung forward on the gravel which covered Hilda von Einem’s grave.

As I picked myself up, and to my amazement found myself uninjured, I saw Blenkiron rubbing the dust out of his eyes and arranging a disordered card. He had stopped humming, and was singing aloud:

‘He captured Harper’s Ferry, with his nineteen men so true
And he frightened old Virginny . . .’

‘Say, Major,’ he cried, ‘I believe this game of mine is coming out.’

I was now pretty well mad. The thought that old Peter had won, that we had won beyond our wildest dreams, that if we died there were those coming who would exact the uttermost vengeance, rode my brain like a fever. I sprang on the parapet and waved my hand to Stumm, shouting defiance. Rifle shots cracked out from behind, and I leaped back just in time for the next shell.

The charge must have been short, for it was a bad miss, landing somewhere on the glacis. The next was better and crashed on the near parapet, carving a great hole in the rocky *kranz*. This time my arm hung limp, broken by a fragment of stone, but I felt no pain.

Blenkiron seemed to bear a charmed life, for he was smothered in dust, but unhurt. He blew the dust away from his cards very gingerly and went on playing.

‘Sister Anne,’ he asked, ‘do you see anybody coming?’

Then came a dud which dropped neatly inside on the soft ground.

I was determined to break for the open and chance the rifle fire, for if Stumm went on shooting the *castrol* was certain death. I caught Blenkiron round the middle, scattering his cards to the winds, and jumped over the parapet.

‘Don’t apologize, Sister Anne,’ said he. ‘The game was as good as won. But for God’s sake drop me, for if you wave me like the banner of freedom I’ll get plugged sure and good.’

My one thought was to get cover for the next minutes, for I had an instinct that our vigil was near its end. The defences of Erzerum were crumbling like sand-castles, and it was a proof of the tenseness of my nerves that I seemed to be deaf to the sound. Stumm had seen us cross the parapet, and he started to sprinkle all the surroundings of the *castrol*. Blenkiron and I lay like a working-party between the lines caught by machine-guns, taking a pull on ourselves as best we could. Sandy had some kind of cover, but we were on the bare farther slope, and the riflemen on that side might have had us at their mercy.

But no shots came from them. As I looked east, the hillside, which a little before had been held by our enemies, was as empty as the desert. And then I saw on the main road a sight which for a second time made me yell like a maniac. Down that glen came a throng of men and galloping limbers — a crazy, jostling crowd, spreading away beyond the road to the steep slopes, and leaving behind it many black dots to darken the snows. The gates of the South had yielded, and our friends were through them.

At that sight I forgot all about our danger. I didn’t give a cent for Stumm’s shells. I didn’t believe he could hit me. The fate which had mercifully preserved us for the first taste of victory would see us through to the end.

I remember bundling Blenkiron along the hill to find Sandy. But our news was anticipated. For down our own side-glen came the same broken tumult of men. More; for at their backs, far up at the throat of the pass, I saw horsemen — the horsemen of the pursuit. Old Nicholas had flung his cavalry in.

Sandy was on his feet, with his lips set and his eye abstracted. If his face hadn’t been burned black by weather it would have been pale as a dish-clout. A man like him doesn’t make up his mind for death and then be given his life again without being wrenched out of his bearings. I thought he didn’t understand what had happened, so I beat him on the shoulders.

‘Man, d’you see?’ I cried. ‘The Cossacks! The Cossacks! God! How they’re taking that slope! They’re into them now. By heaven, we’ll ride with them! We’ll get the gun horses!’

A little knoll prevented Stumm and his men from seeing what was happening farther up the glen, till the first wave of the rout was on them. He had gone on bombarding the *castrol* and its environs while the world was cracking over his head. The gun team was in the hollow below the road, and down the hill among the boulders we crawled, Blenkiron as lame as a duck, and me with a limp left arm.

The poor beasts were straining at their pickets and sniffing the morning wind, which brought down the thick fumes of the great bombardment and the indescribable babbling cries of a beaten army. Before we reached them that maddened horde had swept down on them, men panting and gasping in their flight, many of them bloody from wounds, many tottering in the first stages of collapse and death. I saw the horses seized by a dozen hands, and a desperate fight for their possession. But as we halted there our eyes were fixed on the battery on the road above us, for round it was now sweeping the van of the retreat.

I had never seen a rout before, when strong men come to the end of their tether and only their broken shadows stumble towards the refuge they never find. No more had Stumm, poor devil. I had no ill-will left for him, though coming down that hill I was rather hoping that the two of us might have a final scrap. He was a brute and a bully, but, by God! he was a man. I heard his great roar when he saw the tumult, and the next I saw was his monstrous figure working at the gun. He swung it south and turned it on the fugitives.

But he never fired it. The press was on him, and the gun was swept sideways. He stood up, a foot higher than any of them, and he seemed to be trying to check the rush with his pistol. There is power in numbers, even though every unit is broken and fleeing. For a second to that wild crowd Stumm was the enemy, and they had strength enough to crush him. The wave flowed round and then across him. I saw the butt-ends of rifles crash on his head and shoulders, and the next second the stream had passed over his body.

That was God's judgement on the man who had set himself above his kind.

Sandy gripped my shoulder and was shouting in my ear:

'They're coming, Dick. Look at the grey devils . . . Oh, God be thanked, it's our friends!'

The next minute we were tumbling down the hillside, Blenkiron hopping on one leg between us. I heard dimly Sandy crying, 'Oh, well done our side!' and Blenkiron declaiming about Harper's Ferry, but I had no voice at all and no wish to shout. I know the tears were in my eyes, and that if I had been left alone I would have sat down and cried with pure thankfulness. For sweeping down the glen came a cloud of grey cavalry on little wiry horses, a cloud which stayed not for the rear of the fugitives, but swept on like a flight of rainbows, with the steel of their lance-heads glittering in the winter sun. They were riding for Erzerum.

Remember that for three months we had been with the enemy and had never seen the face of an Ally in arms. We had been cut off from the fellowship of a great cause, like a fort surrounded by an army. And now we were delivered, and there fell around us the warm joy of comradeship as well as the exultation of victory.

We flung caution to the winds, and went stark mad. Sandy, still in his emerald coat and turban, was scrambling up the farther slope of the hollow, yelling greetings in every language known to man. The leader saw him, with a word checked his men for a moment — it was marvellous to see the horses reined in in such a break-neck ride — and from the squadron half a dozen troopers swung loose and wheeled towards us. Then a man in a grey overcoat and a sheepskin cap was on the ground beside us wringing our hands.

'You are safe, my old friends' — it was Peter's voice that spoke — 'I will take you back to our army, and get you breakfast.'

'No, by the Lord, you won't,' cried Sandy. 'We've had the rough end of the job and now we'll have the fun. Look after Blenkiron and these fellows of mine. I'm going to ride knee by knee with your sportsmen for the city.'

Peter spoke a word, and two of the Cossacks dismounted. The next I knew I was mixed up in the cloud of greycoats, galloping down the road up which the morning before we had strained to the *castrol*.

That was the great hour of my life, and to live through it was worth a dozen years of slavery. With a broken left arm I had little hold on my beast, so I trusted my neck to him and let him have his will. Black with dirt and smoke, hatless, with no kind of uniform, I was a wilder figure than any Cossack. I soon was separated from Sandy, who had two hands and a better horse, and seemed resolute to press forward to the very van. That would have been suicide for me, and I had all I could do to keep my place in the bunch I rode with.

But, Great God! what an hour it was! There was loose shooting on our flank, but nothing to trouble us, though the gun team of some Austrian howitzer, struggling madly at a bridge, gave us a bit of a tussle. Everything flitted past me like smoke, or like the mad finale of a dream just before waking. I knew the living movement under me, and the companionship of men, but all dimly, for at heart I was alone, grappling with the realization of a new world. I felt the shadows of the Palantuken glen fading, and the great burst of light as we emerged on the wider valley. Somewhere before us was a pall of smoke seamed with red flames, and beyond the darkness of still higher hills. All that time I was dreaming, crooning daft catches of song to myself, so happy, so deliriously happy that I dared not try to think. I kept muttering a kind of prayer made up of Bible words to Him who had shown me His goodness in the land of the living.

But as we drew out from the skirts of the hills and began the long slope to the city, I woke to clear consciousness. I felt the smell of sheepskin and lathered horses, and above all the bitter smell of fire. Down in the trough lay Erzerum, now

burning in many places, and from the east, past the silent forts, horsemen were closing in on it. I yelled to my comrades that we were nearest, that we would be first in the city, and they nodded happily and shouted their strange war-cries. As we topped the last ridge I saw below me the van of our charge — a dark mass on the snow — while the broken enemy on both sides were flinging away their arms and scattering in the fields.

In the very front, now nearing the city ramparts, was one man. He was like the point of the steel spear soon to be driven home. In the clear morning air I could see that he did not wear the uniform of the invaders. He was turbaned and rode like one possessed, and against the snow I caught the dark sheen of emerald. As he rode it seemed that the fleeing Turks were stricken still, and sank by the roadside with eyes strained after his unheeding figure . . .

Then I knew that the prophecy had been true, and that their prophet had not failed them. The long-looked for revelation had come. Greenmantle had appeared at last to an awaiting people.



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Mr. Standfast

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THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

THE WICKET-GATE

I spent one-third of my journey looking out of the window of a first-class carriage, the next in a local motor-car following the course of a trout stream in a shallow valley, and the last tramping over a ridge of downland through great beech-woods to my quarters for the night. In the first part I was in an infamous temper; in the second I was worried and mystified; but the cool twilight of the third stage calmed and heartened me, and I reached the gates of Fosse Manor with a mighty appetite and a quiet mind.

As we slipped up the Thames valley on the smooth Great Western line I had reflected ruefully on the thorns in the path of duty. For more than a year I had never been out of khaki, except the months I spent in hospital. They gave me my battalion before the Somme, and I came out of that weary battle after the first big September fighting with a crack in my head and a D.S.O. I had received a C.B. for the Erzerum business, so what with these and my Matabele and South African medals and the Legion of Honour, I had a chest like the High Priest's breastplate. I rejoined in January, and got a brigade on the eve of Arras. There we had a star turn, and took about as many prisoners as we put infantry over the top. After that we were hauled out for a month, and subsequently planted in a bad bit on the Scarpe with a hint that we would soon be used for a big push. Then suddenly I was ordered home to report to the War Office, and passed on by them to Bullivant and his merry men. So here I was sitting in a railway carriage in a grey tweed suit, with a neat new suitcase on the rack labelled C.B. The initials stood for Cornelius Brand, for that was my name now. And an old boy in the corner was asking me questions and wondering audibly why I wasn't fighting, while a young blood of a second lieutenant with a wound stripe was eyeing me with scorn.

The old chap was one of the cross-examining type, and after he had borrowed my matches he set to work to find out all about me. He was a tremendous fire-eater, and a bit of a pessimist about our slow progress in the west. I told him I came from South Africa and was a mining engineer.

'Been fighting with Botha?' he asked.

'No,' I said. 'I'm not the fighting kind.'

The second lieutenant screwed up his nose.

'Is there no conscription in South Africa?'

'Thank God there isn't,' I said, and the old fellow begged permission to tell me a lot of unpalatable things. I knew his kind and didn't give much for it. He was the sort who, if he had been under fifty, would have crawled on his belly to his tribunal to get exempted, but being over age was able to pose as a patriot. But I didn't like the second lieutenant's grin, for he seemed a good class of lad. I looked steadily out of the window for the rest of the way, and wasn't sorry when I got to my station.

I had had the queerest interview with Bullivant and Macgillivray. They asked me first if I was willing to serve again in the old game, and I said I was. I felt as bitter as sin, for I had got fixed in the military groove, and had made good there. Here was I— a brigadier and still under forty, and with another year of the war there was no saying where I might end. I had started out without any ambition, only a great wish to see the business finished. But now I had acquired a professional interest in the thing, I had a nailing good brigade, and I had got the hang of our new kind of war as well as any fellow from Sandhurst and Camberley. They were asking me to scrap all I had learned and start again in a new job. I had to agree, for discipline's discipline, but I could have knocked their heads together in my vexation.

What was worse they wouldn't, or couldn't, tell me anything about what they wanted me for. It was the old game of running me in blinkers. They asked me to take it on trust and put myself unreservedly in their hands. I would get my instructions later, they said.

I asked if it was important.

Bullivant narrowed his eyes. 'If it weren't, do you suppose we could have wrung an active brigadier out of the War Office? As it was, it was like drawing teeth.'

'Is it risky?' was my next question.

'In the long run — damnably,' was the answer.

'And you can't tell me anything more?'

'Nothing as yet. You'll get your instructions soon enough. You know both of us, Hannay, and you know we wouldn't waste the time of a good man on folly. We are going to ask you for something which will make a big call on your patriotism. It will be a difficult and arduous task, and it may be a very grim one before you get to the end of it, but we believe you can do it, and that no one else can . . . You know us pretty well. Will you let us judge for you?'

I looked at Bullivant's shrewd, kind old face and Macgillivray's steady eyes. These men were my friends and wouldn't play with Me.

'All right,' I said. 'I'm willing. What's the first step?'

'Get out of uniform and forget you ever were a soldier. Change your name. Your old one, Cornelis Brandt, will do, but you'd better spell it "Brand" this time. Remember that you are an engineer just back from South Africa, and that you don't care a rush about the war. You can't understand what all the fools are fighting about, and you think we might have peace at once by a little friendly business talk. You needn't be pro-German — if you like you can be rather severe on the Hun. But you must be in deadly earnest about a speedy peace.'

I expect the corners of my mouth fell, for Bullivant burst out laughing.

'Hang it all, man, it's not so difficult. I feel sometimes inclined to argue that way myself, when my dinner doesn't agree with me. It's not so hard as to wander round the Fatherland abusing Britain, which was your last job.'

'I'm ready,' I said. 'But I want to do one errand on my own first. I must see a fellow in my brigade who is in a shell-shock hospital in the Cotswolds. Isham's the name of the place.'

The two men exchanged glances. 'This looks like fate,' said Bullivant. 'By all means go to Isham. The place where your work begins is only a couple of miles off. I want you to spend next Thursday night as the guest of two maiden ladies called Wymondham at Fosse Manor. You will go down there as a lone South African visiting a sick friend. They are hospitable souls and entertain many angels unawares.'

'And I get my orders there?'

'You get your orders, and you are under bond to obey them.' And Bullivant and Macgillivray smiled at each other.

I was thinking hard about that odd conversation as the small Ford car, which I had wired for to the inn, carried me away from the suburbs of the county town into a land of rolling hills and green water-meadows. It was a gorgeous afternoon and the blossom of early June was on every tree. But I had no eyes for landscape and the summer, being engaged in reprobating Bullivant and cursing my fantastic fate. I detested my new part and looked forward to naked shame. It was bad enough for anyone to have to pose as a pacifist, but for me, strong as a bull and as sunburnt as a gipsy and not looking my forty years, it was a black disgrace. To go into Germany as an anti-British Afrikander was a stoutish adventure, but to lounge about at home talking rot was a very different-sized job. My stomach rose at the thought of it, and I had pretty well decided to wire to Bullivant and cry off. There are some things that no one has a right to ask of any white man.

When I got to Isham and found poor old Blaikie I didn't feel happier. He had been a friend of mine in Rhodesia, and after the German South-West affair was over had come home to a Fusilier battalion, which was in my brigade at Arras. He had been buried by a big crump just before we got our second objective, and was dug out without a scratch on him, but as daft as a hatter. I had heard he was mending, and had promised his family to look him up the first chance I got. I found him sitting on a garden seat, staring steadily before him like a lookout at sea. He knew me all right and cheered up for a second, but very soon he was back at his staring, and every word he uttered was like the careful speech of a drunken man. A bird flew out of a bush, and I could see him holding himself tight to keep from screaming. The best I could do was to put a hand on his shoulder and stroke him as one strokes a frightened horse. The sight of the price my old friend had paid didn't put me in love with pacifism.

We talked of brother officers and South Africa, for I wanted to keep his thoughts off the war, but he kept edging round to it.

'How long will the damned thing last?' he asked.

'Oh, it's practically over,' I lied cheerfully. 'No more fighting for you and precious little for me. The Boche is done in all right . . . What you've got to do, my lad, is to sleep fourteen hours in the twenty-four and spend half the rest catching trout. We'll have a shot at the grouse-bird together this autumn and we'll get some of the old gang to join us.'

Someone put a tea-tray on the table beside us, and I looked up to see the very prettiest girl I ever set eyes on. She seemed little more than a child, and before the war would probably have still ranked as a flapper. She wore the neat blue dress and apron of a V.A.D. and her white cap was set on hair like spun gold. She smiled demurely as she arranged the tea-things, and I thought I had never seen eyes at once so merry and so grave. I stared after her as she walked across the lawn, and I remember noticing that she moved with the free grace of an athletic boy.

'Who on earth's that?' I asked Blaikie.

'That? Oh, one of the sisters,' he said listlessly. 'There are squads of them. I can't tell one from another.'

Nothing gave me such an impression of my friend's sickness as the fact that he should have no interest in something so fresh and jolly as that girl. Presently my time was up and I had to go, and as I looked back I saw him sunk in his chair again, his eyes fixed on vacancy, and his hands gripping his knees.

The thought of him depressed me horribly. Here was I condemned to some rotten buffoonery in inglorious safety, while the salt of the earth like Blaikie was paying the ghastliest price. From him my thoughts flew to old Peter Pienaar, and I sat down on a roadside wall and read his last letter. It nearly made me howl. Peter, you must know, had shaved his beard and joined the Royal Flying Corps the summer before when we got back from the Greenmantle affair. That was the only kind of reward he wanted, and, though he was absurdly over age, the authorities allowed it. They were wise not to stickle about rules, for Peter's eyesight and nerve were as good as those of any boy of twenty. I knew he would do well, but I was not prepared for his immediately blazing success. He got his pilot's certificate in record time and went out to France; and presently even we foot-sloggers, busy shifting ground before the Somme, began to hear rumours of his doings. He developed a perfect genius for air-fighting. There were plenty better trick-flyers, and plenty who knew more about the science of the game, but there was no one with quite Peter's genius for an actual scrap. He was as full of dodges a couple of miles up in the sky as he had been among the rocks of the Berg. He apparently knew how to hide in the empty air as cleverly as in the long grass of the Lebombo Flats. Amazing yarns began to circulate among the infantry about this new airman, who could take cover below one plane of an enemy squadron while all the rest were looking for him. I remember talking about him with the South Africans when we were out resting next door to them after the bloody Delville Wood business. The day before we had seen a good battle in the clouds when the Boche plane had crashed, and a Transvaal machine-gun officer brought the report that the British airman had been Pienaar. 'Well done, the old *takhaar!*' he cried, and started to yarn about Peter's methods. It appeared that Peter had a theory that every man has a blind spot, and that he knew just how to find that blind spot in the world of air. The best cover, he maintained, was not in cloud or a wisp of fog, but in the unseeing patch in the eye of your enemy. I recognized that talk for the real thing. It was on a par with Peter's doctrine of 'atmosphere' and 'the double bluff' and all the other principles that his queer old mind had cogitated out of his rackets life.

By the end of August that year Peter's was about the best-known figure in the Flying Corps. If the reports had mentioned names he would have been a national hero, but he was only 'Lieutenant Blank', and the newspapers, which expatiated on his deeds, had to praise the Service and not the man. That was right enough, for half the magic of our Flying Corps was its freedom from advertisement. But the British Army knew all about him, and the men in the trenches used to discuss him as if he were a crack football-player. There was a very big German airman called Lensch, one of the Albatross heroes, who about the end of August claimed to have destroyed thirty-two Allied machines. Peter had then only seventeen planes to his credit, but he was rapidly increasing his score. Lensch was a mighty man of valour and a good sportsman after his fashion. He was amazingly quick at manoeuvring his machine in the actual fight, but Peter was supposed to be better at forcing the kind of fight he wanted. Lensch, if you like, was the tactician and Peter the strategist. Anyhow the two were out to get each other. There were plenty of fellows who saw the campaign as a struggle not between Hun and Briton, but between Lensch and Pienaar.

The 15th September came, and I got knocked out and went to hospital. When I was fit to read the papers again and receive letters, I found to my consternation that Peter had been downed. It happened at the end of October when the

southwest gales badly handicapped our airwork. When our bombing or reconnaissance jobs behind the enemy lines were completed, instead of being able to glide back into safety, we had to fight our way home slowly against a head-wind exposed to Archies and Hun planes. Somewhere east of Bapaume on a return journey Peter fell in with Lensch — at least the German Press gave Lensch the credit. His petrol tank was shot to bits and he was forced to descend in a wood near Morchies. ‘The celebrated British airman, Pinner,’ in the words of the German communique, was made prisoner.

I had no letter from him till the beginning of the New Year, when I was preparing to return to France. It was a very contented letter. He seemed to have been fairly well treated, though he had always a low standard of what he expected from the world in the way of comfort. I inferred that his captors had not identified in the brilliant airman the Dutch miscreant who a year before had broken out of a German jail. He had discovered the pleasures of reading and had perfected himself in an art which he had once practised indifferently. Somehow or other he had got a *Pilgrim’s Progress*, from which he seemed to extract enormous pleasure. And then at the end, quite casually, he mentioned that he had been badly wounded and that his left leg would never be much use again.

After that I got frequent letters, and I wrote to him every week and sent him every kind of parcel I could think of. His letters used to make me both ashamed and happy. I had always banked on old Peter, and here he was behaving like an early Christian martyr — never a word of complaint, and just as cheery as if it were a winter morning on the high veld and we were off to ride down springbok. I knew what the loss of a leg must mean to him, for bodily fitness had always been his pride. The rest of life must have unrolled itself before him very drab and dusty to the grave. But he wrote as if he were on the top of his form and kept commiserating me on the discomforts of my job. The picture of that patient, gentle old fellow, hobbling about his compound and puzzling over his *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a cripple for life after five months of blazing glory, would have stiffened the back of a jellyfish.

This last letter was horribly touching, for summer had come and the smell of the woods behind his prison reminded Peter of a place in the Woodbush, and one could read in every sentence the ache of exile. I sat on that stone wall and considered how trifling were the crumpled leaves in my bed of life compared with the thorns Peter and Blaikie had to lie on. I thought of Sandy far off in Mesopotamia, and old Blenkiron groaning with dyspepsia somewhere in America, and I considered that they were the kind of fellows who did their jobs without complaining. The result was that when I got up to go on I had recovered a manlier temper. I wasn’t going to shame my friends or pick and choose my duty. I would trust myself to Providence, for, as Blenkiron used to say, Providence was all right if you gave him a chance.

It was not only Peter’s letter that steadied and calmed me. Isham stood high up in a fold of the hills away from the main valley, and the road I was taking brought me over the ridge and back to the stream-side. I climbed through great beechwoods, which seemed in the twilight like some green place far below the sea, and then over a short stretch of hill pasture to the rim of the vale. All about me were little fields enclosed with walls of grey stone and full of dim sheep. Below were dusky woods around what I took to be Fosse Manor, for the great Roman Fosse Way, straight as an arrow, passed over the hills to the south and skirted its grounds. I could see the stream slipping among its water-meadows and could hear the splash of the weir. A tiny village settled in a crook of the hill, and its church-tower sounded seven with a curiously sweet chime. Otherwise there was no noise but the twitter of small birds and the night wind in the tops of the beeches.

In that moment I had a kind of revelation. I had a vision of what I had been fighting for, what we all were fighting for. It was peace, deep and holy and ancient, peace older than the oldest wars, peace which would endure when all our swords were hammered into ploughshares. It was more; for in that hour England first took hold of me. Before my country had been South Africa, and when I thought of home it had been the wide sun-steeped spaces of the veld or some scented glen of the Berg. But now I realized that I had a new home. I understood what a precious thing this little England was, how old and kindly and comforting, how wholly worth striving for. The freedom of an acre of her soil was cheaply bought by the blood of the best of us. I knew what it meant to be a poet, though for the life of me I could not have made a line of verse. For in that hour I had a prospect as if from a hilltop which made all the present troubles of the road seem of no account. I saw not only victory after war, but a new and happier world after victory, when I should inherit something of this English peace and wrap myself in it till the end of my days.

Very humbly and quietly, like a man walking through a cathedral, I went down the hill to the Manor lodge, and came to a door in an old red-brick facade, smothered in magnolias which smelt like hot lemons in the June dusk. The car from the inn had brought on my baggage, and presently I was dressing in a room which looked out on a water-garden. For the first time for more than a year I put on a starched shirt and a dinner-jacket, and as I dressed I could have sung from pure

lightheartedness. I was in for some arduous job, and sometime that evening in that place I should get my marching orders. Someone would arrive — perhaps Bullivant — and read me the riddle. But whatever it was, I was ready for it, for my whole being had found a new purpose. Living in the trenches, you are apt to get your horizon narrowed down to the front line of enemy barbed wire on one side and the nearest rest billets on the other. But now I seemed to see beyond the fog to a happy country.

High-pitched voices greeted my ears as I came down the broad staircase, voices which scarcely accorded with the panelled walls and the austere family portraits; and when I found my hostesses in the hall I thought their looks still less in keeping with the house. Both ladies were on the wrong side of forty, but their dress was that of young girls. Miss Doria Wymondham was tall and thin with a mass of nondescript pale hair confined by a black velvet fillet. Miss Claire Wymondham was shorter and plumper and had done her best by ill-applied cosmetics to make herself look like a foreign *demi-mondaine*. They greeted me with the friendly casualness which I had long ago discovered was the right English manner towards your guests; as if they had just strolled in and billeted themselves, and you were quite glad to see them but mustn't be asked to trouble yourself further. The next second they were cooing like pigeons round a picture which a young man was holding up in the lamplight.

He was a tallish, lean fellow of round about thirty years, wearing grey flannels and shoes dusty from the country roads. His thin face was sallow as if from living indoors, and he had rather more hair on his head than most of us. In the glow of the lamp his features were very clear, and I examined them with interest, for, remember, I was expecting a stranger to give me orders. He had a long, rather strong chin and an obstinate mouth with peevish lines about its corners. But the remarkable feature was his eyes. I can best describe them by saying that they looked hot — not fierce or angry, but so restless that they seemed to ache physically and to want sponging with cold water.

They finished their talk about the picture — which was couched in a jargon of which I did not understand one word — and Miss Doria turned to me and the young man.

'My cousin Launcelot Wake — Mr Brand.'

We nodded stiffly and Mr Wake's hand went up to smooth his hair in a self-conscious gesture.

'Has Barnard announced dinner? By the way, where is Mary?'

'She came in five minutes ago and I sent her to change,' said Miss Claire. 'I won't have her spoiling the evening with that horrid uniform. She may masquerade as she likes out-of-doors, but this house is for civilized people.'

The butler appeared and mumbled something. 'Come along,' cried Miss Doria, 'for I'm sure you are starving, Mr Brand. And Launcelot has bicycled ten miles.'

The dining-room was very unlike the hall. The panelling had been stripped off, and the walls and ceiling were covered with a dead-black satiny paper on which hung the most monstrous pictures in large dull-gold frames. I could only see them dimly, but they seemed to be a mere riot of ugly colour. The young man nodded towards them. 'I see you have got the Degousses hung at last,' he said.

'How exquisite they are!' cried Miss Claire. 'How subtle and candid and brave! Doria and I warm our souls at their flame.'

Some aromatic wood had been burned in the room, and there was a queer sickly scent about. Everything in that place was strained and uneasy and abnormal — the candle shades on the table, the mass of faked china fruit in the centre dish, the gaudy hangings and the nightmarish walls. But the food was magnificent. It was the best dinner I had eaten since 1914.

'Tell me, Mr Brand,' said Miss Doria, her long white face propped on a much-beringed hand. 'You are one of us? You are in revolt against this crazy war?'

'Why, yes,' I said, remembering my part. 'I think a little common-sense would settle it right away.'

'With a little common-sense it would never have started,' said Mr Wake.

'Launcelot's a C.O., you know,' said Miss Doria.

I did not know, for he did not look any kind of soldier . . . I was just about to ask him what he commanded, when I remembered that the letters stood also for 'Conscientious Objector,' and stopped in time.

At that moment someone slipped into the vacant seat on my right hand. I turned and saw the V.A.D. girl who had brought tea to Blaikie that afternoon at the hospital.

‘He was exempted by his Department,’ the lady went on, ‘for he’s a Civil Servant, and so he never had a chance of testifying in court, but no one has done better work for our cause. He is on the committee of the L.D.A., and questions have been asked about him in Parliament.’

The man was not quite comfortable at this biography. He glanced nervously at me and was going to begin some kind of explanation, when Miss Doria cut him short. ‘Remember our rule, Launcelot. No turgid war controversy within these walls.’

I agreed with her. The war had seemed closely knit to the Summer landscape for all its peace, and to the noble old chambers of the Manor. But in that demented modish dining-room it was shriekingly incongruous.

Then they spoke of other things. Mostly of pictures or common friends, and a little of books. They paid no heed to me, which was fortunate, for I know nothing about these matters and didn’t understand half the language. But once Miss Doria tried to bring me in. They were talking about some Russian novel — a name like Leprous Souls — and she asked me if I had read it. By a curious chance I had. It had drifted somehow into our dug-out on the Scarpe, and after we had all stuck in the second chapter it had disappeared in the mud to which it naturally belonged. The lady praised its ‘poignancy’ and ‘grave beauty’. I assented and congratulated myself on my second escape — for if the question had been put to me I should have described it as God-forgotten twaddle.

I turned to the girl, who welcomed me with a smile. I had thought her pretty in her V.A.D. dress, but now, in a filmy black gown and with her hair no longer hidden by a cap, she was the most ravishing thing you ever saw. And I observed something else. There was more than good looks in her young face. Her broad, low brow and her laughing eyes were amazingly intelligent. She had an uncanny power of making her eyes go suddenly grave and deep, like a glittering river narrowing into a pool.

‘We shall never be introduced,’ she said, ‘so let me reveal myself. I’m Mary Lamington and these are my aunts . . . Did you really like Leprous Souls?’

It was easy enough to talk to her. And oddly enough her mere presence took away the oppression I had felt in that room. For she belonged to the out-of-doors and to the old house and to the world at large. She belonged to the war, and to that happier world beyond it — a world which must be won by going through the struggle and not by shirking it, like those two silly ladies.

I could see Wake’s eyes often on the girl, while he boomed and oraculated and the Misses Wymondham prattled. Presently the conversation seemed to leave the flowery paths of art and to verge perilously near forbidden topics. He began to abuse our generals in the field. I could not choose but listen. Miss Lamington’s brows were slightly bent, as if in disapproval, and my own temper began to rise.

He had every kind of idiotic criticism — incompetence, faint-heartedness, corruption. Where he got the stuff I can’t imagine, for the most grouching Tommy, with his leave stopped, never put together such balderdash. Worst of all he asked me to agree with him.

It took all my sense of discipline. ‘I don’t know much about the subject,’ I said, ‘but out in South Africa I did hear that the British leading was the weak point. I expect there’s a good deal in what you say.’

It may have been fancy, but the girl at my side seemed to whisper ‘Well done!’

Wake and I did not remain long behind before joining the ladies; I purposely cut it short, for I was in mortal fear lest I should lose my temper and spoil everything. I stood up with my back against the mantelpiece for as long as a man may smoke a cigarette, and I let him yarn to me, while I looked steadily at his face. By this time I was very clear that Wake was not the fellow to give me my instructions. He wasn’t playing a game. He was a perfectly honest crank, but not a fanatic, for he wasn’t sure of himself. He had somehow lost his self-respect and was trying to argue himself back into it. He had considerable brains, for the reasons he gave for differing from most of his countrymen were good so far as they went. I shouldn’t have cared to take him on in public argument. If you had told me about such a fellow a week before I should have been sick at the thought of him. But now I didn’t dislike him. I was bored by him and I was also tremendously sorry for him. You could see he was as restless as a hen.

When we went back to the hall he announced that he must get on the road, and commandeered Miss Lamington to help him find his bicycle. It appeared he was staying at an inn a dozen miles off for a couple of days’ fishing, and the news somehow made me like him better. Presently the ladies of the house departed to bed for their beauty sleep and I was left to

my own devices.

For some time I sat smoking in the hall wondering when the messenger would arrive. It was getting late and there seemed to be no preparation in the house to receive anybody. The butler came in with a tray of drinks and I asked him if he expected another guest that night.

‘I ‘adn’t ‘eard of it, sir,’ was his answer. ‘There ‘asn’t been a telegram that I know of, and I ‘ave received no instructions.’

I lit my pipe and sat for twenty minutes reading a weekly paper. Then I got up and looked at the family portraits. The moon coming through the lattice invited me out-of-doors as a cure for my anxiety. It was after eleven o’clock, and I was still without any knowledge of my next step. It is a maddening business to be screwed up for an unpleasant job and to have the wheels of the confounded thing tarry.

Outside the house beyond a flagged terrace the lawn fell away, white in the moonshine, to the edge of the stream, which here had expanded into a miniature lake. By the water’s edge was a little formal garden with grey stone parapets which now gleamed like dusky marble. Great wafts of scent rose from it, for the lilacs were scarcely over and the may was in full blossom. Out from the shade of it came suddenly a voice like a nightingale.

It was singing the old song ‘Cherry Ripe’, a common enough thing which I had chiefly known from barrel-organs. But heard in the scented moonlight it seemed to hold all the lingering magic of an elder England and of this hallowed countryside. I stepped inside the garden bounds and saw the head of the girl Mary.

She was conscious of my presence, for she turned towards me.

‘I was coming to look for you,’ she said, ‘now that the house is quiet. I have something to say to you, General Hannay.’

She knew my name and must be somehow in the business. The thought entranced me.

‘Thank God I can speak to you freely,’ I cried. ‘Who and what are you — living in that house in that kind of company?’

‘My good aunts!’ She laughed softly. ‘They talk a great deal about their souls, but they really mean their nerves. Why, they are what you call my camouflage, and a very good one too.’

‘And that cadaverous young prig?’

‘Poor Launcelot! Yes — camouflage too — perhaps something a little more. You must not judge him too harshly.’

‘But . . . but —’ I did not know how to put it, and stammered in my eagerness. ‘How can I tell that you are the right person for me to speak to? You see I am under orders, and I have got none about you.’

‘I will give You Proof,’ she said. ‘Three days ago Sir Walter Bullivant and Mr Macgillivray told you to come here tonight and to wait here for further instructions. You met them in the little smoking-room at the back of the Rota Club. You were bidden take the name of Cornelius Brand, and turn yourself from a successful general into a pacifist South African engineer. Is that correct?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘You have been restless all evening looking for the messenger to give you these instructions. Set your mind at ease. No messenger is coming. You will get your orders from me.’

‘I could not take them from a more welcome source,’ I said.

‘Very prettily put. If you want further credentials I can tell you much about your own doings in the past three years. I can explain to you who don’t need the explanation, every step in the business of the Black Stone. I think I could draw a pretty accurate map of your journey to Erzerum. You have a letter from Peter Pienaar in your pocket — I can tell you its contents. Are you willing to trust me?’

‘With all my heart,’ I said.

‘Good. Then my first order will try you pretty hard. For I have no orders to give you except to bid you go and steep yourself in a particular kind of life. Your first duty is to get “atmosphere”, as your friend Peter used to say. Oh, I will tell you where to go and how to behave. But I can’t bid you do anything, only live idly with open eyes and ears till you have got the “feel” of the situation.’

She stopped and laid a hand on my arm.

‘It won’t be easy. It would madden me, and it will be a far heavier burden for a man like you. You have got to sink down deep into the life of the half-baked, the people whom this war hasn’t touched or has touched in the wrong way, the

people who split hairs all day and are engrossed in what you and I would call selfish little fads. Yes. People like my aunts and Launcelot, only for the most part in a different social grade. You won't live in an old manor like this, but among gimcrack little "arty" houses. You will hear everything you regard as sacred laughed at and condemned, and every kind of nauseous folly acclaimed, and you must hold your tongue and pretend to agree. You will have nothing in the world to do except to let the life soak into you, and, as I have said, keep your eyes and ears open.'

'But you must give me some clue as to what I should be looking for?'

'My orders are to give you none. Our chiefs — yours and mine — want you to go where you are going without any kind of *parti pris*. Remember we are still in the intelligence stage of the affair. The time hasn't yet come for a plan of campaign, and still less for action.'

'Tell me one thing,' I said. 'Is it a really big thing we're after?'

'A— really — big — thing,' she said slowly and very gravely. 'You and I and some hundred others are hunting the most dangerous man in all the world. Till we succeed everything that Britain does is crippled. If we fail or succeed too late the Allies may never win the victory which is their right. I will tell you one thing to cheer you. It is in some sort a race against time, so your purgatory won't endure too long.'

I was bound to obey, and she knew it, for she took my willingness for granted.

From a little gold satchel she selected a tiny box, and opening it extracted a thing like a purple wafer with a white St Andrew's Cross on it.

'What kind of watch have you? Ah, a hunter. Paste that inside the lid. Some day you may be called on to show it . . . One other thing. Buy tomorrow a copy of the *Pilgrim's Progress* and get it by heart. You will receive letters and messages some day and the style of our friends is apt to be reminiscent of John Bunyan . . . The car will be at the door tomorrow to catch the ten-thirty, and I will give you the address of the rooms that have been taken for you . . . Beyond that I have nothing to say, except to beg you to play the part well and keep your temper. You behaved very nicely at dinner.'

I asked one last question as we said good night in the hall. 'Shall I see you again?'

'Soon, and often,' was the answer. 'Remember we are colleagues.'

I went upstairs feeling extraordinarily comforted. I had a perfectly beastly time ahead of me, but now it was all glorified and coloured with the thought of the girl who had sung 'Cherry Ripe' in the garden. I commended the wisdom of that old serpent Bullivant in the choice of his intermediary, for I'm hanged if I would have taken such orders from anyone else.



CHAPTER TWO

‘THE VILLAGE NAMED MORALITY’

UP on the high veld our rivers are apt to be strings of pools linked by muddy trickles — the most stagnant kind of watercourse you would look for in a day’s journey. But presently they reach the edge of the plateau and are tossed down into the flats in noble ravines, and roll thereafter in full and sounding currents to the sea. So with the story I am telling. It began in smooth reaches, as idle as a mill-pond; yet the day soon came when I was in the grip of a torrent, flung breathless from rock to rock by a destiny which I could not control. But for the present I was in a backwater, no less than the Garden City of Biggleswick, where Mr Cornelius Brand, a South African gentleman visiting England on holiday, lodged in a pair of rooms in the cottage of Mr Tancred Jimson.

The house — or ‘home’ as they preferred to name it at Biggleswick — was one of some two hundred others which ringed a pleasant Midland common. It was badly built and oddly furnished; the bed was too short, the windows did not fit, the doors did not stay shut; but it was as clean as soap and water and scrubbing could make it. The three-quarters of an acre of garden were mainly devoted to the culture of potatoes, though under the parlour window Mrs Jimson had a plot of sweet-smelling herbs, and lines of lank sunflowers fringed the path that led to the front door. It was Mrs Jimson who received me as I descended from the station fly — a large red woman with hair bleached by constant exposure to weather, clad in a gown which, both in shape and material, seemed to have been modelled on a chintz curtain. She was a good kindly soul, and as proud as Punch of her house.

‘We follow the simple life here, Mr Brand,’ she said. ‘You must take us as you find us.’

I assured her that I asked for nothing better, and as I unpacked in my fresh little bedroom with a west wind blowing in at the window I considered that I had seen worse quarters.

I had bought in London a considerable number of books, for I thought that, as I would have time on my hands, I might as well do something about my education. They were mostly English classics, whose names I knew but which I had never read, and they were all in a little flat-backed series at a shilling apiece. I arranged them on top of a chest of drawers, but I kept the *Pilgrim’s Progress* beside my bed, for that was one of my working tools and I had got to get it by heart.

Mrs Jimson, who came in while I was unpacking to see if the room was to my liking, approved my taste. At our midday dinner she wanted to discuss books with me, and was so full of her own knowledge that I was able to conceal my ignorance.

‘We are all labouring to express our personalities,’ she informed me. ‘Have you found your medium, Mr Brand? is it to be the pen or the pencil? Or perhaps it is music? You have the brow of an artist, the frontal “bar of Michelangelo”, you remember!’

I told her that I concluded I would try literature, but before writing anything I would read a bit more.

It was a Saturday, so Jimson came back from town in the early afternoon. He was a managing clerk in some shipping office, but you wouldn’t have guessed it from his appearance. His city clothes were loose dark-grey flannels, a soft collar, an orange tie, and a soft black hat. His wife went down the road to meet him, and they returned hand-in-hand, swinging their arms like a couple of schoolchildren. He had a skimpy red beard streaked with grey, and mild blue eyes behind strong glasses. He was the most friendly creature in the world, full of rapid questions, and eager to make me feel one of the family. Presently he got into a tweed Norfolk jacket, and started to cultivate his garden. I took off my coat and lent him a hand, and when he stopped to rest from his labours — which was every five minutes, for he had no kind of physique — he would mop his brow and rub his spectacles and declaim about the good smell of the earth and the joy of getting close to Nature.

Once he looked at my big brown hands and muscular arms with a kind of wistfulness. ‘You are one of the doers, Mr Brand,’ he said, ‘and I could find it in my heart to envy you. You have seen Nature in wild forms in far countries. Some day I hope you will tell us about your life. I must be content with my little corner, but happily there are no territorial limits for the mind. This modest dwelling is a watch-tower from which I look over all the world.’

After that he took me for a walk. We met parties of returning tennis-players and here and there a golfer. There seemed to be an abundance of young men, mostly rather weedy-looking, but with one or two well-grown ones who should have been fighting. The names of some of them Jimson mentioned with awe. An unwholesome youth was Aronson, the great

novelist; a sturdy, bristling fellow with a fierce moustache was Letchford, the celebrated leader-writer of the Critic. Several were pointed out to me as artists who had gone one better than anybody else, and a vast billowy creature was described as the leader of the new Orientalism in England. I noticed that these people, according to Jimson, were all 'great', and that they all dabbled in something 'new'. There were quantities of young women, too, most of them rather badly dressed and inclining to untidy hair. And there were several decent couples taking the air like house-holders of an evening all the world Over. Most of these last were Jimson's friends, to whom he introduced me. They were his own class — modest folk, who sought for a coloured background to their prosaic city lives and found it in this odd settlement.

At supper I was initiated into the peculiar merits of Biggleswick.

'It is one great laboratory of thought,' said Mrs Jimson. 'It is glorious to feel that you are living among the eager, vital people who are at the head of all the newest movements, and that the intellectual history of England is being made in our studies and gardens. The war to us seems a remote and secondary affair. As someone has said, the great fights of the world are all fought in the mind.'

A spasm of pain crossed her husband's face. 'I wish I could feel it far away. After all, Ursula, it is the sacrifice of the young that gives people like us leisure and peace to think. Our duty is to do the best which is permitted to us, but that duty is a poor thing compared with what our young soldiers are giving! I may be quite wrong about the war . . . I know I can't argue with Letchford. But I will not pretend to a superiority I do not feel.'

I went to bed feeling that in Jimson I had struck a pretty sound fellow. As I lit the candles on my dressing-table I observed that the stack of silver which I had taken out of my pockets when I washed before supper was top-heavy. It had two big coins at the top and sixpences and shillings beneath. Now it is one of my oddities that ever since I was a small boy I have arranged my loose coins symmetrically, with the smallest uppermost. That made me observant and led me to notice a second point. The English classics on the top of the chest of drawers were not in the order I had left them. Izaak Walton had got to the left of Sir Thomas Browne, and the poet Burns was wedged disconsolately between two volumes of Hazlitt. Moreover a receipted bill which I had stuck in the *Pilgrim's Progress* to mark my place had been moved. Someone had been going through my belongings.

A moment's reflection convinced me that it couldn't have been Mrs Jimson. She had no servant and did the housework herself, but my things had been untouched when I left the room before supper, for she had come to tidy up before I had gone downstairs. Someone had been here while we were at supper, and had examined elaborately everything I possessed. Happily I had little luggage, and no papers save the new books and a bill or two in the name of Cornelius Brand. The inquisitor, whoever he was, had found nothing . . . The incident gave me a good deal of comfort. It had been hard to believe that any mystery could exist in this public place, where people lived brazenly in the open, and wore their hearts on their sleeves and proclaimed their opinions from the rooftops. Yet mystery there must be, or an inoffensive stranger with a kit-bag would not have received these strange attentions. I made a practice after that of sleeping with my watch below my pillow, for inside the case was Mary Lamington's label. Now began a period of pleasant idle receptiveness. Once a week it was my custom to go up to London for the day to receive letters and instructions, if any should come. I had moved from my chambers in Park Lane, which I leased under my proper name, to a small flat in Westminster taken in the name of Cornelius Brand. The letters addressed to Park Lane were forwarded to Sir Walter, who sent them round under cover to my new address. For the rest I used to spend my mornings reading in the garden, and I discovered for the first time what a pleasure was to be got from old books. They recalled and amplified that vision I had seen from the Cotswold ridge, the revelation of the priceless heritage which is England. I imbibed a mighty quantity of history, but especially I liked the writers, like Walton, who got at the very heart of the English countryside. Soon, too, I found the *Pilgrim's Progress* not a duty but a delight. I discovered new jewels daily in the honest old story, and my letters to Peter began to be as full of it as Peter's own epistles. I loved, also, the songs of the Elizabethans, for they reminded me of the girl who had sung to me in the June night.

In the afternoons I took my exercise in long tramps along the good dusty English roads. The country fell away from Biggleswick into a plain of wood and pasture-land, with low hills on the horizon. The Place was sown with villages, each with its green and pond and ancient church. Most, too, had inns, and there I had many a draught of cool nutty ale, for the inn at Biggleswick was a reformed place which sold nothing but washy cider. Often, tramping home in the dusk, I was so much in love with the land that I could have sung with the pure joy of it. And in the evening, after a bath, there would be supper, when a rather fagged Jimson struggled between sleep and hunger, and the lady, with an artistic mutch on her

untidy head, talked ruthlessly of culture.

Bit by bit I edged my way into local society. The Jimsons were a great help, for they were popular and had a nodding acquaintance with most of the inhabitants. They regarded me as a meritorious aspirant towards a higher life, and I was paraded before their friends with the suggestion of a vivid, if Philistine, past. If I had any gift for writing, I would make a book about the inhabitants of Biggleswick. About half were respectable citizens who came there for country air and low rates, but even these had a touch of queerness and had picked up the jargon of the place. The younger men were mostly Government clerks or writers or artists. There were a few widows with flocks of daughters, and on the outskirts were several bigger houses — mostly houses which had been there before the garden city was planted. One of them was brand-new, a staring villa with sham-antique timbering, stuck on the top of a hill among raw gardens. It belonged to a man called Moxon Ivery, who was a kind of academic pacifist and a great god in the place. Another, a quiet Georgian manor house, was owned by a London publisher, an ardent Liberal whose particular branch of business compelled him to keep in touch with the new movements. I used to see him hurrying to the station swinging a little black bag and returning at night with the fish for dinner.

I soon got to know a surprising lot of people, and they were the rummiest birds you can imagine. For example, there were the Weekeses, three girls who lived with their mother in a house so artistic that you broke your head whichever way you turned in it. The son of the family was a conscientious objector who had refused to do any sort of work whatever, and had got quodded for his pains. They were immensely proud of him and used to relate his sufferings in Dartmoor with a gusto which I thought rather heartless. Art was their great subject, and I am afraid they found me pretty heavy going. It was their fashion never to admire anything that was obviously beautiful, like a sunset or a pretty woman, but to find surprising loveliness in things which I thought hideous. Also they talked a language that was beyond me. This kind of conversation used to happen. — MISS WEEKES: 'Don't you admire Ursula Jimson?' SELF: 'Rather!' MISS W.: 'She is so John-esque in her lines.' SELF: 'Exactly!' MISS W.: 'And Tancred, too — he is so full of nuances.' SELF: 'Rather!' MISS W.: 'He suggests one of Degousse's countrymen.' SELF: 'Exactly!'

They hadn't much use for books, except some Russian ones, and I acquired merit in their eyes for having read Leprous Souls. If you talked to them about that divine countryside, you found they didn't give a rap for it and had never been a mile beyond the village. But they admired greatly the sombre effect of a train going into Marylebone station on a rainy day.

But it was the men who interested me most. Aronson, the novelist, proved on acquaintance the worst kind of blighter. He considered himself a genius whom it was the duty of the country to support, and he sponged on his wretched relatives and anyone who would lend him money. He was always babbling about his sins, and pretty squalid they were. I should like to have flung him among a few good old-fashioned full-blooded sinners of my acquaintance; they would have scared him considerably. He told me that he sought 'reality' and 'life' and 'truth', but it was hard to see how he could know much about them, for he spent half the day in bed smoking cheap cigarettes, and the rest sunning himself in the admiration of half-witted girls. The creature was tuberculous in mind and body, and the only novel of his I read, pretty well turned my stomach. Mr Aronson's strong point was jokes about the war. If he heard of any acquaintance who had joined up or was even doing war work his merriment knew no bounds. My fingers used to itch to box the little wretch's ears.

Letchford was a different pair of shoes. He was some kind of a man, to begin with, and had an excellent brain and the worst manners conceivable. He contradicted everything you said, and looked out for an argument as other people look for their dinner. He was a double-engined, high-speed pacifist, because he was the kind of cantankerous fellow who must always be in a minority. If Britain had stood out of the war he would have been a raving militarist, but since she was in it he had got to find reasons why she was wrong. And jolly good reasons they were, too. I couldn't have met his arguments if I had wanted to, so I sat docilely at his feet. The world was all crooked for Letchford, and God had created him with two left hands. But the fellow had merits. He had a couple of jolly children whom he adored, and he would walk miles with me on a Sunday, and spout poetry about the beauty and greatness of England. He was forty-five; if he had been thirty and in my battalion I could have made a soldier out of him.

There were dozens more whose names I have forgotten, but they had one common characteristic. They were puffed up with spiritual pride, and I used to amuse myself with finding their originals in the *Pilgrim's Progress*. When I tried to judge them by the standard of old Peter, they fell woefully short. They shut out the war from their lives, some out of funk, some out of pure levity of mind, and some because they were really convinced that the thing was all wrong. I think I grew rather popular in my role of the seeker after truth, the honest colonial who was against the war by instinct and was looking

for instruction in the matter. They regarded me as a convert from an alien world of action which they secretly dreaded, though they affected to despise it. Anyhow they talked to me very freely, and before long I had all the pacifist arguments by heart. I made out that there were three schools. One objected to war altogether, and this had few adherents except Aronson and Weekes, C.O., now languishing in Dartmoor. The second thought that the Allies' cause was tainted, and that Britain had contributed as much as Germany to the catastrophe. This included all the adherents of the L.D.A. — or League of Democrats against Aggression — a very proud body. The third and much the largest, which embraced everybody else, held that we had fought long enough and that the business could now be settled by negotiation, since Germany had learned her lesson. I was myself a modest member of the last school, but I was gradually working my way up to the second, and I hoped with luck to qualify for the first. My acquaintances approved my progress. Letchford said I had a core of fanaticism in my slow nature, and that I would end by waving the red flag.

Spiritual pride and vanity, as I have said, were at the bottom of most of them, and, try as I might, I could find nothing very dangerous in it all. This vexed me, for I began to wonder if the mission which I had embarked on so solemnly were not going to be a fiasco. Sometimes they worried me beyond endurance. When the news of Messines came nobody took the slightest interest, while I was aching to tooth every detail of the great fight. And when they talked on military affairs, as Letchford and others did sometimes, it was difficult to keep from sending them all to the devil, for their amateur cocksureness would have riled Job. One had got to batten down the recollection of our fellows out there who were sweating blood to keep these fools snug. Yet I found it impossible to be angry with them for long, they were so babyishly innocent. Indeed, I couldn't help liking them, and finding a sort of quality in them. I had spent three years among soldiers, and the British regular, great fellow that he is, has his faults. His discipline makes him in a funk of red-tape and any kind of superior authority. Now these people were quite honest and in a perverted way courageous. Letchford was, at any rate. I could no more have done what he did and got hunted off platforms by the crowd and hooted at by women in the streets than I could have written his leading articles.

All the same I was rather low about my job. Barring the episode of the ransacking of my effects the first night, I had not a suspicion of a clue or a hint of any mystery. The place and the people were as open and bright as a Y.M.C.A. hut. But one day I got a solid wad of comfort. In a corner of Letchford's paper, the *Critic*, I found a letter which was one of the steepest pieces of invective I had ever met with. The writer gave tongue like a beagle pup about the prostitution, as he called it, of American republicanism to the vices of European aristocracies. He declared that Senator La Follette was a much-misunderstood patriot, seeing that he alone spoke for the toiling millions who had no other friend. He was mad with President Wilson, and he prophesied a great awakening when Uncle Sam got up against John Bull in Europe and found out the kind of standpatter he was. The letter was signed 'John S. Blenkiron' and dated 'London, 3 July'.

The thought that Blenkiron was in England put a new complexion on my business. I reckoned I would see him soon, for he wasn't the man to stand still in his tracks. He had taken up the role he had played before he left in December 1915, and very right too, for not more than half a dozen people knew of the Erzerum affair, and to the British public he was only the man who had been fired out of the Savoy for talking treason. I had felt a bit lonely before, but now somewhere within the four corners of the island the best companion God ever made was writing nonsense with his tongue in his old cheek.

There was an institution in Biggleswick which deserves mention. On the south of the common, near the station, stood a red-brick building called the Moot Hall, which was a kind of church for the very undevout population. Undevout in the ordinary sense, I mean, for I had already counted twenty-seven varieties of religious conviction, including three Buddhists, a Celestial Hierarchy, five Latter-day Saints, and about ten varieties of Mystic whose names I could never remember. The hall had been the gift of the publisher I have spoken of, and twice a week it was used for lectures and debates. The place was managed by a committee and was surprisingly popular, for it gave all the bubbling intellects a chance of airing their views. When you asked where somebody was and were told he was 'at Moot,' the answer was spoken in the respectful tone in which you would mention a sacrament.

I went there regularly and got my mind broadened to cracking point. We had all the stars of the New Movements. We had Doctor Chirk, who lectured on 'God', which, as far as I could make out, was a new name he had invented for himself. There was a woman, a terrible woman, who had come back from Russia with what she called a 'message of healing'. And to my joy, one night there was a great buck nigger who had a lot to say about 'Africa for the Africans'. I had a few words with him in Sesutu afterwards, and rather spoiled his visit. Some of the people were extraordinarily good, especially one jolly old fellow who talked about English folk songs and dances, and wanted us to set up a Maypole. In the debates which

generally followed I began to join, very coyly at first, but presently with some confidence. If my time at Biggleswick did nothing else it taught me to argue on my feet.

The first big effort I made was on a full-dress occasion, when Launcelot Wake came down to speak. Mr Ivery was in the chair — the first I had seen of him — a plump middle-aged man, with a colourless face and nondescript features. I was not interested in him till he began to talk, and then I sat bolt upright and took notice. For he was the genuine silver-tongue, the sentences flowing from his mouth as smooth as butter and as neatly dovetailed as a parquet floor. He had a sort of man-of-the-world manner, treating his opponents with condescending geniality, deprecating all passion and exaggeration and making you feel that his urbane statement must be right, for if he had wanted he could have put the case so much higher. I watched him, fascinated, studying his face carefully; and the thing that struck me was that there was nothing in it — nothing, that is to say, to lay hold on. It was simply nondescript, so almightily commonplace that that very fact made it rather remarkable.

Wake was speaking of the revelations of the Sukhomhnov trial in Russia, which showed that Germany had not been responsible for the war. He was jolly good at the job, and put as clear an argument as a first-class lawyer. I had been sweating away at the subject and had all the ordinary case at my fingers' ends, so when I got a chance of speaking I gave them a long harangue, with some good quotations I had cribbed out of the *Vossische Zeitung*, which Letchford lent me. I felt it was up to me to be extra violent, for I wanted to establish my character with Wake, seeing that he was a friend of Mary and Mary would know that I was playing the game. I got tremendously applauded, far more than the chief speaker, and after the meeting Wake came up to me with his hot eyes, and wrung my hand. 'You're coming on well, Brand,' he said, and then he introduced me to Mr Ivery. 'Here's a second and a better Smuts,' he said.

Ivery made me walk a bit of the road home with him. 'I am struck by your grip on these difficult problems, Mr Brand,' he told me. 'There is much I can tell you, and you may be of great value to our cause.' He asked me a lot of questions about my past, which I answered with easy mendacity. Before we parted he made me promise to come one night to supper.

Next day I got a glimpse of Mary, and to my vexation she cut me dead. She was walking with a flock of bare-headed girls, all chattering hard, and though she saw me quite plainly she turned away her eyes. I had been waiting for my cue, so I did not lift my hat, but passed on as if we were strangers. I reckoned it was part of the game, but that trifling thing annoyed me, and I spent a morose evening.

The following day I saw her again, this time talking sedately with Mr Ivery, and dressed in a very pretty summer gown, and a broad-brimmed straw hat with flowers in it. This time she stopped with a bright smile and held out her hand. 'Mr Brand, isn't it?' she asked with a pretty hesitation. And then, turning to her companion — 'This is Mr Brand. He stayed with us last month in Gloucestershire.'

Mr Ivery announced that he and I were already acquainted. Seen in broad daylight he was a very personable fellow, somewhere between forty-five and fifty, with a middle-aged figure and a curiously young face. I noticed that there were hardly any lines on it, and it was rather that of a very wise child than that of a man. He had a pleasant smile which made his jaw and cheeks expand like indiarubber. 'You are coming to sup with me, Mr Brand,' he cried after me. 'On Tuesday after Moot. I have already written.' He whisked Mary away from me, and I had to content myself with contemplating her figure till it disappeared round a bend of the road.

Next day in London I found a letter from Peter. He had been very solemn of late, and very reminiscent of old days now that he concluded his active life was over. But this time he was in a different mood. '*I think,*' he wrote, '*that you and I will meet again soon, my old friend. Do you remember when we went after the big black-maned lion in the Rooirand and couldn't get on his track, and then one morning we woke up and said we would get him today? — and we did, but he very near got you first. I've had a feel these last days that we're both going down into the Valley to meet with Apolygon, and that the devil will give us a bad time, but anyhow we'll be together.*'

I had the same kind of feel myself, though I didn't see how Peter and I were going to meet, unless I went out to the Front again and got put in the bag and sent to the same Boche prison. But I had an instinct that my time in Biggleswick was drawing to a close, and that presently I would be in rougher quarters. I felt quite affectionate towards the place, and took all my favourite walks, and drank my own health in the brew of the village inns, with a consciousness of saying goodbye. Also I made haste to finish my English classics, for I concluded I wouldn't have much time in the future for miscellaneous reading.

The Tuesday came, and in the evening I set out rather late for the Moot Hall, for I had been getting into decent clothes after a long, hot stride. When I reached the place it was pretty well packed, and I could only find a seat on the back benches. There on the platform was Ivery, and beside him sat a figure that thrilled every inch of me with affection and a wild anticipation. 'I have now the privilege,' said the chairman, 'of introducing to you the speaker whom we so warmly welcome, our fearless and indefatigable American friend, Mr Blenkiron.'

It was the old Blenkiron, but almightily changed. His stoutness had gone, and he was as lean as Abraham Lincoln. Instead of a puffy face, his cheek-bones and jaw stood out hard and sharp, and in place of his former pasty colour his complexion had the clear glow of health. I saw now that he was a splendid figure of a man, and when he got to his feet every movement had the suppleness of an athlete in training. In that moment I realized that my serious business had now begun. My senses suddenly seemed quicker, my nerves tenser, my brain more active. The big game had started, and he and I were playing it together.

I watched him with strained attention. It was a funny speech, stuffed with extravagance and vehemence, not very well argued and terribly discursive. His main point was that Germany was now in a fine democratic mood and might well be admitted into a brotherly partnership — that indeed she had never been in any other mood, but had been forced into violence by the plots of her enemies. Much of it, I should have thought, was in stark defiance of the Defence of the Realm Acts, but if any wise Scotland Yard officer had listened to it he would probably have considered it harmless because of its contradictions. It was full of a fierce earnestness, and it was full of humour — long-drawn American metaphors at which that most critical audience roared with laughter. But it was not the kind of thing that they were accustomed to, and I could fancy what Wake would have said of it. The conviction grew upon me that Blenkiron was deliberately trying to prove himself an honest idiot. If so, it was a huge success. He produced on one the impression of the type of sentimental revolutionary who ruthlessly knifes his opponent and then weeps and prays over his tomb.

Just at the end he seemed to pull himself together and to try a little argument. He made a great point of the Austrian socialists going to Stockholm, going freely and with their Government's assent, from a country which its critics called an autocracy, while the democratic western peoples held back. 'I admit I haven't any real water-tight proof,' he said, 'but I will bet my bottom dollar that the influence which moved the Austrian Government to allow this embassy of freedom was the influence of Germany herself. And that is the land from which the Allied Pharisees draw in their skirts lest their garments be defiled!'

He sat down amid a good deal of applause, for his audience had not been bored, though I could see that some of them thought his praise of Germany a bit steep. It was all right in Biggleswick to prove Britain in the wrong, but it was a slightly different thing to extol the enemy. I was puzzled about his last point, for it was not of a piece with the rest of his discourse, and I was trying to guess at his purpose. The chairman referred to it in his concluding remarks. 'I am in a position,' he said, 'to bear out all that the lecturer has said. I can go further. I can assure him on the best authority that his surmise is correct, and that Vienna's decision to send delegates to Stockholm was largely dictated by representations from Berlin. I am given to understand that the fact has in the last few days been admitted in the Austrian Press.'

A vote of thanks was carried, and then I found myself shaking hands with Ivery while Blenkiron stood a yard off, talking to one of the Misses Weekes. The next moment I was being introduced.

'Mr Brand, very pleased to meet you,' said the voice I knew so well. 'Mr Ivery has been telling me about you, and I guess we've got something to say to each other. We're both from noo countries, and we've got to teach the old nations a little horse-sense.'

Mr Ivery's car — the only one left in the neighbourhood — carried us to his villa, and presently we were seated in a brightly-lit dining-room. It was not a pretty house, but it had the luxury of an expensive hotel, and the supper we had was as good as any London restaurant. Gone were the old days of fish and toast and boiled milk. Blenkiron squared his shoulders and showed himself a noble trencherman.

'A year ago,' he told our host, 'I was the meanest kind of dyspeptic. I had the love of righteousness in my heart, but I had the devil in my stomach. Then I heard stories about the Robson Brothers, the star surgeons way out west in White Springs, Nebraska. They were reckoned the neatest hands in the world at carving up a man and removing devilments from his intestines. Now, sir, I've always fought pretty shy of surgeons, for I considered that our Maker never intended His handiwork to be reconstructed like a bankrupt Dago railway. But by that time I was feeling so almighty wretched that I

could have paid a man to put a bullet through my head. “There’s no other way,” I said to myself. “Either you forget your religion and your miserable cowardice and get cut up, or it’s you for the Golden Shore.” So I set my teeth and journeyed to White Springs, and the Brothers had a look at my duodenum. They saw that the darned thing wouldn’t do, so they sidetracked it and made a noo route for my noo-trition traffic. It was the cunningest piece of surgery since the Lord took a rib out of the side of our First Parent. They’ve got a mighty fine way of charging, too, for they take five per cent of a man’s income, and it’s all one to them whether he’s a Meat King or a clerk on twenty dollars a week. I can tell you I took some trouble to be a very rich man last year.’

All through the meal I sat in a kind of stupor. I was trying to assimilate the new Blenkiron, and drinking in the comfort of his heavenly drawl, and I was puzzling my head about Ivery. I had a ridiculous notion that I had seen him before, but, delve as I might into my memory, I couldn’t place him. He was the incarnation of the commonplace, a comfortable middle-class sentimentalist, who patronized pacificism out of vanity, but was very careful not to dip his hands too far. He was always damping down Blenkiron’s volcanic utterances. ‘Of course, as you know, the other side have an argument which I find rather hard to meet . . .’ ‘I can sympathize with patriotism, and even with jingoism, in certain moods, but I always come back to this difficulty.’ ‘Our opponents are not ill-meaning so much as ill-judging,’ — these were the sort of sentences he kept throwing in. And he was full of quotations from private conversations he had had with every sort of person — including members of the Government. I remember that he expressed great admiration for Mr Balfour.

Of all that talk, I only recalled one thing clearly, and I recalled it because Blenkiron seemed to collect his wits and try to argue, just as he had done at the end of his lecture. He was speaking about a story he had heard from someone, who had heard it from someone else, that Austria in the last week of July 1914 had accepted Russia’s proposal to hold her hand and negotiate, and that the Kaiser had sent a message to the Tsar saying he agreed. According to his story this telegram had been received in Petrograd, and had been re-written, like Bismarck’s Ems telegram, before it reached the Emperor. He expressed his disbelief in the yarn. ‘I reckon if it had been true,’ he said, ‘we’d have had the right text out long ago. They’d have kept a copy in Berlin. All the same I did hear a sort of rumour that some kind of message of that sort was published in a German paper.’

Mr Ivery looked wise. ‘You are right,’ he said. ‘I happen to know that it has been published. You will find it in the *Wieser Zeitung*.’

‘You don’t say?’ he said admiringly. ‘I wish I could read the old tombstone language. But if I could they wouldn’t let me have the papers.’

‘Oh yes they would.’ Mr Ivery laughed pleasantly. ‘England has still a good share of freedom. Any respectable person can get a permit to import the enemy press. I’m not considered quite respectable, for the authorities have a narrow definition of patriotism, but happily I have respectable friends.’

Blenkiron was staying the night, and I took my leave as the clock struck twelve. They both came into the hall to see me off, and, as I was helping myself to a drink, and my host was looking for my hat and stick, I suddenly heard Blenkiron’s whisper in my ear. ‘London . . . the day after tomorrow,’ he said. Then he took a formal farewell. ‘Mr Brand, it’s been an honour for me, as an American citizen, to make your acquaintance, sir. I will consider myself fortunate if we have an early reunion. I am stopping at Claridge’s Ho-tel, and I hope to be privileged to receive you there.’



CHAPTER THREE

THE REFLECTIONS OF A CURED DYSPEPTIC

Thirty-five hours later I found myself in my rooms in Westminster. I thought there might be a message for me there, for I didn't propose to go and call openly on Blenkiron at Claridge's till I had his instructions. But there was no message — only a line from Peter, saying he had hopes of being sent to Switzerland. That made me realize that he must be pretty badly broken up.

Presently the telephone bell rang. It was Blenkiron who spoke. 'Go down and have a talk with your brokers about the War Loan. Arrive there about twelve o'clock and don't go upstairs till you have met a friend. You'd better have a quick luncheon at your club, and then come to Traill's bookshop in the Haymarket at two. You can get back to Biggleswick by the 5.16.'

I did as I was bid, and twenty minutes later, having travelled by Underground, for I couldn't raise a taxi, I approached the block of chambers in Leadenhall Street where dwelt the respected firm who managed my investments. It was still a few minutes before noon, and as I slowed down a familiar figure came out of the bank next door.

Ivery beamed recognition. 'Up for the day, Mr Brand?' he asked. 'I have to see my brokers,' I said, 'read the South African papers in my club, and get back by the 5.16. Any chance of your company?'

'Why, yes — that's my train. *Au revoir*. We meet at the station.' He bustled off, looking very smart with his neat clothes and a rose in his button-hole.

I lunched impatiently, and at two was turning over some new books in Traill's shop with an eye on the street-door behind me. It seemed a public place for an assignation. I had begun to dip into a big illustrated book on flower-gardens when an assistant came up. 'The manager's compliments, sir, and he thinks there are some old works of travel upstairs that might interest you.' I followed him obediently to an upper floor lined with every kind of volume and with tables littered with maps and engravings. 'This way, sir,' he said, and opened a door in the wall concealed by bogus book-backs. I found myself in a little study, and Blenkiron sitting in an armchair smoking.

He got up and seized both my hands. 'Why, Dick, this is better than good noos. I've heard all about your exploits since we parted a year ago on the wharf at Liverpool. We've both been busy on our own jobs, and there was no way of keeping you wise about my doings, for after I thought I was cured I got worse than hell inside, and, as I told you, had to get the doctor-men to dig into me. After that I was playing a pretty dark game, and had to get down and out of decent society. But, holy Mike! I'm a new man. I used to do my work with a sick heart and a taste in my mouth like a graveyard, and now I can eat and drink what I like and frolic round like a colt. I wake up every morning whistling and thank the good God that I'm alive. It was a bad day for Kaiser when I got on the cars for White Springs.'

'This is a rum place to meet,' I said, 'and you brought me by a roundabout road.'

He grinned and offered me a cigar.

'There were reasons. It don't do for you and me to advertise our acquaintance in the street. As for the shop, I've owned it for five years. I've a taste for good reading, though you wouldn't think it, and it tickles me to hand it out across the counter . . . First, I want to hear about Biggleswick.'

'There isn't a great deal to it. A lot of ignorance, a large slice of vanity, and a pinch or two of wrong-headed honesty — these are the ingredients of the pie. Not much real harm in it. There's one or two dirty literary gents who should be in a navvies' battalion, but they're about as dangerous as yellow Kaffir dogs. I've learned a lot and got all the arguments by heart, but you might plant a Biggleswick in every shire and it wouldn't help the Boche. I can see where the danger lies all the same. These fellows talked academic anarchism, but the genuine article is somewhere about and to find it you've got to look in the big industrial districts. We had faint echoes of it in Biggleswick. I mean that the really dangerous fellows are those who want to close up the war at once and so get on with their blessed class war, which cuts across nationalities. As for being spies and that sort of thing, the Biggleswick lads are too callow.'

'Yes,' said Blenkiron reflectively. 'They haven't got as much sense as God gave to geese. You're sure you didn't hit against any heavier metal?'

‘Yes. There’s a man called Launcelot Wake, who came down to speak once. I had met him before. He has the makings of a fanatic, and he’s the more dangerous because you can see his conscience is uneasy. I can fancy him bombing a Prime Minister merely to quiet his own doubts.’

‘So,’ he said. ‘Nobody else?’

I reflected. ‘There’s Mr Ivery, but you know him better than I. I shouldn’t put much on him, but I’m not precisely certain, for I never had a chance of getting to know him.’

‘Ivery,’ said Blenkiron in surprise. ‘He has a hobby for half-baked youth, just as another rich man might fancy orchids or fast trotters. You sure can place him right enough.’

‘I dare say. Only I don’t know enough to be positive.’

He sucked at his cigar for a minute or so. ‘I guess, Dick, if I told you all I’ve been doing since I reached these shores you would call me a romancer. I’ve been way down among the toilers. I did a spell as unskilled dilooted labour in the Barrow shipyards. I was barman in a hotel on the Portsmouth Road, and I put in a black month driving a taxicab in the city of London. For a while I was the accredited correspondent of the Noo York Sentinel and used to go with the rest of the bunch to the pow-wows of under-secretaries of State and War Office generals. They censored my stuff so cruel that the paper fired me. Then I went on a walking-tour round England and sat for a fortnight in a little farm in Suffolk. By and by I came back to Claridge’s and this bookshop, for I had learned most of what I wanted.

‘I had learned,’ he went on, turning his curious, full, ruminating eyes on me, ‘that the British working-man is about the soundest piece of humanity on God’s earth. He grumbles a bit and jibs a bit when he thinks the Government are giving him a crooked deal, but he’s gotten the patience of Job and the sand of a gamecock. And he’s gotten humour too, that tickles me to death. There’s not much trouble in that quarter for it’s he and his kind that’s beating the Hun . . . But I picked up a thing or two besides that.’

He leaned forward and tapped me on the knee. ‘I reverence the British Intelligence Service. Flies don’t settle on it to any considerable extent. It’s got a mighty fine mesh, but there’s one hole in that mesh, and it’s our job to mend it. There’s a high-powered brain in the game against us. I struck it a couple of years ago when I was hunting Dumba and Albert, and I thought it was in Noo York, but it wasn’t. I struck its working again at home last year and located its head office in Europe. So I tried Switzerland and Holland, but only bits of it were there. The centre of the web where the old spider sits is right here in England, and for six months I’ve been shadowing that spider. There’s a gang to help, a big gang, and a clever gang, and partly an innocent gang. But there’s only one brain, and it’s to match that that the Robson Brothers settled my duodenum.’

I was listening with a quickened pulse, for now at last I was getting to business.

‘What is he — international socialist, or anarchist, or what?’ I asked.

‘Pure-blooded Boche agent, but the biggest-sized brand in the catalogue — bigger than Steinmeier or old Bismarck’s Staubier. Thank God I’ve got him located . . . I must put you wise about some things.’

He lay back in his rubbed leather armchair and yarned for twenty minutes. He told me how at the beginning of the war Scotland Yard had had a pretty complete register of enemy spies, and without making any fuss had just tidied them away. After that, the covey having been broken up, it was a question of picking off stray birds. That had taken some doing. There had been all kinds of inflammatory stuff around, Red Masons and international anarchists, and, worst of all, international finance-touts, but they had mostly been ordinary cranks and rogues, the tools of the Boche agents rather than agents themselves. However, by the middle of 1915 most of the stragglers had been gathered in. But there remained loose ends, and towards the close of last year somebody was very busy combining these ends into a net. Funny cases cropped up of the leakage of vital information. They began to be bad about October 1916, when the Hun submarines started on a special racket. The enemy suddenly appeared possessed of a knowledge which we thought to be shared only by half a dozen officers. Blenkiron said he was not surprised at the leakage, for there’s always a lot of people who hear things they oughtn’t to. What surprised him was that it got so quickly to the enemy.

Then after last February, when the Hun submarines went in for frightfulness on a big scale, the thing grew desperate. Leakages occurred every week, and the business was managed by people who knew their way about, for they avoided all the traps set for them, and when bogus news was released on purpose, they never sent it. A convoy which had been kept a deadly secret would be attacked at the one place where it was helpless. A carefully prepared defensive plan would be

checkmated before it could be tried. Blenkiron said that there was no evidence that a single brain was behind it all, for there was no similarity in the cases, but he had a strong impression all the time that it was the work of one man. We managed to close some of the bolt-holes, but we couldn't put our hands near the big ones. 'By this time,' said he, 'I reckoned I was about ready to change my methods. I had been working by what the highbrows call induction, trying to argue up from the deeds to the doer. Now I tried a new lay, which was to calculate down from the doer to the deeds. They call it deduction. I opined that somewhere in this island was a gentleman whom we will call Mr X, and that, pursuing the line of business he did, he must have certain characteristics. I considered very carefully just what sort of personage he must be. I had noticed that his device was apparently the Double Bluff. That is to say, when he had two courses open to him, A and B, he pretended he was going to take B, and so got us guessing that he would try A. Then he took B after all. So I reckoned that his camouflage must correspond to this little idiosyncrasy. Being a Boche agent, he wouldn't pretend to be a hearty patriot, an honest old blood-and-bones Tory. That would be only the Single Bluff. I considered that he would be a pacifist, cunning enough just to keep inside the law, but with the eyes of the police on him. He would write books which would not be allowed to be exported. He would get himself disliked in the popular papers, but all the mugwumps would admire his moral courage. I drew a mighty fine picture to myself of just the man I expected to find. Then I started out to look for him.'

Blenkiron's face took on the air of a disappointed child. 'It was no good. I kept barking up the wrong tree and wore myself out playing the sleuth on white-souled innocents.'

'But you've found him all right,' I cried, a sudden suspicion leaping into my brain.

'He's found,' he said sadly, 'but the credit does not belong to John S. Blenkiron. That child merely muddled the pond. The big fish was left for a young lady to hook.'

'I know,' I cried excitedly. 'Her name is Miss Mary Lamington.'

He shook a disapproving head. 'You've guessed right, my son, but you've forgotten your manners. This is a rough business and we won't bring in the name of a gently reared and pure-minded young girl. If we speak to her at all we call her by a pet name out of the *Pilgrim's Progress* . . . Anyhow she hooked the fish, though he isn't landed. D'you see any light?'

'Ivery,' I gasped.

'Yes. Ivery. Nothing much to look at, you say. A common, middle-aged, pie-faced, golf-playing high-brow, that you wouldn't keep out of a Sunday school. A touch of the drummer, too, to show he has no dealings with your effete aristocracy. A languishing silver-tongue that adores the sound of his own voice. As mild, you'd say, as curds and cream.'

Blenkiron got out of his chair and stood above me. 'I tell you, Dick, that man makes my spine cold. He hasn't a drop of good red blood in him. The dirtiest apache is a Christian gentleman compared to Moxon Ivery. He's as cruel as a snake and as deep as hell. But, by God, he's got a brain below his hat. He's hooked and we're playing him, but Lord knows if he'll ever be landed!'

'Why on earth don't you put him away?' I asked.

'We haven't the proof — legal proof, I mean; though there's buckets of the other kind. I could put up a morally certain case, but he'd beat me in a court of law. And half a hundred sheep would get up in Parliament and bleat about persecution. He has a graft with every collection of cranks in England, and with all the geese that cackle about the liberty of the individual when the Boche is ranging about to enslave the world. No, sir, that's too dangerous a game! Besides, I've a better in hand, Moxon Ivery is the best-accredited member of this State. His *dossier* is the completest thing outside the Recording Angel's little note-book. We've taken up his references in every corner of the globe and they're all as right as Morgan's balance sheet. From these it appears he's been a high-toned citizen ever since he was in short-clothes. He was raised in Norfolk, and there are people living who remember his father. He was educated at Melton School and his name's in the register. He was in business in Valparaiso, and there's enough evidence to write three volumes of his innocent life there. Then he came home with a modest competence two years before the war, and has been in the public eye ever since. He was Liberal candidate for a London constituency and he has decorated the board of every institution formed for the amelioration of mankind. He's got enough alibis to choke a boa constrictor, and they're water-tight and copper-bottomed, and they're mostly damned lies . . . But you can't beat him at that stunt. The man's the superbest actor that ever walked the earth. You can see it in his face. It isn't a face, it's a mask. He could make himself look like Shakespeare or Julius Caesar or Billy Sunday or Brigadier-General Richard Hannay if he wanted to. He hasn't got any personality either — he's got fifty,

and there's no one he could call his own. I reckon when the devil gets the handling of him at last he'll have to put sand on his claws to keep him from slipping through.'

Blenkiron was settled in his chair again, with one leg hoisted over the side.

'We've closed a fair number of his channels in the last few months. No, he don't suspect me. The world knows nothing of its greatest men, and to him I'm only a Yankee peace-crank, who gives big subscriptions to loony societies and will travel a hundred miles to let off steam before any kind of audience. He's been to see me at Claridge's and I've arranged that he shall know all my record. A darned bad record it is too, for two years ago I was violent pro-British before I found salvation and was requested to leave England. When I was home last I was officially anti-war, when I wasn't stretched upon a bed of pain. Mr Moxon Ivery don't take any stock in John S. Blenkiron as a serious proposition. And while I've been here I've been so low down in the social scale and working in so many devious ways that he can't connect me up . . . As I was saying, we've cut most of his wires, but the biggest we haven't got at. He's still sending stuff out, and mighty compromising stuff it is. Now listen close, Dick, for we're coming near your own business.'

It appeared that Blenkiron had reason to suspect that the channel still open had something to do with the North. He couldn't get closer than that, till he heard from his people that a certain Abel Gresson had turned up in Glasgow from the States. This Gresson he discovered was the same as one Wrankester, who as a leader of the Industrial Workers of the World had been mixed up in some ugly cases of sabotage in Colorado. He kept his news to himself, for he didn't want the police to interfere, but he had his own lot get into touch with Gresson and shadow him closely. The man was very discreet but very mysterious, and he would disappear for a week at a time, leaving no trace. For some unknown reason — he couldn't explain why — Blenkiron had arrived at the conclusion that Gresson was in touch with Ivery, so he made experiments to prove it.

'I wanted various cross-bearings to make certain, and I got them the night before last. My visit to Biggleswick was good business.'

'I don't know what they meant,' I said, 'but I know where they came in. One was in your speech when you spoke of the Austrian socialists, and Ivery took you up about them. The other was after supper when he quoted the *Wieser Zeitung*.'

'You're no fool, Dick,' he said, with his slow smile. 'You've hit the mark first shot. You know me and you could follow my process of thought in those remarks. Ivery, not knowing me so well, and having his head full of just that sort of argument, saw nothing unusual. Those bits of noos were pumped into Gresson that he might pass them on. And he did pass them on — to Ivery. They completed my chain.'

'But they were commonplace enough things which he might have guessed for himself.'

'No, they weren't. They were the nicest tit-bits of political noos which all the cranks have been reaching after.'

'Anyhow, they were quotations from German papers. He might have had the papers themselves earlier than you thought.'

'Wrong again. The paragraph never appeared in the *Wieser Zeitung*. But we faked up a torn bit of that noospaper, and a very pretty bit of forgery it was, and Gresson, who's a kind of a scholar, was allowed to have it. He passed it on. Ivery showed it me two nights ago. Nothing like it ever sullied the columns of Boche journalism. No, it was a perfectly final proof . . . Now, Dick, it's up to you to get after Gresson.'

'Right,' I said. 'I'm jolly glad I'm to start work again. I'm getting fat from lack of exercise. I suppose you want me to catch Gresson out in some piece of blackguardism and have him and Ivery snugly put away.'

'I don't want anything of the kind,' he said very slowly and distinctly. 'You've got to attend very close to your instructions, I cherish these two beauties as if they were my own white-headed boys. I wouldn't for the world interfere with their comfort and liberty. I want them to go on corresponding with their friends. I want to give them every facility.'

He burst out laughing at my mystified face.

'See here, Dick. How do we want to treat the Boche? Why, to fill him up with all the cunningest lies and get him to act on them. Now here is Moxon Ivery, who has always given them good information. They trust him absolutely, and we would be fools to spoil their confidence. Only, if we can find out Moxon's methods, we can arrange to use them ourselves and send noos in his name which isn't quite so genooine. Every word he dispatches goes straight to the Grand High Secret General Staff, and old Hindenburg and Ludendorff put towels round their heads and cipher it out. We want to encourage them to go on doing it. We'll arrange to send true stuff that don't matter, so as they'll continue to trust him, and a few

selected falsehoods that'll matter like hell. It's a game you can't play for ever, but with luck I propose to play it long enough to confuse Fritz's little plans.'

His face became serious and wore the air that our corps commander used to have at the big pow-wow before a push.

'I'm not going to give you instructions, for you're man enough to make your own. But I can give you the general hang of the situation. You tell Ivery you're going North to inquire into industrial disputes at first hand. That will seem to him natural and in line with your recent behaviour. He'll tell his people that you're a guileless colonial who feels disgruntled with Britain, and may come in useful. You'll go to a man of mine in Glasgow, a red-hot agitator who chooses that way of doing his bit for his country. It's a darned hard way and darned dangerous. Through him you'll get in touch with Gresson, and you'll keep alongside that bright citizen. Find out what he is doing, and get a chance of following him. He must never suspect you, and for that purpose you must be very near the edge of the law yourself. You go up there as an unabashed pacifist and you'll live with folk that will turn your stomach. Maybe you'll have to break some of these two-cent rules the British Government have invented to defend the realm, and it's up to you not to get caught out . . . Remember, you'll get no help from me. You've got to wise up about Gresson with the whole forces of the British State arrayed officially against you. I guess it's a steep proposition, but you're man enough to make good.'

As we shook hands, he added a last word. 'You must take your own time, but it's not a case for slouching. Every day that passes Ivery is sending out the worst kind of poison. The Boche is blowing up for a big campaign in the field, and a big effort to shake the nerve and confuse the judgement of our civilians. The whole earth's war-weary, and we've about reached the danger-point. There's pretty big stakes hang on you, Dick, for things are getting mighty delicate.'

I purchased a new novel in the shop and reached St Pancras in time to have a cup of tea at the buffet. Ivery was at the bookstall buying an evening paper. When we got into the carriage he seized my *Punch* and kept laughing and calling my attention to the pictures. As I looked at him, I thought that he made a perfect picture of the citizen turned countryman, going back of an evening to his innocent home. Everything was right — his neat tweeds, his light spats, his spotted neckcloth, and his Aquascutum.

Not that I dared look at him much. What I had learned made me eager to search his face, but I did not dare show any increased interest. I had always been a little off-hand with him, for I had never much liked him, so I had to keep on the same manner. He was as merry as a grig, full of chat and very friendly and amusing. I remember he picked up the book I had brought off that morning to read in the train — the second volume of Hazlitt's *Essays*, the last of my English classics — and discoursed so wisely about books that I wished I had spent more time in his company at Biggleswick.

'Hazlitt was the academic Radical of his day,' he said. 'He is always lashing himself into a state of theoretical fury over abuses he has never encountered in person. Men who are up against the real thing save their breath for action.'

That gave me my cue to tell him about my journey to the North. I said I had learned a lot in Biggleswick, but I wanted to see industrial life at close quarters. 'Otherwise I might become like Hazlitt,' I said.

He was very interested and encouraging. 'That's the right way to set about it,' he said. 'Where were you thinking of going?'

I told him that I had half thought of Barrow, but decided to try Glasgow, since the Clyde seemed to be a warm corner.

'Right,' he said. 'I only wish I was coming with you. It'll take you a little while to understand the language. You'll find a good deal of senseless bellicosity among the workmen, for they've got parrot-cries about the war as they used to have parrot-cries about their labour politics. But there's plenty of shrewd brains and sound hearts too. You must write and tell me your conclusions.'

It was a warm evening and he dozed the last part of the journey. I looked at him and wished I could see into the mind at the back of that mask-like face. I counted for nothing in his eyes, not even enough for him to want to make me a tool, and I was setting out to try to make a tool of him. It sounded a forlorn enterprise. And all the while I was puzzled with a persistent sense of recognition. I told myself it was idiocy, for a man with a face like that must have hints of resemblance to a thousand people. But the idea kept nagging at me till we reached our destination.

As we emerged from the station into the golden evening I saw Mary Lamington again. She was with one of the Weekes girls, and after the Biggleswick fashion was bareheaded, so that the sun glinted from her hair. Ivery swept his hat off and made her a pretty speech, while I faced her steady eyes with the expressionlessness of the stage conspirator.

'A charming child,' he observed as we passed on. 'Not without a touch of seriousness, too, which may yet be touched to

noble issues.’

I considered, as I made my way to my final supper with the Jimsons, that the said child was likely to prove a sufficiently serious business for Mr Moxon Ivery before the game was out.



CHAPTER FOUR

ANDREW AMOS

I took the train three days later from King's Cross to Edinburgh. I went to the Pentland Hotel in Princes Street and left there a suit-case containing some clean linen and a change of clothes. I had been thinking the thing out, and had come to the conclusion that I must have a base somewhere and a fresh outfit. Then in well-worn tweeds and with no more luggage than a small trench kit-bag, I descended upon the city of Glasgow.

I walked from the station to the address which Blenkiron had given me. It was a hot summer evening, and the streets were filled with bareheaded women and weary-looking artisans. As I made my way down the Dumbarton Road I was amazed at the number of able-bodied fellows about, considering that you couldn't stir a mile on any British front without bumping up against a Glasgow battalion. Then I realized that there were such things as munitions and ships, and I wondered no more.

A stout and dishevelled lady at a close-mouth directed me to Mr Amos's dwelling. 'Twa stairs up. Andra will be in noo, havin' his tea. He's no yin for overtime. He's generally hame on the chap of six.' I ascended the stairs with a sinking heart, for like all South Africans I have a horror of dirt. The place was pretty filthy, but at each landing there were two doors with well-polished handles and brass plates. On one I read the name of Andrew Amos.

A man in his shirt-sleeves opened to me, a little man, without a collar, and with an unbuttoned waistcoat. That was all I saw of him in the dim light, but he held out a paw like a gorilla's and drew me in.

The sitting-room, which looked over many chimneys to a pale yellow sky against which two factory stalks stood out sharply, gave me light enough to observe him fully. He was about five feet four, broad-shouldered, and with a great towsey head of grizzled hair. He wore spectacles, and his face was like some old-fashioned Scots minister's, for he had heavy eyebrows and whiskers which joined each other under his jaw, while his chin and enormous upper lip were clean-shaven. His eyes were steely grey and very solemn, but full of smouldering energy. His voice was enormous and would have shaken the walls if he had not had the habit of speaking with half-closed lips. He had not a sound tooth in his head.

A saucer full of tea and a plate which had once contained ham and eggs were on the table. He nodded towards them and asked me if I had fed.

'Ye'll no eat anything? Well, some would offer ye a dram, but this house is staunch teetotal. I door ye'll have to try the nearest public if ye're thirsty.'

I disclaimed any bodily wants, and produced my pipe, at which he started to fill an old clay. 'Mr Brand's your name?' he asked in his gusty voice. 'I was expectin' ye, but Dod! man ye're late!'

He extricated from his trousers pocket an ancient silver watch, and regarded it with disfavour. 'The dashed thing has stoppit. What do ye make the time, Mr Brand?'

He proceeded to prise open the lid of his watch with the knife he had used to cut his tobacco, and, as he examined the works, he turned the back of the case towards me. On the inside I saw pasted Mary Lamington's purple-and-white wafer.

I held my watch so that he could see the same token. His keen eyes, raised for a second, noted it, and he shut his own with a snap and returned it to his pocket. His manner lost its wariness and became almost genial.

'Ye've come up to see Glasgow, Mr Brand? Well, it's a steerin' bit, and there's honest folk bides in it, and some not so honest. They tell me ye're from South Africa. That's a long gait away, but I ken something about South Africa, for I had a cousin's son oot there for his lungs. He was in a shop in Main Street, Bloomfountain. They called him Peter Dobson. Ye would maybe mind of him.'

Then he discoursed of the Clyde. He was an incomer, he told me, from the Borders, his native place being the town of Galashiels, or, as he called it, 'Gawly'. 'I began as a powerloom tuner in Stavert's mill. Then my father dee'd and I took up his trade of jiner. But it's no world nowadays for the sma' independent business, so I cam to the Clyde and learned a shipwright's job. I may say I've become a leader in the trade, for though I'm no an official of the Union, and not likely to be, there's no man's word carries more weight than mine. And the Goavernment kens that, for they've sent me on commissions up and down the land to look at wuds and report on the nature of the timber. Bribery, they think it is, but

Andrew Amos is not to be bribed. He'll have his say about any Goovernment on earth, and tell them to their face what he thinks of them. Ay, and he'll fight the case of the workingman against his oppressor, should it be the Goovernment or the fatted calves they ca' Labour Members. Ye'll have heard tell o' the shop stewards, Mr Brand?'

I admitted I had, for I had been well coached by Blenkiron in the current history of industrial disputes.

'Well, I'm a shop steward. We represent the rank and file against office-bearers that have lost the confidence o' the workingman. But I'm no socialist, and I would have ye keep mind of that. I'm yin o' the old Border radicals, and I'm not like to change. I'm for individual liberty and equal rights and chances for all men. I'll no more bow down before a Dagon of a Goovernment official than before the Baal of a feckless Tweedside laird. I've to keep my views to mysel', for thae young lads are all drucken-daft with their wee books about Cawpital and Collectivism and a wheen long senseless words I wouldna fyle my tongue with. Them and their socialism! There's more gumption in a page of John Stuart Mill than in all that foreign trash. But, as I say, I've got to keep a quiet sough, for the world is gettin' socialism now like the measles. It all comes of a defective eddication.'

'And what does a Border radical say about the war?' I asked.

He took off his spectacles and cocked his shaggy brows at me. 'I'll tell ye, Mr Brand. All that was bad in all that I've ever wrestled with since I cam to years o' discretion — Tories and lairds and manufacturers and publicans and the Auld Kirk — all that was bad, I say, for there were orra bits of decency, ye'll find in the Germans full measure pressed down and running over. When the war started, I considered the subject calmly for three days, and then I said: "Andra Amos, ye've found the enemy at last. The ones ye fought before were in a manner o' speakin' just misguided friends. It's either you or the Kaiser this time, my man!"'

His eyes had lost their gravity and had taken on a sombre ferocity. 'Ay, and I've not wavered. I got a word early in the business as to the way I could serve my country best. It's not been an easy job, and there's plenty of honest folk the day will give me a bad name. They think I'm stirrin' up the men at home and desertin' the cause o' the lads at the front. Man, I'm keepin' them straight. If I didna fight their battles on a sound economic iss hue, they would take the dorts and be at the mercy of the first blagyard that preached revolution. Me and my like are safety-valves, if ye follow me. And dinna you make any mistake, Mr Brand. The men that are agitating for a rise in wages are not for peace. They're fighting for the lads overseas as much as for themselves. There's not yin in a thousand that wouldna sweat himself blind to beat the Germans. The Goovernment has made mistakes, and maun be made to pay for them. If it were not so, the men would feel like a moose in a trap, for they would have no way to make their grievance felt. What for should the big man double his profits and the small man be ill set to get his ham and egg on Sabbath mornin'? That's the meaning o' Labour unrest, as they call it, and it's a good thing, says I, for if Labour didna get its leg over the traces now and then, the spunk o' the land would be dead in it, and Hindenburg could squeeze it like a rotten aipple.'

I asked if he spoke for the bulk of the men.

'For ninety per cent in ony ballot. I don't say that there's not plenty of riff-raff — the pint-and-a-dram gentry and the soft-heads that are aye reading bits of newspapers, and muddlin' their wits with foreign whigmaleeries. But the average man on the Clyde, like the average man in ither places, hates just three things, and that's the Germans, the profiteers, as they call them, and the Irish. But he hates the Germans first.'

'The Irish!' I exclaimed in astonishment.

'Ay, the Irish,' cried the last of the old Border radicals. 'Glasgow's stinkin' nowadays with two things, money and Irish. I mind the day when I followed Mr Gladstone's Home Rule policy, and used to threep about the noble, generous, warm-hearted sister nation held in a foreign bondage. My Goad! I'm not speakin' about Ulster, which is a dour, ill-natured den, but our own folk all the same. But the men that will not do a hand's turn to help the war and take the chance of our necessities to set up a bawbee rebellion are hateful to Goad and man. We treated them like pet lambs and that's the thanks we get. They're coming over here in thousands to tak the jobs of the lads that are doing their duty. I was speakin' last week to a widow woman that keeps a wee dairy down the Dalmarnock Road. She has two sons, and both in the airmy, one in the Cameronians and one a prisoner in Germany. She was telling me that she could not keep goin' any more, lacking the help of the boys, though she had worked her fingers to the bone. "Surely it's a crool job, Mr Amos," she says, "that the Goovernment should tak baith my laddies, and I'll maybe never see them again, and let the Irish gang free and tak the bread frae our mouth. At the gasworks across the road they took on a hundred Irish last week, and every yin o' them as

young and well set up as you would ask to see. And my wee Davie, him that's in Germany, had aye a weak chest, and Jimmy was troubled wi' a bowel complaint. That's surely no justice!". . . .'

He broke off and lit a match by drawing it across the seat of his trousers. 'It's time I got the gas lichtit. There's some men coming here at half-ten.'

As the gas squealed and flickered in the lighting, he sketched for me the coming guests. 'There's Macnab and Niven, two o' my colleagues. And there's Gilkison of the Boiler-fitters, and a lad Wilkie — he's got consumption, and writes wee bits in the papers. And there's a queer chap o' the name o' Tombs — they tell me he comes frae Cambridge, and is a kind of a professor there — anyway he's more stuffed wi' havers than an egg wi' meat. He telled me he was here to get at the heart o' the workingman, and I said to him that he would hae to look a bit further than the sleeve o' the workin'-man's jaicket. There's no muckle in his head, poor soul. Then there'll be Tam Norie, him that edits our weekly paper — *Justice for All*. Tam's a humorist and great on Robert Burns, but he hasna the balance o' a dwinin' teetotum . . . Ye'll understand, Mr Brand, that I keep my mouth shut in such company, and don't express my own views more than is absolutely necessary. I criticize whiles, and that gives me a name of whunstane common-sense, but I never let my tongue wag. The feck o' the lads comin' the night are not the real workingman — they're just the froth on the pot, but it's the froth that will be useful to you. Remember they've heard tell o' ye already, and ye've some sort o' reputation to keep up.'

'Will Mr Abel Gresson be here?' I asked.

'No,' he said. 'Not yet. Him and me havena yet got to the point o' payin' visits. But the men that come will be Gresson's friends and they'll speak of ye to him. It's the best kind of introduction ye could seek.'

The knocker sounded, and Mr Amos hastened to admit the first comers. These were Macnab and Wilkie: the one a decent middle-aged man with a fresh-washed face and a celluloid collar, the other a round-shouldered youth, with lank hair and the large eyes and luminous skin which are the marks of phthisis. 'This is Mr Brand boys, from South Africa,' was Amos's presentation. Presently came Niven, a bearded giant, and Mr Norie, the editor, a fat dirty fellow smoking a rank cigar. Gilkison of the Boiler-fitters, when he arrived, proved to be a pleasant young man in spectacles who spoke with an educated voice and clearly belonged to a slightly different social scale. Last came Tombs, the Cambridge 'professor, a lean youth with a sour mouth and eyes that reminded me of Launcelot Wake.

'Ye'll no be a mawgnate, Mr Brand, though ye come from South Africa,' said Mr Norie with a great guffaw.

'Not me. I'm a working engineer,' I said. 'My father was from Scotland, and this is my first visit to my native country, as my friend Mr Amos was telling you.'

The consumptive looked at me suspiciously. 'We've got two — three of the comrades here that the cawpitalist Government expelled from the Transvaal. If ye're our way of thinking, ye will maybe ken them.'

I said I would be overjoyed to meet them, but that at the time of the outrage in question I had been working on a mine a thousand miles further north.

Then ensued an hour of extraordinary talk. Tombs in his sing-song namby-pamby University voice was concerned to get information. He asked endless questions, chiefly of Gilkison, who was the only one who really understood his language. I thought I had never seen anyone quite so fluent and so futile, and yet there was a kind of feeble violence in him like a demented sheep. He was engaged in venting some private academic spite against society, and I thought that in a revolution he would be the class of lad I would personally conduct to the nearest lamp-post. And all the while Amos and Macnab and Niven carried on their own conversation about the affairs of their society, wholly impervious to the tornado raging around them.

It was Mr Norie, the editor, who brought me into the discussion.

'Our South African friend is very blate,' he said in his boisterous way. 'Andra, if this place of yours wasn't so damned teetotal and we had a dram apiece, we might get his tongue loosened. I want to hear what he's got to say about the war. You told me this morning he was sound in the faith.'

'I said no such thing,' said Mr Amos. 'As ye ken well, Tam Norie, I don't judge soundness on that matter as you judge it. I'm for the war myself, subject to certain conditions that I've often stated. I know nothing of Mr Brand's opinions, except that he's a good democrat, which is more than I can say of some o' your friends.'

'Hear to Andra,' laughed Mr Norie. 'He's thinkin' the inspector in the Socialist State would be a waur kind of awristocrat than the Duke of Buccleuch. Weel, there's maybe something in that. But about the war he's wrong. Ye ken my

views, boys. This war was made by the cawpitalists, and it has been fought by the workers, and it's the workers that maun have the ending of it. That day's comin' very near. There are those that want to spin it out till Labour is that weak it can be pit in chains for the rest o' time. That's the manoeuvre we're out to prevent. We've got to beat the Germans, but it's the workers that has the right to judge when the enemy's beaten and not the cawpitalists. What do you say, Mr Brand?

Mr Norie had obviously pinned his colours to the fence, but he gave me the chance I had been looking for. I let them have my views with a vengeance, and these views were that for the sake of democracy the war must be ended. I flatter myself I put my case well, for I had got up every rotten argument and I borrowed largely from Launcelot Wake's armoury. But I didn't put it too well, for I had a very exact notion of the impression I wanted to produce. I must seem to be honest and in earnest, just a bit of a fanatic, but principally a hard-headed businessman who knew when the time had come to make a deal. Tombs kept interrupting me with imbecile questions, and I had to sit on him. At the end Mr Norie hammered with his pipe on the table.

'That'll sort ye, Andra. Ye're entertain' an angel unawares. What do ye say to that, my man?'

Mr Amos shook his head. 'I'll no deny there's something in it, but I'm not convinced that the Germans have got enough of a wheepin'.' Macnab agreed with him; the others were with me. Norie was for getting me to write an article for his paper, and the consumptive wanted me to address a meeting.

'Wull ye say a' that over again the morn's night down at our hall in Newmilns Street? We've got a lodge meeting o' the I.W.B., and I'll make them pit ye in the programme.' He kept his luminous eyes, like a sick dog's, fixed on me, and I saw that I had made one ally. I told him I had come to Glasgow to learn and not to teach, but I would miss no chance of testifying to my faith.

'Now, boys, I'm for my bed,' said Amos, shaking the dottle from his pipe. 'Mr Tombs, I'll conduct ye the morn over the Brigend works, but I've had enough clavers for one evening. I'm a man that wants his eight hours' sleep.'

The old fellow saw them to the door, and came back to me with the ghost of a grin in his face.

'A queer crowd, Mr Brand! Macnab didna like what ye said. He had a laddie killed in Gallypoly, and he's no lookin' for peace this side the grave. He's my best friend in Glasgow. He's an elder in the Gaelic kirk in the Cowcaddens, and I'm what ye call a free-thinker, but we're wonderful agreed on the fundamentals. Ye spoke your bit verra well, I must admit. Gresson will hear tell of ye as a promising recruit.'

'It's a rotten job,' I said.

'Ay, it's a rotten job. I often feel like vomiting over it mysel'. But it's no for us to complain. There's waur jobs oot in France for better men . . . A word in your ear, Mr Brand. Could ye not look a bit more sheepish? Ye stare folk ower straight in the een, like a Hieland sergeant-major up at Maryhill Barracks.' And he winked slowly and grotesquely with his left eye.

He marched to a cupboard and produced a black bottle and glass. 'I'm blue-ribbon myself, but ye'll be the better of something to tak the taste out of your mouth. There's Loch Katrine water at the pipe there . . . As I was saying, there's not much ill in that lot. Tombs is a black offence, but a dominie's a dominie all the world over. They may crack about their Industrial Workers and the braw things they're going to do, but there's a wholesome dampness about the tinder on Clydeside. They should try Ireland.'

Supposing,' I said, 'there was a really clever man who wanted to help the enemy. You think he could do little good by stirring up trouble in the shops here?'

'I'm positive.'

'And if he were a shrewd fellow, he'd soon tumble to that?'

'Ay.'

'Then if he still stayed on here he would be after bigger game — something really dangerous and damnable?'

Amos drew down his brows and looked me in the face. 'I see what ye're ettlin' at. Ay! That would be my conclusion. I came to it weeks syne about the man ye'll maybe meet the morn's night.'

Then from below the bed he pulled a box from which he drew a handsome flute. 'Ye'll forgive me, Mr Brand, but I aye like a tune before I go to my bed. Macnab says his prayers, and I have a tune on the flute, and the principle is just the same.'

So that singular evening closed with music — very sweet and true renderings of old Border melodies like 'My Peggy is a

young thing', and 'When the kye come hame'. I fell asleep with a vision of Amos, his face all puckered up at the mouth and a wandering sentiment in his eye, recapturing in his dingy world the emotions of a boy.

The widow-woman from next door, who acted as house-keeper, cook, and general factotum to the establishment, brought me shaving water next morning, but I had to go without a bath. When I entered the kitchen I found no one there, but while I consumed the inevitable ham and egg, Amos arrived back for breakfast. He brought with him the morning's paper.

'The *Herald* says there's been a big battle at Eepers,' he announced.

I tore open the sheet and read of the great attack of 31 July which was spoiled by the weather. 'My God!' I cried. 'They've got St Julien and that dirty Frezenberg ridge . . . and Hooze . . . and Sanctuary Wood. I know every inch of the damned place. . . .'

'Mr Brand,' said a warning voice, 'that'll never do. If our friends last night heard ye talk like that ye might as well tak the train back to London . . . They're speakin' about ye in the yards this morning. ye'll get a good turnout at your meeting the night, but they're Sayin' that the polis will interfere. That mightna be a bad thing, but I trust ye to show discretion, for ye'll not be muckle use to onybody if they jyle ye in Duke Street. I hear Gresson will be there with a fraternal message from his lunatics in America . . . I've arranged that ye go down to Tam Norie this afternoon and give him a hand with his bit paper. Tam will tell ye the whole clash o' the West country, and I look to ye to keep him off the drink. He's aye arguin' that writin' and drinkin' gang thegither, and quotin' Robert Burns, but the creature has a wife and five bairns dependin' on him.'

I spent a fantastic day. For two hours I sat in Norie's dirty den, while he smoked and orated, and, when he remembered his business, took down in shorthand my impressions of the Labour situation in South Africa for his rag. They were fine breezy impressions, based on the most whole-hearted ignorance, and if they ever reached the Rand I wonder what my friends there made of Cornelius Brand, their author. I stood him dinner in an indifferent eating-house in a street off the Broomielaw, and thereafter had a drink with him in a public-house, and was introduced to some of his less reputable friends.

About tea-time I went back to Amos's lodgings, and spent an hour or so writing a long letter to Mr Ivery. I described to him everybody I had met, I gave highly coloured views of the explosive material on the Clyde, and I deplored the lack of clearheadedness in the progressive forces. I drew an elaborate picture of Amos, and deduced from it that the Radicals were likely to be a bar to true progress. 'They have switched their old militancy,' I wrote, 'on to another track, for with them it is a matter of conscience to be always militant.' I finished up with some very crude remarks on economics culled from the table-talk of the egregious Tombs. It was the kind of letter which I hoped would establish my character in his mind as an industrious innocent.

Seven o'clock found me in Newmilns Street, where I was seized upon by Wilkie. He had put on a clean collar for the occasion and had partially washed his thin face. The poor fellow had a cough that shook him like the walls of a power-house when the dynamos are going.

He was very apologetic about Amos. 'Andra belongs to a past worlrd,' he said. 'He has a big reputation in his society, and he's a fine fighter, but he has no kind of Vision, if ye understand me. He's an auld Gladstonian, and that's done and damned in Scotland. He's not a Modern, Mr Brand, like you and me. But tonight ye'll meet one or two chaps that'll be worth your while to ken. Ye'll maybe no go quite as far as them, but ye're on the same road. I'm hoping for the day when we'll have oor Councils of Workmen and Soldiers like the Russians all over the land and dictate our terms to the pawrasites in Pawrliament. They tell me, too, the boys in the trenches are comin' round to our side.'

We entered the hall by a back door, and in a little waiting-room I was introduced to some of the speakers. They were a scratch lot as seen in that dingy place. The chairman was a shop-steward in one of the Societies, a fierce little rat of a man, who spoke with a cockney accent and addressed me as 'Comrade'. But one of them roused my liveliest interest. I heard the name of Gresson, and turned to find a fellow of about thirty-five, rather sprucely dressed, with a flower in his buttonhole. 'Mr Brand,' he said, in a rich American voice which recalled Blenkiron's. 'Very pleased to meet you, sir. We have Come from remote parts of the globe to be present at this gathering.' I noticed that he had reddish hair, and small bright eyes, and a nose with a droop like a Polish Jew's.

As soon as we reached the platform I saw that there was going to be trouble. The hall was packed to the door, and in all

the front half there was the kind of audience I expected to see — working-men of the political type who before the war would have thronged to party meetings. But not all the crowd at the back had come to listen. Some were scallawags, some looked like better-class clerks out for a spree, and there was a fair quantity of khaki. There were also one or two gentlemen not strictly sober.

The chairman began by putting his foot in it. He said we were there tonight to protest against the continuation of the war and to form a branch of the new British Council of Workmen and Soldiers. He told them with a fine mixture of metaphors that we had got to take the reins into our own hands, for the men who were running the war had their own axes to grind and were marching to oligarchy through the blood of the workers. He added that we had no quarrel with Germany half as bad as we had with our own capitalists. He looked forward to the day when British soldiers would leap from their trenches and extend the hand of friendship to their German comrades.

‘No me!’ said a solemn voice. ‘I’m not seekin’ a bullet in my wame,’ — at which there was laughter and cat-calls.

Tombs followed and made a worse hash of it. He was determined to speak, as he would have put it, to democracy in its own language, so he said ‘hell’ several times, loudly but without conviction. Presently he slipped into the manner of the lecturer, and the audience grew restless. ‘I propose to ask myself a question —’ he began, and from the back of the hall came — ‘And a damned sully answer ye’ll get.’ After that there was no more Tombs.

I followed with extreme nervousness, and to my surprise got a fair hearing. I felt as mean as a mangy dog on a cold morning, for I hated to talk rot before soldiers — especially before a couple of Royal Scots Fusiliers, who, for all I knew, might have been in my own brigade. My line was the plain, practical, patriotic man, just come from the colonies, who looked at things with fresh eyes, and called for a new deal. I was very moderate, but to justify my appearance there I had to put in a wild patch or two, and I got these by impassioned attacks on the Ministry of Munitions. I mixed up a little mild praise of the Germans, whom I said I had known all over the world for decent fellows. I received little applause, but no marked dissent, and sat down with deep thankfulness.

The next speaker put the lid on it. I believe he was a noted agitator, who had already been deported. Towards him there was no lukewarmness, for one half of the audience cheered wildly when he rose, and the other half hissed and groaned. He began with whirlwind abuse of the idle rich, then of the middle-classes (he called them the ‘rich man’s flunkies’), and finally of the Government. All that was fairly well received, for it is the fashion of the Briton to run down every Government and yet to be very averse to parting from it. Then he started on the soldiers and slanged the officers (‘gentry pups’ was his name for them), and the generals, whom he accused of idleness, of cowardice, and of habitual intoxication. He told us that our own kith and kin were sacrificed in every battle by leaders who had not the guts to share their risks. The Scots Fusiliers looked perturbed, as if they were in doubt of his meaning. Then he put it more plainly. ‘Will any soldier deny that the men are the barrage to keep the officers’ skins whole?’

‘That’s a bloody lee,’ said one of the Fusilier jocks.

The man took no notice of the interruption, being carried away by the torrent of his own rhetoric, but he had not allowed for the persistence of the interrupter. The jock got slowly to his feet, and announced that he wanted satisfaction. ‘If ye open your dirty gab to blagyard honest men, I’ll come up on the platform and wring your neck.’

At that there was a fine old row, some crying out ‘Order’, some ‘Fair play’, and some applauding. A Canadian at the back of the hall started a song, and there was an ugly press forward. The hall seemed to be moving up from the back, and already men were standing in all the passages and right to the edge of the platform. I did not like the look in the eyes of these new-comers, and among the crowd I saw several who were obviously plain-clothes policemen.

The chairman whispered a word to the speaker, who continued when the noise had temporarily died down. He kept off the army and returned to the Government, and for a little sluiced out pure anarchism. But he got his foot in it again, for he pointed to the Sinn Feiners as examples of manly independence. At that, pandemonium broke loose, and he never had another look in. There were several fights going on in the hall between the public and courageous supporters of the orator.

Then Gresson advanced to the edge of the platform in a vain endeavour to retrieve the day. I must say he did it uncommonly well. He was clearly a practised speaker, and for a moment his appeal ‘Now, boys, let’s cool down a bit and talk sense,’ had an effect. But the mischief had been done, and the crowd was surging round the lonely redoubt where we sat. Besides, I could see that for all his clever talk the meeting did not like the look of him. He was as mild as a turtle dove, but they wouldn’t stand for it. A missile hurtled past my nose, and I saw a rotten cabbage envelop the baldish head of the

ex-deportee. Someone reached out a long arm and grabbed a chair, and with it took the legs from Gresson. Then the lights suddenly went out, and we retreated in good order by the platform door with a yelling crowd at our heels.

It was here that the plain-clothes men came in handy. They held the door while the ex-deportee was smuggled out by some side entrance. That class of lad would soon cease to exist but for the protection of the law which he would abolish. The rest of us, having less to fear, were suffered to leak into Newmilns Street. I found myself next to Gresson, and took his arm. There was something hard in his coat pocket.

Unfortunately there was a big lamp at the point where we emerged, and there for our confusion were the Fusilier jocks. Both were strung to fighting pitch, and were determined to have someone's blood. Of me they took no notice, but Gresson had spoken after their ire had been roused, and was marked out as a victim. With a howl of joy they rushed for him.

I felt his hand steal to his side-pocket. 'Let that alone, you fool,' I growled in his ear.

'Sure, mister,' he said, and the next second we were in the thick of it.

It was like so many street fights I have seen — an immense crowd which surged up around us, and yet left a clear ring. Gresson and I got against the wall on the side-walk, and faced the furious soldiery. My intention was to do as little as possible, but the first minute convinced me that my companion had no idea how to use his fists, and I was mortally afraid that he would get busy with the gun in his pocket. It was that fear that brought me into the scrap. The jocks were sportsmen every bit of them, and only one advanced to the combat. He hit Gresson a clip on the jaw with his left, and but for the wall would have laid him out. I saw in the lamplight the vicious gleam in the American's eye and the twitch of his hand to his pocket. That decided me to interfere and I got in front of him.

This brought the second jock into the fray. He was a broad, thickset fellow, of the adorable bandy-legged stocky type that I had seen go through the Railway Triangle at Arras as though it were blotting-paper. He had some notion of fighting, too, and gave me a rough time, for I had to keep edging the other fellow off Gresson.

'Go home, you fool,' I shouted. 'Let this gentleman alone. I don't want to hurt you.'

The only answer was a hook-hit which I just managed to guard, followed by a mighty drive with his right which I dodged so that he barked his knuckles on the wall. I heard a yell of rage, and observed that Gresson seemed to have kicked his assailant on the shin. I began to long for the police.

Then there was that swaying of the crowd which betokens the approach of the forces of law and order. But they were too late to prevent trouble. In self-defence I had to take my jock seriously, and got in my blow when he had overreached himself and lost his balance. I never hit anyone so unwillingly in my life. He went over like a poled ox, and measured his length on the causeway.

I found myself explaining things politely to the constables. 'These men objected to this gentleman's speech at the meeting, and I had to interfere to protect him. No, no! I don't want to charge anybody. It was all a misunderstanding.' I helped the stricken jock to rise and offered him ten bob for consolation.

He looked at me sullenly and spat on the ground. 'Keep your dirty money,' he said. 'I'll be even with ye yet, my man — you and that red-headed scab. I'll mind the looks of ye the next time I see ye.'

Gresson was wiping the blood from his cheek with a silk handkerchief. 'I guess I'm in your debt, Mr Brand,' he said. 'You may bet I won't forget it.'

I returned to an anxious Amos. He heard my story in silence and his only comment was — 'Well done the Fusiliers!'

'It might have been worse, I'll not deny,' he went on. 'Ye've established some kind of a claim upon Gresson, which may come in handy . . . Speaking about Gresson, I've news for ye. He's sailing on Friday as purser in the *Tobermory*. The *Tobermory's* a boat that wanders every month up the West Highlands as far as Stornoway. I've arranged for ye to take a trip on that boat, Mr Brand.'

I nodded. 'How did you find out that?' I asked.

'It took me some finding,' he said dryly, 'but I've ways and means. Now I'll not trouble ye with advice, for ye ken your job as well as me. But I'm going north myself the morn to look after some of the Ross-shire wuds, and I'll be in the way of getting telegrams at the Kyle. Ye'll keep that in mind. Keep in mind, too, that I'm a great reader of the *Pilgrim's Progress* and that I've a cousin of the name of Ochterlony.'

CHAPTER FIVE

VARIOUS DOINGS IN THE WEST

The *Tobermory* was no ship for passengers. Its decks were littered with a hundred oddments, so that a man could barely walk a step without tacking, and my bunk was simply a shelf in the frowsty little saloon, where the odour of ham and eggs hung like a fog. I joined her at Greenock and took a turn on deck with the captain after tea, when he told me the names of the big blue hills to the north. He had a fine old copper-coloured face and side-whiskers like an archbishop, and, having spent all his days beating up the western seas, had as many yarns in his head as Peter himself.

‘On this boat,’ he announced, ‘we don’t ken what a day may bring forth. I may put into Colonsay for twa hours and bide there three days. I get a telegram at Oban and the next thing I’m awa ayont Barra. Sheep’s the difficult business. They maun be fetched for the sales, and they’re dooms slow to lift. So ye see it’s not what ye call a pleasure trip, Maister Brand.’

Indeed it wasn’t, for the confounded tub wallowed like a fat sow as soon as we rounded a headland and got the weight of the south-western wind. When asked my purpose, I explained that I was a colonial of Scots extraction, who was paying his first visit to his fatherland and wanted to explore the beauties of the West Highlands. I let him gather that I was not rich in this world’s goods.

‘Ye’ll have a passport?’ he asked. ‘They’ll no let ye go north o’ Fort William without one.’

Amos had said nothing about passports, so I looked blank.

‘I could keep ye on board for the whole voyage,’ he went on, ‘but ye wouldna be permitted to land. If ye’re seekin’ enjoyment, it would be a poor job sittin’ on this deck and admirin’ the works o’ God and no allowed to step on the pier-head. Ye should have applied to the military gentlemen in Glesca. But ye’ve plenty o’ time to make up your mind afore we get to Oban. We’ve a heap o’ calls to make Mull and Islay way.’

The purser came up to inquire about my ticket, and greeted me with a grin.

‘Ye’re acquaint with Mr Gresson, then?’ said the captain. ‘Weel, we’re a cheery wee ship’s company, and that’s the great thing on this kind o’ job.’

I made but a poor supper, for the wind had risen to half a gale, and I saw hours of wretchedness approaching. The trouble with me is that I cannot be honestly sick and get it over. Queasiness and headache beset me and there is no refuge but bed. I turned into my bunk, leaving the captain and the mate smoking shag not six feet from my head, and fell into a restless sleep. When I woke the place was empty, and smelt vilely of stale tobacco and cheese. My throbbing brows made sleep impossible, and I tried to ease them by staggering upon deck. I saw a clear windy sky, with every star as bright as a live coal, and a heaving waste of dark waters running to ink-black hills. Then a douche of spray caught me and sent me down the companion to my bunk again, where I lay for hours trying to make a plan of campaign.

I argued that if Amos had wanted me to have a passport he would have provided one, so I needn’t bother my head about that. But it was my business to keep alongside Gresson, and if the boat stayed a week in some port and he went off ashore, I must follow him. Having no passport I would have to be always dodging trouble, which would handicap my movements and in all likelihood make me more conspicuous than I wanted. I guessed that Amos had denied me the passport for the very reason that he wanted Gresson to think me harmless. The area of danger would, therefore, be the passport country, somewhere north of Fort William.

But to follow Gresson I must run risks and enter that country. His suspicions, if he had any, would be lulled if I left the boat at Oban, but it was up to me to follow overland to the north and hit the place where the *Tobermory* made a long stay. The confounded tub had no plans; she wandered about the West Highlands looking for sheep and things; and the captain himself could give me no time-table of her voyage. It was incredible that Gresson should take all this trouble if he did not know that at some place — and the right place — he would have time to get a spell ashore. But I could scarcely ask Gresson for that information, though I determined to cast a wary fly over him. I knew roughly the *Tobermory’s* course — through the Sound of Islay to Colonsay; then up the east side of Mull to Oban; then through the Sound of Mull to the islands with names like cocktails, Rum and Eigg and Coll; then to Skye; and then for the Outer Hebrides. I thought the last would be the place, and it seemed madness to leave the boat, for the Lord knew how I should get across the Minch. This consideration

upset all my plans again, and I fell into a troubled sleep without coming to any conclusion.

Morning found us nosing between Jura and Islay, and about midday we touched at a little port, where we unloaded some cargo and took on a couple of shepherds who were going to Colonsay. The mellow afternoon and the good smell of salt and heather got rid of the dregs of my queasiness, and I spent a profitable hour on the pier-head with a guide-book called *Baddely's Scotland*, and one of Bartholomew's maps. I was beginning to think that Amos might be able to tell me something, for a talk with the captain had suggested that the *Tobermory* would not dally long in the neighbourhood of Rum and Eigg. The big droving season was scarcely on yet, and sheep for the Oban market would be lifted on the return journey. In that case Skye was the first place to watch, and if I could get wind of any big cargo waiting there I would be able to make a plan. Amos was somewhere near the Kyle, and that was across the narrows from Skye. Looking at the map, it seemed to me that, in spite of being passportless, I might be able somehow to make my way up through Morvern and Arisaig to the latitude of Skye. The difficulty would be to get across the strip of sea, but there must be boats to beg, borrow or steal.

I was poring over Baddely when Gresson sat down beside me. He was in a good temper, and disposed to talk, and to my surprise his talk was all about the beauties of the countryside. There was a kind of apple-green light over everything; the steep heather hills cut into the sky like purple amethysts, while beyond the straits the western ocean stretched its pale molten gold to the sunset. Gresson waxed lyrical over the scene. 'This just about puts me right inside, Mr Brand. I've got to get away from that little old town pretty frequent or I begin to moult like a canary. A man feels a man when he gets to a place that smells as good as this. Why in hell do we ever get messed up in those stone and lime cages? I reckon some day I'll pull my freight for a clean location and settle down there and make little poems. This place would about content me. And there's a spot out in California in the Coast ranges that I've been keeping my eye on,' The odd thing was that I believe he meant it. His ugly face was lit up with a serious delight.

He told me he had taken this voyage before, so I got out Baddely and asked for advice. 'I can't spend too much time on holidaying,' I told him, 'and I want to see all the beauty spots. But the best of them seem to be in the area that this fool British Government won't let you into without a passport. I suppose I shall have to leave you at Oban.'

'Too bad,' he said sympathetically. 'Well, they tell me there's some pretty sights round Oban.' And he thumbed the guide-book and began to read about Glencoe.

I said that was not my purpose, and pitched him a yarn about Prince Charlie and how my mother's great-grandfather had played some kind of part in that show. I told him I wanted to see the place where the Prince landed and where he left for France. 'So far as I can make out that won't take me into the passport country, but I'll have to do a bit of footslogging. Well, I'm used to padding the hoof. I must get the captain to put me off in Morvern, and then I can foot it round the top of Lochiel and get back to Oban through Appin. How's that for a holiday trek?'

He gave the scheme his approval. 'But if it was me, Mr Brand, I would have a shot at puzzling your gallant policemen. You and I don't take much stock in Governments and their two-cent laws, and it would be a good game to see just how far you could get into the forbidden land. A man like you could put up a good bluff on those hayseeds. I don't mind having a bet . . .'

'No,' I said. 'I'm out for a rest, and not for sport. If there was anything to be gained I'd undertake to bluff my way to the Orkney Islands. But it's a wearing job and I've better things to think about.'

'So? Well, enjoy yourself your own way. I'll be sorry when you leave us, for I owe you something for that rough-house, and beside there's darned little company in the old moss-back captain.'

That evening Gresson and I swapped yarns after supper to the accompaniment of the 'Ma Goad!' and 'Is't possible?' of captain and mate. I went to bed after a glass or two of weak grog, and made up for the last night's vigil by falling sound asleep. I had very little kit with me, beyond what I stood up in and could carry in my waterproof pockets, but on Amos's advice I had brought my little nickel-plated revolver. This lived by day in my hip pocket, but at night I put it behind my pillow. But when I woke next morning to find us casting anchor in the bay below rough low hills, which I knew to be the island of Colonsay, I could find no trace of the revolver. I searched every inch of the bunk and only shook out feathers from the mouldy ticking. I remembered perfectly putting the thing behind my head before I went to sleep, and now it had vanished utterly. Of course I could not advertise my loss, and I didn't greatly mind it, for this was not a job where I could do much shooting. But it made me think a good deal about Mr Gresson. He simply could not suspect me; if he had bagged

my gun, as I was pretty certain he had, it must be because he wanted it for himself and not that he might disarm me. Every way I argued it I reached the same conclusion. In Gresson's eyes I must seem as harmless as a child.

We spent the better part of a day at Colonsay, and Gresson, so far as his duties allowed, stuck to me like a limpet. Before I went ashore I wrote out a telegram for Amos. I devoted a hectic hour to the *Pilgrim's Progress*, but I could not compose any kind of intelligible message with reference to its text. We had all the same edition — the one in the *Golden Treasury* series — so I could have made up a sort of cipher by referring to lines and pages, but that would have taken up a dozen telegraph forms and seemed to me too elaborate for the purpose. So I sent this message:

Ochterlony, Post Office, Kyle, I hope to spend part of holiday near you and to see you if boat's programme permits. Are any good cargoes waiting in your neighbourhood? Reply Post Office, Oban.

It was highly important that Gresson should not see this, but it was the deuce of a business to shake him off. I went for a walk in the afternoon along the shore and passed the telegraph office, but the confounded fellow was with me all the time. My only chance was just before we sailed, when he had to go on board to check some cargo. As the telegraph office stood full in view of the ship's deck I did not go near it. But in the back end of the clachan I found the schoolmaster, and got him to promise to send the wire. I also bought off him a couple of well-worn sevenpenny novels.

The result was that I delayed our departure for ten minutes and when I came on board faced a wrathful Gresson. 'Where the hell have you been?' he asked. 'The weather's blowing up dirty and the old man's mad to get off. Didn't you get your legs stretched enough this afternoon?'

I explained humbly that I had been to the schoolmaster to get something to read, and produced my dingy red volumes. At that his brow cleared. I could see that his suspicions were set at rest.

We left Colonsay about six in the evening with the sky behind us banking for a storm, and the hills of Jura to starboard an angry purple. Colonsay was too low an island to be any kind of breakwater against a western gale, so the weather was bad from the start. Our course was north by east, and when we had passed the butt-end of the island we nosed about in the trough of big seas, shipping tons of water and rolling like a buffalo. I know as much about boats as about Egyptian hieroglyphics, but even my landsman's eyes could tell that we were in for a rough night. I was determined not to get queasy again, but when I went below the smell of tripe and onions promised to be my undoing; so I dined off a slab of chocolate and a cabin biscuit, put on my waterproof, and resolved to stick it out on deck.

I took up position near the bows, where I was out of reach of the oily steamer smells. It was as fresh as the top of a mountain, but mighty cold and wet, for a gusty drizzle had set in, and I got the spindrift of the big waves. There I balanced myself, as we lurched into the twilight, hanging on with one hand to a rope which descended from the stumpy mast. I noticed that there was only an indifferent rail between me and the edge, but that interested me and helped to keep off sickness. I swung to the movement of the vessel, and though I was mortally cold it was rather pleasant than otherwise. My notion was to get the nausea whipped out of me by the weather, and, when I was properly tired, to go down and turn in.

I stood there till the dark had fallen. By that time I was an automaton, the way a man gets on sentry-go, and I could have easily hung on till morning. My thoughts ranged about the earth, beginning with the business I had set out on, and presently — by way of recollections of Blenkiron and Peter — reaching the German forest where, in the Christmas of 1915, I had been nearly done in by fever and old Stumm. I remembered the bitter cold of that wild race, and the way the snow seemed to burn like fire when I stumbled and got my face into it. I reflected that sea-sickness was kitten's play to a good bout of malaria.

The weather was growing worse, and I was getting more than spindrift from the seas. I hooked my arm round the rope, for my fingers were numbing. Then I fell to dreaming again, principally about Fosse Manor and Mary Lamington. This so ravished me that I was as good as asleep. I was trying to reconstruct the picture as I had last seen her at Biggleswick station . . .

A heavy body collided with me and shook my arm from the rope. I slithered across the yard of deck, engulfed in a whirl of water. One foot caught a stanchion of the rail, and it gave with me, so that for an instant I was more than half overboard. But my fingers clawed wildly and caught in the links of what must have been the anchor chain. They held, though a ton's weight seemed to be tugging at my feet . . . Then the old tub rolled back, the waters slipped off, and I was sprawling on a wet deck with no breath in me and a gallon of brine in my windpipe.

I heard a voice cry out sharply, and a hand helped me to my feet. It was Gresson, and he seemed excited.

‘God, Mr Brand, that was a close call! I was coming up to find you, when this damned ship took to lying on her side. I guess I must have cannoned into you, and I was calling myself bad names when I saw you rolling into the Atlantic. If I hadn’t got a grip on the rope I would have been down beside you. Say, you’re not hurt? I reckon you’d better come below and get a glass of rum under your belt. You’re about as wet as mother’s dish-clouts.’

There’s one advantage about campaigning. You take your luck when it comes and don’t worry about what might have been. I didn’t think any more of the business, except that it had cured me of wanting to be sea-sick. I went down to the reeking cabin without one qualm in my stomach, and ate a good meal of welsh-rabbit and bottled Bass, with a tot of rum to follow up with. Then I shed my wet garments, and slept in my bunk till we anchored off a village in Mull in a clear blue morning.

It took us four days to crawl up that coast and make Oban, for we seemed to be a floating general store for every hamlet in those parts. Gresson made himself very pleasant, as if he wanted to atone for nearly doing me in. We played some poker, and I read the little books I had got in Colonsay, and then rigged up a fishing-line, and caught saithe and lythe and an occasional big haddock. But I found the time pass slowly, and I was glad that about noon one day we came into a bay blocked with islands and saw a clean little town sitting on the hills and the smoke of a railway engine.

I went ashore and purchased a better brand of hat in a tweed store. Then I made a bee-line for the post office, and asked for telegrams. One was given to me, and as I opened it I saw Gresson at my elbow.

It read thus:

Brand, Post office, Oban. Page 117, paragraph 3. Ochterlony.

I passed it to Gresson with a rueful face.

‘There’s a piece of foolishness,’ I said. ‘I’ve got a cousin who’s a Presbyterian minister up in Ross-shire, and before I knew about this passport humbug I wrote to him and offered to pay him a visit. I told him to wire me here if it was convenient, and the old idiot has sent me the wrong telegram. This was likely as not meant for some other brother parson, who’s got my message instead.’

‘What’s the guy’s name?’ Gresson asked curiously, peering at the signature.

‘Ochterlony. David Ochterlony. He’s a great swell at writing books, but he’s no earthly use at handling the telegraph. However, it don’t signify, seeing I’m not going near him.’ I crumpled up the pink form and tossed it on the floor. Gresson and I walked to the *Tobermory* together.

That afternoon, when I got a chance, I had out my *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Page 117, paragraph 3, read:

‘Then I saw in my dream, that a little off the road, over against the Silver-mine, stood Demas (gentlemanlike) to call to passengers to come and see: who said to Christian and his fellow, Ho, turn aside hither and I will show you a thing.

At tea I led the talk to my own past life. I yarned about my experiences as a mining engineer, and said I could never get out of the trick of looking at country with the eye of the prospector. ‘For instance,’ I said, ‘if this had been Rhodesia, I would have said there was a good chance of copper in these little kopjes above the town. They’re not unlike the hills round the Messina mine.’ I told the captain that after the war I was thinking of turning my attention to the West Highlands and looking out for minerals.

‘Ye’ll make nothing of it,’ said the captain. ‘The costs are ower big, even if ye found the minerals, for ye’d have to import a’ your labour. The West Hielandman is no fond o’ hard work. Ye ken the psalm o’ the crofter?’

*O that the peats would cut themselves,
The fish chump on the shore,
And that I in my bed might lie
Henceforth for ever more!’*

‘Has it ever been tried?’ I asked.

‘Often. There’s marble and slate quarries, and there was word o’ coal in Benbecula. And there’s the iron mines at Ranna.’

‘Where’s that?’ I asked.

‘Up forenent Skye. We call in there, and generally bide a bit. There’s a heap of cargo for Ranna, and we usually get a

good load back. But as I tell ye, there's few Hielanders working there. Mostly Irish and lads frae Fife and Falkirk way.'

I didn't pursue the subject, for I had found Demas's silver-mine. If the *Tobermory* lay at Ranna for a week, Gresson would have time to do his own private business. Ranna would not be the spot, for the island was bare to the world in the middle of a much-frequented channel. But Skye was just across the way, and when I looked in my map at its big, wandering peninsulas I concluded that my guess had been right, and that Skye was the place to make for.

That night I sat on deck with Gresson, and in a wonderful starry silence we watched the lights die out of the houses in the town, and talked of a thousand things. I noticed — what I had had a hint of before — that my companion was no common man. There were moments when he forgot himself and talked like an educated gentleman: then he would remember, and relapse into the lingo of Leadville, Colorado. In my character of the ingenuous inquirer I set him posers about politics and economics, the kind of thing I might have been supposed to pick up from unintelligent browsing among little books. Generally he answered with some slangy catchword, but occasionally he was interested beyond his discretion, and treated me to a harangue like an equal. I discovered another thing, that he had a craze for poetry, and a capacious memory for it. I forgot how we drifted into the subject, but I remember he quoted some queer haunting stuff which he said was Swinburne, and verses by people I had heard of from Letchford at Biggleswick. Then he saw by my silence that he had gone too far, and fell back into the jargon of the West. He wanted to know about my plans, and we went down into the cabin and had a look at the map. I explained my route, up Morvern and round the head of Lochiel, and back to Oban by the east side of Loch Linnhe.

'Got you,' he said. 'You've a hell of a walk before you. That bug never bit me, and I guess I'm not envying you any. And after that, Mr Brand?'

'Back to Glasgow to do some work for the cause,' I said lightly.

'Just so,' he said with a grin. 'It's a great life if you don't weaken.'

We steamed out of the bay next morning at dawn, and about nine o'clock I got on shore at a little place called Lochaline. My kit was all on my person, and my waterproof's pockets were stuffed with chocolates and biscuits I had bought in Oban. The captain was discouraging. 'Ye'll get your bellyful o' Hieland hills, Mr Brand, afore ye win round the loch head. Ye'll be wishin' yerself back on the *Tobermory*.' But Gresson speeded me joyfully on my way, and said he wished he were coming with me. He even accompanied me the first hundred yards, and waved his hat after me till I was round the turn of the road.

The first stage in that journey was pure delight. I was thankful to be rid of the infernal boat, and the hot summer scents coming down the glen were comforting after the cold, salt smell of the sea. The road lay up the side of a small bay, at the top of which a big white house stood among gardens. Presently I had left the coast and was in a glen where a brown salmon-river swirled through acres of bog-myrtle. It had its source in a loch, from which the mountain rose steeply — a place so glassy in that August forenoon that every scar and wrinkle of the hillside were faithfully reflected. After that I crossed a low pass to the head of another sea-lock, and, following the map, struck over the shoulder of a great hill and ate my luncheon far up on its side, with a wonderful vista of wood and water below me.

All that morning I was very happy, not thinking about Gresson or Ivery, but getting my mind clear in those wide spaces, and my lungs filled with the brisk hill air. But I noticed one curious thing. On my last visit to Scotland, when I covered more moorland miles a day than any man since Claverhouse, I had been fascinated by the land, and had pleased myself with plans for settling down in it. But now, after three years of war and general rocketing, I felt less drawn to that kind of landscape. I wanted something more green and peaceful and habitable, and it was to the Cotswolds that my memory turned with longing.

I puzzled over this till I realized that in all my Cotswold pictures a figure kept going and coming — a young girl with a cloud of gold hair and the strong, slim grace of a boy, who had sung 'Cherry Ripe' in a moonlit garden. Up on that hillside I understood very clearly that I, who had been as careless of women as any monk, had fallen wildly in love with a child of half my age. I was loath to admit it, though for weeks the conclusion had been forcing itself on me. Not that I didn't revel in my madness, but that it seemed too hopeless a business, and I had no use for barren philandering. But, seated on a rock munching chocolate and biscuits, I faced up to the fact and resolved to trust my luck. After all we were comrades in a big job, and it was up to me to be man enough to win her. The thought seemed to brace any courage that was in me. No task seemed too hard with her approval to gain and her companionship somewhere at the back of it. I sat for a long time in a

happy dream, remembering all the glimpses I had had of her, and humming her song to an audience of one black-faced sheep.

On the highroad half a mile below me, I saw a figure on a bicycle mounting the hill, and then getting off to mop its face at the summit. I turned my Ziess glasses on to it, and observed that it was a country policeman. It caught sight of me, stared for a bit, tucked its machine into the side of the road, and then very slowly began to climb the hillside. Once it stopped, waved its hand and shouted something which I could not hear. I sat finishing my luncheon, till the features were revealed to me of a fat oldish man, blowing like a grampus, his cap well on the back of a bald head, and his trousers tied about the shins with string.

There was a spring beside me and I had out my flask to round off my meal.

‘Have a drink,’ I said.

His eye brightened, and a smile overran his moist face.

‘Thank you, sir. It will be very warrm coming up the brae.’

‘You oughtn’t to,’ I said. ‘You really oughtn’t, you know. Scorching up hills and then doubling up a mountain are not good for your time of life.’

He raised the cap of my flask in solemn salutation. ‘Your very good health.’ Then he smacked his lips, and had several cupfuls of water from the spring.

‘You will haf come from Achranich way, maybe?’ he said in his soft sing-song, having at last found his breath.

‘Just so. Fine weather for the birds, if there was anybody to shoot them.’

‘Ah, no. There will be few shots fired today, for there are no gentlemen left in Morvern. But I wass asking you, if you come from Achranich, if you haf seen anybody on the road.’

From his pocket he extricated a brown envelope and a bulky telegraph form. ‘Will you read it, sir, for I haf forgot my spectacles?’

It contained a description of one Brand, a South African and a suspected character, whom the police were warned to stop and return to Oban. The description wasn’t bad, but it lacked any one good distinctive detail. Clearly the policeman took me for an innocent pedestrian, probably the guest of some moorland shooting-box, with my brown face and rough tweeds and hobnailed shoes.

I frowned and puzzled a little. ‘I did see a fellow about three miles back on the hillside. There’s a public-house just where the burn comes in, and I think he was making for it. Maybe that was your man. This wire says “South African”; and now I remember the fellow had the look of a colonial.’

The policeman sighed. ‘No doubt it will be the man. Perhaps he will haf a pistol and will shoot.’

‘Not him,’ I laughed. ‘He looked a mangy sort of chap, and he’ll be scared out of his senses at the sight of you. But take my advice and get somebody with you before you tackle him. You’re always the better of a witness.’

‘That is so,’ he said, brightening. ‘Ach, these are the bad times! in old days there wass nothing to do but watch the doors at the flower-shows and keep the yachts from poaching the sea-trout. But now it is spies, spies, and “Donald, get out of your bed, and go off twenty mile to find a German.” I wass wishing the war wass by, and the Germans all dead.’

‘Hear, hear!’ I cried, and on the strength of it gave him another dram.

I accompanied him to the road, and saw him mount his bicycle and zig-zag like a snipe down the hill towards Achranich. Then I set off briskly northward. It was clear that the faster I moved the better.

As I went I paid disgusted tribute to the efficiency of the Scottish police. I wondered how on earth they had marked me down. Perhaps it was the Glasgow meeting, or perhaps my association with Ivery at Biggleswick. Anyhow there was somebody somewhere mighty quick at compiling a *dossier*. Unless I wanted to be bundled back to Oban I must make good speed to the Arisaig coast.

Presently the road fell to a gleaming sea-loch which lay like the blue blade of a sword among the purple of the hills. At the head there was a tiny clachan, nestled among birches and rowans, where a tawny burn wound to the sea. When I entered the place it was about four o’clock in the afternoon, and peace lay on it like a garment. In the wide, sunny street there was no sign of life, and no sound except of hens clucking and of bees busy among the roses. There was a little grey box of a kirk, and close to the bridge a thatched cottage which bore the sign of a post and telegraph office.

For the past hour I had been considering that I had better prepare for mishaps. If the police of these parts had been warned they might prove too much for me, and Gresson would be allowed to make his journey unmatched. The only thing to do was to send a wire to Amos and leave the matter in his hands. Whether that was possible or not depended upon this remote postal authority.

I entered the little shop, and passed from bright sunshine to a twilight smelling of paraffin and black-striped peppermint balls. An old woman with a mutch sat in an arm-chair behind the counter. She looked up at me over her spectacles and smiled, and I took to her on the instant. She had the kind of old wise face that God loves.

Beside her I noticed a little pile of books, one of which was a Bible. Open on her lap was a paper, the *United Free Church Monthly*. I noticed these details greedily, for I had to make up my mind on the part to play.

‘It’s a warm day, mistress,’ I said, my voice falling into the broad Lowland speech, for I had an instinct that she was not of the Highlands.

She laid aside her paper. ‘It is that, sir. It is grand weather for the hairst, but here that’s no till the hinner end o’ September, and at the best it’s a bit scart o’ aits.’

‘Ay. It’s a different thing down Annandale way,’ I said.

Her face lit up. ‘Are ye from Dumfries, sir?’

‘Not just from Dumfries, but I know the Borders fine.’

‘Ye’ll no beat them,’ she cried. ‘Not that this is no a guid place and I’ve muckle to be thankfu’ for since John Sanderson — that was ma man — brought me here forty-seeven year syne come Martinmas. But the aulder I get the mair I think o’ the bit whaur I was born. It was twae miles from Wamphray on the Lockerbie road, but they tell me the place is noo just a rickle o’ stanes.’

‘I was wondering, mistress, if I could get a cup of tea in the village.’

‘Ye’ll hae a cup wi’ me,’ she said. ‘It’s no often we see onybody frae the Borders hereaways. The kettle’s just on the boil.’

She gave me tea and scones and butter, and black-currant jam, and treacle biscuits that melted in the mouth. And as we ate we talked of many things — chiefly of the war and of the wickedness of the world.

‘There’s nae lads left here,’ she said. ‘They a’ joined the Camerons, and the feck o’ them fell at an awfu’ place called Lowse. John and me never had no boys, jist the one lassie that’s married on Donald Frew, the Strontian carrier. I used to vex mysel’ about it, but now I thank the Lord that in His mercy He spared me sorrow. But I wad hae liked to have had one laddie fechtin’ for his country. I whiles wish I was a Catholic and could pit up prayers for the sodgers that are deid. It maun be a great consolation.’

I whipped out the *Pilgrim’s Progress* from my pocket. ‘That is the grand book for a time like this.’

‘Fine I ken it,’ she said. ‘I got it for a prize in the Sabbath School when I was a lassie.’

I turned the pages. I read out a passage or two, and then I seemed struck with a sudden memory.

‘This is a telegraph office, mistress. Could I trouble you to send a telegram? You see I’ve a cousin that’s a minister in Ross-shire at the Kyle, and him and me are great correspondents. He was writing about something in the *Pilgrim’s Progress* and I think I’ll send him a telegram in answer.’

‘A letter would be cheaper,’ she said.

‘Ay, but I’m on holiday and I’ve no time for writing.’

She gave me a form, and I wrote:

Ochterlony. Post Office, Kyle. — Demas will be at his mine within the week. Strive with him, lest I faint by the way.

‘Ye’re unco lavish wi’ the words, sir,’ was her only comment.

We parted with regret, and there was nearly a row when I tried to pay for the tea. I was bidden remember her to one David Tudhole, farmer in Nether Mirecleuch, the next time I passed by Wamphray.

The village was as quiet when I left it as when I had entered. I took my way up the hill with an easier mind, for I had got off the telegram, and I hoped I had covered my tracks. My friend the postmistress would, if questioned, be unlikely to recognize any South African suspect in the frank and homely traveller who had spoken with her of Annandale and the *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

The soft mulberry gloaming of the west coast was beginning to fall on the hills. I hoped to put in a dozen miles before dark to the next village on the map, where I might find quarters. But ere I had gone far I heard the sound of a motor behind me, and a car slipped past bearing three men. The driver favoured me with a sharp glance, and clapped on the brakes. I noted that the two men in the tonneau were carrying sporting rifles.

‘Hi, you, sir,’ he cried. ‘Come here.’ The two rifle-bearers — solemn gillies — brought their weapons to attention.

‘By God,’ he said, ‘it’s the man. What’s your name? Keep him covered, Angus.’

The gillies duly covered me, and I did not like the look of their wavering barrels. They were obviously as surprised as myself.

I had about half a second to make my plans. I advanced with a very stiff air, and asked him what the devil he meant. No Lowland Scots for me now. My tone was that of an adjutant of a Guards’ battalion.

My inquisitor was a tall man in an ulster, with a green felt hat on his small head. He had a lean, well-bred face, and very choleric blue eyes. I set him down as a soldier, retired, Highland regiment or cavalry, old style.

He produced a telegraph form, like the policeman.

‘Middle height — strongly built — grey tweeds — brown hat — speaks with a colonial accent — much sunburnt. What’s your name, sir?’

I did not reply in a colonial accent, but with the hauteur of the British officer when stopped by a French sentry. I asked him again what the devil he had to do with my business. This made him angry and he began to stammer.

‘I’ll teach you what I have to do with it. I’m a deputy-lieutenant of this county, and I have Admiralty instructions to watch the coast. Damn it, sir, I’ve a wire here from the Chief Constable describing you. You’re Brand, a very dangerous fellow, and we want to know what the devil you’re doing here.’

As I looked at his wrathful eye and lean head, which could not have held much brains, I saw that I must change my tone. If I irritated him he would get nasty and refuse to listen and hang me up for hours. So my voice became respectful.

‘I beg your pardon, sir, but I’ve not been accustomed to be pulled up suddenly, and asked for my credentials. My name is Blaikie, Captain Robert Blaikie, of the Scots Fusiliers. I’m home on three weeks’ leave, to get a little peace after Hooge. We were only hauled out five days ago.’ I hoped my old friend in the shell-shock hospital at Isham would pardon my borrowing his identity.

The man looked puzzled. ‘How the devil am I to be satisfied about that? Have you any papers to prove it?’

‘Why, no. I don’t carry passports about with me on a walking tour. But you can wire to the depot, or to my London address.’

He pulled at his yellow moustache. ‘I’m hanged if I know what to do. I want to get home for dinner. I tell you what, sir, I’ll take you on with me and put you up for the night. My boy’s at home, convalescing, and if he says you’re pukka I’ll ask your pardon and give you a dashed good bottle of port. I’ll trust him and I warn you he’s a keen hand.’

There was nothing to do but consent, and I got in beside him with an uneasy conscience. Supposing the son knew the real Blaikie! I asked the name of the boy’s battalion, and was told the 10th Seaforths. That wasn’t pleasant hearing, for they had been brigaded with us on the Somme. But Colonel Broadbury — for he told me his name — volunteered another piece of news which set my mind at rest. The boy was not yet twenty, and had only been out seven months. At Arras he had got a bit of shrapnel in his thigh, which had played the deuce with the sciatic nerve, and he was still on crutches.

We spun over ridges of moorland, always keeping northward, and brought up at a pleasant white-washed house close to the sea. Colonel Broadbury ushered me into a hall where a small fire of peats was burning, and on a couch beside it lay a slim, pale-faced young man. He had dropped his policeman’s manner, and behaved like a gentleman. ‘Ted,’ he said, ‘I’ve brought a friend home for the night. I went out to look for a suspect and found a British officer. This is Captain Blaikie, of the Scots Fusiliers.’

The boy looked at me pleasantly. ‘I’m very glad to meet you, sir. You’ll excuse me not getting up, but I’ve got a game leg.’ He was the copy of his father in features, but dark and sallow where the other was blond. He had just the same narrow head, and stubborn mouth, and honest, quick-tempered eyes. It is the type that makes dashing regimental officers, and earns V.C.s, and gets done in wholesale. I was never that kind. I belonged to the school of the cunning cowards.

In the half-hour before dinner the last wisp of suspicion fled from my host’s mind. For Ted Broadbury and I were

immediately deep in 'shop'. I had met most of his senior officers, and I knew all about their doings at Arras, for his brigade had been across the river on my left. We fought the great fight over again, and yarned about technicalities and slanged the Staff in the way young officers have, the father throwing in questions that showed how mighty proud he was of his son. I had a bath before dinner, and as he led me to the bathroom he apologized very handsomely for his bad manners. 'Your coming's been a godsend for Ted. He was moping a bit in this place. And, though I say it that shouldn't, he's a dashed good boy.'

I had my promised bottle of port, and after dinner I took on the father at billiards. Then we settled in the smoking-room, and I laid myself out to entertain the pair. The result was that they would have me stay a week, but I spoke of the shortness of my leave, and said I must get on to the railway and then back to Fort William for my luggage.

So I spent that night between clean sheets, and ate a Christian breakfast, and was given my host's car to set me a bit on the road. I dismissed it after half a dozen miles, and, following the map, struck over the hills to the west. About midday I topped a ridge, and beheld the Sound of Sleat shining beneath me. There were other things in the landscape. In the valley on the right a long goods train was crawling on the Mallaig railway. And across the strip of sea, like some fortress of the old gods, rose the dark bastions and turrets of the hills of Skye.



CHAPTER SIX

THE SKIRTS OF THE COOLIN

Obviously I must keep away from the railway. If the police were after me in Morvern, that line would be warned, for it was a barrier I must cross if I were to go farther north. I observed from the map that it turned up the coast, and concluded that the place for me to make for was the shore south of that turn, where Heaven might send me some luck in the boat line. For I was pretty certain that every porter and station-master on that tin-pot outfit was anxious to make better acquaintance with my humble self.

I lunched off the sandwiches the Broadburys had given me, and in the bright afternoon made my way down the hill, crossed at the foot of a small fresh-water lochan, and pursued the issuing stream through midge-infested woods of hazels to its junction with the sea. It was rough going, but very pleasant, and I fell into the same mood of idle contentment that I had enjoyed the previous morning. I never met a soul. Sometimes a roe deer broke out of the covert, or an old blackcock startled me with his scolding. The place was bright with heather, still in its first bloom, and smelt better than the myrrh of Arabia. It was a blessed glen, and I was as happy as a king, till I began to feel the coming of hunger, and reflected that the Lord alone knew when I might get a meal. I had still some chocolate and biscuits, but I wanted something substantial.

The distance was greater than I thought, and it was already twilight when I reached the coast. The shore was open and desolate — great banks of pebbles to which straggled alders and hazels from the hillside scrub. But as I marched northward and turned a little point of land I saw before me in a crook of the bay a smoking cottage. And, plodding along by the water's edge, was the bent figure of a man, laden with nets and lobster pots. Also, beached on the shingle was a boat.

I quickened my pace and overtook the fisherman. He was an old man with a ragged grey beard, and his rig was seaman's boots and a much-darned blue jersey. He was deaf, and did not hear me when I hailed him. When he caught sight of me he never stopped, though he very solemnly returned my good evening. I fell into step with him, and in his silent company reached the cottage.

He halted before the door and unslung his burdens. The place was a two-roomed building with a roof of thatch, and the walls all grown over with a yellow-flowered creeper. When he had straightened his back, he looked seaward and at the sky, as if to prospect the weather. Then he turned on me his gentle, absorbed eyes. 'It will haf been a fine day, sir. Wass you seeking the road to anywhere?'

'I was seeking a night's lodging,' I said. 'I've had a long tramp on the hills, and I'd be glad of a chance of not going farther.'

'We will haf no accommodation for a gentleman,' he said gravely.

'I can sleep on the floor, if you can give me a blanket and a bite of supper.'

'Indeed you will not,' and he smiled slowly. 'But I will ask the wife. Mary, come here!'

An old woman appeared in answer to his call, a woman whose face was so old that she seemed like his mother. In highland places one sex ages quicker than the other.

'This gentleman would like to bide the night. I wass telling him that we had a poor small house, but he says he will not be minding it.'

She looked at me with the timid politeness that you find only in outland places.

'We can do our best, indeed, sir. The gentleman can have Colin's bed in the loft, but he will haf to be doing with plain food. Supper is ready if you will come in now.'

I had a scrub with a piece of yellow soap at an adjacent pool in the burn and then entered a kitchen blue with peat-reek. We had a meal of boiled fish, oatcakes and skim-milk cheese, with cups of strong tea to wash it down. The old folk had the manners of princes. They pressed food on me, and asked me no questions, till for very decency's sake I had to put up a story and give some account of myself.

I found they had a son in the Argylls and a young boy in the Navy. But they seemed disinclined to talk of them or of the war. By a mere accident I hit on the old man's absorbing interest. He was passionate about the land. He had taken part in

long-forgotten agitations, and had suffered eviction in some ancient landlords' quarrel farther north. Presently he was pouring out to me all the woes of the crofter — woes that seemed so antediluvian and forgotten that I listened as one would listen to an old song. 'You who come from a new country will not haf heard of these things,' he kept telling me, but by that peat fire I made up for my defective education. He told me of evictions in the year. One somewhere in Sutherland, and of harsh doings in the Outer Isles. It was far more than a political grievance. It was the lament of the conservative for vanished days and manners. 'Over in Skye wass the fine land for black cattle, and every man had his bit herd on the hillside. But the lairds said it wass better for sheep, and then they said it wass not good for sheep, so they put it under deer, and now there is no black cattle anywhere in Skye.' I tell you it was like sad music on the bagpipes hearing that old fellow. The war and all things modern meant nothing to him; he lived among the tragedies of his youth and his prime.

I'm a Tory myself and a bit of a land-reformer, so we agreed well enough. So well, that I got what I wanted without asking for it. I told him I was going to Skye, and he offered to take me over in his boat in the morning. 'It will be no trouble. Indeed no. I will be going that way myself to the fishing.'

I told him that after the war, every acre of British soil would have to be used for the men that had earned the right to it. But that did not comfort him. He was not thinking about the land itself, but about the men who had been driven from it fifty years before. His desire was not for reform, but for restitution, and that was past the power of any Government. I went to bed in the loft in a sad, reflective mood, considering how in speeding our newfangled plough we must break down a multitude of molehills and how desirable and unreplaceable was the life of the moles.

In brisk, shining weather, with a wind from the south-east, we put off next morning. In front was a brown line of low hills, and behind them, a little to the north, that black toothcomb of mountain range which I had seen the day before from the Arisaig ridge.

'That is the Coolin,' said the fisherman. 'It is a bad place where even the deer cannot go. But all the rest of Skye wass the fine land for black cattle.'

As we neared the coast, he pointed out many places. 'Look there, Sir, in that glen. I haf seen six cot houses smoking there, and now there is not any left. There were three men of my own name had crofts on the machars beyond the point, and if you go there you will only find the marks of their bit gardens. You will know the place by the gean trees.'

When he put me ashore in a sandy bay between green ridges of bracken, he was still harping upon the past. I got him to take a pound — for the boat and not for the night's hospitality, for he would have beaten me with an oar if I had suggested that. The last I saw of him, as I turned round at the top of the hill, he had still his sail down, and was gazing at the lands which had once been full of human dwellings and now were desolate.

I kept for a while along the ridge, with the Sound of Sleat on my right, and beyond it the high hills of Knoydart and Kintail. I was watching for the *Tobermory*, but saw no sign of her. A steamer put out from Mallaig, and there were several drifters crawling up the channel and once I saw the white ensign and a destroyer bustled northward, leaving a cloud of black smoke in her wake. Then, after consulting the map, I struck across country, still keeping the higher ground, but, except at odd minutes, being out of sight of the sea. I concluded that my business was to get to the latitude of Ranna without wasting time.

So soon as I changed my course I had the Coolin for company. Mountains have always been a craze of mine, and the blackness and mystery of those grim peaks went to my head. I forgot all about Fosse Manor and the Cotswolds. I forgot, too, what had been my chief feeling since I left Glasgow, a sense of the absurdity of my mission. It had all seemed too far-fetched and whimsical. I was running apparently no great personal risk, and I had always the unpleasing fear that Blenkiron might have been too clever and that the whole thing might be a mare's nest. But that dark mountain mass changed my outlook. I began to have a queer instinct that that was the place, that something might be concealed there, something pretty damnable. I remember I sat on a top for half an hour raking the hills with my glasses. I made out ugly precipices, and glens which lost themselves in primeval blackness. When the sun caught them — for it was a gleamy day — it brought out no colours, only degrees of shade. No mountains I had ever seen — not the Drakensberg or the red kopjes of Damaraland or the cold, white peaks around Erzerum — ever looked so unearthly and uncanny.

Oddly enough, too, the sight of them set me thinking about Ivery. There seemed no link between a smooth, sedentary being, dwelling in villas and lecture-rooms, and that shaggy tangle of precipices. But I felt there was, for I had begun to realize the bigness of my opponent. Blenkiron had said that he spun his web wide. That was intelligible enough among the

half-baked youth of Biggleswick, and the pacifist societies, or even the toughs on the Clyde. I could fit him in all right to that picture. But that he should be playing his game among those mysterious black crags seemed to make him bigger and more desperate, altogether a different kind of proposition. I didn't exactly dislike the idea, for my objection to my past weeks had been that I was out of my proper job, and this was more my line of country. I always felt that I was a better bandit than a detective. But a sort of awe mingled with my satisfaction. I began to feel about Ivery as I had felt about the three devils of the Black Stone who had hunted me before the war, and as I never felt about any other Hun. The men we fought at the Front and the men I had run across in the Greenmantle business, even old Stumm himself, had been human miscreants. They were formidable enough, but you could gauge and calculate their capacities. But this Ivery was like a poison gas that hung in the air and got into unexpected crannies and that you couldn't fight in an upstanding way. Till then, in spite of Blenkiron's solemnity, I had regarded him simply as a problem. But now he seemed an intimate and omnipresent enemy, intangible, too, as the horror of a haunted house. Up on that sunny hillside, with the sea winds round me and the whaups calling, I got a chill in my spine when I thought of him.

I am ashamed to confess it, but I was also horribly hungry. There was something about the war that made me ravenous, and the less chance of food the worse I felt. If I had been in London with twenty restaurants open to me, I should as likely as not have gone off my feed. That was the cussedness of my stomach. I had still a little chocolate left, and I ate the fisherman's buttered scones for luncheon, but long before the evening my thoughts were dwelling on my empty interior.

I put up that night in a shepherd's cottage miles from anywhere. The man was called Macmorran, and he had come from Galloway when sheep were booming. He was a very good imitation of a savage, a little fellow with red hair and red eyes, who might have been a Pict. He lived with a daughter who had once been in service in Glasgow, a fat young woman with a face entirely covered with freckles and a pout of habitual discontent. No wonder, for that cottage was a pretty mean place. It was so thick with peat-reek that throat and eyes were always smarting. It was badly built, and must have leaked like a sieve in a storm. The father was a surly fellow, whose conversation was one long growl at the world, the high prices, the difficulty of moving his sheep, the meanness of his master, and the godforsaken character of Skye. 'Here's me no seen baker's bread for a month, and no company but a wheen ignorant Hielanders that yatter Gawlic. I wish I was back in the Glenkens. And I'd gang the morn if I could get paid what I'm awed.'

However, he gave me supper — a braxy ham and oatcake, and I bought the remnants off him for use next day. I did not trust his blankets, so I slept the night by the fire in the ruins of an arm-chair, and woke at dawn with a foul taste in my mouth. A dip in the burn refreshed me, and after a bowl of porridge I took the road again. For I was anxious to get to some hill-top that looked over to Ranna.

Before midday I was close under the eastern side of the Coolin, on a road which was more a rockery than a path. Presently I saw a big house ahead of me that looked like an inn, so I gave it a miss and struck the highway that led to it a little farther north. Then I bore off to the east, and was just beginning to climb a hill which I judged stood between me and the sea, when I heard wheels on the road and looked back.

It was a farmer's gig carrying one man. I was about half a mile off, and something in the cut of his jib seemed familiar. I got my glasses on him and made out a short, stout figure clad in a mackintosh, with a woollen comforter round its throat. As I watched, it made a movement as if to rub its nose on its sleeve. That was the pet trick of one man I knew. Inconspicuously I slipped through the long heather so as to reach the road ahead of the gig. When I rose like a wraith from the wayside the horse started, but not the driver.

'So ye're there,' said Amos's voice. 'I've news for ye. The *Tobermory* will be in Ranna by now. She passed Broadford two hours syne. When I saw her I yoked this beast and came up on the chance of foregathering with ye.'

'How on earth did you know I would be here?' I asked in some surprise.

'Oh, I saw the way your mind was workin' from your telegram. And says I to mysel' — that man Brand, says I, is not the chiel to be easy stoppit. But I was feared ye might be a day late, so I came up the road to hold the fort. Man, I'm glad to see ye. Ye're younger and soopler than me, and yon Gresson's a stirrin' lad.'

'There's one thing you've got to do for me,' I said. 'I can't go into inns and shops, but I can't do without food. I see from the map there's a town about six miles on. Go there and buy me anything that's tinned — biscuits and tongue and sardines, and a couple of bottles of whisky if you can get them. This may be a long job, so buy plenty.'

'Whaur'll I put them?' was his only question.

We fixed on a cache, a hundred yards from the highway in a place where two ridges of hill enclosed the view so that only a short bit of road was visible.

'I'll get back to the Kyle,' he told me, 'and a'body there kens Andra Amos, if ye should find a way of sendin' a message or comin' yourself. Oh, and I've got a word to ye from a lady that we ken of. She says, the sooner ye're back in Vawnty Fair the better she'll be pleased, always provided ye've got over the Hill Difficulty.'

A smile screwed up his old face and he waved his whip in farewell. I interpreted Mary's message as an incitement to speed, but I could not make the pace. That was Gresson's business. I think I was a little nettled, till I cheered myself by another interpretation. She might be anxious for my safety, she might want to see me again, anyhow the mere sending of the message showed I was not forgotten. I was in a pleasant muse as I breasted the hill, keeping discreetly in the cover of the many gullies. At the top I looked down on Ranna and the sea.

There lay the *Tobermory* busy unloading. It would be some time, no doubt, before Gresson could leave. There was no row-boat in the channel yet, and I might have to wait hours. I settled myself snugly between two rocks, where I could not be seen, and where I had a clear view of the sea and shore. But presently I found that I wanted some long heather to make a couch, and I emerged to get some. I had not raised my head for a second when I flopped down again. For I had a neighbour on the hill-top.

He was about two hundred yards off, just reaching the crest, and, unlike me, walking quite openly. His eyes were on Ranna, so he did not notice me, but from my cover I scanned every line of him. He looked an ordinary countryman, wearing badly cut, baggy knickerbockers of the kind that gillies affect. He had a face like a Portuguese Jew, but I had seen that type before among people with Highland names; they might be Jews or not, but they could speak Gaelic. Presently he disappeared. He had followed my example and selected a hiding-place.

It was a clear, hot day, but very pleasant in that airy place. Good scents came up from the sea, the heather was warm and fragrant, bees droned about, and stray seagulls swept the ridge with their wings. I took a look now and then towards my neighbour, but he was deep in his hidey-hole. Most of the time I kept my glasses on Ranna, and watched the doings of the *Tobermory*. She was tied up at the jetty, but seemed in no hurry to unload. I watched the captain disembark and walk up to a house on the hillside. Then some idlers sauntered down towards her and stood talking and smoking close to her side. The captain returned and left again. A man with papers in his hand appeared, and a woman with what looked like a telegram. The mate went ashore in his best clothes. Then at last, after midday, Gresson appeared. He joined the captain at the piermaster's office, and presently emerged on the other side of the jetty where some small boats were beached. A man from the *Tobermory* came in answer to his call, a boat was launched, and began to make its way into the channel. Gresson sat in the stern, placidly eating his luncheon.

I watched every detail of that crossing with some satisfaction that my forecast was turning out right. About half-way across, Gresson took the oars, but soon surrendered them to the *Tobermory* man, and lit a pipe. He got out a pair of binoculars and raked my hillside. I tried to see if my neighbour was making any signal, but all was quiet. Presently the boat was hid from me by the bulge of the hill, and I caught the sound of her scraping on the beach.

Gresson was not a hill-walker like my neighbour. It took him the best part of an hour to get to the top, and he reached it at a point not two yards from my hiding-place. I could hear by his labouring breath that he was very blown. He walked straight over the crest till he was out of sight of Ranna, and flung himself on the ground. He was now about fifty yards from me, and I made shift to lessen the distance. There was a grassy trench skirting the north side of the hill, deep and thickly overgrown with heather. I wound my way along it till I was about twelve yards from him, where I stuck, owing to the trench dying away. When I peered out of the cover I saw that the other man had joined him and that the idiots were engaged in embracing each other.

I dared not move an inch nearer, and as they talked in a low voice I could hear nothing of what they said. Nothing except one phrase, which the strange man repeated twice, very emphatically. 'Tomorrow night,' he said, and I noticed that his voice had not the Highland inflection which I looked for. Gresson nodded and glanced at his watch, and then the two began to move downhill towards the road I had travelled that morning.

I followed as best I could, using a shallow dry watercourse of which sheep had made a track, and which kept me well below the level of the moor. It took me down the hill, but some distance from the line the pair were taking, and I had to reconnoitre frequently to watch their movements. They were still a quarter of a mile or so from the road, when they

stopped and stared, and I stared with them. On that lonely highway travellers were about as rare as roadmenders, and what caught their eye was a farmer's gig driven by a thick-set elderly man with a woollen comforter round his neck.

I had a bad moment, for I reckoned that if Gresson recognized Amos he might take fright. Perhaps the driver of the gig thought the same, for he appeared to be very drunk. He waved his whip, he jiggoted the reins, and he made an effort to sing. He looked towards the figures on the hillside, and cried out something. The gig narrowly missed the ditch, and then to my relief the horse bolted. Swaying like a ship in a gale, the whole outfit lurched out of sight round the corner of hill where lay my cache. If Amos could stop the beast and deliver the goods there, he had put up a masterly bit of buffoonery.

The two men laughed at the performance, and then they parted. Gresson retraced his steps up the hill. The other man — I called him in my mind the Portuguese Jew — started off at a great pace due west, across the road, and over a big patch of bog towards the northern butt of the Coolin. He had some errand, which Gresson knew about, and he was in a hurry to perform it. It was clearly my job to get after him.

I had a rotten afternoon. The fellow covered the moorland miles like a deer, and under the hot August sun I toiled on his trail. I had to keep well behind, and as much as possible in cover, in case he looked back; and that meant that when he had passed over a ridge I had to double not to let him get too far ahead, and when we were in an open place I had to make wide circuits to keep hidden. We struck a road which crossed a low pass and skirted the flank of the mountains, and this we followed till we were on the western side and within sight of the sea. It was gorgeous weather, and out on the blue water I saw cool sails moving and little breezes ruffling the calm, while I was glowing like a furnace. Happily I was in fair training, and I needed it. The Portuguese Jew must have done a steady six miles an hour over abominable country.

About five o'clock we came to a point where I dared not follow. The road ran flat by the edge of the sea, so that several miles of it were visible. Moreover, the man had begun to look round every few minutes. He was getting near something and wanted to be sure that no one was in his neighbourhood. I left the road accordingly, and took to the hillside, which to my undoing was one long cascade of screes and tumbled rocks. I saw him drop over a rise which seemed to mark the rim of a little bay into which descended one of the big corries of the mountains. It must have been a good half-hour later before I, at my greater altitude and with far worse going, reached the same rim. I looked into the glen and my man had disappeared.

He could not have crossed it, for the place was wider than I had thought. A ring of black precipices came down to within half a mile of the shore, and between them was a big stream — long, shallow pools at the sea end and a chain of waterfalls above. He had gone to earth like a badger somewhere, and I dared not move in case he might be watching me from behind a boulder.

But even as I hesitated he appeared again, fording the stream, his face set on the road we had come. Whatever his errand was he had finished it, and was posting back to his master. For a moment I thought I should follow him, but another instinct prevailed. He had not come to this wild place for the scenery. Somewhere down in the glen there was something or somebody that held the key of the mystery. It was my business to stay there till I had unlocked it. Besides, in two hours it would be dark, and I had had enough walking for one day.

I made my way to the stream side and had a long drink. The corrie behind me was lit up with the westering sun, and the bald cliffs were flushed with pink and gold. On each side of the stream was turf like a lawn, perhaps a hundred yards wide, and then a tangle of long heather and boulders right up to the edge of the great rocks. I had never seen a more delectable evening, but I could not enjoy its peace because of my anxiety about the Portuguese Jew. He had not been there more than half an hour, just about long enough for a man to travel to the first ridge across the burn and back. Yet he had found time to do his business. He might have left a letter in some prearranged place — in which case I would stay there till the man it was meant for turned up. Or he might have met someone, though I didn't think that possible. As I scanned the acres of rough moor and then looked at the sea lapping delicately on the grey sand I had the feeling that a knotty problem was before me. It was too dark to try to track his steps. That must be left for the morning, and I prayed that there would be no rain in the night.

I ate for supper most of the braxy ham and oatcake I had brought from Macmorran's cottage. It took some self-denial, for I was ferociously hungry, to save a little for breakfast next morning. Then I pulled heather and bracken and made myself a bed in the shelter of a rock which stood on a knoll above the stream. My bed-chamber was well hidden, but at the same time, if anything should appear in the early dawn, it gave me a prospect. With my waterproof I was perfectly warm, and, after smoking two pipes, I fell asleep.

My night's rest was broken. First it was a fox which came and barked at my ear and woke me to a pitch-black night, with scarcely a star showing. The next time it was nothing but a wandering hill-wind, but as I sat up and listened I thought I saw a spark of light near the edge of the sea. It was only for a second, but it disquieted me. I got out and climbed on the top of the rock, but all was still save for the gentle lap of the tide and the croak of some night bird among the crags. The third time I was suddenly quite wide awake, and without any reason, for I had not been dreaming. Now I have slept hundreds of times alone beside my horse on the veld, and I never knew any cause for such awakenings but the one, and that was the presence near me of some human being. A man who is accustomed to solitude gets this extra sense which announces like an alarm-clock the approach of one of his kind.

But I could hear nothing. There was a scraping and rustling on the moor, but that was only the wind and the little wild things of the hills. A fox, perhaps, or a blue hare. I convinced my reason, but not my senses, and for long I lay awake with my ears at full cock and every nerve tense. Then I fell asleep, and woke to the first flush of dawn.

The sun was behind the Coolin and the hills were black as ink, but far out in the western seas was a broad band of gold. I got up and went down to the shore. The mouth of the stream was shallow, but as I moved south I came to a place where two small capes enclosed an inlet. It must have been a fault in the volcanic rock, for its depth was portentous. I stripped and dived far into its cold abysses, but I did not reach the bottom. I came to the surface rather breathless, and struck out to sea, where I floated on my back and looked at the great rampart of crag. I saw that the place where I had spent the night was only a little oasis of green at the base of one of the grimmest corries the imagination could picture. It was as desert as Damaraland. I noticed, too, how sharply the cliffs rose from the level. There were chimneys and gullies by which a man might have made his way to the summit, but no one of them could have been scaled except by a mountaineer.

I was feeling better now, with all the frowsiness washed out of me, and I dried myself by racing up and down the heather. Then I noticed something. There were marks of human feet at the top of the deep-water inlet — not mine, for they were on the other side. The short sea-turf was bruised and trampled in several places, and there were broken stems of bracken. I thought that some fisherman had probably landed there to stretch his legs.

But that set me thinking of the Portuguese Jew. After breakfasting on my last morsels of food — a knuckle of braxy and a bit of oatcake — I set about tracking him from the place where he had first entered the glen. To get my bearings, I went back over the road I had come myself, and after a good deal of trouble I found his spoor. It was pretty clear as far as the stream, for he had been walking — or rather running — over ground with many patches of gravel on it. After that it was difficult, and I lost it entirely in the rough heather below the crags. All that I could make out for certain was that he had crossed the stream, and that his business, whatever it was, had been with the few acres of tumbled wilderness below the precipices.

I spent a busy morning there, but found nothing except the skeleton of a sheep picked clean by the ravens. It was a thankless job, and I got very cross over it. I had an ugly feeling that I was on a false scent and wasting my time. I wished to Heaven I had old Peter with me. He could follow spoor like a Bushman, and would have riddled the Portuguese Jew's track out of any jungle on earth. That was a game I had never learned, for in the old days I had always left it to my natives. I chucked the attempt, and lay disconsolately on a warm patch of grass and smoked and thought about Peter. But my chief reflections were that I had breakfasted at five, that it was now eleven, that I was intolerably hungry, that there was nothing here to feed a grasshopper, and that I should starve unless I got supplies.

It was a long road to my cache, but there were no two ways of it. My only hope was to sit tight in the glen, and it might involve a wait of days. To wait I must have food, and, though it meant relinquishing guard for a matter of six hours, the risk had to be taken. I set off at a brisk pace with a very depressed mind.

From the map it seemed that a short cut lay over a pass in the range. I resolved to take it, and that short cut, like most of its kind, was unblessed by Heaven. I will not dwell upon the discomforts of the journey. I found myself slithering among screes, climbing steep chimneys, and travelling precariously along razor-backs. The shoes were nearly rent from my feet by the infernal rocks, which were all pitted as if by some geological small-pox. When at last I crossed the divide, I had a horrible business getting down from one level to another in a gruesome corrie, where each step was composed of smooth boiler-plates. But at last I was among the bogs on the east side, and came to the place beside the road where I had fixed my cache.

The faithful Amos had not failed me. There were the provisions — a couple of small loaves, a dozen tins, and a bottle of

whisky. I made the best pack I could of them in my waterproof, swung it on my stick, and started back, thinking that I must be very like the picture of Christian on the title-page of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

I was liker Christian before I reached my destination — Christian after he had got up the Hill Difficulty. The morning's walk had been bad, but the afternoon's was worse, for I was in a fever to get back, and, having had enough of the hills, chose the longer route I had followed the previous day. I was mortally afraid of being seen, for I cut a queer figure, so I avoided every stretch of road where I had not a clear view ahead. Many weary detours I made among moss-hags and screes and the stony channels of burns. But I got there at last, and it was almost with a sense of comfort that I flung my pack down beside the stream where I had passed the night.

I ate a good meal, lit my pipe, and fell into the equable mood which follows upon fatigue ended and hunger satisfied. The sun was westering, and its light fell upon the rock-wall above the place where I had abandoned my search for the spoor.

As I gazed at it idly I saw a curious thing.

It seemed to be split in two and a shaft of sunlight came through between. There could be no doubt about it. I saw the end of the shaft on the moor beneath, while all the rest lay in shadow. I rubbed my eyes, and got out my glasses. Then I guessed the explanation. There was a rock tower close against the face of the main precipice and indistinguishable from it to anyone looking direct at the face. Only when the sun fell on it obliquely could it be discovered. And between the tower and the cliff there must be a substantial hollow.

The discovery brought me to my feet, and set me running towards the end of the shaft of sunlight. I left the heather, scrambled up some yards of screes, and had a difficult time on some very smooth slabs, where only the friction of tweed and rough rock gave me a hold. Slowly I worked my way towards the speck of sunlight, till I found a handhold, and swung myself into the crack. On one side was the main wall of the hill, on the other a tower some ninety feet high, and between them a long crevice varying in width from three to six feet. Beyond it there showed a small bright patch of sea.

There was more, for at the point where I entered it there was an overhang which made a fine cavern, low at the entrance but a dozen feet high inside, and as dry as tinder. Here, thought I, is the perfect hiding-place. Before going farther I resolved to return for food. It was not very easy descending, and I slipped the last twenty feet, landing on my head in a soft patch of screes. At the burnside I filled my flask from the whisky bottle, and put half a loaf, a tin of sardines, a tin of tongue, and a packet of chocolate in my waterproof pockets. Laden as I was, it took me some time to get up again, but I managed it, and stored my belongings in a corner of the cave. Then I set out to explore the rest of the crack.

It slanted down and then rose again to a small platform. After that it dropped in easy steps to the moor beyond the tower. If the Portuguese Jew had come here, that was the way by which he had reached it, for he would not have had the time to make my ascent. I went very cautiously, for I felt I was on the eve of a big discovery. The platform was partly hidden from my end by a bend in the crack, and it was more or less screened by an outlying bastion of the tower from the other side. Its surface was covered with fine powdery dust, as were the steps beyond it. In some excitement I knelt down and examined it.

Beyond doubt there was spoor here. I knew the Portuguese Jew's footmarks by this time, and I made them out clearly, especially in one corner. But there were other footsteps, quite different. The one showed the rackets of rough country boots, the others were from un-nailed soles. Again I longed for Peter to make certain, though I was pretty sure of my conclusions. The man I had followed had come here, and he had not stayed long. Someone else had been here, probably later, for the un-nailed shoes overlaid the rackets. The first man might have left a message for the second. Perhaps the second was that human presence of which I had been dimly conscious in the night-time.

I carefully removed all traces of my own footmarks, and went back to my cave. My head was humming with my discovery. I remembered Gresson's word to his friend: 'Tomorrow night.' As I read it, the Portuguese Jew had taken a message from Gresson to someone, and that someone had come from somewhere and picked it up. The message contained an assignation for this very night. I had found a point of observation, for no one was likely to come near my cave, which was reached from the moor by such a toilsome climb. There I should bivouac and see what the darkness brought forth. I remember reflecting on the amazing luck which had so far attended me. As I looked from my refuge at the blue haze of twilight creeping over the waters, I felt my pulses quicken with a wild anticipation. Then I heard a sound below me, and craned my neck round the edge of the tower. A man was climbing up the rock by the way I had come.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I HEAR OF THE WILD BIRDS

I saw an old green felt hat, and below it lean tweed-clad shoulders. Then I saw a knapsack with a stick slung through it, as the owner wriggled his way on to a shelf. Presently he turned his face upward to judge the remaining distance. It was the face of a young man, a face sallow and angular, but now a little flushed with the day's sun and the work of climbing. It was a face that I had first seen at Fosse Manor.

I felt suddenly sick and heartsore. I don't know why, but I had never really associated the intellectuals of Biggleswick with a business like this. None of them but Ivery, and he was different. They had been silly and priggish, but no more — I would have taken my oath on it. Yet here was one of them engaged in black treason against his native land. Something began to beat in my temples when I remembered that Mary and this man had been friends, that he had held her hand, and called her by her Christian name. My first impulse was to wait till he got up and then pitch him down among the boulders and let his German accomplices puzzle over his broken neck.

With difficulty I kept down that tide of fury. I had my duty to do, and to keep on terms with this man was part of it. I had to convince him that I was an accomplice, and that might not be easy. I leaned over the edge, and, as he got to his feet on the ledge above the boiler-plates, I whistled so that he turned his face to me.

'Hullo, Wake,' I said.

He started, stared for a second, and recognized me. He did not seem over-pleased to see me.

'Brand!' he cried. 'How did you get here?'

He swung himself up beside me, straightened his back and unbuckled his knapsack. 'I thought this was my own private sanctuary, and that nobody knew it but me. Have you spotted the cave? It's the best bedroom in Skye.' His tone was, as usual, rather acid.

That little hammer was beating in my head. I longed to get my hands on his throat and choke the smug treason in him. But I kept my mind fixed on one purpose — to persuade him that I shared his secret and was on his side. His off-hand self-possession seemed only the clever screen of the surprised conspirator who was hunting for a plan.

We entered the cave, and he flung his pack into a corner. 'Last time I was here,' he said, 'I covered the floor with heather. We must get some more if we would sleep soft.' In the twilight he was a dim figure, but he seemed a new man from the one I had last seen in the Moot Hall at Biggleswick. There was a wiry vigour in his body and a purpose in his face. What a fool I had been to set him down as no more than a conceited fidneur!

He went out to the shelf again and sniffed the fresh evening. There was a wonderful red sky in the west, but in the crevice the shades had fallen, and only the bright patches at either end told of the sunset.

'Wake,' I said, 'you and I have to understand each other. I'm a friend of Ivery and I know the meaning of this place. I discovered it by accident, but I want you to know that I'm heart and soul with you. You may trust me in tonight's job as if I were Ivery himself.'

He swung round and looked at me sharply. His eyes were hot again, as I remembered them at our first meeting.

'What do you mean? How much do you know?'

The hammer was going hard in my forehead, and I had to pull myself together to answer.

'I know that at the end of this crack a message was left last night, and that someone came out of the sea and picked it up. That someone is coming again when darkness falls, and there will be another message.'

He had turned his head away. 'You are talking nonsense. No submarine could land on this coast.'

I could see that he was trying me.

'This morning,' I said, 'I swam in the deep-water inlet below us. It is the most perfect submarine shelter in Britain.'

He still kept his face from me, looking the way he had come. For a moment he was silent, and then he spoke in the bitter, drawling voice which had annoyed me at Fosse Manor.

'How do you reconcile this business with your principles, Mr Brand? You were always a patriot, I remember, though

you didn't see eye to eye with the Government.'

It was not quite what I expected and I was unready. I stammered in my reply. 'It's because I am a patriot that I want peace. I think that . . . I mean . . .'

'Therefore you are willing to help the enemy to win?'

'They have already won. I want that recognized and the end hurried on.' I was getting my mind clearer and continued fluently.

'The longer the war lasts, the worse this country is ruined. We must make the people realize the truth, and —'

But he swung round suddenly, his eyes blazing.

'You blackguard!' he cried, 'you damnable blackguard!' And he flung himself on me like a wild-cat.

I had got my answer. He did not believe me, he knew me for a spy, and he was determined to do me in. We were beyond finesse now, and back at the old barbaric game. It was his life or mine. The hammer beat furiously in my head as we closed, and a fierce satisfaction rose in my heart.

He never had a chance, for though he was in good trim and had the light, wiry figure of the mountaineer, he hadn't a quarter of my muscular strength. Besides, he was wrongly placed, for he had the outside station. Had he been on the inside he might have toppled me over the edge by his sudden assault. As it was, I grappled him and forced him to the ground, squeezing the breath out of his body in the process. I must have hurt him considerably, but he never gave a cry. With a good deal of trouble I lashed his hands behind his back with the belt of my waterproof, carried him inside the cave and laid him in the dark end of it. Then I tied his feet with the strap of his own knapsack. I would have to gag him, but that could wait.

I had still to contrive a plan of action for the night, for I did not know what part he had been meant to play in it. He might be the messenger instead of the Portuguese Jew, in which case he would have papers about his person. If he knew of the cave, others might have the same knowledge, and I had better shift him before they came. I looked at my wrist-watch, and the luminous dial showed that the hour was half past nine.

Then I noticed that the bundle in the corner was sobbing. It was a horrid sound and it worried me. I had a little pocket electric torch and I flashed it on Wake's face. If he was crying, it was with dry eyes.

'What are you going to do with me?' he asked.

'That depends,' I said grimly.

'Well, I'm ready. I may be a poor creature, but I'm damned if I'm afraid of you, or anything like you.' That was a brave thing to say, for it was a lie; his teeth were chattering.

'I'm ready for a deal,' I said.

'You won't get it,' was his answer. 'Cut my throat if you mean to, but for God's sake don't insult me . . . I choke when I think about you. You come to us and we welcome you, and receive you in our houses, and tell you our inmost thoughts, and all the time you're a bloody traitor. You want to sell us to Germany. You may win now, but by God! your time will come! That is my last word to you . . . you swine!'

The hammer stopped beating in my head. I saw myself suddenly as a blind, preposterous fool. I strode over to Wake, and he shut his eyes as if he expected a blow. Instead I unbuckled the straps which held his legs and arms.

'Wake, old fellow,' I said, 'I'm the worst kind of idiot. I'll eat all the dirt you want. I'll give you leave to knock me black and blue, and I won't lift a hand. But not now. Now we've another job on hand. Man, we're on the same side and I never knew it. It's too bad a case for apologies, but if it's any consolation to you I feel the lowest dog in Europe at this moment.'

He was sitting up rubbing his bruised shoulders. 'What do you mean?' he asked hoarsely.

'I mean that you and I are allies. My name's not Brand. I'm a soldier — a general, if you want to know. I went to Biggleswick under orders, and I came chasing up here on the same job. Ivery's the biggest German agent in Britain and I'm after him. I've struck his communication lines, and this very night, please God, we'll get the last clue to the riddle. Do you hear? We're in this business together, and you've got to lend a hand.'

I told him briefly the story of Gresson, and how I had tracked his man here. As I talked we ate our supper, and I wish I could have watched Wake's face. He asked questions, for he wasn't convinced in a hurry. I think it was my mention of Mary Lamington that did the trick. I don't know why, but that seemed to satisfy him. But he wasn't going to give himself away.

‘You may count on me,’ he said, ‘for this is black, blackguardly treason. But you know my politics, and I don’t change them for this. I’m more against your accursed war than ever, now that I know what war involves.’

‘Right-o,’ I said, ‘I’m a pacifist myself. You won’t get any heroics about war from me. I’m all for peace, but we’ve got to down those devils first.’

It wasn’t safe for either of us to stick in that cave, so we cleared away the marks of our occupation, and hid our packs in a deep crevice on the rock. Wake announced his intention of climbing the tower, while there was still a faint afterglow of light. ‘It’s broad on the top, and I can keep a watch out to sea if any light shows. I’ve been up it before. I found the way two years ago. No, I won’t fall asleep and tumble off. I slept most of the afternoon on the top of Sgurr Vhiconnich, and I’m as wakeful as a bat now.’

I watched him shin up the face of the tower, and admired greatly the speed and neatness with which he climbed. Then I followed the crevice southward to the hollow just below the platform where I had found the footmarks. There was a big boulder there, which partly shut off the view of it from the direction of our cave. The place was perfect for my purpose, for between the boulder and the wall of the tower was a narrow gap, through which I could hear all that passed on the platform. I found a stance where I could rest in comfort and keep an eye through the crack on what happened beyond.

There was still a faint light on the platform, but soon that disappeared and black darkness settled down on the hills. It was the dark of the moon, and, as had happened the night before, a thin wrack blew over the sky, hiding the stars. The place was very still, though now and then would come the cry of a bird from the crags that beetled above me, and from the shore the pipe of a tern or oyster-catcher. An owl hooted from somewhere up on the tower. That I reckoned was Wake, so I hooted back and was answered. I unbuckled my wrist-watch and pocketed it, lest its luminous dial should betray me; and I noticed that the hour was close on eleven. I had already removed my shoes, and my jacket was buttoned at the collar so as to show no shirt. I did not think that the coming visitor would trouble to explore the crevice beyond the platform, but I wanted to be prepared for emergencies.

Then followed an hour of waiting. I felt wonderfully cheered and exhilarated, for Wake had restored my confidence in human nature. In that eerie place we were wrapped round with mystery like a fog. Some unknown figure was coming out of the sea, the emissary of that Power we had been at grips with for three years. It was as if the war had just made contact with our own shores, and never, not even when I was alone in the South German forest, had I felt so much the sport of a whimsical fate. I only wished Peter could have been with me. And so my thoughts fled to Peter in his prison camp, and I longed for another sight of my old friend as a girl longs for her lover.

Then I heard the hoot of an owl, and presently the sound of careful steps fell on my ear. I could see nothing, but I guessed it was the Portuguese Jew, for I could hear the grinding of heavily nailed boots on the gritty rock.

The figure was very quiet. It appeared to be sitting down, and then it rose and fumbled with the wall of the tower just beyond the boulder behind which I sheltered. It seemed to move a stone and to replace it. After that came silence, and then once more the hoot of an owl. There were steps on the rock staircase, the steps of a man who did not know the road well and stumbled a little. Also they were the steps of one without nails in his boots.

They reached the platform and someone spoke. It was the Portuguese Jew and he spoke in good German.

‘*Die vögelein schweigen im Walde,*’ he said.

The answer came from a clear, authoritative voice.

‘*Warte nur, balde ruhest du auch.*’

Clearly some kind of password, for sane men don’t talk about little birds in that kind of situation. It sounded to me like indifferent poetry.

Then followed a conversation in low tones, of which I only caught odd phrases. I heard two names — Chelius and what sounded like a Dutch word, Bommaerts. Then to my joy I caught *Elfenbein*, and when uttered it seemed to be followed by a laugh. I heard too a phrase several times repeated, which seemed to me to be pure gibberish — *Die Stubenvogel verstehn*. It was spoken by the man from the sea. And then the word *Wildvogel*. The pair seemed demented about birds.

For a second an electric torch was flashed in the shelter of the rock, and I could see a tanned, bearded face looking at some papers. The light disappeared, and again the Portuguese Jew was fumbling with the stones at the base of the tower. To my joy he was close to my crack, and I could hear every word. ‘You cannot come here very often,’ he said, ‘and it may be hard to arrange a meeting. See, therefore, the place I have made to put the *Viageffutter*. When I get a chance I will come

here, and you will come also when you are able. Often there will be nothing, but sometimes there will be much.'

My luck was clearly in, and my exultation made me careless. A stone, on which a foot rested, slipped and though I checked myself at once, the confounded thing rolled down into the hollow, making a great clatter. I plastered myself in the embrasure of the rock and waited with a beating heart. The place was pitch dark, but they had an electric torch, and if they once flashed it on me I was gone. I heard them leave the platform and climb down into the hollow. There they stood listening, while I held my breath. Then I heard '*Nix, mein freund,*' and the two went back, the naval officer's boots slipping on the gravel.

They did not leave the platform together. The man from the sea bade a short farewell to the Portuguese Jew, listening, I thought, impatiently to his final message as if eager to be gone. It was a good half-hour before the latter took himself off, and I heard the sound of his nailed boots die away as he reached the heather of the moor.

I waited a little longer, and then crawled back to the cave. The owl hooted, and presently Wake descended lightly beside me; he must have known every foothold and handhold by heart to do the job in that inky blackness. I remember that he asked no question of me, but he used language rare on the lips of conscientious objectors about the men who had lately been in the crevice. We, who four hours earlier had been at death grips, now curled up on the hard floor like two tired dogs, and fell sound asleep.

I woke to find Wake in a thundering bad temper. The thing he remembered most about the night before was our scrap and the gross way I had insulted him. I didn't blame him, for if any man had taken me for a German spy I would have been out for his blood, and it was no good explaining that he had given me grounds for suspicion. He was as touchy about his blessed principles as an old maid about her age. I was feeling rather extra buckish myself and that didn't improve matters. His face was like a gargoyle as we went down to the beach to bathe, so I held my tongue. He was chewing the cud of his wounded pride.

But the salt water cleared out the dregs of his distemper. You couldn't be peevish swimming in that jolly, shining sea. We raced each other away beyond the inlet to the outer water, which a brisk morning breeze was curling. Then back to a promontory of heather, where the first beams of the sun coming over the Coolin dried our skins. He sat hunched up staring at the mountains while I prospected the rocks at the edge. Out in the Minch two destroyers were hurrying southward, and I wondered where in that waste of blue was the craft which had come here in the night watches.

I found the spoor of the man from the sea quite fresh on a patch of gravel above the tide-mark.

'There's our friend of the night,' I said.

'I believe the whole thing was a whimsy,' said Wake, his eyes on the chimneys of Sgurr Dearg. 'They were only two natives — poachers, perhaps, or tinkers.'

'They don't speak German in these parts.'

'It was Gaelic probably.'

'What do you make of this, then?' and I quoted the stuff about birds with which they had greeted each other.

Wake looked interested. 'That's *Über allen Gipfeln*. Have you ever read Goethe?'

'Never a word. And what do you make of that?' I pointed to a flat rock below tide-mark covered with a tangle of seaweed. It was of a softer stone than the hard stuff in the hills and somebody had scraped off half the seaweed and a slice of the side. 'That wasn't done yesterday morning, for I had my bath here.'

Wake got up and examined the place. He nosed about in the crannies of the rocks lining the inlet, and got into the water again to explore better. When he joined me he was smiling. 'I apologize for my scepticism,' he said. 'There's been some petrol-driven craft here in the night. I can smell it, for I've a nose like a retriever. I daresay you're on the right track. Anyhow, though you seem to know a bit about German, you could scarcely invent immortal poetry.'

We took our belongings to a green crook of the burn, and made a very good breakfast. Wake had nothing in his pack but plasmon biscuits and raisins, for that, he said, was his mountaineering provender, but he was not averse to sampling my tinned stuff. He was a different-sized fellow out in the hills from the anaemic intellectual of Biggleswick. He had forgotten his beastly self-consciousness, and spoke of his hobby with a serious passion. It seemed he had scrambled about everywhere in Europe, from the Caucasus to the Pyrenees. I could see he must be good at the job, for he didn't brag of his exploits. It was the mountains that he loved, not wriggling his body up hard places. The Coolin, he said, were his favourites, for on some of them you could get two thousand feet of good rock. We got our glasses on the face of Sgurr

Alasdair, and he sketched out for me various ways of getting to its grim summit. The Coolin and the Dolomites for him, for he had grown tired of the Chamonix aiguilles. I remember he described with tremendous gusto the joys of early dawn in Tyrol, when you ascended through acres of flowery meadows to a tooth of clean white limestone against a clean blue sky. He spoke, too, of the little wild hills in the Bavarian Wettersteingebirge, and of a guide he had picked up there and trained to the job.

‘They called him Sebastian Buchwieser. He was the jolliest boy you ever saw, and as clever on crags as a chamois. He is probably dead by now, dead in a filthy jaeger battalion. That’s you and your accursed war.’

‘Well, we’ve got to get busy and end it in the right way,’ I said. ‘And you’ve got to help, my lad.’

He was a good draughtsman, and with his assistance I drew a rough map of the crevice where we had roosted for the night, giving its bearings carefully in relation to the burn and the sea. Then I wrote down all the details about Gresson and the Portuguese Jew, and described the latter in minute detail. I described, too, most precisely the cache where it had been arranged that the messages should be placed. That finished my stock of paper, and I left the record of the oddments overheard of the conversation for a later time. I put the thing in an old leather cigarette-case I possessed, and handed it to Wake.

‘You’ve got to go straight off to the Kyle and not waste any time on the way. Nobody suspects you, so you can travel any road you please. When you get there you ask for Mr Andrew Amos, who has some Government job in the neighbourhood. Give him that paper from me. He’ll know what to do with it all right. Tell him I’ll get somehow to the Kyle before midday the day after tomorrow. I must cover my tracks a bit, so I can’t come with you, and I want that thing in his hands just as fast as your legs will take you. If anyone tries to steal it from you, for God’s sake eat it. You can see for yourself that it’s devilish important.’

‘I shall be back in England in three days,’ he said. ‘Any message for your other friends?’

‘Forget all about me. You never saw me here. I’m still Brand, the amiable colonial studying social movements. If you meet Ivery, say you heard of me on the Clyde, deep in sedition. But if you see Miss Lamington you can tell her I’m past the Hill Difficulty. I’m coming back as soon as God will let me, and I’m going to drop right into the Biggleswick push. Only this time I’ll be a little more advanced in my views . . . You needn’t get cross. I’m not saying anything against your principles. The main point is that we both hate dirty treason.’

He put the case in his waistcoat pocket. ‘I’ll go round Garsbheinn,’ he said, ‘and over by Camasunary. I’ll be at the Kyle long before evening. I meant anyhow to sleep at Broadford tonight . . . Goodbye, Brand, for I’ve forgotten your proper name. You’re not a bad fellow, but you’ve landed me in melodrama for the first time in my sober existence. I have a grudge against you for mixing up the Coolin with a shilling shocker. You’ve spoiled their sanctity.’

‘You’ve the wrong notion of romance,’ I said. ‘Why, man, last night for an hour you were in the front line — the place where the enemy forces touch our own. You were over the top — you were in No-man’s-land.’

He laughed. ‘That is one way to look at it;’ and then he stalked off and I watched his lean figure till it was round the turn of the hill.

All that morning I smoked peacefully by the burn, and let my thoughts wander over the whole business. I had got precisely what Blenkiron wanted, a post office for the enemy. It would need careful handling, but I could see the juiciest lies passing that way to the *Grosses Hauptquartier*. Yet I had an ugly feeling at the back of my head that it had been all too easy, and that Ivery was not the man to be duped in this way for long. That set me thinking about the queer talk on the crevice. The poetry stuff I dismissed as the ordinary password, probably changed every time. But who were Chelius and Bommaerts, and what in the name of goodness were the Wild Birds and the Cage Birds? Twice in the past three years I had had two such riddles to solve — Scudder’s scribble in his pocket-book, and Harry Bullivant’s three words. I remembered how it had only been by constant chewing at them that I had got a sort of meaning, and I wondered if fate would some day expound this puzzle also.

Meantime I had to get back to London as inconspicuously as I had come. It might take some doing, for the police who had been active in Morvern might be still on the track, and it was essential that I should keep out of trouble and give no hint to Gresson and his friends that I had been so far north. However, that was for Amos to advise me on, and about noon I picked up my waterproof with its bursting pockets and set off on a long detour up the coast. All that blessed day I scarcely met a soul. I passed a distillery which seemed to have quit business, and in the evening came to a little town on the sea

where I had a bed and supper in a superior kind of public-house.

Next day I struck southward along the coast, and had two experiences of interest. I had a good look at Ranna, and observed that the *Tobermory* was no longer there. Gresson had only waited to get his job finished; he could probably twist the old captain any way he wanted. The second was that at the door of a village smithy I saw the back of the Portuguese Jew. He was talking Gaelic this time — good Gaelic it sounded, and in that knot of idlers he would have passed for the ordinariest kind of gillie.

He did not see me, and I had no desire to give him the chance, for I had an odd feeling that the day might come when it would be good for us to meet as strangers.

That night I put up boldly in the inn at Broadford, where they fed me nobly on fresh sea-trout and I first tasted an excellent liqueur made of honey and whisky. Next morning I was early afoot, and well before midday was in sight of the narrows of the Kyle, and the two little stone clachans which face each other across the strip of sea.

About two miles from the place at a turn of the road I came upon a farmer's gig, drawn up by the wayside, with the horse cropping the moorland grass. A man sat on the bank smoking, with his left arm hooked in the reins. He was an oldish man, with a short, square figure, and a woollen comforter enveloped his throat.



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ADVENTURES OF A BAGMAN

‘Ye’re punctual to time, Mr Brand,’ said the voice of Amos. ‘But losh! man, what have ye done to your breeks! And your buits? Ye’re no just very respectable in your appearance.’

I wasn’t. The confounded rocks of the Coolin had left their mark on my shoes, which moreover had not been cleaned for a week, and the same hills had rent my jacket at the shoulders, and torn my trousers above the right knee, and stained every part of my apparel with peat and lichen.

I cast myself on the bank beside Amos and lit my pipe. ‘Did you get my message?’ I asked.

‘Ay. It’s gone on by a sure hand to the destination we ken of. Ye’ve managed well, Mr Brand, but I wish ye were back in London.’ He sucked at his pipe, and the shaggy brows were pulled so low as to hide the wary eyes. Then he proceeded to think aloud.

‘Ye canna go back by Mallaig. I don’t just understand why, but they’re lookin’ for you down that line. It’s a vexatious business when your friends, meanin’ the polis, are doing their best to upset your plans and you no able to enlighten them. I could send word to the Chief Constable and get ye through to London without a stop like a load of fish from Aiberdeen, but that would be spoilin’ the fine character ye’ve been at such pains to construct. Na, na! Ye maun take the risk and travel by Muirtown without any credentials.’

‘It can’t be a very big risk,’ I interpolated.

‘I’m no so sure. Gresson’s left the *Tobermory*. He went by here yesterday, on the Mallaig boat, and there was a wee blackavised man with him that got out at the Kyle. He’s there still, stoppin’ at the hotel. They ca’ him Linklater and he travels in whisky. I don’t like the looks of him.’

‘But Gresson does not suspect me?’

‘Maybe no. But ye wouldna like him to see ye hereaways. Yon gentry don’t leave muckle to chance. Be very certain that every man in Gresson’s lot kens all about ye, and has your description down to the mole on your chin.’

‘Then they’ve got it wrong,’ I replied.

‘I was speakin’ feeguratively,’ said Amos. ‘I was considerin’ your case the feck of yesterday, and I’ve brought the best I could do for ye in the gig. I wish ye were more respectable clad, but a good topcoat will hide defeecencies.’

From behind the gig’s seat he pulled out an ancient Gladstone bag and revealed its contents. There was a bowler of a vulgar and antiquated style; there was a ready-made overcoat of some dark cloth, of the kind that a clerk wears on the road to the office; there was a pair of detachable celluloid cuffs, and there was a linen collar and dickie. Also there was a small handcase, such as bagmen carry on their rounds.

‘That’s your luggage,’ said Amos with pride. ‘That wee bag’s full of samples. Ye’ll mind I took the precaution of measurin’ ye in Glasgow, so the things’ll fit. Ye’ve got a new name, Mr Brand, and I’ve taken a room for ye in the hotel on the strength of it. Ye’re Archibald McCaskie, and ye’re travellin’ for the firm o’ Todd, Sons & Brothers, of Edinburgh. Ye ken the folk? They publish wee releegious books, that ye’ve bin trying to sell for Sabbath-school prizes to the Free Kirk ministers in Skye.’

The notion amused Amos, and he relapsed into the sombre chuckle which with him did duty for a laugh.

I put my hat and waterproof in the bag and donned the bowler and the top-coat. They fitted fairly well. Likewise the cuffs and collar, though here I struck a snag, for I had lost my scarf somewhere in the Coolin, and Amos, pelican-like, had to surrender the rusty black tie which adorned his own person. It was a queer rig, and I felt like nothing on earth in it, but Amos was satisfied.

‘Mr McCaskie, sir,’ he said, ‘ye’re the very model of a publisher’s traveller. Ye’d better learn a few biographical details, which ye’ve maybe forgotten. Ye’re an Edinburgh man, but ye were some years in London, which explains the way ye speak. Ye bide at 6, Russell Street, off the Meadows, and ye’re an elder in the Nethergate U.F. Kirk. Have ye ony special taste ye could lead the crack on to, if ye’re engaged in conversation?’

I suggested the English classics.

‘And very suitable. Ye can try poalitics, too. Ye’d better be a Free-trader but convertit by Lloyd George. That’s a common case, and ye’ll need to be by-ordinar common . . . If I was you, I would daunder about here for a bit, and no arrive at your hotel till after dark. Then ye can have your supper and gang to bed. The Muirtown train leaves at half-seven in the morning . . . Na, ye can’t come with me. It wouldna do for us to be seen thegither. If I meet ye in the street I’ll never let on I know ye.’

Amos climbed into the gig and jolted off home. I went down to the shore and sat among the rocks, finishing about tea-time the remains of my provisions. In the mellow gloaming I strolled into the clachan and got a boat to put me over to the inn. It proved to be a comfortable place, with a motherly old landlady who showed me to my room and promised ham and eggs and cold salmon for supper. After a good wash, which I needed, and an honest attempt to make my clothes presentable, I descended to the meal in a coffee-room lit by a single dim parafin lamp.

The food was excellent, and, as I ate, my spirits rose. In two days I should be back in London beside Blenkiron and somewhere within a day’s journey of Mary. I could picture no scene now without thinking how Mary fitted into it. For her sake I held Biggleswick delectable, because I had seen her there. I wasn’t sure if this was love, but it was something I had never dreamed of before, something which I now hugged the thought of. It made the whole earth rosy and golden for me, and life so well worth living that I felt like a miser towards the days to come.

I had about finished supper, when I was joined by another guest. Seen in the light of that infamous lamp, he seemed a small, alert fellow, with a bushy, black moustache, and black hair parted in the middle. He had fed already and appeared to be hungering for human society.

In three minutes he had told me that he had come down from Portree and was on his way to Leith. A minute later he had whipped out a card on which I read ‘J. J. Linklater’, and in the corner the name of Hatherwick Bros. His accent betrayed that he hailed from the west.

‘I’ve been up among the distilleries,’ he informed me. ‘It’s a poor business distillin’ in these times, wi’ the teetotallers yowlin’ about the nation’s shame and the way to lose the war. I’m a temperate man mysel’, but I would think shame to spile decent folks’ business. If the Government want to stop the drink, let them buy us out. They’ve permitted us to invest good money in the trade, and they must see that we get it back. The other way will wreck public credit. That’s what I say. Supposin’ some Labour Government takes the notion that soap’s bad for the nation? Are they goin’ to shut up Port Sunlight? Or good clothes? Or lum hats? There’s no end to their daftness if they once start on that track. A lawfu’ trade’s a lawfu’ trade, says I, and it’s contrary to public policy to pit it at the mercy of wheen cranks. D’ye no agree, sir? By the way, I havena got your name?’

I told him and he rambled on.

‘We’re blenders and do a very high-class business, mostly foreign. The war’s hit us wi’ our export trade, of course, but we’re no as bad as some. What’s your line, Mr McCaskie?’

When he heard he was keenly interested.

‘D’ye say so? Ye’re from Todd’s! Man, I was in the book business mysel’, till I changed it for something a wee bit more lucrative. I was on the road for three years for Andrew Matheson. Ye ken the name — Paternoster Row — I’ve forgotten the number. I had a kind of ambition to start a book-sellin’ shop of my own and to make Linklater o’ Paisley a big name in the trade. But I got the offer from Hatherwick’s, and I was wantin’ to get married, so filthy lucre won the day. And I’m no sorry I changed. If it hadna been for this war, I would have been makin’ four figures with my salary and commissions . . . My pipe’s out. Have you one of those rare and valuable curiosities called a spunk, Mr McCaskie?’

He was a merry little grig of a man, and he babbled on, till I announced my intention of going to bed. If this was Amos’s bagman, who had been seen in company with Gresson, I understood how idle may be the suspicions of a clever man. He had probably foregathered with Gresson on the Skye boat, and wearied that saturnine soul with his cackle.

I was up betimes, paid my bill, ate a breakfast of porridge and fresh haddock, and walked the few hundred yards to the station. It was a warm, thick morning, with no sun visible, and the Skye hills misty to their base. The three coaches on the little train were nearly filled when I had bought my ticket, and I selected a third-class smoking carriage which held four soldiers returning from leave.

The train was already moving when a late passenger hurried along the platform and clambered in beside me. A cheery

‘Mornin’, Mr McCaskie,’ revealed my fellow guest at the hotel.

We jolted away from the coast up a broad glen and then on to a wide expanse of bog with big hills showing towards the north. It was a drowsy day, and in that atmosphere of shag and crowded humanity I felt my eyes closing. I had a short nap, and woke to find that Mr Linklater had changed his seat and was now beside me.

‘We’ll no get a Scotsman till Muirtown,’ he said. ‘Have ye nothing in your samples ye could give me to read?’

I had forgotten about the samples. I opened the case and found the oddest collection of little books, all in gay bindings. Some were religious, with names like *Dew of Hermon* and *Cool Siloam*; some were innocent narratives, *How Tommy saved his Pennies*, *A Missionary Child in China*, and *Little Susie and her Uncle*. There was a *Life of David Livingstone*, a child’s book on sea-shells, and a richly gilt edition of the poems of one James Montgomery. I offered the selection to Mr Linklater, who grinned and chose the *Missionary Child*. ‘It’s not the reading I’m accustomed to,’ he said. ‘I like strong meat — Hall Caine and Jack London. By the way, how d’ye square this business of yours wi’ the booksellers? When I was in Matheson’s there would have been trouble if we had dealt direct wi’ the public like you.’

The confounded fellow started to talk about the details of the book trade, of which I knew nothing. He wanted to know on what terms we sold ‘juveniles’, and what discount we gave the big wholesalers, and what class of book we put out ‘on sale’. I didn’t understand a word of his jargon, and I must have given myself away badly, for he asked me questions about firms of which I had never heard, and I had to make some kind of answer. I told myself that the donkey was harmless, and that his opinion of me mattered nothing, but as soon as I decently could I pretended to be absorbed in the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a gaudy copy of which was among the samples. It opened at the episode of Christian and Hopeful in the Enchanted Ground, and in that stuffy carriage I presently followed the example of Heedless and Too-Bold and fell sound asleep. I was awakened by the train rumbling over the points of a little moorland junction. Sunk in a pleasing lethargy, I sat with my eyes closed, and then covertly took a glance at my companion. He had abandoned the *Missionary Child* and was reading a little dun-coloured book, and marking passages with a pencil. His face was absorbed, and it was a new face, not the vacant, good-humoured look of the garrulous bagman, but something shrewd, purposeful, and formidable. I remained hunched up as if still sleeping, and tried to see what the book was. But my eyes, good as they are, could make out nothing of the text or title, except that I had a very strong impression that that book was not written in the English tongue.

I woke abruptly, and leaned over to him. Quick as lightning he slid his pencil up his sleeve and turned on me with a fatuous smile.

‘What d’ye make o’ this, Mr McCaskie? It’s a wee book I picked up at a roup along with fifty others. I paid five shillings for the lot. It looks like Gairman, but in my young days they didna teach us foreign languages.’

I took the thing and turned over the pages, trying to keep any sign of intelligence out of my face. It was German right enough, a little manual of hydrography with no publisher’s name on it. It had the look of the kind of textbook a Government department might issue to its officials.

I handed it back. ‘It’s either German or Dutch. I’m not much of a scholar, barring a little French and the Latin I got at Heriot’s Hospital . . . This is an awful slow train, Mr Linklater.’

The soldiers were playing nap, and the bagman proposed a game of cards. I remembered in time that I was an elder in the Nethergate U.F. Church and refused with some asperity. After that I shut my eyes again, for I wanted to think out this new phenomenon.

The fellow knew German — that was clear. He had also been seen in Gresson’s company. I didn’t believe he suspected me, though I suspected him profoundly. It was my business to keep strictly to my part and give him no cause to doubt me. He was clearly practising his own part on me, and I must appear to take him literally on his professions. So, presently, I woke up and engaged him in a disputatious conversation about the morality of selling strong liquors. He responded readily, and put the case for alcohol with much point and vehemence. The discussion interested the soldiers, and one of them, to show he was on Linklater’s side, produced a flask and offered him a drink. I concluded by observing morosely that the bagman had been a better man when he peddled books for Alexander Matheson, and that put the closure on the business.

That train was a record. It stopped at every station, and in the afternoon it simply got tired and sat down in the middle of a moor and reflected for an hour. I stuck my head out of the window now and then, and smelt the rooty fragrance of bogs, and when we halted on a bridge I watched the trout in the pools of the brown river. Then I slept and smoked

alternately, and began to get furiously hungry.

Once I woke to hear the soldiers discussing the war. There was an argument between a lance-corporal in the Camerons and a sapper private about some trivial incident on the Somme.

'I tell ye I was there,' said the Cameron. 'We were relievin' the Black Watch, and Fritz was shelling the road, and we didna get up to the line till one o'clock in the mornin'. Frae Frickout Circus to the south end o' the High Wood is every bit o' five mile.'

'Not abune three,' said the sapper dogmatically.

'Man, I've trampit it.'

'Same here. I took up wire every nicht for a week.'

The Cameron looked moodily round the company. 'I wish there was anither man here that kent the place. He wad bear me out. These boys are no good, for they didna join till later. I tell ye it's five mile.'

'Three,' said the sapper.

Tempers were rising, for each of the disputants felt his veracity assailed. It was too hot for a quarrel and I was so drowsy that I was heedless.

'Shut up, you fools,' I said. 'The distance is six kilometres, so you're both wrong.'

My tone was so familiar to the men that it stopped the wrangle, but it was not the tone of a publisher's traveller. Mr Linklater cocked his ears.

'What's a kilometre, Mr McCaskie?' he asked blandly.

'Multiply by five and divide by eight and you get the miles.'

I was on my guard now, and told a long story of a nephew who had been killed on the Somme, and how I had corresponded with the War Office about his case. 'Besides,' I said, 'I'm a great student o' the newspapers, and I've read all the books about the war. It's a difficult time this for us all, and if you can take a serious interest in the campaign it helps a lot. I mean working out the places on the map and reading Haig's dispatches.'

'Just so,' he said dryly, and I thought he watched me with an odd look in his eyes.

A fresh idea possessed me. This man had been in Gresson's company, he knew German, he was obviously something very different from what he professed to be. What if he were in the employ of our own Secret Service? I had appeared out of the void at the Kyle, and I had made but a poor appearance as a bagman, showing no knowledge of my own trade. I was in an area interdicted to the ordinary public; and he had good reason to keep an eye on my movements. He was going south, and so was I; clearly we must somehow part company.

'We change at Muirtown, don't we?' I asked. 'When does the train for the south leave?'

He consulted a pocket timetable. 'Ten-thirty-three. There's generally four hours to wait, for we're due in at six-fifteen. But this auld hearse will be lucky if it's in by nine.'

His forecast was correct. We rumbled out of the hills into haughlands and caught a glimpse of the North Sea. Then we were hung up while a long goods train passed down the line. It was almost dark when at last we crawled into Muirtown station and disgorged our load of hot and weary soldiery.

I bade an ostentatious farewell to Linklater. 'Very pleased to have met you. I'll see you later on the Edinburgh train. I'm for a walk to stretch my legs, and a bite o' supper.' I was very determined that the ten-thirty for the south should leave without me.

My notion was to get a bed and a meal in some secluded inn, and walk out next morning and pick up a slow train down the line. Linklater had disappeared towards the guard's van to find his luggage, and the soldiers were sitting on their packs with that air of being utterly and finally lost and neglected which characterizes the British fighting-man on a journey. I gave up my ticket and, since I had come off a northern train, walked unhindered into the town.

It was market night, and the streets were crowded. Blue-jackets from the Fleet, country-folk in to shop, and every kind of military detail thronged the pavements. Fish-hawkers were crying their wares, and there was a tatterdemalion piper making the night hideous at a corner. I took a tortuous route and finally fixed on a modest-looking public-house in a back street. When I inquired for a room I could find no one in authority, but a slatternly girl informed me that there was one vacant bed, and that I could have ham and eggs in the bar. So, after hitting my head violently against a cross-beam, I

stumbled down some steps and entered a frowsty little place smelling of spilt beer and stale tobacco.

The promised ham and eggs proved impossible — there were no eggs to be had in Muirtown that night — but I was given cold mutton and a pint of indifferent ale. There was nobody in the place but two farmers drinking hot whisky and water and discussing with sombre interest the rise in the price of feeding-stuffs. I ate my supper, and was just preparing to find the whereabouts of my bedroom when through the street door there entered a dozen soldiers.

In a second the quiet place became a babel. The men were strictly sober; but they were in that temper of friendliness which demands a libation of some kind. One was prepared to stand treat; he was the leader of the lot, and it was to celebrate the end of his leave that he was entertaining his pals. From where I sat I could not see him, but his voice was dominant. 'What's your fancy, jock? Beer for you, Andra? A pint and a dram for me. This is better than vongblong and vongrooge, Davie. Man, when I'm sittin' in those estamints, as they ca' them, I often long for a guid Scots public.'

The voice was familiar. I shifted my seat to get a view of the speaker, and then I hastily drew back. It was the Scots Fusilier I had clipped on the jaw in defending Gresson after the Glasgow meeting.

But by a strange fatality he had caught sight of me.

'Whae's that i' the corner?' he cried, leaving the bar to stare at me. Now it is a queer thing, but if you have once fought with a man, though only for a few seconds, you remember his face, and the scrap in Glasgow had been under a lamp. The jock recognized me well enough.

'By God!' he cried, 'if this is no a bit o' luck! Boys, here's the man I feucht wi' in Glesca. Ye mind I telled ye about it. He laid me oot, and it's my turn to do the same wi' him. I had a notion I was gaun to mak' a nicht o't. There's naebody can hit Geordie Hamilton without Geordie gettin' his ain back some day. Get up, man, for I'm gaun to knock the heid off ye.'

I duly got up, and with the best composure I could muster looked him in the face.

'You're mistaken, my friend. I never clapped eyes on you before, and I never was in Glasgow in my life.'

'That's a damned lee,' said the Fusilier. 'Ye're the man, and if ye're no, ye're like enough him to need a hidin!'

'Confound your nonsense!' I said. 'I've no quarrel with you, and I've better things to do than be scrapping with a stranger in a public-house.'

'Have ye sae? Well, I'll learn ye better. I'm gaun to hit ye, and then ye'll hae to fecht whether ye want it or no. Tam, haud my jacket, and see that my drink's no skailed.'

This was an infernal nuisance, for a row here would bring in the police, and my dubious position would be laid bare. I thought of putting up a fight, for I was certain I could lay out the jock a second time, but the worst of that was that I did not know where the thing would end. I might have to fight the lot of them, and that meant a noble public shindy. I did my best to speak my opponent fair. I said we were all good friends and offered to stand drinks for the party. But the Fusilier's blood was up and he was spoiling for a row, ably abetted by his comrades. He had his tunic off now and was stamping in front of me with doubled fists.

I did the best thing I could think of in the circumstances. My seat was close to the steps which led to the other part of the inn. I grabbed my hat, darted up them, and before they realized what I was doing had bolted the door behind me. I could hear pandemonium break loose in the bar.

I slipped down a dark passage to another which ran at right angles to it, and which seemed to connect the street door of the inn itself with the back premises. I could hear voices in the little hall, and that stopped me short.

One of them was Linklater's, but he was not talking as Linklater had talked. He was speaking educated English. I heard another with a Scots accent, which I took to be the landlord's, and a third which sounded like some superior sort of constable's, very prompt and official. I heard one phrase, too, from Linklater — 'He calls himself McCaskie.' Then they stopped, for the turmoil from the bar had reached the front door. The Fusilier and his friends were looking for me by the other entrance.

The attention of the men in the hall was distracted, and that gave me a chance. There was nothing for it but the back door. I slipped through it into a courtyard and almost tumbled over a tub of water. I planted the thing so that anyone coming that way would fall over it. A door led me into an empty stable, and from that into a lane. It was all absurdly easy, but as I started down the lane I heard a mighty row and the sound of angry voices. Someone had gone into the tub and I hoped it was Linklater. I had taken a liking to the Fusilier jock.

There was the beginning of a moon somewhere, but that lane was very dark. I ran to the left, for on the right it looked like a cul-de-sac. This brought me into a quiet road of two-storied cottages which showed at one end the lights of a street. So I took the other way, for I wasn't going to have the whole population of Muirtown on the hue-and-cry after me. I came into a country lane, and I also came into the van of the pursuit, which must have taken a short cut. They shouted when they saw me, but I had a small start, and legged it down that road in the belief that I was making for open country.

That was where I was wrong. The road took me round to the other side of the town, and just when I was beginning to think I had a fair chance I saw before me the lights of a signal-box and a little to the left of it the lights of the station. In half an hour's time the Edinburgh train would be leaving, but I had made that impossible. Behind me I could hear the pursuers, giving tongue like hound puppies, for they had attracted some pretty drunken gentlemen to their party. I was badly puzzled where to turn, when I noticed outside the station a long line of blurred lights, which could only mean a train with the carriage blinds down. It had an engine attached and seemed to be waiting for the addition of a couple of trucks to start. It was a wild chance, but the only one I saw. I scrambled across a piece of waste ground, climbed an embankment and found myself on the metals. I ducked under the couplings and got on the far side of the train, away from the enemy.

Then simultaneously two things happened. I heard the yells of my pursuers a dozen yards off, and the train jolted into motion. I jumped on the footboard, and looked into an open window. The compartment was packed with troops, six a side and two men sitting on the floor, and the door was locked. I dived headforemost through the window and landed on the neck of a weary warrior who had just dropped off to sleep.

While I was falling I made up my mind on my conduct. I must be intoxicated, for I knew the infinite sympathy of the British soldier towards those thus overtaken. They pulled me to my feet, and the man I had descended on rubbed his skull and blasphemously demanded explanations.

'Gen'lmen,' I hiccupped, 'I 'pologize. I was late for this bl-blighted train and I mus' be in E'inburgh 'morrow or I'll get the sack. I 'pologize. If I've hurt my friend's head, I'll kiss it and make it well.'

At this there was a great laugh. 'Ye'd better accept, Pete,' said one. 'It's the first time anybody ever offered to kiss your ugly heid.'

A man asked me who I was, and I appeared to be searching for a card-case.

'Losht,' I groaned. 'Losht, and so's my wee bag and I've bashed my po' hat. I'm an awful sight, gen'lmen — an awful warning to be in time for trains. I'm John Johnstone, managing clerk to Messrs Watters, Brown & Elph'stone, 923 Charl'tte Street, E'inburgh. I've been up north seein' my mamma.'

'Ye should be in France,' said one man.

'Wish't I was, but they wouldn't let me. "Mr Johnstone," they said, "ye're no dam good. Ye've varicose veins and a bad heart," they said. So I says, "Good mornin', gen'lmen. Don't blame me if the country's ru'ned". That's what I said.'

I had by this time occupied the only remaining space left on the floor. With the philosophy of their race the men had accepted my presence, and were turning again to their own talk. The train had got up speed, and as I judged it to be a special of some kind I looked for few stoppings. Moreover it was not a corridor carriage, but one of the old-fashioned kind, so I was safe for a time from the unwelcome attention of conductors. I stretched my legs below the seat, rested my head against the knees of a brawny gunner, and settled down to make the best of it.

My reflections were not pleasant. I had got down too far below the surface, and had the naked feeling you get in a dream when you think you have gone to the theatre in your nightgown. I had had three names in two days, and as many characters. I felt as if I had no home or position anywhere, and was only a stray dog with everybody's hand and foot against me. It was an ugly sensation, and it was not redeemed by any acute fear or any knowledge of being mixed up in some desperate drama. I knew I could easily go on to Edinburgh, and when the police made trouble, as they would, a wire to Scotland Yard would settle matters in a couple of hours. There wasn't a suspicion of bodily danger to restore my dignity. The worst that could happen would be that Ivery would hear of my being befriended by the authorities, and the part I had settled to play would be impossible. He would certainly hear. I had the greatest respect for his intelligence service.

Yet that was bad enough. So far I had done well. I had put Gresson off the scent. I had found out what Bullivant wanted to know, and I had only to return unostentatiously to London to have won out on the game. I told myself all that, but it didn't cheer my spirits. I was feeling mean and hunted and very cold about the feet.

But I have a tough knuckle of obstinacy in me which makes me unwilling to give up a thing till I am fairly choked off it.

The chances were badly against me. The Scottish police were actively interested in my movements and would be ready to welcome me at my journey's end. I had ruined my hat, and my clothes, as Amos had observed, were not respectable. I had got rid of a four-days' beard the night before, but had cut myself in the process, and what with my weather-beaten face and tangled hair looked liker a tinker than a decent bagman. I thought with longing of my portmanteau in the Pentland Hotel, Edinburgh, and the neat blue serge suit and the clean linen that reposed in it. It was no case for a subtle game, for I held no cards. Still I was determined not to chuck in my hand till I was forced to. If the train stopped anywhere I would get out, and trust to my own wits and the standing luck of the British Army for the rest.

The chance came just after dawn, when we halted at a little junction. I got up yawning and tried to open the door, till I remembered it was locked. Thereupon I stuck my legs out of the window on the side away from the platform, and was immediately seized upon by a sleepy Seaforth who thought I contemplated suicide.

'Let me go,' I said. 'I'll be back in a jiffy.'

'Let him gang, jock,' said another voice. 'Ye ken what a man's like when he's been on the bash. The cauld air'll sober him.'

I was released, and after some gymnastics dropped on the metals and made my way round the rear of the train. As I clambered on the platform it began to move, and a face looked out of one of the back carriages. It was Linklater and he recognized me. He tried to get out, but the door was promptly slammed by an indignant porter. I heard him protest, and he kept his head out till the train went round the curve. That cooked my goose all right. He would wire to the police from the next station.

Meantime in that clean, bare, chilly place there was only one traveller. He was a slim young man, with a kit-bag and a gun-case. His clothes were beautiful, a green Homburg hat, a smart green tweed overcoat, and boots as brightly polished as a horse chestnut. I caught his profile as he gave up his ticket and to my amazement I recognized it.

The station-master looked askance at me as I presented myself, dilapidated and dishevelled, to the official gaze. I tried to speak in a tone of authority.

'Who is the man who has just gone out?'

'Whaur's your ticket?'

'I had no time to get one at Muirtown, and as you see I have left my luggage behind me. Take it out of that pound and I'll come back for the change. I want to know if that was Sir Archibald Roylance.'

He looked suspiciously at the note. 'I think that's the name. He's a captain up at the Fleein' School. What was ye wantin' with him?'

I charged through the booking-office and found my man about to enter a big grey motor-car.

'Archie,' I cried and beat him on the shoulders.

He turned round sharply. 'What the devil —! Who are you?' And then recognition crept into his face and he gave a joyous shout. 'My holy aunt! The General disguised as Charlie Chaplin! Can I drive you anywhere, sir?'



CHAPTER NINE

I TAKE THE WINGS OF A DOVE

‘Drive me somewhere to breakfast, Archie,’ I said, ‘for I’m perishing hungry.’

He and I got into the tonneau, and the driver swung us out of the station road up a long incline of hill. Sir Archie had been one of my subalterns in the old Lennox Highlanders, and had left us before the Somme to join the Flying Corps. I had heard that he had got his wings and had done well before Arras, and was now training pilots at home. He had been a light-hearted youth, who had endured a good deal of rough-tonguing from me for his sins of omission. But it was the casual class of lad I was looking for now.

I saw him steal amused glances at my appearance.

‘Been seein’ a bit of life, sir?’ he inquired respectfully.

‘I’m being hunted by the police,’ I said.

‘Dirty dogs! But don’t worry, sir; we’ll get you off all right. I’ve been in the same fix myself. You can lie snug in my little log hut, for that old image Gibbons won’t blab. Or, tell you what, I’ve got an aunt who lives near here and she’s a bit of a sportsman. You can hide in her moated grange till the bobbies get tired.’

I think it was Archie’s calm acceptance of my position as natural and becoming that restored my good temper. He was far too well bred to ask what crime I had committed, and I didn’t propose to enlighten him much. But as we swung up the moorland road I let him know that I was serving the Government, but that it was necessary that I should appear to be unauthenticated and that therefore I must dodge the police. He whistled his appreciation.

‘Gad, that’s a deep game. Sort of camouflage? Speaking from my experience it is easy to overdo that kind of stunt. When I was at Misieux the French started out to camouflage the caravans where they keep their pigeons, and they did it so damned well that the poor little birds couldn’t hit ’em off, and spent the night out.’

We entered the white gates of a big aerodrome, skirted a forest of tents and huts, and drew up at a shanty on the far confines of the place. The hour was half past four, and the world was still asleep. Archie nodded towards one of the hangars, from the mouth of which projected the propeller end of an aeroplane.

‘I’m by way of flyin’ that bus down to Farnton tomorrow,’ he remarked. ‘It’s the new Shark–Gladas. Got a mouth like a tree.’

An idea flashed into my mind.

‘You’re going this morning,’ I said.

‘How did you know?’ he exclaimed. ‘I’m due to go today, but the grouse up in Caithness wanted shootin’ so badly that I decided to wangle another day’s leave. They can’t expect a man to start for the south of England when he’s just off a frowsy journey.’

‘All the same you’re going to be a stout fellow and start in two hours’ time. And you’re going to take me with you.’

He stared blankly, and then burst into a roar of laughter. ‘You’re the man to go tiger-shootin’ with. But what price my commandant? He’s not a bad chap, but a trifle shaggy about the fetlocks. He won’t appreciate the joke.’

‘He needn’t know. He mustn’t know. This is an affair between you and me till it’s finished. I promise you I’ll make it all square with the Flying Corps. Get me down to Farnton before evening, and you’ll have done a good piece of work for the country.’

‘Right-o! Let’s have a tub and a bit of breakfast, and then I’m your man. I’ll tell them to get the bus ready.’

In Archie’s bedroom I washed and shaved and borrowed a green tweed cap and a brand-new Aquascutum. The latter covered the deficiencies of my raiment, and when I commandeered a pair of gloves I felt almost respectable. Gibbons, who seemed to be a jack-of-all-trades, cooked us some bacon and an omelette, and as he ate Archie yarned. In the battalion his conversation had been mostly of race-meetings and the forsaken delights of town, but now he had forgotten all that, and, like every good airman I have ever known, wallowed enthusiastically in ‘shop’. I have a deep respect for the Flying Corps, but it is apt to change its jargon every month, and its conversation is hard for the layman to follow. He was desperately

keen about the war, which he saw wholly from the viewpoint of the air. Arras to him was over before the infantry crossed the top, and the tough bit of the Somme was October, not September. He calculated that the big air-fighting had not come along yet, and all he hoped for was to be allowed out to France to have his share in it. Like all good airmen, too, he was very modest about himself. 'I've done a bit of steeple-chasin' and huntin' and I've good hands for a horse, so I can handle a bus fairly well. It's all a matter of hands, you know. There ain't half the risk of the infantry down below you, and a million times the fun. Jolly glad I changed, sir.'

We talked of Peter, and he put him about top. Voss, he thought, was the only Boche that could compare with him, for he hadn't made up his mind about Lensch. The Frenchman Guynemer he ranked high, but in a different way. I remember he had no respect for Richthofen and his celebrated circus.

At six sharp we were ready to go. A couple of mechanics had got out the machine, and Archie put on his coat and gloves and climbed into the pilot's seat, while I squeezed in behind in the observer's place. The aerodrome was waking up, but I saw no officers about. We were scarcely seated when Gibbons called our attention to a motor-car on the road, and presently we heard a shout and saw men waving in our direction.

'Better get off, my lad,' I said. 'These look like my friends.'

The engine started and the mechanics stood clear. As we taxied over the turf I looked back and saw several figures running in our direction. The next second we had left the bumpy earth for the smooth highroad of the air.

I had flown several dozen times before, generally over the enemy lines when I wanted to see for myself how the land lay. Then we had flown low, and been nicely dusted by the Hun Archies, not to speak of an occasional machine-gun. But never till that hour had I realized the joy of a straight flight in a swift plane in perfect weather. Archie didn't lose time. Soon the hangars behind looked like a child's toys, and the world ran away from us till it seemed like a great golden bowl spilling over with the quintessence of light. The air was cold and my hands numbed, but I never felt them. As we throbbed and tore southward, sometimes bumping in eddies, sometimes swimming evenly in a stream of motionless ether, my head and heart grew as light as a boy's. I forgot all about the vexations of my job and saw only its joyful comedy. I didn't think that anything on earth could worry me again. Far to the left was a wedge of silver and beside it a cluster of toy houses. That must be Edinburgh, where reposed my portmanteau, and where a most efficient police force was now inquiring for me. At the thought I laughed so loud that Archie must have heard me. He turned round, saw my grinning face, and grinned back. Then he signalled to me to strap myself in. I obeyed, and he proceeded to practise 'stunts'— the loop, the spinning nose-dive, and others I didn't know the names of. It was glorious fun, and he handled his machine as a good rider coaxes a nervous horse over a stiff hurdle. He had that extra something in his blood that makes the great pilot.

Presently the chessboard of green and brown had changed to a deep purple with faint silvery lines like veins in a rock. We were crossing the Border hills, the place where I had legged it for weary days when I was mixed up in the Black Stone business. What a marvellous element was this air, which took one far above the fatigues of humanity! Archie had done well to change. Peter had been the wise man. I felt a tremendous pity for my old friend hobbling about a German prison-yard, when he had once flown a hawk. I reflected that I had wasted my life hitherto. And then I remembered that all this glory had only one use in war and that was to help the muddy British infantryman to down his Hun opponent. He was the fellow, after all, that decided battles, and the thought comforted me.

A great exhilaration is often the precursor of disaster, and mine was to have a sudden downfall. It was getting on for noon and we were well into England — I guessed from the rivers we had passed that we were somewhere in the north of Yorkshire — when the machine began to make odd sounds, and we bumped in perfectly calm patches of air. We dived and then climbed, but the confounded thing kept sputtering. Archie passed back a slip of paper on which he had scribbled: 'Engine conked. Must land at Micklegill. Very sorry.' So we dropped to a lower elevation where we could see clearly the houses and roads and the long swelling ridges of a moorland country. I could never have found my way about, but Archie's practised eye knew every landmark. We were trundling along very slowly now, and even I was soon able to pick up the hangars of a big aerodrome.

We made Micklegill, but only by the skin of our teeth. We were so low that the smoky chimneys of the city of Bradfield seven miles to the east were half hidden by a ridge of down. Archie achieved a clever descent in the lee of a belt of firs, and got out full of imprecations against the Gladys engine. 'I'll go up to the camp and report,' he said, 'and send mechanics down to tinker this darned gramophone. You'd better go for a walk, sir. I don't want to answer questions about you till

we're ready to start. I reckon it'll be an hour's job.'

The cheerfulness I had acquired in the upper air still filled me. I sat down in a ditch, as merry as a sand-boy, and lit a pipe. I was possessed by a boyish spirit of casual adventure, and waited on the next turn of fortune's wheel with only a pleasant amusement.

That turn was not long in coming. Archie appeared very breathless.

'Look here, sir, there's the deuce of a row up there. They've been wirin' about you all over the country, and they know you're with me. They've got the police, and they'll have you in five minutes if you don't leg it. I lied like billy-o and said I had never heard of you, but they're comin' to see for themselves. For God's sake get off . . . You'd better keep in cover down that hollow and round the back of these trees. I'll stay here and try to brazen it out. I'll get strafed to blazes anyhow . . . I hope you'll get me out of the scrape, sir.'

'Don't you worry, my lad,' I said. 'I'll make it all square when I get back to town. I'll make for Bradfield, for this place is a bit conspicuous. Goodbye, Archie. You're a good chap and I'll see you don't suffer.'

I started off down the hollow of the moor, trying to make speed atone for lack of strategy, for it was hard to know how much my pursuers commanded from that higher ground. They must have seen me, for I heard whistles blown and men's cries. I struck a road, crossed it, and passed a ridge from which I had a view of Bradfield six miles off. And as I ran I began to reflect that this kind of chase could not last long. They were bound to round me up in the next half-hour unless I could puzzle them. But in that bare green place there was no cover, and it looked as if my chances were pretty much those of a hare coursed by a good greyhound on a naked moor.

Suddenly from just in front of me came a familiar sound. It was the roar of guns — the slam of field-batteries and the boom of small howitzers. I wondered if I had gone off my head. As I plodded on the rattle of machine-guns was added, and over the ridge before me I saw the dust and fumes of bursting shells. I concluded that I was not mad, and that therefore the Germans must have landed. I crawled up the last slope, quite forgetting the pursuit behind me.

And then I'm blessed if I did not look down on a veritable battle.

There were two sets of trenches with barbed wire and all the fixings, one set filled with troops and the other empty. On these latter shells were bursting, but there was no sign of life in them. In the other lines there seemed the better part of two brigades, and the first trench was stiff with bayonets. My first thought was that Home Forces had gone dotty, for this kind of show could have no sort of training value. And then I saw other things — cameras and camera-men on platforms on the flanks, and men with megaphones behind them on wooden scaffoldings. One of the megaphones was going full blast all the time.

I saw the meaning of the performance at last. Some movie-merchant had got a graft with the Government, and troops had been turned out to make a war film. It occurred to me that if I were mixed up in that push I might get the cover I was looking for. I scurried down the hill to the nearest camera-man.

As I ran, the first wave of troops went over the top. They did it uncommon well, for they entered into the spirit of the thing, and went over with grim faces and that slow, purposeful lope that I had seen in my own fellows at Arras. Smoke grenades burst among them, and now and then some resourceful mountebank would roll over. Altogether it was about the best show I have ever seen. The cameras clicked, the guns banged, a background of boy scouts applauded, and the dust rose in billows to the sky.

But all the same something was wrong. I could imagine that this kind of business took a good deal of planning from the point of view of the movie-merchant, for his purpose was not the same as that of the officer in command. You know how a photographer finicks about and is dissatisfied with a pose that seems all right to his sitter. I should have thought the spectacle enough to get any cinema audience off their feet, but the man on the scaffolding near me judged differently. He made his megaphone boom like the swan-song of a dying buffalo. He wanted to change something and didn't know how to do it. He hopped on one leg; he took the megaphone from his mouth to curse; he waved it like a banner and yelled at some opposite number on the other flank. And then his patience forsook him and he skipped down the ladder, dropping his megaphone, past the camera-men, on to the battlefield.

That was his undoing. He got in the way of the second wave and was swallowed up like a leaf in a torrent. For a moment I saw a red face and a loud-checked suit, and the rest was silence. He was carried on over the hill, or rolled into an enemy trench, but anyhow he was lost to my ken.

I bagged his megaphone and hopped up the steps to the platform. At last I saw a chance of first-class cover, for with Archie's coat and cap I made a very good appearance as a movie-merchant. Two waves had gone over the top, and the cinema-men, working like beavers, had filmed the lot. But there was still a fair amount of troops to play with, and I determined to tangle up that outfit so that the fellows who were after me would have better things to think about.

My advantage was that I knew how to command men. I could see that my opposite number with the megaphone was helpless, for the mistake which had swept my man into a shell-hole had reduced him to impotence. The troops seemed to be mainly in charge of N.C.O.s (I could imagine that the officers would try to shirk this business), and an N.C.O. is the most literal creature on earth. So with my megaphone I proceeded to change the battle order.

I brought up the third wave to the front trenches. In about three minutes the men had recognized the professional touch and were moving smartly to my orders. They thought it was part of the show, and the obedient cameras clicked at everything that came into their orbit. My aim was to deploy the troops on too narrow a front so that they were bound to fan outward, and I had to be quick about it, for I didn't know when the hapless movie-merchant might be retrieved from the battle-field and dispute my authority.

It takes a long time to straighten a thing out, but it does not take long to tangle it, especially when the thing is so delicate a machine as disciplined troops. In about eight minutes I had produced chaos. The flanks spread out, in spite of all the shepherding of the N.C.O.s, and the fringe engulfed the photographers. The cameras on their little platforms went down like ninepins. It was solemn to see the startled face of a photographer, taken unawares, supplicating the purposeful infantry, before he was swept off his feet into speechlessness.

It was no place for me to linger in, so I chucked away the megaphone and got mixed up with the tail of the third wave. I was swept on and came to anchor in the enemy trenches, where I found, as I expected, my profane and breathless predecessor, the movie-merchant. I had nothing to say to him, so I stuck to the trench till it ended against the slope of the hill.

On that flank, delirious with excitement, stood a knot of boy scouts. My business was to get to Bradfield as quick as my legs would take me, and as inconspicuously as the gods would permit. Unhappily I was far too great an object of interest to that nursery of heroes. Every boy scout is an amateur detective and hungry for knowledge. I was followed by several, who plied me with questions, and were told that I was off to Bradfield to hurry up part of the cinema outfit. It sounded lame enough, for that cinema outfit was already past praying for.

We reached the road and against a stone wall stood several bicycles. I selected one and prepared to mount.

'That's Mr Emmott's machine,' said one boy sharply. 'He told me to keep an eye on it.'

'I must borrow it, sonny,' I said. 'Mr Emmott's my very good friend and won't object.'

From the place where we stood I overlooked the back of the battle-field and could see an anxious congress of officers. I could see others, too, whose appearance I did not like. They had not been there when I operated on the megaphone. They must have come downhill from the aerodrome and in all likelihood were the pursuers I had avoided. The exhilaration which I had won in the air and which had carried me into the tomfoolery of the past half-hour was ebbing. I had the hunted feeling once more, and grew middle-aged and cautious. I had a baddish record for the day, what with getting Archie into a scrape and busting up an official cinema show — neither consistent with the duties of a brigadier-general. Besides, I had still to get to London.

I had not gone two hundred yards down the road when a boy scout, pedalling furiously, came up abreast me.

'Colonel Edgeworth wants to see you,' he panted. 'You're to come back at once.'

'Tell him I can't wait now,' I said. 'I'll pay my respects to him in an hour.'

'He said you were to come at once,' said the faithful messenger. 'He's in an awful temper with you, and he's got bobbies with him.'

I put on pace and left the boy behind. I reckoned I had the better part of two miles' start and could beat anything except petrol. But my enemies were bound to have cars, so I had better get off the road as soon as possible. I coasted down a long hill to a bridge which spanned a small discoloured stream that flowed in a wooded glen. There was nobody for the moment on the hill behind me, so I slipped into the covert, shoved the bicycle under the bridge, and hid Archie's aquascutum in a bramble thicket. I was now in my own disreputable tweeds and I hoped that the shedding of my most conspicuous garment would puzzle my pursuers if they should catch up with me.

But this I was determined they should not do. I made good going down that stream and out into a lane which led from the downs to the market-gardens round the city. I thanked Heaven I had got rid of the aquascutum, for the August afternoon was warm and my pace was not leisurely. When I was in secluded ground I ran, and when anyone was in sight I walked smartly.

As I went I reflected that Bradfield would see the end of my adventures. The police knew that I was there and would watch the stations and hunt me down if I lingered in the place. I knew no one there and had no chance of getting an effective disguise. Indeed I very soon began to wonder if I should get even as far as the streets. For at the moment when I had got a lift on the back of a fishmonger's cart and was screened by its flapping canvas, two figures passed on motor-bicycles, and one of them was the inquisitive boy scout. The main road from the aerodrome was probably now being patrolled by motor-cars. It looked as if there would be a degrading arrest in one of the suburbs.

The fish-cart, helped by half a crown to the driver, took me past the outlying small-villadom, between long lines of workmen's houses, to narrow cobbled lanes and the purlieus of great factories. As soon as I saw the streets well crowded I got out and walked. In my old clothes I must have appeared like some second-class bookie or seedy horse-coper. The only respectable thing I had about me was my gold watch. I looked at the time and found it half past five.

I wanted food and was casting about for an eating-house when I heard the purr of a motor-cycle and across the road saw the intelligent boy scout. He saw me, too, and put on the brake with a sharpness which caused him to skid and all but come to grief under the wheels of a wool-wagon. That gave me time to efface myself by darting up a side street. I had an unpleasant sense that I was about to be trapped, for in a place I knew nothing of I had not a chance to use my wits.

I remember trying feverishly to think, and I suppose that my preoccupation made me careless. I was now in a veritable slum, and when I put my hand to my vest pocket I found that my watch had gone. That put the top stone on my depression. The reaction from the wild burnout of the forenoon had left me very cold about the feet. I was getting into the under-world again and there was no chance of a second Archie Roylance turning up to rescue me. I remember yet the sour smell of the factories and the mist of smoke in the evening air. It is a smell I have never met since without a sort of dulling of spirit.

Presently I came out into a market-place. Whistles were blowing, and there was a great hurrying of people back from the mills. The crowd gave me a momentary sense of security, and I was just about to inquire my way to the railway station when someone jostled my arm.

A rough-looking fellow in mechanic's clothes was beside me.

'Mate,' he whispered. 'I've got summat o' yours here.' And to my amazement he slipped my watch into my hand.

'It was took by mistake. We're friends o' yours. You're right enough if you do what I tell you. There's a peeler over there got his eye on you. Follow me and I'll get you off.'

I didn't much like the man's looks, but I had no choice, and anyhow he had given me back my watch. He sidled into an alley between tall houses and I sidled after him. Then he took to his heels, and led me a twisting course through smelly courts into a tanyard and then by a narrow lane to the back-quarters of a factory. Twice we doubled back, and once we climbed a wall and followed the bank of a blue-black stream with a filthy scum on it. Then we got into a very mean quarter of the town, and emerged in a dingy garden, strewn with tin cans and broken flowerpots. By a back door we entered one of the cottages and my guide very carefully locked it behind him.

He lit the gas and drew the blinds in a small parlour and looked at me long and quizzically. He spoke now in an educated voice.

'I ask no questions,' he said, 'but it's my business to put my services at your disposal. You carry the passport.'

I stared at him, and he pulled out his watch and showed a white-and-purple cross inside the lid.

'I don't defend all the people we employ,' he said, grinning. 'Men's morals are not always as good as their patriotism. One of them pinched your watch, and when he saw what was inside it he reported to me. We soon picked up your trail, and observed you were in a bit of trouble. As I say, I ask no questions. What can we do for you?'

'I want to get to London without any questions asked. They're looking for me in my present rig, so I've got to change it.'

'That's easy enough,' he said. 'Make yourself comfortable for a little and I'll fix you up. The night train goes at eleven-thirty. . . . You'll find cigars in the cupboard and there's this week's *Critic* on that table. It's got a good article on Conrad, if you care for such things.'

I helped myself to a cigar and spent a profitable half-hour reading about the vices of the British Government. Then my host returned and bade me ascend to his bedroom. 'You're Private Henry Tomkins of the 12th Gloucesters, and you'll find your clothes ready for you. I'll send on your present togs if you give me an address.'

I did as I was bid, and presently emerged in the uniform of a British private, complete down to the shapeless boots and the dropsical puttees. Then my friend took me in hand and finished the transformation. He started on my hair with scissors and arranged a lock which, when well oiled, curled over my forehead. My hands were hard and rough and only needed some grubbiness and hacking about the nails to pass muster. With my cap on the side of my head, a pack on my back, a service rifle in my hands, and my pockets bursting with penny picture papers, I was the very model of the British soldier returning from leave. I had also a packet of Woodbine cigarettes and a hunch of bread-and-cheese for the journey. And I had a railway warrant made out in my name for London.

Then my friend gave me supper — bread and cold meat and a bottle of Bass, which I wolfed savagely, for I had had nothing since breakfast. He was a curious fellow, as discreet as a tombstone, very ready to speak about general subjects, but never once coming near the intimate business which had linked him and me and Heaven knew how many others by means of a little purple-and-white cross in a watch-case. I remember we talked about the topics that used to be popular at Biggleswick — the big political things that begin with capital letters. He took Amos's view of the soundness of the British working-man, but he said something which made me think. He was convinced that there was a tremendous lot of German spy work about, and that most of the practitioners were innocent. 'The ordinary Briton doesn't run to treason, but he's not very bright. A clever man in that kind of game can make better use of a fool than a rogue.'

As he saw me off he gave me a piece of advice. 'Get out of these clothes as soon as you reach London. Private Tomkins will frank you out of Bradfield, but it mightn't be a healthy alias in the metropolis.'

At eleven-thirty I was safe in the train, talking the jargon of the returning soldier with half a dozen of my own type in a smoky third-class carriage. I had been lucky in my escape, for at the station entrance and on the platform I had noticed several men with the unmistakable look of plainclothes police. Also — though this may have been my fancy — I thought I caught in the crowd a glimpse of the bagman who had called himself Linklater.



CHAPTER TEN

THE ADVANTAGES OF AN AIR RAID

The train was abominably late. It was due at eight-twenty-seven, but it was nearly ten when we reached St Pancras. I had resolved to go straight to my rooms in Westminster, buying on the way a cap and waterproof to conceal my uniform should anyone be near my door on my arrival. Then I would ring up Blenkiron and tell him all my adventures. I breakfasted at a coffee-stall, left my pack and rifle in the cloak-room, and walked out into the clear sunny morning.

I was feeling very pleased with myself. Looking back on my madcap journey, I seemed to have had an amazing run of luck and to be entitled to a little credit too. I told myself that persistence always pays and that nobody is beaten till he is dead. All Blenkiron's instructions had been faithfully carried out. I had found Ivery's post office. I had laid the lines of our own special communications with the enemy, and so far as I could see I had left no clue behind me. Ivery and Gresson took me for a well-meaning nincompoop. It was true that I had aroused profound suspicion in the breasts of the Scottish police. But that mattered nothing, for Cornelius Brand, the suspect, would presently disappear, and there was nothing against that rising soldier, Brigadier-General Richard Hannay, who would soon be on his way to France. After all this piece of service had not been so very unpleasant. I laughed when I remembered my grim forebodings in Gloucestershire. Bullivant had said it would be damnably risky in the long run, but here was the end and I had never been in danger of anything worse than making a fool of myself.

I remember that, as I made my way through Bloomsbury, I was not thinking so much of my triumphant report to Blenkiron as of my speedy return to the Front. Soon I would be with my beloved brigade again. I had missed Messines and the first part of Third Ypres, but the battle was still going on, and I had yet a chance. I might get a division, for there had been talk of that before I left. I knew the Army Commander thought a lot of me. But on the whole I hoped I would be left with the brigade. After all I was an amateur soldier, and I wasn't certain of my powers with a bigger command.

In Charing Cross Road I thought of Mary, and the brigade seemed suddenly less attractive. I hoped the war wouldn't last much longer, though with Russia heading straight for the devil I didn't know how it was going to stop very soon. I was determined to see Mary before I left, and I had a good excuse, for I had taken my orders from her. The prospect entranced me, and I was mooning along in a happy dream, when I collided violently with an agitated citizen.

Then I realized that something very odd was happening.

There was a dull sound like the popping of the corks of flat soda-water bottles. There was a humming, too, from very far up in the skies. People in the street were either staring at the heavens or running wildly for shelter. A motor-bus in front of me emptied its contents in a twinkling; a taxi pulled up with a jar and the driver and fare dived into a second-hand bookshop. It took me a moment or two to realize the meaning of it all, and I had scarcely done this when I got a very practical proof. A hundred yards away a bomb fell on a street island, shivering every window-pane in a wide radius, and sending splinters of stone flying about my head. I did what I had done a hundred times before at the Front, and dropped flat on my face.

The man who says he doesn't mind being bombed or shelled is either a liar or a maniac. This London air raid seemed to me a singularly unpleasant business. I think it was the sight of the decent civilized life around one and the orderly streets, for what was perfectly natural in a rubble-heap like Ypres or Arras seemed an outrage here. I remember once being in billets in a Flanders village where I had the Maire's house and sat in a room upholstered in cut velvet, with wax flowers on the mantelpiece and oil paintings of three generations on the walls. The Boche took it into his head to shell the place with a long-range naval gun, and I simply loathed it. It was horrible to have dust and splinters blown into that snug, homely room, whereas if I had been in a ruined barn I wouldn't have given the thing two thoughts. In the same way bombs dropping in central London seemed a grotesque indecency. I hated to see plump citizens with wild eyes, and nursemaids with scared children, and miserable women scuttling like rabbits in a warren.

The drone grew louder, and, looking up, I could see the enemy planes flying in a beautiful formation, very leisurely as it seemed, with all London at their mercy. Another bomb fell to the right, and presently bits of our own shrapnel were

clattering viciously around me. I thought it about time to take cover, and ran shamelessly for the best place I could see, which was a Tube station. Five minutes before the street had been crowded; now I left behind me a desert dotted with one bus and three empty taxicabs.

I found the Tube entrance filled with excited humanity. One stout lady had fainted, and a nurse had become hysterical, but on the whole people were behaving well. Oddly enough they did not seem inclined to go down the stairs to the complete security of underground; but preferred rather to collect where they could still get a glimpse of the upper world, as if they were torn between fear of their lives and interest in the spectacle. That crowd gave me a good deal of respect for my countrymen. But several were badly rattled, and one man a little way off, whose back was turned, kept twitching his shoulders as if he had the colic.

I watched him curiously, and a movement of the crowd brought his face into profile. Then I gasped with amazement, for I saw that it was Ivery.

And yet it was not Ivery. There were the familiar nondescript features, the blandness, the plumpness, but all, so to speak, in ruins. The man was in a blind funk. His features seemed to be dislimning before my eyes. He was growing sharper, finer, in a way younger, a man without grip on himself, a shapeless creature in process of transformation. He was being reduced to his rudiments. Under the spell of panic he was becoming a new man.

And the crazy thing was that I knew the new man better than the old.

My hands were jammed close to my sides by the crowd; I could scarcely turn my head, and it was not the occasion for one's neighbours to observe one's expression. If it had been, mine must have been a study. My mind was far away from air raids, back in the hot summer weather of 1914. I saw a row of villas perched on a headland above the sea. In the garden of one of them two men were playing tennis, while I was crouching behind an adjacent bush. One of these was a plump young man who wore a coloured scarf round his waist and babbled of golf handicaps . . . I saw him again in the villa dining-room, wearing a dinner-jacket, and lisping a little. . . . I sat opposite him at bridge, I beheld him collared by two of Macgillivray's men, when his comrade had rushed for the thirty-nine steps that led to the sea . . . I saw, too, the sitting-room of my old flat in Portland Place and heard little Scudder's quick, anxious voice talking about the three men he feared most on earth, one of whom lisped in his speech. I had thought that all three had long ago been laid under the turf . . .

He was not looking my way, and I could devour his face in safety. There was no shadow of doubt. I had always put him down as the most amazing actor on earth, for had he not played the part of the First Sea Lord and deluded that officer's daily colleagues? But he could do far more than any human actor, for he could take on a new personality and with it a new appearance, and live steadily in the character as if he had been born in it . . . My mind was a blank, and I could only make blind gropings at conclusions . . . How had he escaped the death of a spy and a murderer, for I had last seen him in the hands of justice? . . . Of course he had known me from the first day in Biggleswick . . . I had thought to play with him, and he had played most cunningly and damnably with me. In that sweating sardine-tin of refugees I shivered in the bitterness of my chagrin.

And then I found his face turned to mine, and I knew that he recognized me. More, I knew that he knew that I had recognized him — not as Ivery, but as that other man. There came into his eyes a curious look of comprehension, which for a moment overcame his funk.

I had sense enough to see that that put the final lid on it. There was still something doing if he believed that I was blind, but if he once thought that I knew the truth he would be through our meshes and disappear like a fog.

My first thought was to get at him and collar him and summon everybody to help me by denouncing him for what he was. Then I saw that that was impossible. I was a private soldier in a borrowed uniform, and he could easily turn the story against me. I must use surer weapons. I must get to Bullivant and Macgillivray and set their big machine to work. Above all I must get to Blenkiron.

I started to squeeze out of that push, for air raids now seemed far too trivial to give a thought to. Moreover the guns had stopped, but so sheeplike is human nature that the crowd still hung together, and it took me a good fifteen minutes to edge my way to the open air. I found that the trouble was over, and the street had resumed its usual appearance. Buses and taxis were running, and voluble knots of people were recounting their experiences. I started off for Blenkiron's bookshop, as the nearest harbour of refuge.

But in Piccadilly Circus I was stopped by a military policeman. He asked my name and battalion, and I gave him them,

while his suspicious eye ran over my figure. I had no pack or rifle, and the crush in the Tube station had not improved my appearance. I explained that I was going back to France that evening, and he asked for my warrant. I fancy my preoccupation made me nervous and I lied badly. I said I had left it with my kit in the house of my married sister, but I fumbled in giving the address. I could see that the fellow did not believe a word of it.

Just then up came an A.P.M. He was a pompous dug-out, very splendid in his red tabs and probably bucked up at having just been under fire. Anyhow he was out to walk in the strict path of duty.

‘Tomkins!’ he said. ‘Tomkins! We’ve got some fellow of that name on our records. Bring him along, Wilson.’

‘But, sir,’ I said, ‘I must — I simply must meet my friend. It’s urgent business, and I assure you I’m all right. If you don’t believe me, I’ll take a taxi and we’ll go down to Scotland Yard and I’ll stand by what they say.’

His brow grew dark with wrath. ‘What infernal nonsense is this? Scotland Yard! What the devil has Scotland Yard to do with it? You’re an imposter. I can see it in your face. I’ll have your depot rung up, and you’ll be in jail in a couple of hours. I know a deserter when I see him. Bring him along, Wilson. You know what to do if he tries to bolt.’

I had a momentary thought of breaking away, but decided that the odds were too much against me. Fuming with impatience, I followed the A.P.M. to his office on the first floor in a side street. The precious minutes were slipping past; Ivery, now thoroughly warned, was making good his escape; and I, the sole repository of a deadly secret, was tramping in this absurd procession.

The A.P.M. issued his orders. He gave instructions that my depot should be rung up, and he bade Wilson remove me to what he called the guard-room. He sat down at his desk, and busied himself with a mass of buff dockets.

In desperation I renewed my appeal. ‘I implore you to telephone to Mr Macgillivray at Scotland Yard. It’s a matter of life and death, Sir. You’re taking a very big responsibility if you don’t.’

I had hopelessly offended his brittle dignity. ‘Any more of your insolence and I’ll have you put in irons. I’ll attend to you soon enough for your comfort. Get out of this till I send for you.’

As I looked at his foolish, irritable face I realized that I was fairly UP against it. Short of assault and battery on everybody I was bound to submit. I saluted respectfully and was marched away.

The hours I spent in that bare anteroom are like a nightmare in my recollection. A sergeant was busy at a desk with more buff dockets and an orderly waited on a stool by a telephone. I looked at my watch and observed that it was one o’clock. Soon the slamming of a door announced that the A.P.M. had gone to lunch. I tried conversation with the fat sergeant, but he very soon shut me up. So I sat hunched up on the wooden form and chewed the cud of my vexation.

I thought with bitterness of the satisfaction which had filled me in the morning. I had fancied myself the devil of a fine fellow, and I had been no more than a mountebank. The adventures of the past days seemed merely childish. I had been telling lies and cutting capers over half Britain, thinking I was playing a deep game, and I had only been behaving like a schoolboy. On such occasions a man is rarely just to himself, and the intensity of my self-abasement would have satisfied my worst enemy. It didn’t console me that the futility of it all was not my blame. I was looking for excuses. It was the facts that cried out against me, and on the facts I had been an idiotic failure.

For of course Ivery had played with me, played with me since the first day at Biggleswick. He had applauded my speeches and flattered me, and advised me to go to the Clyde, laughing at me all the time. Gresson, too, had known. Now I saw it all. He had tried to drown me between Colonsay and Mull. It was Gresson who had set the police on me in Morvern. The bagman Linklater had been one of Gresson’s creatures. The only meagre consolation was that the gang had thought me dangerous enough to attempt to murder me, and that they knew nothing about my doings in Skye. Of that I was positive. They had marked me down, but for several days I had slipped clean out of their ken.

As I went over all the incidents, I asked if everything was yet lost. I had failed to hoodwink Ivery, but I had found out his post office, and if he only believed I hadn’t recognized him for the miscreant of the Black Stone he would go on in his old ways and play into Blenkiron’s hands. Yes, but I had seen him in undress, so to speak, and he knew that I had so seen him. The only thing now was to collar him before he left the country, for there was ample evidence to hang him on. The law must stretch out its long arm and collect him and Gresson and the Portuguese Jew, try them by court martial, and put them decently underground.

But he had now had more than an hour’s warning, and I was entangled with red-tape in this damned A.P.M.’s office. The thought drove me frantic, and I got up and paced the floor. I saw the orderly with rather a scared face making ready to

press the bell, and I noticed that the fat sergeant had gone to lunch.

'Say, mate,' I said, 'don't you feel inclined to do a poor fellow a good turn? I know I'm for it all right, and I'll take my medicine like a lamb. But I want badly to put a telephone call through.'

'It ain't allowed,' was the answer. 'I'd get 'ell from the old man.'

'But he's gone out,' I urged. 'I don't want you to do anything wrong, mate, I leave you to do the talkin' if you'll only send my message. I'm flush of money, and I don't mind handin' you a quid for the job.'

He was a pinched little man with a weak chin, and he obviously wavered.

'Oo d'ye want to talk to?' he asked.

'Scotland Yard,' I said, 'the home of the police. Lord bless you, there can't be no harm in that. Ye've only got to ring up Scotland Yard — I'll give you the number — and give the message to Mr Macgillivray. He's the head bummer of all the bobbies.'

'That sounds a bit of all right,' he said. 'The old man 'e won't be back for 'alf an hour, nor the sergeant neither. Let's see your quid though.'

I laid a pound note on the form beside me. 'It's yours, mate, if you get through to Scotland Yard and speak the piece I'm goin' to give you.'

He went over to the instrument. 'What d'you want to say to the bloke with the long name?'

'Say that Richard Hannay is detained at the A.P.M.'s office in Claxton Street. Say he's got important news — say urgent and secret news — and ask Mr Macgillivray to do something about it at once.'

'But 'Annay ain't the name you gave.'

'Lord bless you, no. Did you never hear of a man borrowin' another name? Anyhow that's the one I want you to give.'

'But if this Mac man comes round 'ere, they'll know 'e's bin rung up, and I'll 'ave the old man down on me.'

It took ten minutes and a second pound note to get him past this hurdle. By and by he screwed up courage and rang up the number. I listened with some nervousness while he gave my message — he had to repeat it twice — and waited eagerly on the next words.

'No, sir,' I heard him say, 'e don't want you to come round 'ere. 'E thinks as 'ow — I mean to say, 'e wants —'

I took a long stride and twitched the receiver from him.

'Macgillivray,' I said, 'is that you? Richard Hannay! For the love of God come round here this instant and deliver me from the clutches of a tomfool A.P.M. I've got the most deadly news. There's not a second to waste. For God's sake come quick!' Then I added: 'Just tell your fellows to gather Ivery in at once. You know his lairs.'

I hung up the receiver and faced a pale and indignant orderly. 'It's all right,' I said. 'I promise you that you won't get into any trouble on my account. And there's your two quid.'

The door in the next room opened and shut. The A.P.M. had returned from lunch . . .

Ten minutes later the door opened again. I heard Macgillivray's voice, and it was not pitched in dulcet tones. He had run up against minor officialdom and was making hay with it.

I was my own master once more, so I forsook the company of the orderly. I found a most rattled officer trying to save a few rags of his dignity and the formidable figure of Macgillivray instructing him in manners.

'Glad to see you, Dick,' he said. 'This is General Hannay, sir. It may comfort you to know that your folly may have made just the difference between your country's victory and defeat. I shall have a word to say to your superiors.'

It was hardly fair. I had to put in a word for the old fellow, whose red tabs seemed suddenly to have grown dingy.

'It was my blame wearing this kit. We'll call it a misunderstanding and forget it. But I would suggest that civility is not wasted even on a poor devil of a defaulting private soldier.'

Once in Macgillivray's car, I poured out my tale. 'Tell me it's a nightmare,' I cried. 'Tell me that the three men we collected on the Ruff were shot long ago.'

'Two,' he replied, 'but one escaped. Heaven knows how he managed it, but he disappeared clean out of the world.'

'The plump one who lisped in his speech?'

Macgillivray nodded.

‘Well, we’re in for it this time. Have you issued instructions?’

‘Yes. With luck we shall have our hands on him within an hour. We’ve our net round all his haunts.’

‘But two hours’ start! It’s a big handicap, for you’re dealing with a genius.’

‘Yet I think we can manage it. Where are you bound for?’

I told him my rooms in Westminster and then to my old flat in Park Lane. ‘The day of disguises is past. In half an hour I’ll be Richard Hannay. It’ll be a comfort to get into uniform again. Then I’ll look up Blenkiron.’

He grinned. ‘I gather you’ve had a riotous time. We’ve had a good many anxious messages from the north about a certain Mr Brand. I couldn’t discourage our men, for I fancied it might have spoiled your game. I heard that last night they had lost touch with you in Bradfield, so I rather expected to see you here today. Efficient body of men the Scottish police.’

‘Especially when they have various enthusiastic amateur helpers.’

‘So?’ he said. ‘Yes, of course. They would have. But I hope presently to congratulate you on the success of your mission.’

‘I’ll bet you a pony you don’t,’ I said.

‘I never bet on a professional subject. Why this pessimism?’

‘Only that I know our gentleman better than you. I’ve been twice up against him. He’s the kind of wicked that don’t cease from troubling till they’re stone-dead. And even then I’d want to see the body cremated and take the ashes into mid-ocean and scatter them. I’ve got a feeling that he’s the biggest thing you or I will ever tackle.’



CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE VALLEY OF HUMILIATION

I collected some baggage and a pile of newly arrived letters from my rooms in Westminster and took a taxi to my Park Lane flat. Usually I had gone back to that old place with a great feeling of comfort, like a boy from school who ranges about his room at home and examines his treasures. I used to like to see my hunting trophies on the wall and to sink into my own armchairs. But now I had no pleasure in the thing. I had a bath, and changed into uniform, and that made me feel in better fighting trim. But I suffered from a heavy conviction of abject failure, and had no share in Macgillivray's optimism. The awe with which the Black Stone gang had filled me three years before had revived a thousandfold. Personal humiliation was the least part of my trouble. What worried me was the sense of being up against something inhumanly formidable and wise and strong. I believed I was willing to own defeat and chuck up the game.

Among the unopened letters was one from Peter, a very bulky one which I sat down to read at leisure. It was a curious epistle, far the longest he had ever written me, and its size made me understand his loneliness. He was still at his German prison-camp, but expecting every day to go to Switzerland. He said he could get back to England or South Africa, if he wanted, for they were clear that he could never be a combatant again; but he thought he had better stay in Switzerland, for he would be unhappy in England with all his friends fighting. As usual he made no complaints, and seemed to be very grateful for his small mercies. There was a doctor who was kind to him, and some good fellows among the prisoners.

But Peter's letter was made up chiefly of reflection. He had always been a bit of a philosopher, and now, in his isolation, he had taken to thinking hard, and poured out the results to me on pages of thin paper in his clumsy handwriting. I could read between the lines that he was having a stiff fight with himself. He was trying to keep his courage going in face of the bitterest trial he could be called on to face — a crippled old age. He had always known a good deal about the Bible, and that and the *Pilgrim's Progress* were his chief aids in reflection. Both he took quite literally, as if they were newspaper reports of actual recent events.

He mentioned that after much consideration he had reached the conclusion that the three greatest men he had ever heard of or met were Mr Valiant-for-Truth, the Apostle Paul, and a certain Billy Strang who had been with him in Mashonaland in '92. Billy I knew all about; he had been Peter's hero and leader till a lion got him in the Blaauwberg. Peter preferred Valiant-for-Truth to Mr Greatheart, I think, because of his superior truculence, for, being very gentle himself, he loved a bold speaker. After that he dropped into a vein of self-examination. He regretted that he fell far short of any of the three. He thought that he might with luck resemble Mr Standfast, for like him he had not much trouble in keeping wakeful, and was also as 'poor as a howler', and didn't care for women. He only hoped that he could imitate him in making a good end.

Then followed some remarks of Peter's on courage, which came to me in that London room as if spoken by his living voice. I have never known anyone so brave, so brave by instinct, or anyone who hated so much to be told so. It was almost the only thing that could make him angry. All his life he had been facing death, and to take risks seemed to him as natural as to get up in the morning and eat his breakfast. But he had started out to consider the very thing which before he had taken for granted, and here is an extract from his conclusions. I paraphrase him, for he was not grammatical.

It's easy enough to be brave if you're feeling well and have food inside you. And it's not so difficult even if you're short of a meal and seedy, for that makes you inclined to gamble. I mean by being brave playing the game by the right rules without letting it worry you that you may very likely get knocked on the head. It's the wisest way to save your skin. It doesn't do to think about death if you're facing a charging lion or trying to bluff a lot of savages. If you think about it you'll get it; if you don't, the odds are you won't. That kind of courage is only good nerves and experience . . . Most courage is experience. Most people are a little scared at new things . . .

You want a bigger heart to face danger which you go out to look for, and which doesn't come to you in the ordinary way of business. Still, that's pretty much the same thing — good nerves and good health, and a natural liking for rows. You see, Dick, in all that game there's a lot of fun. There's excitement and the fun of using your wits and skill, and you know that the bad bits can't last long. When Arcoll sent me to Makapan's kraal I didn't altogether fancy the job, but at

the worst it was three parts sport, and I got so excited that I never thought of the risk till it was over . . .

But the big courage is the cold-blooded kind, the kind that never lets go even when you're feeling empty inside, and your blood's thin, and there's no kind of fun or profit to be had, and the trouble's not over in an hour or two but lasts for months and years. One of the men here was speaking about that kind, and he called it 'Fortitude'. I reckon fortitude's the biggest thing a man can have — just to go on enduring when there's no guts or heart left in you. Billy had it when he trekked solitary from Garungoze to the Limpopo with fever and a broken arm just to show the Portugooses that he wouldn't be downed by them. But the head man at the job was the Apostle Paul . . .

Peter was writing for his own comfort, for fortitude was all that was left to him now. But his words came pretty straight to me, and I read them again and again, for I needed the lesson. Here was I losing heart just because I had failed in the first round and my pride had taken a knock. I felt honestly ashamed of myself, and that made me a far happier man. There could be no question of dropping the business, whatever its difficulties. I had a queer religious feeling that Ivery and I had our fortunes intertwined, and that no will of mine could keep us apart. I had faced him before the war and won; I had faced him again and lost; the third time or the twentieth time we would reach a final decision. The whole business had hitherto appeared to me a trifle unreal, at any rate my own connection with it. I had been docilely obeying orders, but my real self had been standing aside and watching my doings with a certain aloofness. But that hour in the Tube station had brought me into the serum, and I saw the affair not as Bullivant's or even Blenkiron's, but as my own. Before I had been itching to get back to the Front; now I wanted to get on to Ivery's trail, though it should take me through the nether pit. Peter was right; fortitude was the thing a man must possess if he would save his soul.

The hours passed, and, as I expected, there came no word from Macgillivray. I had some dinner sent up to me at seven o'clock, and about eight I was thinking of looking up Blenkiron. Just then came a telephone call asking me to go round to Sir Walter Bullivant's house in Queen Anne's Gate.

Ten minutes later I was ringing the bell, and the door was opened to me by the same impassive butler who had admitted me on that famous night three years before. Nothing had changed in the pleasant green-panelled hall; the alcove was the same as when I had watched from it the departure of the man who now called himself Ivery; the telephone book lay in the very place from which I had snatched it in order to ring up the First Sea Lord. And in the back room, where that night five anxious officials had conferred, I found Sir Walter and Blenkiron.

Both looked worried, the American feverishly so. He walked up and down the hearthrug, sucking an unlit black cigar.

'Say, Dick,' he said, this is a bad business. It wasn't no fault of yours. You did fine. It was us — me and Sir Walter and Mr Macgillivray that were the quitters.'

'Any news?' I asked.

'So far the cover's drawn blank,' Sir Walter replied. 'It was the devil's own work that our friend looked your way today. You're pretty certain he saw that you recognized him?'

'Absolutely. As sure as that he knew I recognized him in your hall three years ago when he was swaggering as Lord Alloa.'

'No,' said Blenkiron dolefully, that little flicker of recognition is just the one thing you can't be wrong about. Land alive! I wish Mr Macgillivray would come.'

The bell rang, and the door opened, but it was not Macgillivray. It was a young girl in a white ball-gown, with a cluster of blue cornflowers at her breast. The sight of her fetched Sir Walter out of his chair so suddenly that he upset his coffee cup.

'Mary, my dear, how did you manage it? I didn't expect you till the late train.'

'I was in London, you see, and they telephoned on your telegram. I'm staying with Aunt Doria, and I cut her theatre party. She thinks I'm at the Shandwick's dance, so I needn't go home till morning . . . Good evening, General Hannay. You got over the Hill Difficulty.'

'The next stage is the Valley of Humiliation,' I answered.

'So it would appear,' she said gravely, and sat very quietly on the edge of Sir Walter's chair with her small, cool hand upon his.

I had been picturing her in my recollection as very young and glimmering, a dancing, exquisite child. But now I revised

that picture. The crystal freshness of morning was still there, but I saw how deep the waters were. It was the clean fineness and strength of her that entranced me. I didn't even think of her as pretty, any more than a man thinks of the good looks of the friend he worships.

We waited, hardly speaking a word, till Macgillivray came. The first sight of his face told his story.

'Gone?' asked Blenkiron sharply. The man's lethargic calm seemed to have wholly deserted him.

'Gone,' repeated the newcomer. 'We have just tracked him down. Oh, he managed it cleverly. Never a sign of disturbance in any of his lairs. His dinner ordered at Biggleswick and several people invited to stay with him for the weekend — one a member of the Government. Two meetings at which he was to speak arranged for next week. Early this afternoon he flew over to France as a passenger in one of the new planes. He had been mixed up with the Air Board people for months — of course as another man with another face. Miss Lamington discovered that just too late. The bus went out of its course and came down in Normandy. By this time our man's in Paris or beyond it.'

Sir Walter took off his big tortoiseshell spectacles and laid them carefully on the table.

'Roll up the map of Europe,' he said. 'This is our Austerlitz. Mary, my dear, I am feeling very old.'

Macgillivray had the sharpened face of a bitterly disappointed man. Blenkiron had got very red, and I could see that he was blaspheming violently under his breath. Mary's eyes were quiet and solemn. She kept on patting Sir Walter's hand. The sense of some great impending disaster hung heavily on me, and to break the spell I asked for details.

'Tell me just the extent of the damage,' I asked. 'Our neat plan for deceiving the Boche has failed. That is bad. A dangerous spy has got beyond our power. That's worse. Tell me, is there still a worst? What's the limit of mischief he can do?'

Sir Walter had risen and joined Blenkiron on the hearthrug. His brows were furrowed and his mouth hard as if he were suffering pain.

'There is no limit,' he said. 'None that I can see, except the long-suffering of God. You know the man as Ivery, and you knew him as that other whom you believed to have been shot one summer morning and decently buried. You feared the second — at least if you didn't, I did — most mortally. You realized that we feared Ivery, and you knew enough about him to see his fiendish cleverness. Well, you have the two men combined in one man. Ivery was the best brain Macgillivray and I ever encountered, the most cunning and patient and long-sighted. Combine him with the other, the chameleon who can blend himself with his environment, and has as many personalities as there are types and traits on the earth. What kind of enemy is that to have to fight?'

'I admit it's a steep proposition. But after all how much ill can he do? There are pretty strict limits to the activity of even the cleverest spy.'

'I agree. But this man is not a spy who buys a few wretched subordinates and steals a dozen private letters. He's a genius who has been living as part of our English life. There's nothing he hasn't seen. He's been on terms of intimacy with all kinds of politicians. We know that. He did it as Ivery. They rather liked him, for he was clever and flattered them, and they told him things. But God knows what he saw and heard in his other personalities. For all I know he may have breakfasted at Downing Street with letters of introduction from President Wilson, or visited the Grand Fleet as a distinguished neutral. Then think of the women; how they talk. We're the leakiest society on earth, and we safeguard ourselves by keeping dangerous people out of it. We trust to our outer barrage. But anyone who has really slipped inside has a million chances. And this, remember, is one man in ten millions, a man whose brain never sleeps for a moment, who is quick to seize the slightest hint, who can piece a plan together out of a dozen bits of gossip. It's like — it's as if the Chief of the Intelligence Department were suddenly to desert to the enemy . . . The ordinary spy knows only bits of unconnected facts. This man knows our life and our way of thinking and everything about us.'

'Well, but a treatise on English life in time of war won't do much good to the Boche.'

Sir Walter shook his head. 'Don't you realize the explosive stuff that is lying about? Ivery knows enough to make the next German peace offensive really deadly — not the blundering thing which it has been up to now, but something which gets our weak spots on the raw. He knows enough to wreck our campaign in the field. And the awful thing is that we don't know just what he knows or what he is aiming for. This war's a packet of surprises. Both sides are struggling for the margin, the little fraction of advantage, and between evenly matched enemies it's just the extra atom of foreknowledge that tells.'

‘Then we’ve got to push off and get after him,’ I said cheerfully.

‘But what are you going to do?’ asked Macgillivray. ‘If it were merely a question of destroying an organization it might be managed, for an organization presents a big front. But it’s a question of destroying this one man, and his front is a razor edge. How are you going to find him? It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack, and such a needle! A needle which can become a piece of straw or a tin-tack when it chooses!’

‘All the same we’ve got to do it,’ I said, remembering old Peter’s lesson on fortitude, though I can’t say I was feeling very stout-hearted.

Sir Walter flung himself wearily into an arm-chair. ‘I wish I could be an optimist,’ he said, ‘but it looks as if we must own defeat. I’ve been at this work for twenty years, and, though I’ve been often beaten, I’ve always held certain cards in the game. Now I’m hanged if I’ve any. It looks like a knock-out, Hannay. It’s no good deluding ourselves. We’re men enough to look facts in the face and tell ourselves the truth. I don’t see any ray of light in the business. We’ve missed our shot by a hairsbreadth and that’s the same as missing by miles.’

I remember he looked at Mary as if for confirmation, but she did not smile or nod. Her face was very grave and her eyes looked steadily at him. Then they moved and met mine, and they seemed to give me my marching orders.

‘Sir Walter,’ I said, ‘three years ago you and I sat in this very room. We thought we were done to the world, as we think now. We had just that one miserable little clue to hang on to — a dozen words scribbled in a notebook by a dead man. You thought I was mad when I asked for Scudder’s book, but we put our backs into the job and in twenty-four hours we had won out. Remember that then we were fighting against time. Now we have a reasonable amount of leisure. Then we had nothing but a sentence of gibberish. Now we have a great body of knowledge, for Blenkiron has been brooding over Ivery like an old hen, and he knows his ways of working and his breed of confederate. You’ve got something to work on now. Do you mean to tell me that, when the stakes are so big, you’re going to chuck in your hand?’

Macgillivray raised his head. ‘We know a good deal about Ivery, but Ivery’s dead. We know nothing of the man who was gloriously resurrected this evening in Normandy.’

‘Oh, yes we do. There are many faces to the man, but only one mind, and you know plenty about that mind.’

‘I wonder,’ said Sir Walter. ‘How can you know a mind which has no characteristics except that it is wholly and supremely competent? Mere mental powers won’t give us a clue. We want to know the character which is behind all the personalities. Above all we want to know its foibles. If we had only a hint of some weakness we might make a plan.’

‘Well, let’s set down all we know,’ I cried, for the more I argued the keener I grew. I told them in some detail the story of the night in the Coolin and what I had heard there.

‘There’s the two names Chelius and Bommaerts. The man spoke them in the same breath as Elfenbein, so they must be associated with Ivery’s gang. You’ve got to get the whole Secret Service of the Allies busy to fit a meaning to these two words. Surely to goodness you’ll find something! Remember those names don’t belong to the Ivery part, but to the big game behind all the different disguises . . . Then there’s the talk about the Wild Birds and the Cage Birds. I haven’t a guess at what it means. But it refers to some infernal gang, and among your piles of records there must be some clue. You set the intelligence of two hemispheres busy on the job. You’ve got all the machinery, and it’s my experience that if even one solitary man keeps chewing on a problem he discovers something.’

My enthusiasm was beginning to strike sparks from Macgillivray. He was looking thoughtful now, instead of despondent.

‘There might be something in that,’ he said, ‘but it’s a far-out chance.’

‘Of course it’s a far-out chance, and that’s all we’re ever going to get from Ivery. But we’ve taken a bad chance before and won . . . Then you’ve all that you know about Ivery here. Go through his *dossier* with a small-tooth comb and I’ll bet you find something to work on. Blenkiron, you’re a man with a cool head. You admit we’ve a sporting chance.’

‘Sure, Dick. He’s fixed things so that the lines are across the track, but we’ll clear somehow. So far as John S. Blenkiron is concerned he’s got just one thing to do in this world, and that’s to follow the yellow dog and have him neatly and cleanly tidied up. I’ve got a stack of personal affronts to settle. I was easy fruit and he hasn’t been very respectful. You can count me in, Dick.’

‘Then we’re agreed,’ I cried. ‘Well, gentlemen, it’s up to you to arrange the first stage. You’ve some pretty solid staff work to put in before you get on the trail.’

‘And you?’ Sir Walter asked.

‘I’m going back to my brigade. I want a rest and a change. Besides, the first stage is office work, and I’m no use for that. But I’ll be waiting to be summoned, and I’ll come like a shot as soon as you hoick me out. I’ve got a presentiment about this thing. I know there’ll be a finish and that I’ll be in at it, and I think it will be a desperate, bloody business too.’

I found Mary’s eyes fixed upon me, and in them I read the same thought. She had not spoken a word, but had sat on the edge of a chair, swinging a foot idly, one hand playing with an ivory fan. She had given me my old orders and I looked to her for confirmation of the new.

‘Miss Lamington, you are the wisest of the lot of us. What do you say?’

She smiled — that shy, companionable smile which I had been picturing to myself through all the wanderings of the past month.

‘I think you are right. We’ve a long way to go yet, for the Valley of Humiliation comes only half-way in the *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The next stage was Vanity Fair. I might be of some use there, don’t you think?’

I remember the way she laughed and flung back her head like a gallant boy.

‘The mistake we’ve all been making,’ she said, ‘is that our methods are too terre-a-terre. We’ve a poet to deal with, a great poet, and we must fling our imaginations forward to catch up with him. His strength is his unexpectedness, you know, and we won’t beat him by plodding only. I believe the wildest course is the wisest, for it’s the most likely to intersect his . . . Who’s the poet among us?’

‘Peter,’ I said. ‘But he’s pinned down with a game leg in Germany. All the same we must rope him in.’

By this time we had all cheered up, for it is wonderful what a tonic there is in a prospect of action. The butler brought in tea, which it was Bullivant’s habit to drink after dinner. To me it seemed fantastic to watch a slip of a girl pouring it out for two grizzled and distinguished servants of the State and one battered soldier — as decorous a family party as you would ask to see — and to reflect that all four were engaged in an enterprise where men’s lives must be reckoned at less than thistledown.

After that we went upstairs to a noble Georgian drawing-room and Mary played to us. I don’t care two straws for music from an instrument — unless it be the pipes or a regimental band — but I dearly love the human voice. But she would not sing, for singing to her, I fancy, was something that did not come at will, but flowed only like a bird’s note when the mood favoured. I did not want it either. I was content to let ‘Cherry Ripe’ be the one song linked with her in my memory.

It was Macgillivray who brought us back to business.

‘I wish to Heaven there was one habit of mind we could definitely attach to him and to no one else.’ (At this moment ‘He’ had only one meaning for us.)

‘You can’t do nothing with his mind,’ Blenkiron drawled. ‘You can’t loose the bands of Orion, as the Bible says, or hold Leviathan with a hook. I reckoned I could and made a mighty close study of his de-vices. But the darned cuss wouldn’t stay put. I thought I had tied him down to the double bluff, and he went and played the triple bluff on me. There’s nothing doing that line.’

A memory of Peter recurred to me.

‘What about the “blind spot”?’ I asked, and I told them old Peter’s pet theory. ‘Every man that God made has his weak spot somewhere, some flaw in his character which leaves a dull patch in his brain. We’ve got to find that out, and I think I’ve made a beginning.’

Macgillivray in a sharp voice asked my meaning.

‘He’s in a funk . . . of something. Oh, I don’t mean he’s a coward. A man in his trade wants the nerve of a buffalo. He could give us all points in courage. What I mean is that he’s not clean white all through. There are yellow streaks somewhere in him . . . I’ve given a good deal of thought to this courage business, for I haven’t got a great deal of it myself. Not like Peter, I mean. I’ve got heaps of soft places in me. I’m afraid of being drowned for one thing, or of getting my eyes shot out. Ivery’s afraid of bombs — at any rate he’s afraid of bombs in a big city. I once read a book which talked about a thing called agoraphobia. Perhaps it’s that . . . Now if we know that weak spot it helps us in our work. There are some places he won’t go to, and there are some things he can’t do — not well, anyway. I reckon that’s useful.’

‘Ye-es,’ said Macgillivray. ‘Perhaps it’s not what you’d call a burning and a shining light.’

‘There’s another chink in his armour,’ I went on. ‘There’s one person in the world he can never practise his transformations on, and that’s me. I shall always know him again, though he appeared as Sir Douglas Haig. I can’t explain why, but I’ve got a feel in my bones about it. I didn’t recognize him before, for I thought he was dead, and the nerve in my brain which should have been looking for him wasn’t working. But I’m on my guard now, and that nerve’s functioning at full power. Whenever and wherever and howsoever we meet again on the face of the earth, it will be “Dr Livingstone, I presume” between him and me.’

‘That is better,’ said Macgillivray. ‘If we have any luck, Hannay, it won’t be long till we pull you out of His Majesty’s Forces.’

Mary got up from the piano and resumed her old perch on the arm of Sir Walter’s chair.

‘There’s another blind spot which you haven’t mentioned.’ It was a cool evening, but I noticed that her cheeks had suddenly flushed.

‘Last week Mr Ivery asked me to marry him,’ she said.



PART II

CHAPTER TWELVE

I BECOME A COMBATANT ONCE MORE

I returned to France on 13 September, and took over my old brigade on the 19th of the same month. We were shoved in at the Polygon Wood on the 26th, and after four days got so badly mauled that we were brought out to refit. On 7 October, very much to my surprise, I was given command of a division and was on the fringes of the Ypres fighting during the first days of November. From that front we were hurried down to Cambrai in support, but came in only for the last backwash of that singular battle. We held a bit of the St Quentin sector till just before Christmas, when we had a spell of rest in billets, which endured, so far as I was concerned, till the beginning of January, when I was sent off on the errand which I shall presently relate.

That is a brief summary of my military record in the latter part of 1917. I am not going to enlarge on the fighting. Except for the days of the Polygon Wood it was neither very severe nor very distinguished, and you will find it in the history books. What I have to tell of here is my own personal quest, for all the time I was living with my mind turned two ways. In the morasses of the Haanebeek flats, in the slimy support lines at Zonnebeke, in the tortured uplands about Flesquieres, and in many other odd places I kept worrying at my private conundrum. At night I would lie awake thinking of it, and many a toss I took into shell-holes and many a time I stepped off the duckboards, because my eyes were on a different landscape. Nobody ever chewed a few wretched clues into such a pulp as I did during those bleak months in Flanders and Picardy.

For I had an instinct that the thing was desperately grave, graver even than the battle before me. Russia had gone headlong to the devil, Italy had taken it between the eyes and was still dizzy, and our own prospects were none too bright. The Boche was getting uppish and with some cause, and I foresaw a rocky time ahead till America could line up with us in the field. It was the chance for the Wild Birds, and I used to wake in a sweat to think what devilry Ivery might be engineering. I believe I did my proper job reasonably well, but I put in my most savage thinking over the other. I remember how I used to go over every hour of every day from that June night in the Cotswolds till my last meeting with Bullivant in London, trying to find a new bearing. I should probably have got brain-fever, if I hadn't had to spend most of my days and nights fighting a stiffish battle with a very watchful Hun. That kept my mind balanced, and I dare say it gave an edge to it; for during those months I was lucky enough to hit on a better scent than Bullivant and Macgillivray and Blenkiron, pulling a thousand wires in their London offices.

I will set down in order of time the various incidents in this private quest of mine. The first was my meeting with Geordie Hamilton. It happened just after I rejoined the brigade, when I went down to have a look at our Scots Fusilier battalion. The old brigade had been roughly handled on 31st July, and had had to get heavy drafts to come anywhere near strength. The Fusiliers especially were almost a new lot, formed by joining our remnants to the remains of a battalion in another division and bringing about a dozen officers from the training unit at home.

I inspected the men and my eyes caught sight of a familiar face. I asked his name and the colonel got it from the sergeant-major. It was Lance-Corporal George Hamilton.

Now I wanted a new batman, and I resolved then and there to have my old antagonist. That afternoon he reported to me at brigade headquarters. As I looked at that solid bandy-legged figure, standing as stiff to attention as a tobacconist's sign, his ugly face hewn out of brown oak, his honest, sullen mouth, and his blue eyes staring into vacancy, I knew I had got the man I wanted.

'Hamilton,' I said, 'you and I have met before.'

'Sirr?' came the mystified answer.

'Look at me, man, and tell me if you don't recognize me.'

He moved his eyes a fraction, in a respectful glance.

'Sirr, I don't mind of you.'

‘Well, I’ll refresh your memory. Do you remember the hall in Newmilns Street and the meeting there? You had a fight with a man outside, and got knocked down.’

He made no answer, but his colour deepened.

‘And a fortnight later in a public-house in Muirtown you saw the same man, and gave him the chase of his life.’

I could see his mouth set, for visions of the penalties laid down by the King’s Regulations for striking an officer must have crossed his mind. But he never budged.

‘Look me in the face, man,’ I said. ‘Do you remember me now?’

He did as he was bid.

‘Sirr, I mind of you.’

‘Have you nothing more to say?’

He cleared his throat. ‘Sirr, I did not ken I was hittin’ an officer.’

‘Of course you didn’t. You did perfectly right, and if the war was over and we were both free men, I would give you a chance of knocking me down here and now. That’s got to wait. When you saw me last I was serving my country, though you didn’t know it. We’re serving together now, and you must get your revenge out of the Boche. I’m going to make you my servant, for you and I have a pretty close bond between us. What do you say to that?’

This time he looked me full in the face. His troubled eye appraised me and was satisfied. ‘I’m proud to be servant to ye, sirr,’ he said. Then out of his chest came a strangled chuckle, and he forgot his discipline. ‘Losh, but ye’re the great lad!’ He recovered himself promptly, saluted, and marched off.

The second episode befell during our brief rest after the Polygon Wood, when I had ridden down the line one afternoon to see a friend in the Heavy Artillery. I was returning in the drizzle of evening, clanking along the greasy path between the sad poplars, when I struck a Labour company repairing the ravages of a Boche strafe that morning. I wasn’t very certain of my road and asked one of the workers. He straightened himself and saluted, and I saw beneath a disreputable cap the features of the man who had been with me in the Coolin crevice.

I spoke a word to his sergeant, who fell him out, and he walked a bit of the way with me.

‘Great Scot, Wake, what brought you here?’ I asked.

‘Same thing as brought you. This rotten war.’

I had dismounted and was walking beside him, and I noticed that his lean face had lost its pallor and that his eyes were less hot than they used to be.

‘You seem to thrive on it,’ I said, for I did not know what to say. A sudden shyness possessed me. Wake must have gone through some violent cyclones of feeling before it came to this. He saw what I was thinking and laughed in his sharp, ironical way.

‘Don’t flatter yourself you’ve made a convert. I think as I always thought. But I came to the conclusion that since the fates had made me a Government servant I might as well do my work somewhere less cushioned than a chair in the Home Office . . . Oh, no, it wasn’t a matter of principle. One kind of work’s as good as another, and I’m a better clerk than a navvy. With me it was self-indulgence: I wanted fresh air and exercise.’

I looked at him — mud to the waist, and his hands all blistered and cut with unaccustomed labour. I could realize what his associates must mean to him, and how he would relish the rough tonguing of non-coms.

‘You’re a confounded humbug,’ I said. ‘Why on earth didn’t you go into an O.T.C. and come out with a commission? They’re easy enough to get.’

‘You mistake my case,’ he said bitterly. ‘I experienced no sudden conviction about the justice of the war. I stand where I always stood. I’m a non-combatant, and I wanted a change of civilian work . . . No, it wasn’t any idiotic tribunal sent me here. I came of my own free will, and I’m really rather enjoying myself.’

‘It’s a rough job for a man like you,’ I said.

‘Not so rough as the fellows get in the trenches. I watched a battalion marching back today and they looked like ghosts who had been years in muddy graves. White faces and dazed eyes and leaden feet. Mine’s a cushy job. I like it best when the weather’s foul. It cheats me into thinking I’m doing my duty.’

I nodded towards a recent shell-hole. ‘Much of that sort of thing?’

‘Now and then. We had a good dusting this morning. I can’t say I liked it at the time, but I like to look back on it. A sort of moral anodyne.’

‘I wonder what on earth the rest of your lot make of you?’

‘They don’t make anything. I’m not remarkable for my *bonhomie*. They think I’m a prig — which I am. It doesn’t amuse me to talk about beer and women or listen to a gramophone or grouse about my last meal. But I’m quite content, thank you. Sometimes I get a seat in a corner of a Y.M.C.A. hut, and I’ve a book or two. My chief affliction is the padre. He was up at Keble in my time, and, as one of my colleagues puts it, wants to be “too bloody helpful”. . . . What are you doing, Hannay? I see you’re some kind of general. They’re pretty thick on the ground here.’

‘I’m a sort of general. Soldiering in the Salient isn’t the softest of jobs, but I don’t believe it’s as tough as yours is for you. D’you know, Wake, I wish I had you in my brigade. Trained or untrained, you’re a dashed stout-hearted fellow.’

He laughed with a trifle less acidity than usual. ‘Almost thou persuadest me to be combatant. No, thank you. I haven’t the courage, and besides there’s my jolly old principles. All the same I’d like to be near you. You’re a good chap, and I’ve had the honour to assist in your education . . . I must be getting back, or the sergeant will think I’ve bolted.’

We shook hands, and the last I saw of him was a figure saluting stiffly in the wet twilight.

The third incident was trivial enough, though momentous in its results. Just before I got the division I had a bout of malaria. We were in support in the Salient, in very uncomfortable trenches behind Wieltje, and I spent three days on my back in a dug-out. Outside was a blizzard of rain, and the water now and then came down the stairs through the gas curtain and stood in pools at my bed foot. It wasn’t the merriest place to convalesce in, but I was as hard as nails at the time and by the third day I was beginning to sit up and be bored.

I read all my English papers twice and a big stack of German ones which I used to have sent up by a friend in the G.H.Q. Intelligence, who knew I liked to follow what the Boche was saying. As I dozed and ruminated in the way a man does after fever, I was struck by the tremendous display of one advertisement in the English press. It was a thing called ‘Gussiter’s Deep-breathing System,’ which, according to its promoter, was a cure for every ill, mental, moral, or physical, that man can suffer. Politicians, generals, admirals, and music-hall artists all testified to the new life it had opened up for them. I remember wondering what these sportsmen got for their testimonies, and thinking I would write a spoof letter myself to old Gussiter.

Then I picked up the German papers, and suddenly my eye caught an advertisement of the same kind in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. It was not Gussiter this time, but one Weissmann, but his game was identical — ‘deep breathing’. The Hun style was different from the English — all about the Goddess of Health, and the Nymphs of the Mountains, and two quotations from Schiller. But the principle was the same.

That made me ponder a little, and I went carefully through the whole batch. I found the advertisement in the *Frankfurter* and in one or two rather obscure *Volkstimmes* and *Volkszeitungs*. I found it too in *Der Grosse Krieg*, the official German propagandist picture-paper. They were the same all but one, and that one had a bold variation, for it contained four of the sentences used in the ordinary English advertisement.

This struck me as fishy, and I started to write a letter to Macgillivray pointing out what seemed to be a case of trading with the enemy, and advising him to get on to Mr Gussiter’s financial backing. I thought he might find a Hun syndicate behind him. And then I had another notion, which made me rewrite my letter.

I went through the papers again. The English ones which contained the advertisement were all good, solid, bellicose organs; the kind of thing no censorship would object to leaving the country. I had before me a small sheaf of pacifist prints, and they had not the advertisement. That might be for reasons of circulation, or it might not. The German papers were either Radical or Socialist publications, just the opposite of the English lot, except the *Grosse Krieg*. Now we have a free press, and Germany has, strictly speaking, none. All her journalistic indiscretions are calculated. Therefore the Boche has no objection to his rags getting to enemy countries. He wants it. He likes to see them quoted in columns headed ‘Through German Glasses’, and made the text of articles showing what a good democrat he is becoming.

As I puzzled over the subject, certain conclusions began to form in my mind. The four identical sentences seemed to hint that ‘Deep Breathing’ had Boche affiliations. Here was a chance of communicating with the enemy which would defy the argus-eyed gentlemen who examine the mails. What was to hinder Mr A at one end writing an advertisement with a good cipher in it, and the paper containing it getting into Germany by Holland in three days? Herr B at the other end

replied in the *Frankfurter*, and a few days later shrewd editors and acute Intelligence officers — and Mr A— were reading it in London, though only Mr A knew what it really meant.

It struck me as a bright idea, the sort of simple thing that doesn't occur to clever people, and very rarely to the Boche. I wished I was not in the middle of a battle, for I would have had a try at investigating the cipher myself. I wrote a long letter to Macgillivray putting my case, and then went to sleep. When I awoke I reflected that it was a pretty thin argument, and would have stopped the letter, if it hadn't gone off early by a ration party.

After that things began very slowly to happen. The first was when Hamilton, having gone to Boulogne to fetch some mess-stores, returned with the startling news that he had seen Gresson. He had not heard his name, but described him dramatically to me as the wee red-headed devil that kicked Ecky Brockie's knee yon time in Glesca, sirr; I recognized the description.

Gresson, it appeared, was joy-riding. He was with a party of Labour delegates who had been met by two officers and carried off in chars-a-bancs. Hamilton reported from inquiries among his friends that this kind of visitor came weekly. I thought it a very sensible notion on the Government's part, but I wondered how Gresson had been selected. I had hoped that Macgillivray had weeks ago made a long arm and quodded him. Perhaps they had too little evidence to hang him, but he was the blackest sort of suspect and should have been interned.

A week later I had occasion to be at G.H.Q. on business connected with my new division. My friends in the Intelligence allowed me to use the direct line to London, and I called up Macgillivray. For ten minutes I had an exciting talk, for I had had no news from that quarter since I left England. I heard that the Portuguese Jew had escaped — had vanished from his native heather when they went to get him. They had identified him as a German professor of Celtic languages, who had held a chair in a Welsh college — a dangerous fellow, for he was an upright, high-minded, raging fanatic. Against Gresson they had no evidence at all, but he was kept under strict observation. When I asked about his crossing to France, Macgillivray replied that that was part of their scheme. I inquired if the visit had given them any clues, but I never got an answer, for the line had to be cleared at that moment for the War Office. I hunted up the man who had charge of these Labour visits, and made friends with him. Gresson, he said, had been a quiet, well-mannered, and most appreciative guest. He had wept tears on Vimy Ridge, and — strictly against orders — had made a speech to some troops he met on the Arras road about how British Labour was remembering the Army in its prayers and sweating blood to make guns. On the last day he had had a misadventure, for he got very sick on the road — some kidney trouble that couldn't stand the jolting of the car — and had to be left at a village and picked up by the party on its way back. They found him better, but still shaky. I cross-examined the particular officer in charge about that halt, and learned that Gresson had been left alone in a peasant's cottage, for he said he only needed to lie down. The place was the hamlet of Eaucourt Sainte-Anne.

For several weeks that name stuck in my head. It had a pleasant, quaint sound, and I wondered how Gresson had spent his hours there. I hunted it up on the map, and promised myself to have a look at it the next time we came out to rest. And then I forgot about it till I heard the name mentioned again.

On 23rd October I had the bad luck, during a tour of my first-line trenches, to stop a small shell-fragment with my head. It was a close, misty day and I had taken off my tin hat to wipe my brow when the thing happened. I got a long, shallow scalp wound which meant nothing but bled a lot, and, as we were not in for any big move, the M.O. sent me back to a clearing station to have it seen to. I was three days in the place and, being perfectly well, had leisure to look about me and reflect, so that I recall that time as a queer, restful interlude in the infernal racket of war. I remember yet how on my last night there a gale made the lamps swing and flicker, and turned the grey-green canvas walls into a mass of mottled shadows. The floor canvas was muddy from the tramping of many feet bringing in the constant dribble of casualties from the line. In my tent there was no one very bad at the time, except a boy with his shoulder half-blown off by a whizz-bang, who lay in a drugged sleep at the far end. The majority were influenza, bronchitis, and trench-fever — waiting to be moved to the base, or convalescent and about to return to their units.

A small group of us dined off tinned chicken, stewed fruit, and radon cheese round the smoky stove, where two screens manufactured from packing cases gave some protection against the draughts which swept like young tornadoes down the tent. One man had been reading a book called the *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, and the talk turned on the unexplainable things that happen to everybody once or twice in a lifetime. I contributed a yarn about the men who went to look for Kruger's treasure in the bushveld and got scared by a green wildebeeste. It is a good yarn and I'll write it down some day. A tall Highlander, who kept his slippered feet on the top of the stove, and whose costume consisted of a kilt, a British warm, a

grey hospital dressing-gown, and four pairs of socks, told the story of the Camerons at First Ypres, and of the Lowland subaltern who knew no Gaelic and suddenly found himself encouraging his men with some ancient Highland rigmarole. The poor chap had a racking bronchial cough, which suggested that his country might well use him on some warmer battle-ground than Flanders. He seemed a bit of a scholar and explained the Cameron business in a lot of long words.

I remember how the talk meandered on as talk does when men are idle and thinking about the next day. I didn't pay much attention, for I was reflecting on a change I meant to make in one of my battalion commands, when a fresh voice broke in. It belonged to a Canadian captain from Winnipeg, a very silent fellow who smoked shag tobacco.

'There's a lot of ghosts in this darned country,' he said.

Then he started to tell about what happened to him when his division was last back in rest billets. He had a staff job and put up with the divisional command at an old French chateau. They had only a little bit of the house; the rest was shut up, but the passages were so tortuous that it was difficult to keep from wandering into the unoccupied part. One night, he said, he woke with a mighty thirst, and, since he wasn't going to get cholera by drinking the local water in his bedroom, he started out for the room they messed in to try to pick up a whisky-and-soda. He couldn't find it, though he knew the road like his own name. He admitted he might have taken a wrong turning, but he didn't think so. Anyway he landed in a passage which he had never seen before, and, since he had no candle, he tried to retrace his steps. Again he went wrong, and groped on till he saw a faint light which he thought must be the room of the G.S.O., a good fellow and a friend of his. So he barged in, and found a big, dim salon with two figures in it and a lamp burning between them, and a queer, unpleasant smell about. He took a step forward, and then he saw that the figures had no faces. That fairly loosened his joints with fear, and he gave a cry. One of the two ran towards him, the lamp went out, and the sickly scent caught suddenly at his throat. After that he knew nothing till he awoke in his own bed next morning with a splitting headache. He said he got the General's permission and went over all the unoccupied part of the house, but he couldn't find the room. Dust lay thick on everything, and there was no sign of recent human presence.

I give the story as he told it in his drawling voice. 'I reckon that was the genuine article in ghosts. You don't believe me and conclude I was drunk? I wasn't. There isn't any drink concocted yet that could lay me out like that. I just struck a crack in the old universe and pushed my head outside. It may happen to you boys any day.'

The Highlander began to argue with him, and I lost interest in the talk. But one phrase brought me to attention. 'I'll give you the name of the darned place, and next time you're around you can do a bit of prospecting for yourself. It's called the Chateau of Eaucourt Sainte-Anne, about seven kilometres from Douvecourt. If I was purchasing real estate in this country I guess I'd give that location a miss.'

After that I had a grim month, what with the finish of Third Ypres and the hustles to Cambrai. By the middle of December we had shaken down a bit, but the line my division held was not of our choosing, and we had to keep a wary eye on the Boche doings. It was a weary job, and I had no time to think of anything but the military kind of intelligence — fixing the units against us from prisoners' stories, organizing small raids, and keeping the Royal Flying Corps busy. I was keen about the last, and I made several trips myself over the lines with Archie Roylance, who had got his heart's desire and by good luck belonged to the squadron just behind me. I said as little as possible about this, for G.H.Q. did not encourage divisional generals to practise such methods, though there was one famous army commander who made a hobby of them. It was on one of these trips that an incident occurred which brought my spell of waiting on the bigger game to an end.

One dull December day, just after luncheon, Archie and I set out to reconnoitre. You know the way that fogs in Picardy seem suddenly to reek out of the ground and envelop the slopes like a shawl. That was our luck this time. We had crossed the lines, flying very high, and received the usual salute of Hun Archies. After a mile or two the ground seemed to climb up to us, though we hadn't descended, and presently we were in the heart of a cold, clinging mist. We dived for several thousand feet, but the confounded thing grew thicker and no sort of landmark could be found anywhere. I thought if we went on at this rate we should hit a tree or a church steeple and be easy fruit for the enemy.

The same thought must have been in Archie's mind, for he climbed again. We got into a mortally cold zone, but the air was no clearer. Thereupon he decided to head for home, and passed me word to work out a compass course on the map. That was easier said than done, but I had a rough notion of the rate we had travelled since we had crossed the lines and I knew our original direction, so I did the best I could. On we went for a bit, and then I began to get doubtful. So did Archie. We dropped low down, but we could hear none of the row that's always going on for a mile on each side of the lines. The

world was very eerie and deadly still, so still that Archie and I could talk through the speaking-tube.

‘We’ve mislaid this blamed battle,’ he shouted.

‘I think your rotten old compass has soured on us,’ I replied.

We decided that it wouldn’t do to change direction, so we held on the same course. I was getting as nervous as a kitten, chiefly owing to the silence. It’s not what you expect in the middle of a battle-field . . . I looked at the compass carefully and saw that it was really crooked. Archie must have damaged it on a former flight and forgotten to have it changed.

He had a very scared face when I pointed this out.

‘Great God!’ he croaked — for he had a fearsome cold — ‘we’re either about Calais or near Paris or miles the wrong side of the Boche line. What the devil are we to do?’

And then to put the lid on it his engine went wrong. It was the same performance as on the Yorkshire moors, and seemed to be a speciality of the Shark–Gladys type. But this time the end came quick. We dived steeply, and I could see by Archie’s grip on the stick that he was going to have his work cut out to save our necks. Save them he did, but not by much for we jolted down on the edge of a ploughed field with a series of bumps that shook the teeth in my head. It was the same dense, dripping fog, and we crawled out of the old bus and bolted for cover like two ferreted rabbits.

Our refuge was the lee of a small copse.

‘It’s my opinion,’ said Archie solemnly, ‘that we’re somewhere about La Cateau. Tim Wilbraham got left there in the Retreat, and it took him nine months to make the Dutch frontier. It’s a giddy prospect, sir.’

I sallied out to reconnoitre. At the other side of the wood was a highway, and the fog so blanketed sound that I could not hear a man on it till I saw his face. The first one I saw made me lie flat in the covert . . . For he was a German soldier, field-grey, forage cap, red band and all, and he had a pick on his shoulder.

A second’s reflection showed me that this was not final proof. He might be one of our prisoners. But it was no place to take chances. I went back to Archie, and the pair of us crossed the ploughed field and struck the road farther on. There we saw a farmer’s cart with a woman and child in it. They looked French, but melancholy, just what you would expect from the inhabitants of a countryside in enemy occupation.

Then we came to the park wall of a great house, and saw dimly the outlines of a cottage. Here sooner or later we would get proof of our whereabouts, so we lay and shivered among the poplars of the roadside. No one seemed abroad that afternoon. For a quarter of an hour it was as quiet as the grave. Then came a sound of whistling, and muffled steps.

‘That’s an Englishman,’ said Archie joyfully. ‘No Boche could make such a beastly noise.’

He was right. The form of an Army Service Corps private emerged from the mist, his cap on the back of his head, his hands in his pockets, and his walk the walk of a free man. I never saw a welcomer sight than that jam-merchant.

We stood up and greeted him. ‘What’s this place?’ I shouted.

He raised a grubby hand to his forelock. ‘Ockott Saint Anny, sir,’ he said. ‘Beg pardon, sir, but you ain’t whurt, sir?’

Ten minutes later I was having tea in the mess of an M.T. workshop while Archie had gone to the nearest Signals to telephone for a car and give instructions about his precious bus. It was almost dark, but I gulped my tea and hastened out into the thick dusk. For I wanted to have a look at the Chateau.

I found a big entrance with high stone pillars, but the iron gates were locked and looked as if they had not been opened in the memory of man. Knowing the way of such places, I hunted for the side entrance and found a muddy road which led to the back of the house. The front was evidently towards a kind of park; at the back was a nest of outbuildings and a section of moat which looked very deep and black in the winter twilight. This was crossed by a stone bridge with a door at the end of it.

Clearly the Chateau was not being used for billets. There was no sign of the British soldier; there was no sign of anything human. I crept through the fog as noiselessly as if I trod on velvet, and I hadn’t even the company of my own footsteps. I remembered the Canadian’s ghost story, and concluded I would be imagining the same sort of thing if I lived in such a place.

The door was bolted and padlocked. I turned along the side of the moat, hoping to reach the house front, which was probably modern and boasted a civilized entrance. There must be somebody in the place, for one chimney was smoking. Presently the moat petered out, and gave place to a cobbled causeway, but a wall, running at right angles with the house,

blocked my way. I had half a mind to go back and hammer at the door, but I reflected that major-generals don't pay visits to deserted chateaux at night without a reasonable errand. I should look a fool in the eyes of some old concierge. The daylight was almost gone, and I didn't wish to go groping about the house with a candle.

But I wanted to see what was beyond the wall — one of those whims that beset the soberest men. I rolled a dissolute water-butt to the foot of it, and gingerly balanced myself on its rotten staves. This gave me a grip on the flat brick top, and I pulled myself up.

I looked down on a little courtyard with another wall beyond it, which shut off any view of the park. On the right was the Chateau, on the left more outbuildings; the whole place was not more than twenty yards each way. I was just about to retire by the road I had come, for in spite of my fur coat it was uncommon chilly on that perch, when I heard a key turn in the door in the Chateau wall beneath me.

A lantern made a blur of light in the misty darkness. I saw that the bearer was a woman, an oldish woman, round-shouldered like most French peasants. In one hand she carried a leather bag, and she moved so silently that she must have worn rubber boots. The light was held level with her head and illumined her face. It was the evillest thing I have ever beheld, for a horrible scar had puckered the skin of the forehead and drawn up the eyebrows so that it looked like some diabolical Chinese mask.

Slowly she padded across the yard, carrying the bag as gingerly as if it had been an infant. She stopped at the door of one of the outhouses and set down the lantern and her burden on the ground. From her apron she drew something which looked like a gas-mask, and put it over her head. She also put on a pair of long gauntlets. Then she unlocked the door, picked up the lantern and went in. I heard the key turn behind her.

Crouching on that wall, I felt a very ugly tremor run down my spine. I had a glimpse of what the Canadian's ghost might have been. That hag, hooded like some venomous snake, was too much for my stomach. I dropped off the wall and ran — yes, ran till I reached the highroad and saw the cheery headlights of a transport wagon, and heard the honest speech of the British soldier. That restored me to my senses, and made me feel every kind of a fool.

As I drove back to the line with Archie, I was black ashamed of my funk. I told myself that I had seen only an old countrywoman going to feed her hens. I convinced my reason, but I did not convince the whole of me. An insensate dread of the place hung around me, and I could only retrieve my self-respect by resolving to return and explore every nook of it.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE ADVENTURE OF THE PICARDY CHATEAU

I looked up Eaucourt Sainte-Anne on the map, and the more I studied its position the less I liked it. It was the knot from which sprang all the main routes to our Picardy front. If the Boche ever broke us, it was the place for which old Hindenburg would make. At all hours troops and transport trains were moving through that insignificant hamlet. Eminent generals and their staffs passed daily within sight of the Chateau. It was a convenient halting-place for battalions coming back to rest. Supposing, I argued, our enemies wanted a key-spot for some assault upon the morale or the discipline or health of the British Army, they couldn't find a better than Eaucourt Sainte-Anne. It was the ideal centre of espionage. But when I guardedly sounded my friends of the Intelligence they didn't seem to be worrying about it.

From them I got a chit to the local French authorities, and, as soon as we came out of the line, towards the end of December, I made straight for the country town of Douvecourt. By a bit of luck our divisional quarters were almost next door. I interviewed a tremendous swell in a black uniform and black kid gloves, who received me affably and put his archives and registers at my disposal. By this time I talked French fairly well, having a natural turn for languages, but half the rapid speech of the *sous-prifet* was lost on me. By and by he left me with the papers and a clerk, and I proceeded to grub up the history of the Chateau.

It had belonged since long before Agincourt to the noble house of the D'Eaucourts, now represented by an ancient Marquise who dwelt at Biarritz. She had never lived in the place, which a dozen years before had been falling to ruins, when a rich American leased it and partially restored it. He had soon got sick of it — his daughter had married a blackguard French cavalry officer with whom he quarrelled, said the clerk — and since then there had been several tenants. I wondered why a house so unattractive should have let so readily, but the clerk explained that the cause was the partridge-shooting. It was about the best in France, and in 1912 had shown the record bag.

The list of the tenants was before me. There was a second American, an Englishman called Halford, a Paris Jew-banker, and an Egyptian prince. But the space for 1913 was blank, and I asked the clerk about it. He told me that it had been taken by a woollen manufacturer from Lille, but he had never shot the partridges, though he had spent occasional nights in the house. He had a five years' lease, and was still paying rent to the Marquise. I asked the name, but the clerk had forgotten. 'It will be written there,' he said.

'But, no,' I said. 'Somebody must have been asleep over this register. There's nothing after 1912.'

He examined the page and blinked his eyes. 'Someone indeed must have slept. No doubt it was young Louis who is now with the guns in Champagne. But the name will be on the Commissary's list. It is, as I remember, a sort of Flemish.'

He hobbled off and returned in five minutes.

'Bommaerts,' he said, 'Jacques Bommaerts. A young man with no wife but with money — Dieu de Dieu, what oceans of it!'

That clerk got twenty-five francs, and he was cheap at the price. I went back to my division with a sense of awe on me. It was a marvellous fate that had brought me by odd routes to this out-of-the-way corner. First, the accident of Hamilton's seeing Gresson; then the night in the Clearing Station; last the mishap of Archie's plane getting lost in the fog. I had three grounds of suspicion — Gresson's sudden illness, the Canadian's ghost, and that horrid old woman in the dusk. And now I had one tremendous fact. The place was leased by a man called Bommaerts, and that was one of the two names I had heard whispered in that far-away cleft in the Coolin by the stranger from the sea.

A sensible man would have gone off to the contre-espionage people and told them his story. I couldn't do this; I felt that it was my own private find and I was going to do the prospecting myself. Every moment of leisure I had I was puzzling over the thing. I rode round by the Chateau one frosty morning and examined all the entrances. The main one was the grand avenue with the locked gates. That led straight to the front of the house where the terrace was — or you might call it the back, for the main door was on the other side. Anyhow the drive came up to the edge of the terrace and then split into two, one branch going to the stables by way of the outbuildings where I had seen the old woman, the other circling round the house, skirting the moat, and joining the back road just before the bridge. If I had gone to the right instead of the left

that first evening with Archie, I should have circumnavigated the place without any trouble.

Seen in the fresh morning light the house looked commonplace enough. Part of it was as old as Noah, but most was newish and jerry-built, the kind of flat-chested, thin French Chateau, all front and no depth, and full of draughts and smoky chimneys. I might have gone in and ransacked the place, but I knew I should find nothing. It was borne in on me that it was only when evening fell that that house was interesting and that I must come, like Nicodemus, by night. Besides I had a private account to settle with my conscience. I had funk'd the place in the foggy twilight, and it does not do to let a matter like that slide. A man's courage is like a horse that refuses a fence; you have got to take him by the head and cram him at it again. If you don't, he will funk worse next time. I hadn't enough courage to be able to take chances with it, though I was afraid of many things, the thing I feared most mortally was being afraid.

I did not get a chance till Christmas Eve. The day before there had been a fall of snow, but the frost set in and the afternoon ended in a green sunset with the earth crisp and crackling like a shark's skin. I dined early, and took with me Geordie Hamilton, who added to his many accomplishments that of driving a car. He was the only man in the B.E.F. who guessed anything of the game I was after, and I knew that he was as discreet as a tombstone. I put on my oldest trench cap, slacks, and a pair of scaife-soled boots, that I used to change into in the evening. I had a useful little electric torch, which lived in my pocket, and from which a cord led to a small bulb of light that worked with a switch and could be hung on my belt. That left my arms free in case of emergencies. Likewise I strapped on my pistol.

There was little traffic in the hamlet of Eaucourt Sainte-Anne that night. Few cars were on the road, and the M.T. detachment, judging from the din, seemed to be busy on a private spree. It was about nine o'clock when we turned into the side road, and at the entrance to it I saw a solid figure in khaki mounting guard beside two bicycles. Something in the man's gesture, as he saluted, struck me as familiar, but I had no time to hunt for casual memories. I left the car just short of the bridge, and took the road which would bring me to the terraced front of the house.

Once I turned the corner of the Chateau and saw the long ghostly facade white in the moonlight, I felt less confident. The eeriness of the place smote me. In that still, snowy world it loomed up immense and mysterious with its rows of shuttered windows, each with that air which empty houses have of concealing some wild story. I longed to have old Peter with me, for he was the man for this kind of escapade. I had heard that he had been removed to Switzerland and I pictured him now in some mountain village where the snow lay deep. I would have given anything to have had Peter with a whole leg by my side.

I stepped on the terrace and listened. There was not a sound in the world, not even the distant rumble of a cart. The pile towered above me like a mausoleum, and I reflected that it must take some nerve to burgle an empty house. It would be good enough fun to break into a bustling dwelling and pinch the plate when the folk were at dinner, but to burgle emptiness and silence meant a fight with the terrors in a man's soul. It was worse in my case, for I wasn't cheered with prospects of loot. I wanted to get inside chiefly to soothe my conscience.

I hadn't much doubt I would find a way, for three years of war and the frequent presence of untidy headquarters' staffs have loosened the joints of most Picardy houses. There's generally a window that doesn't latch or a door that doesn't bar. But I tried window after window on the terrace without result. The heavy green sun-shutters were down over each, and when I broke the hinges of one there was a long bar within to hold it firm. I was beginning to think of shinning up a rain-pipe and trying the second floor, when a shutter I had laid hold on swung back in my hand. It had been left unfastened, and, kicking the snow from my boots, I entered a room.

A gleam of moonlight followed me and I saw I was in a big salon with a polished wood floor and dark lumps of furniture swathed in sheets. I clicked the bulb at my belt, and the little circle of light showed a place which had not been dwelt in for years. At the far end was another door, and as I tiptoed towards it something caught my eye on the parquet. It was a piece of fresh snow like that which clumps on the heel of a boot. I had not brought it there. Some other visitor had passed this way, and not long before me.

Very gently I opened the door and slipped in. In front of me was a pile of furniture which made a kind of screen, and behind that I halted and listened. There was somebody in the room. I heard the sound of human breathing and soft movements; the man, whoever he was, was at the far end from me, and though there was a dim glow of Moon through a broken shutter I could see nothing of what he was after. I was beginning to enjoy myself now. I knew of his presence and he did not know of mine, and that is the sport of stalking.

An unwary movement of my hand caused the screen to creak. Instantly the movements ceased and there was utter silence. I held my breath, and after a second or two the tiny sounds began again. I had a feeling, though my eyes could not assure me, that the man before me was at work, and was using a very small shaded torch. There was just the faintest moving shimmer on the wall beyond, though that might come from the crack of moonlight.

Apparently he was reassured, for his movements became more distinct. There was a jar as if a table had been pushed back. Once more there was silence, and I heard only the intake of breath. I have very quick ears, and to me it sounded as if the man was rattled. The breathing was quick and anxious.

Suddenly it changed and became the ghost of a whistle — the kind of sound one makes with the lips and teeth without ever letting the tune break out clear. We all do it when we are preoccupied with something — shaving, or writing letters, or reading the newspaper. But I did not think my man was preoccupied. He was whistling to quiet fluttering nerves.

Then I caught the air. It was 'Cherry Ripe'.

In a moment, from being hugely at my ease, I became the nervous one. I had been playing peep-bo with the unseen, and the tables were turned. My heart beat against my ribs like a hammer. I shuffled my feet, and again there fell the tense silence.

'Mary,' I said — and the word seemed to explode like a bomb in the stillness — 'Mary! It's me — Dick Hannay.'

There was no answer but a sob and the sound of a timid step.

I took four paces into the darkness and caught in my arms a trembling girl . . .

Often in the last months I had pictured the kind of scene which would be the culminating point of my life. When our work was over and war had been forgotten, somewhere — perhaps in a green Cotswold meadow or in a room of an old manor — I would talk with Mary. By that time we should know each other well and I would have lost my shyness. I would try to tell her that I loved her, but whenever I thought of what I should say my heart sank, for I knew I would make a fool of myself. You can't live my kind of life for forty years wholly among men and be of any use at pretty speeches to women. I knew I should stutter and blunder, and I used despairingly to invent impossible situations where I might make my love plain to her without words by some piece of melodramatic sacrifice.

But the kind Fates had saved me the trouble. Without a syllable save Christian names stammered in that eerie darkness we had come to complete understanding. The fairies had been at work unseen, and the thoughts of each of us had been moving towards the other, till love had germinated like a seed in the dark. As I held her in my arms I stroked her hair and murmured things which seemed to spring out of some ancestral memory. Certainly my tongue had never used them before, nor my mind imagined them . . . By and by she slipped her arms round my neck and with a half sob strained towards me. She was still trembling.

'Dick,' she said, and to hear that name on her lips was the sweetest thing I had ever known. 'Dick, is it really you? Tell me I'm not dreaming.'

'It's me, sure enough, Mary dear. And now I have found you I will never let you go again. But, my precious child, how on earth did you get here?'

She disengaged herself and let her little electric torch wander over my rough habiliments.

'You look a tremendous warrior, Dick. I have never seen you like this before. I was in Doubting Castle and very much afraid of Giant Despair, till you came.'

'I think I call it the Interpreter's House,' I said.

'It's the house of somebody we both know,' she went on. 'He calls himself Bommaerts here. That was one of the two names, you remember. I have seen him since in Paris. Oh, it is a long story and you shall hear it all soon. I knew he came here sometimes, so I came here too. I have been nursing for the last fortnight at the Douvecourt Hospital only four miles away.'

'But what brought you alone at night?'

'Madness, I think. Vanity, too. You see I had found out a good deal, and I wanted to find out the one vital thing which had puzzled Mr Blenkiron. I told myself it was foolish, but I couldn't keep away. And then my courage broke down, and before you came I would have screamed at the sound of a mouse. If I hadn't whistled I would have cried.'

'But why alone and at this hour?'

'I couldn't get off in the day. And it was safest to come alone. You see he is in love with me, and when he heard I was coming to Douvecourt forgot his caution and proposed to meet me here. He said he was going on a long journey and wanted to say goodbye. If he had found me alone — well, he would have said goodbye. If there had been anyone with me, he would have suspected, and he mustn't suspect me. Mr Blenkiron says that would be fatal to his great plan. He believes I am like my aunts, and that I think him an apostle of peace working by his own methods against the stupidity and wickedness of all the Governments. He talks more bitterly about Germany than about England. He had told me how he had to disguise himself and play many parts on his mission, and of course I have applauded him. Oh, I have had a difficult autumn.'

'Mary,' I cried, 'tell me you hate him.'

'No,' she said quietly. 'I do not hate him. I am keeping that for later. I fear him desperately. Some day when we have broken him utterly I will hate him, and drive all likeness of him out of my memory like an unclean thing. But till then I won't waste energy on hate. We want to hoard every atom of our strength for the work of beating him.'

She had won back her composure, and I turned on my light to look at her. She was in nurses' outdoor uniform, and I thought her eyes seemed tired. The priceless gift that had suddenly come to me had driven out all recollection of my own errand. I thought of Ivery only as a would-be lover of Mary, and forgot the manufacturer from Lille who had rented his house for the partridge-shooting. 'And you, Dick,' she asked; 'is it part of a general's duties to pay visits at night to empty houses?'

'I came to look for traces of M. Bommaerts. I, too, got on his track from another angle, but that story must wait.'

'You observe that he has been here today?'

She pointed to some cigarette ash spilled on the table edge, and a space on its surface cleared from dust. 'In a place like this the dust would settle again in a few hours, and that is quite clean. I should say he has been here just after luncheon.'

'Great Scott!' I cried, 'what a close shave! I'm in the mood at this moment to shoot him at sight. You say you saw him in Paris and knew his lair. Surely you had a good enough case to have him collared.'

She shook her head. 'Mr Blenkiron — he's in Paris too — wouldn't hear of it. He hasn't just figured the thing out yet, he says. We've identified one of your names, but we're still in doubt about Chelius.'

'Ah, Chelius! Yes, I see. We must get the whole business complete before we strike. Has old Blenkiron had any luck?'

'Your guess about the "Deep-breathing" advertisement was very clever, Dick. It was true, and it may give us Chelius. I must leave Mr Blenkiron to tell you how. But the trouble is this. We know something of the doings of someone who may be Chelius, but we can't link them with Ivery. We know that Ivery is Bommaerts, and our hope is to link Bommaerts with Chelius. That's why I came here. I was trying to burgle this *escritoire* in an amateur way. It's a bad piece of fake Empire and deserves smashing.'

I could see that Mary was eager to get my mind back to business, and with some difficulty I clambered down from the exultant heights. The intoxication of the thing was on me — the winter night, the circle of light in that dreary room, the sudden coming together of two souls from the ends of the earth, the realization of my wildest hopes, the gilding and glorifying of all the future. But she had always twice as much wisdom as me, and we were in the midst of a campaign which had no use for day-dreaming. I turned my attention to the desk.

It was a flat table with drawers, and at the back a half-circle of more drawers with a central cupboard. I tilted it up and most of the drawers slid out, empty of anything but dust. I forced two open with my knife and they held empty cigar boxes. Only the cupboard remained, and that appeared to be locked. I wedged a key from my pocket into its keyhole, but the thing would not budge.

'It's no good,' I said. 'He wouldn't leave anything he valued in a place like this. That sort of fellow doesn't take risks. If he wanted to hide something there are a hundred holes in this Chateau which would puzzle the best detective.'

'Can't you open it?' she asked. 'I've a fancy about that table. He was sitting here this afternoon and he may be coming back.'

I solved the problem by turning up the *escritoire* and putting my knee through the cupboard door. Out of it tumbled a little dark-green *attache* case.

'This is getting solemn,' said Mary. 'Is it locked?'

It was, but I took my knife and cut the lock out and spilled the contents on the table. There were some papers, a newspaper or two, and a small bag tied with black cord. The last I opened, while Mary looked over my shoulder. It contained a fine yellowish powder.

‘Stand back,’ I said harshly. ‘For God’s sake, stand back and don’t breathe.’

With trembling hands I tied up the bag again, rolled it in a newspaper, and stuffed it into my pocket. For I remembered a day near Peronne when a Boche plane had come over in the night and had dropped little bags like this. Happily they were all collected, and the men who found them were wise and took them off to the nearest laboratory. They proved to be full of anthrax germs . . .

I remembered how Eaucourt Sainte-Anne stood at the junction of a dozen roads where all day long troops passed to and from the lines. From such a vantage ground an enemy could wreck the health of an army . . .

I remembered the woman I had seen in the courtyard of this house in the foggy dusk, and I knew now why she had worn a gas-mask.

This discovery gave me a horrid shock. I was brought down with a crash from my high sentiment to something earthly and devilish. I was fairly well used to Boche filthiness, but this seemed too grim a piece of the utterly damnable. I wanted to have Ivery by the throat and force the stuff into his body, and watch him decay slowly into the horror he had contrived for honest men.

‘Let’s get out of this infernal place,’ I said.

But Mary was not listening. She had picked up one of the newspapers and was gloating over it. I looked and saw that it was open at an advertisement of Weissmann’s ‘Deep-breathing’ system.

‘Oh, look, Dick,’ she cried breathlessly.

The column of type had little dots made by a red pencil below certain words.

‘It’s it,’ she whispered, ‘it’s the cipher — I’m almost sure it’s the cipher!’

‘Well, he’d be likely to know it if anyone did.’

‘But don’t you see it’s the cipher which Chelius uses — the man in Switzerland? Oh, I can’t explain now, for it’s very long, but I think — I think — I have found out what we have all been wanting. Chelius . . .’

‘Whisht!’ I said. ‘What’s that?’

There was a queer sound from the out-of-doors as if a sudden wind had risen in the still night.

‘It’s only a car on the main road,’ said Mary.

‘How did you get in?’ I asked.

‘By the broken window in the next room. I cycled out here one morning, and walked round the place and found the broken catch.’

‘Perhaps it is left open on purpose. That may be the way M. Bommaerts visits his country home . . . Let’s get off, Mary, for this place has a curse on it. It deserves fire from heaven.’

I slipped the contents of the attache case into my pockets. ‘I’m going to drive you back,’ I said. ‘I’ve got a car out there.’

‘Then you must take my bicycle and my servant too. He’s an old friend of yours — one Andrew Amos.’

‘Now how on earth did Andrew get over here?’

‘He’s one of us,’ said Mary, laughing at my surprise. ‘A most useful member of our party, at present disguised as an *infirmier* in Lady Manorwater’s Hospital at Douvecourt. He is learning French, and . . .’

‘Hush!’ I whispered. ‘There’s someone in the next room.’

I swept her behind a stack of furniture, with my eyes glued on a crack of light below the door. The handle turned and the shadows raced before a big electric lamp of the kind they have in stables. I could not see the bearer, but I guessed it was the old woman.

There was a man behind her. A brisk step sounded on the parquet, and a figure brushed past her. It wore the horizon-blue of a French officer, very smart, with those French riding-boots that show the shape of the leg, and a handsome fur-lined pelisse. I would have called him a young man, not more than thirty-five. The face was brown and clean-shaven, the eyes bright and masterful . . . Yet he did not deceive me. I had not boasted idly to Sir Walter when I said that there was one

man alive who could never again be mistaken by me.

I had my hand on my pistol, as I motioned Mary farther back into the shadows. For a second I was about to shoot. I had a perfect mark and could have put a bullet through his brain with utter certitude. I think if I had been alone I might have fired. Perhaps not. Anyhow now I could not do it. It seemed like potting at a sitting rabbit. I was obliged, though he was my worst enemy, to give him a chance, while all the while my sober senses kept calling me a fool.

I stepped into the light.

‘Hullo, Mr Ivery,’ I said. ‘This is an odd place to meet again!’

In his amazement he fell back a step, while his hungry eyes took in my face. There was no mistake about the recognition. I saw something I had seen once before in him, and that was fear. Out went the light and he sprang for the door.

I fired in the dark, but the shot must have been too high. In the same instant I heard him slip on the smooth parquet and the tinkle of glass as the broken window swung open. Hastily I reflected that his car must be at the moat end of the terrace, and that therefore to reach it he must pass outside this very room. Seizing the damaged escritoire, I used it as a ram, and charged the window nearest me. The panes and shutters went with a crash, for I had driven the thing out of its rotten frame. The next second I was on the moonlit snow.

I got a shot at him as he went over the terrace, and again I went wide. I never was at my best with a pistol. Still I reckoned I had got him, for the car which was waiting below must come back by the moat to reach the highroad. But I had forgotten the great closed park gates. Somehow or other they must have been opened, for as soon as the car started it headed straight for the grand avenue. I tried a couple of long-range shots after it, and one must have damaged either Ivery or his chauffeur, for there came back a cry of pain.

I turned in deep chagrin to find Mary beside me. She was bubbling with laughter.

‘Were you ever a cinema actor, Dick? The last two minutes have been a really high-class performance. “Featuring Mary Lamington.” How does the jargon go?’

‘I could have got him when he first entered,’ I said ruefully.

‘I know,’ she said in a graver tone. ‘Only of course you couldn’t . . . Besides, Mr Blenkiron doesn’t want it — yet.’

She put her hand on my arm. ‘Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t written it should happen that way. It would have been too easy. We have a long road to travel yet before we clip the wings of the Wild Birds.’

‘Look,’ I cried. ‘The fire from heaven!’

Red tongues of flame were shooting up from the out-buildings at the farther end, the place where I had first seen the woman. Some agreed plan must have been acted on, and Ivery was destroying all traces of his infamous yellow powder. Even now the concierge with her odds and ends of belongings would be slipping out to some refuge in the village.

In the still dry night the flames rose, for the place must have been made ready for a rapid burning. As I hurried Mary round the moat I could see that part of the main building had caught fire. The hamlet was awakened, and before we reached the corner of the highroad sleepy British soldiers were hurrying towards the scene, and the Town Major was mustering the fire brigade. I knew that Ivery had laid his plans well, and that they hadn’t a chance — that long before dawn the Chateau of Eaucourt Sainte-Anne would be a heap of ashes and that in a day or two the lawyers of the aged Marquise at Biarritz would be wrangling with the insurance company.

At the corner stood Amos beside two bicycles, solid as a graven image. He recognized me with a gap-toothed grin.

‘It’s a cauld night, General, but the home fires keep burnin’. I havena seen such a cheery lowe since Dickson’s mill at Gawly.’

We packed, bicycles and all, into my car with Amos wedged in the narrow seat beside Hamilton. Recognizing a fellow countryman, he gave thanks for the lift in the broadest Doric. ‘For,’ said he, ‘I’m not what you would call a practised hand wi’ a velocipede, and my feet are dinnled wi’ standin’ in the snaw.’

As for me, the miles to Douvecourt passed as in a blissful moment of time. I wrapped Mary in a fur rug, and after that we did not speak a word. I had come suddenly into a great possession and was dazed with the joy of it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MR BLENKIRON DISCOURSES ON LOVE AND WAR

Three days later I got my orders to report at Paris for special service. They came none too soon, for I chafed at each hour's delay. Every thought in my head was directed to the game which we were playing against Ivery. He was the big enemy, compared to whom the ordinary Boche in the trenches was innocent and friendly. I had almost lost interest in my division, for I knew that for me the real battle-front was not in Picardy, and that my job was not so easy as holding a length of line. Also I longed to be at the same work as Mary.

I remember waking up in billets the morning after the night at the Chateau with the feeling that I had become extraordinarily rich. I felt very humble, too, and very kindly towards all the world — even to the Boche, though I can't say I had ever hated him very wildly. You find hate more among journalists and politicians at home than among fighting men. I wanted to be quiet and alone to think, and since that was impossible I went about my work in a happy abstraction. I tried not to look ahead, but only to live in the present, remembering that a war was on, and that there was desperate and dangerous business before me, and that my hopes hung on a slender thread. Yet for all that I had sometimes to let my fancies go free, and revel in delicious dreams.

But there was one thought that always brought me back to hard ground, and that was Ivery. I do not think I hated anybody in the world but him. It was his relation to Mary that stung me. He had the insolence with all his toad-like past to make love to that clean and radiant girl. I felt that he and I stood as mortal antagonists, and the thought pleased me, for it helped me to put some honest detestation into my job. Also I was going to win. Twice I had failed, but the third time I should succeed. It had been like ranging shots for a gun — first short, second over, and I vowed that the third should be dead on the mark.

I was summoned to G.H.Q., where I had half an hour's talk with the greatest British commander. I can see yet his patient, kindly face and that steady eye which no vicissitude of fortune could perturb. He took the biggest view, for he was statesman as well as soldier, and knew that the whole world was one battle-field and every man and woman among the combatant nations was in the battle-line. So contradictory is human nature, that talk made me wish for a moment to stay where I was. I wanted to go on serving under that man. I realized suddenly how much I loved my work, and when I got back to my quarters that night and saw my men swinging in from a route march I could have howled like a dog at leaving them. Though I say it who shouldn't, there wasn't a better division in the Army.

One morning a few days later I picked up Mary in Amiens. I always liked the place, for after the dirt of the Somme it was a comfort to go there for a bath and a square meal, and it had the noblest church that the hand of man ever built for God. It was a clear morning when we started from the boulevard beside the railway station; and the air smelt of washed streets and fresh coffee, and women were going marketing and the little trams ran clanking by, just as in any other city far from the sound of guns. There was very little khaki or horizon-blue about, and I remember thinking how completely Amiens had got out of the war-zone. Two months later it was a different story.

To the end I shall count that day as one of the happiest in my life. Spring was in the air, though the trees and fields had still their winter colouring. A thousand good fresh scents came out of the earth, and the larks were busy over the new furrows. I remember that we ran up a little glen, where a stream spread into pools among shallows, and the roadside trees were heavy with mistletoe. On the tableland beyond the Somme valley the sun shone like April. At Beauvais we lunched badly in an inn — badly as to food, but there was an excellent Burgundy at two francs a bottle. Then we slipped down through little flat-chested townships to the Seine, and in the late afternoon passed through St Germain's forest. The wide green spaces among the trees set my fancy dwelling on that divine English countryside where Mary and I would one day make our home. She had been in high spirits all the journey, but when I spoke of the Cotswolds her face grew grave.

'Don't let us speak of it, Dick,' she said. 'It's too happy a thing and I feel as if it would wither if we touched it. I don't let myself think of peace and home, for it makes me too homesick . . . I think we shall get there some day, you and I . . . but it's a long road to the Delectable Mountains, and Faithful, you know, has to die first . . . There is a price to be paid.'

The words sobered me.

‘Who is our Faithful?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. But he was the best of the Pilgrims.’

Then, as if a veil had lifted, her mood changed, and when we came through the suburbs of Paris and swung down the Champs Elysees she was in a holiday humour. The lights were twinkling in the blue January dusk, and the warm breath of the city came to greet us. I knew little of the place, for I had visited it once only on a four days’ Paris leave, but it had seemed to me then the most habitable of cities, and now, coming from the battle-field with Mary by my side, it was like the happy ending of a dream.

I left her at her cousin’s house near the Rue St Honore, and deposited myself, according to instructions, at the Hotel Louis Quinze. There I wallowed in a hot bath, and got into the civilian clothes which had been sent on from London. They made me feel that I had taken leave of my division for good and all this time. Blenkiron had a private room, where we were to dine; and a more wonderful litter of books and cigar boxes I have never seen, for he hadn’t a notion of tidiness. I could hear him grunting at his toilet in the adjacent bedroom, and I noticed that the table was laid for three. I went downstairs to get a paper, and on the way ran into Launcelot Wake.

He was no longer a private in a Labour Battalion. Evening clothes showed beneath his overcoat. ‘Hullo, Wake, are you in this push too?’

‘I suppose so,’ he said, and his manner was not cordial. ‘Anyhow I was ordered down here. My business is to do as I am told.’

‘Coming to dine?’ I asked.

‘No. I’m dining with some friends at the Crillon.’

Then he looked me in the face, and his eyes were hot as I first remembered them. ‘I hear I’ve to congratulate you, Hannay,’ and he held out a limp hand.

I never felt more antagonism in a human being.

‘You don’t like it?’ I said, for I guessed what he meant.

‘How on earth can I like it?’ he cried angrily. ‘Good Lord, man, you’ll murder her soul. You an ordinary, stupid, successful fellow and she — she’s the most precious thing God ever made. You can never understand a fraction of her preciousness, but you’ll clip her wings all right. She can never fly now . . .’

He poured out this hysterical stuff to me at the foot of the staircase within hearing of an elderly French widow with a poodle. I had no impulse to be angry, for I was far too happy.

‘Don’t, Wake,’ I said. ‘We’re all too close together to quarrel. I’m not fit to black Mary’s shoes. You can’t put me too low or her too high. But I’ve at least the sense to know it. You couldn’t want me to be humbler than I felt.’

He shrugged his shoulders, as he went out to the street. ‘Your infernal magnanimity would break any man’s temper.’

I went upstairs to find Blenkiron, washed and shaven, admiring a pair of bright patent-leather shoes.

‘Why, Dick, I’ve been wearying bad to see you. I was nervous you would be blown to glory, for I’ve been reading awful things about your battles in the noospapers. The war correspondents worry me so I can’t take breakfast.’

He mixed cocktails and clinked his glass on mine. ‘Here’s to the young lady. I was trying to write her a pretty little sonnet, but the darned rhymes wouldn’t fit. I’ve gotten a heap of things to say to you when we’ve finished dinner.’

Mary came in, her cheeks bright from the weather, and Blenkiron promptly fell abashed. But she had a way to meet his shyness, for, when he began an embarrassed speech of good wishes, she put her arms round his neck and kissed him. Oddly enough, that set him completely at his ease.

It was pleasant to eat off linen and china again, pleasant to see old Blenkiron’s benignant face and the way he tucked into his food, but it was delicious for me to sit at a meal with Mary across the table. It made me feel that she was really mine, and not a pixie that would vanish at a word. To Blenkiron she bore herself like an affectionate but mischievous daughter, while the desperately refined manners that afflicted him whenever women were concerned mellowed into something like his everyday self. They did most of the talking, and I remember he fetched from some mysterious hiding-place a great box of chocolates, which you could no longer buy in Paris, and the two ate them like spoiled children. I didn’t want to talk, for it was pure happiness for me to look on. I loved to watch her, when the servants had gone, with her elbows on the table like a schoolboy, her crisp gold hair a little rumpled, cracking walnuts with gusto, like some child who has been

allowed down from the nursery for dessert and means to make the most of it.

With his first cigar Blenkiron got to business.

'You want to know about the staff-work we've been busy on at home. Well, it's finished now, thanks to you, Dick. We weren't getting on very fast till you took to perusing the press on your sick-bed and dropped us that hint about the "Deep-breathing" ads.'

'Then there was something in it?' I asked.

'There was black hell in it. There wasn't any Gussiter, but there was a mighty fine little syndicate of crooks with old man Gresson at the back of them. First thing, I started out to get the cipher. It took some looking for, but there's no cipher on earth can't be got hold of somehow if you know it's there, and in this case we were helped a lot by the return messages in the German papers. It was bad stuff when we read it, and explained the darned leakages in important noos we've been up against. At first I figured to keep the thing going and turn Gussiter into a corporation with John S. Blenkiron as president. But it wouldn't do, for at the first hint of tampering with their communications the whole bunch got skeery and sent out SOS signals. So we tenderly plucked the flowers.'

'Gresson, too?' I asked.

He nodded. 'I guess your seafaring companion's now under the sod. We had collected enough evidence to hang him ten times over . . . But that was the least of it. For your little old cipher, Dick, gave us a line on Ivery.'

I asked how, and Blenkiron told me the story. He had about a dozen cross-bearings proving that the organization of the 'Deep-breathing' game had its headquarters in Switzerland. He suspected Ivery from the first, but the man had vanished out of his ken, so he started working from the other end, and instead of trying to deduce the Swiss business from Ivery he tried to deduce Ivery from the Swiss business. He went to Berne and made a conspicuous public fool of himself for several weeks. He called himself an agent of the American propaganda there, and took some advertising space in the press and put in spread-eagle announcements of his mission, with the result that the Swiss Government threatened to turn him out of the country if he tampered that amount with their neutrality. He also wrote a lot of rot in the Geneva newspapers, which he paid to have printed, explaining how he was a pacifist, and was going to convert Germany to peace by 'inspirational advertisement of pure-minded war aims'. All this was in keeping with his English reputation, and he wanted to make himself a bait for Ivery.

But Ivery did not rise to the fly, and though he had a dozen agents working for him on the quiet he could never hear of the name Chelius. That was, he reckoned, a very private and particular name among the Wild Birds. However, he got to know a good deal about the Swiss end of the 'Deep-breathing' business. That took some doing and cost a lot of money. His best people were a girl who posed as a mannequin in a milliner's shop in Lyons and a concierge in a big hotel at St Moritz. His most important discovery was that there was a second cipher in the return messages sent from Switzerland, different from the one that the Gussiter lot used in England. He got this cipher, but though he could read it he couldn't make anything out of it. He concluded that it was a very secret means of communication between the inner circle of the Wild Birds, and that Ivery must be at the back of it . . . But he was still a long way from finding out anything that mattered.

Then the whole situation changed, for Mary got in touch with Ivery. I must say she behaved like a shameless minx, for she kept on writing to him to an address he had once given her in Paris, and suddenly she got an answer. She was in Paris herself, helping to run one of the railway canteens, and staying with her French cousins, the de Mezieres. One day he came to see her. That showed the boldness of the man, and his cleverness, for the whole secret police of France were after him and they never got within sight or sound. Yet here he was coming openly in the afternoon to have tea with an English girl. It showed another thing, which made me blaspheme. A man so resolute and single-hearted in his job must have been pretty badly in love to take a risk like that.

He came, and he called himself the Capitaine Bommaerts, with a transport job on the staff of the French G.Q.G. He was on the staff right enough too. Mary said that when she heard that name she nearly fell down. He was quite frank with her, and she with him. They are both peacemakers, ready to break the laws of any land for the sake of a great ideal. Goodness knows what stuff they talked together. Mary said she would blush to think of it till her dying day, and I gathered that on her side it was a mixture of Launcelot Wake at his most pedantic and schoolgirl silliness.

He came again, and they met often, unbeknown to the decorous Madame de Mezieres. They walked together in the Bois de Boulogne, and once, with a beating heart, she motored with him to Auteuil for luncheon. He spoke of his house in

Picardy, and there were moments, I gathered, when he became the declared lover, to be rebuffed with a hoydenish shyness. Presently the pace became too hot, and after some anguished arguments with Bullivant on the long-distance telephone she went off to Douvecourt to Lady Manorwater's hospital. She went there to escape from him, but mainly, I think, to have a look — trembling in every limb, mind you — at the Chateau of Eaucourt Sainte-Anne.

I had only to think of Mary to know just what Joan of Arc was. No man ever born could have done that kind of thing. It wasn't recklessness. It was sheer calculating courage.

Then Blenkiron took up the tale. The newspaper we found that Christmas Eve in the Chateau was of tremendous importance, for Bommaerts had pricked out in the advertisement the very special second cipher of the Wild Birds. That proved that Ivery was at the back of the Swiss business. But Blenkiron made doubly sure.

'I considered the time had come,' he said, 'to pay high for valuable noos, so I sold the enemy a very pretty de-vice. If you ever gave your mind to ciphers and illicit correspondence, Dick, you would know that the one kind of document you can't write on in invisible ink is a coated paper, the kind they use in the weeklies to print photographs of leading actresses and the stately homes of England. Anything wet that touches it corrugates the surface a little, and you can tell with a microscope if someone's been playing at it. Well, we had the good fortune to discover just how to get over that little difficulty — how to write on glazed paper with a quill so as the cutest analyst couldn't spot it, and likewise how to detect the writing. I decided to sacrifice that invention, casting my bread upon the waters and looking for a good-sized bakery in return . . . I had it sold to the enemy. The job wanted delicate handling, but the tenth man from me — he was an Austrian Jew — did the deal and scooped fifty thousand dollars out of it. Then I lay low to watch how my friend would use the de-vice, and I didn't wait long.'

He took from his pocket a folded sheet of *L'Illustration*. Over a photogravure plate ran some words in a large sprawling hand, as if written with a brush.

'That page when I got it yesterday,' he said, 'was an unassuming picture of General Petain presenting military medals. There wasn't a scratch or a ripple on its surface. But I got busy with it, and see there!'

He pointed out two names. The writing was a set of key-words we did not know, but two names stood out which I knew too well. They were 'Bommaerts' and 'Chelius'.

'My God!' I cried, 'that's uncanny. It only shows that if you chew long enough —'

'Dick,' said Mary, 'you mustn't say that again. At the best it's an ugly metaphor, and you're making it a platitude.'

'Who is Ivery anyhow?' I asked. 'Do you know more about him than we knew in the summer? Mary, what did Bommaerts pretend to be?'

'An Englishman.' Mary spoke in the most matter-of-fact tone, as if it were a perfectly usual thing to be made love to by a spy, and that rather soothed my annoyance. 'When he asked me to marry him he proposed to take me to a country-house in Devonshire. I rather think, too, he had a place in Scotland. But of course he's a German.'

'Ye-es,' said Blenkiron slowly, 'I've got on to his record, and it isn't a pretty story. It's taken some working out, but I've got all the links tested now . . . He's a Boche and a large-sized nobleman in his own state. Did you ever hear of the Graf von Schwabing?'

I shook my head.

'I think I have heard Uncle Charlie speak of him,' said Mary, wrinkling her brows. 'He used to hunt with the Pytchley.'

'That's the man. But he hasn't troubled the Pytchley for the last eight years. There was a time when he was the last thing in smartness in the German court — officer in the Guards, ancient family, rich, darned clever — all the fixings. Kaiser liked him, and it's easy to see why. I guess a man who had as many personalities as the Graf was amusing after-dinner company. Specially among the Germans, who in my experience don't excel in the lighter vein. Anyway, he was William's white-headed boy, and there wasn't a mother with a daughter who wasn't out gunning for Otto von Schwabing. He was about as popular in London and Noo York — and in Paris, too. Ask Sir Walter about him, Dick. He says he had twice the brains of Kuhlmann, and better manners than the Austrian fellow he used to yarn about . . . Well, one day there came an almighty court scandal, and the bottom dropped out of the Graf's World. It was a pretty beastly story, and I don't gather that Schwabing was as deep in it as some others. But the trouble was that those others had to be shielded at all costs, and Schwabing was made the scapegoat. His name came out in the papers and he had to go.'

'What was the case called?' I asked.

Blenkiron mentioned a name, and I knew why the word Schwabbiog was familiar. I had read the story long ago in Rhodesia.

'It was some smash,' Blenkiron went on. 'He was drummed out of the Guards, out of the clubs, out of the country . . . Now, how would you have felt, Dick, if you had been the Graf? Your life and work and happiness crossed out, and all to save a mangy princeling. "Bitter as hell," you say. Hungering for a chance to put it across the lot that had outed you? You wouldn't rest till you had William sobbing on his knees asking your pardon, and you not thinking of granting it? That's the way you'd feel, but that wasn't the Graf's way, and what's more it isn't the German way. He went into exile hating humanity, and with a heart all poison and snakes, but itching to get back. And I'll tell you why. It's because his kind of German hasn't got any other home on this earth. Oh, yes, I know there's stacks of good old Teutons come and squat in our little country and turn into fine Americans. You can do a lot with them if you catch them young and teach them the Declaration of Independence and make them study our Sunday papers. But you can't deny there's something comic in the rough about all Germans, before you've civilized them. They're a peccoliar people, a darned peccoliar people, else they wouldn't staff all the menial and indecent occupations on the globe. But that peccoliarity, which is only skin-deep in the working Boche, is in the bone of the grandee. Your German aristocracy can't consort on terms of equality with any other Upper Ten Thousand. They swagger and bluff about the world, but they know very well that the world's sniggering at them. They're like a boss from Salt Creek Gully who's made his pile and bought a dress suit and dropped into a Newport evening party. They don't know where to put their hands or how to keep their feet still . . . Your copper-bottomed English nobleman has got to keep jogging himself to treat them as equals instead of sending them down to the servants' hall. Their fine fixings are just the high light that reveals the everlasting jay. They can't be gentlemen, because they aren't sure of themselves. The world laughs at them, and they know it and it riles them like hell . . . That's why when a Graf is booted out of the Fatherland, he's got to creep back somehow or be a wandering Jew for the rest of time.'

Blenkiron lit another cigar and fixed me with his steady, ruminating eye.

'For eight years the man has slaved, body and soul, for the men who degraded him. He's earned his restoration and I daresay he's got it in his pocket. If merit was rewarded he should be covered with Iron Crosses and Red Eagles . . . He had a pretty good hand to start out with. He knew other countries and he was a dandy at languages. More, he had an uncommon gift for living a part. That is real genius, Dick, however much it gets up against us. Best of all he had a first-class outfit of brains. I can't say I ever struck a better, and I've come across some bright citizens in my time . . . And now he's going to win out, unless we get mighty busy.'

There was a knock at the door and the solid figure of Andrew Amos revealed itself.

'It's time ye was home, Miss Mary. It chappit half-eleven as I came up the stairs. It's comin' on to rain, so I've brought an umbrelly.'

'One word,' I said. 'How old is the man?'

'Just gone thirty-six,' Blenkiron replied.

I turned to Mary, who nodded. 'Younger than you, Dick,' she said wickedly as she got into her big Jaeger coat.

'I'm going to see you home,' I said.

'Not allowed. You've had quite enough of my society for one day. Andrew's on escort duty tonight.'

Blenkiron looked after her as the door closed.

'I reckon you've got the best girl in the world.'

'Ivery thinks the same,' I said grimly, for my detestation of the man who had made love to Mary fairly choked me.

'You can see why. Here's this degenerate coming out of his rotten class, all pampered and petted and satiated with the easy pleasures of life. He has seen nothing of women except the bad kind and the overfed specimens of his own country. I hate being impolite about females, but I've always considered the German variety uncommon like cows. He has had desperate years of intrigue and danger, and consorting with every kind of scallawag. Remember, he's a big man and a poet, with a brain and an imagination that takes every grade without changing gears. Suddenly he meets something that is as fresh and lovely as a spring flower, and has wits too, and the steeliest courage, and yet is all youth and gaiety. It's a new experience for him, a kind of revelation, and he's big enough to value her as she should be valued . . . No, Dick, I can understand you getting cross, but I reckon it an item to the man's credit.'

'It's his blind spot all the same,' I said.

‘His blind spot,’ Blenkiron repeated solemnly, ‘and, please God, we’re going to remember that.’

Next morning in miserable sloppy weather Blenkiron carted me about Paris. We climbed five sets of stairs to a flat away up in Montmartre, where I was talked to by a fat man with spectacles and a slow voice and told various things that deeply concerned me. Then I went to a room in the Boulevard St Germain, with a little cabinet opening off it, where I was shown papers and maps and some figures on a sheet of paper that made me open my eyes. We lunched in a modest cafe tucked away behind the Palais Royal, and our companions were two Alsations who spoke German better than a Boche and had no names — only numbers. In the afternoon I went to a low building beside the Invalides and saw many generals, including more than one whose features were familiar in two hemispheres. I told them everything about myself, and I was examined like a convict, and all particulars about my appearance and manner of speech written down in a book. That was to prepare the way for me, in case of need, among the vast army of those who work underground and know their chief but do not know each other.

The rain cleared before night, and Blenkiron and I walked back to the hotel through that lemon-coloured dusk that you get in a French winter. We passed a company of American soldiers, and Blenkiron had to stop and stare. I could see that he was stiff with pride, though he wouldn’t show it.

‘What d’you think of that bunch?’ he asked.

‘First-rate stuff,’ I said.

‘The men are all right,’ he drawled critically. ‘But some of the officer-boys are a bit puffy. They want fining down.’

‘They’ll get it soon enough, honest fellows. You don’t keep your weight long in this war.’

‘Say, Dick,’ he said shyly, ‘what do you truly think of our Americans? You’ve seen a lot of them, and I’d value your views.’ His tone was that of a bashful author asking for an opinion on his first book.

‘I’ll tell you what I think. You’re constructing a great middle-class army, and that’s the most formidable fighting machine on earth. This kind of war doesn’t want the Berserker so much as the quiet fellow with a trained mind and a lot to fight for. The American ranks are filled with all sorts, from cow-punchers to college boys, but mostly with decent lads that have good prospects in life before them and are fighting because they feel they’re bound to, not because they like it. It was the same stock that pulled through your Civil War. We have a middle-class division, too — Scottish Territorials, mostly clerks and shopmen and engineers and farmers’ sons. When I first struck them my only crab was that the officers weren’t much better than the men. It’s still true, but the men are super-excellent, and consequently so are the officers. That division gets top marks in the Boche calendar for sheer fighting devilment . . . And, please God, that’s what your American army’s going to be. You can wash out the old idea of a regiment of scallawags commanded by dukes. That was right enough, maybe, in the days when you hurrooshed into battle waving a banner, but it don’t do with high explosives and a couple of million men on each side and a battle front of five hundred miles. The hero of this war is the plain man out of the middle class, who wants to get back to his home and is going to use all the brains and grit he possesses to finish the job soon.’

‘That sounds about right,’ said Blenkiron reflectively. ‘It pleases me some, for you’ve maybe guessed that I respect the British Army quite a little. Which part of it do you put top?’

‘All of it’s good. The French are keen judges and they give front place to the Scots and the Australians. For myself I think the backbone of the Army is the old-fashioned English county regiments that hardly ever get into the papers. Though I don’t know, if I had to pick, but I’d take the South Africans. There’s only a brigade of them, but they’re hell’s delight in a battle. But then you’ll say I’m prejudiced.’

‘Well,’ drawled Blenkiron, you’re a mighty Empire anyhow. I’ve sojourned up and down it and I can’t guess how the old-time highbrows in your little island came to put it together. But I’ll let you into a secret, Dick. I read this morning in a noospaper that there was a natural affinity between Americans and the men of the British Dominions. Take it from me, there isn’t — at least not with this American. I don’t understand them one little bit. When I see your lean, tall Australians with the sun at the back of their eyes, I’m looking at men from another planet. Outside you and Peter, I never got to fathom a South African. The Canadians live over the fence from us, but you mix up a Canuck with a Yank in your remarks and you’ll get a bat in the eye . . . But most of us Americans have gotten a grip on your Old Country. You’ll find us mighty respectful to other parts of your Empire, but we say anything we damn well please about England. You see, we know her that well and like her that well, we can be free with her.

'It's like,' he concluded as we reached the hotel, 'it's like a lot of boys that are getting on in the world and are a bit jealous and stand-offish with each other. But they're all at home with the old man who used to warm them up with a hickory cane, even though sometimes in their haste they call him a stand-patter.'

That night at dinner we talked solid business — Blenkiron and I and a young French Colonel from the IIIeme Section at G.Q.G. Blenkiron, I remember, got very hurt about being called a business man by the Frenchman, who thought he was paying him a compliment.

'Cut it out,' he said. 'It is a word that's gone bad with me. There's just two kind of men, those who've gotten sense and those who haven't. A big percentage of us Americans make our living by trading, but we don't think because a man's in business or even because he's made big money that he's any natural good at every job. We've made a college professor our President, and do what he tells us like little boys, though he don't earn more than some of us pay our works' manager. You English have gotten business on the brain, and think a fellow's a dandy at handling your Government if he happens to have made a pile by some flat-catching ramp on your Stock Exchange. It makes me tired. You're about the best business nation on earth, but for God's sake don't begin to talk about it or you'll lose your power. And don't go confusing real business with the ordinary gift of raking in the dollars. Any man with sense could make money if he wanted to, but he mayn't want. He may prefer the fun of the job and let other people do the looting. I reckon the biggest business on the globe today is the work behind your lines and the way you feed and supply and transport your army. It beats the Steel Corporation and the Standard Oil to a frazzle. But the man at the head of it all don't earn more than a thousand dollars a month . . . Your nation's getting to worship Mammon, Dick. Cut it out. There's just the one difference in humanity — sense or no sense, and most likely you won't find any more sense in the man that makes a billion selling bonds than in his brother Tim that lives in a shack and sells corn-cobs. I'm not speaking out of sinful jealousy, for there was a day when I was reckoned a railroad king, and I quit with a bigger pile than kings usually retire on. But I haven't the sense of old Peter, who never even had a bank account . . . And it's sense that wins in this war.'

The Colonel, who spoke good English, asked a question about a speech which some politician had made.

'There isn't all the sense I'd like to see at the top,' said Blenkiron. 'They're fine at smooth words. That wouldn't matter, but they're thinking smooth thoughts. What d'you make of the situation, Dick?'

'I think it's the worst since First Ypres,' I said. 'Everybody's cock-a-whoop, but God knows why.'

'God knows why,' Blenkiron repeated. 'I reckon it's a simple calculation, and you can't deny it any more than a mathematical law. Russia is counted out. The Boche won't get food from her for a good many months, but he can get more men, and he's got them. He's fighting only on one foot, and he's been able to bring troops and guns west so he's as strong as the Allies now on paper. And he's stronger in reality. He's got better railways behind him, and he's fighting on inside lines and can concentrate fast against any bit of our front. I'm no soldier, but that's so, Dick?'

The Frenchman smiled and shook his head. 'All the same they will not pass. They could not when they were two to one in 1914, and they will not now. If we Allies could not break through in the last year when we had many more men, how will the Germans succeed now with only equal numbers?'

Blenkiron did not look convinced. 'That's what they all say. I talked to a general last week about the coming offensive, and he said he was praying for it to hurry up, for he reckoned Fritz would get the fright of his life. It's a good spirit, maybe, but I don't think it's sound on the facts. We've got two mighty great armies of fine fighting-men, but, because we've two commands, we're bound to move ragged like a peal of bells. The Hun's got one army and forty years of stiff tradition, and, what's more, he's going all out this time. He's going to smash our front before America lines up, or perish in the attempt . . . Why do you suppose all the peace racket in Germany has died down, and the very men that were talking democracy in the summer are now hot for fighting to a finish? I'll tell you. It's because old Ludendorff has promised them complete victory this spring if they spend enough men, and the Boche is a good gambler and is out to risk it. We're not up against a local attack this time. We're standing up to a great nation going bald-headed for victory or destruction. If we're broken, then America's got to fight a new campaign by herself when she's ready, and the Boche has time to make Russia his feeding-ground and diddle our blockade. That puts another five years on to the war, maybe another ten. Are we free and independent peoples going to endure that much? . . . I tell you we're tossing to quit before Easter.'

He turned towards me, and I nodded assent.

'That's more or less my view,' I said. 'We ought to hold, but it'll be by our teeth and nails. For the next six months we'll

be fighting without any margin.'

'But, my friends, you put it too gravely,' cried the Frenchman. 'We may lose a mile or two of ground — yes. But serious danger is not possible. They had better chances at Verdun and they failed. Why should they succeed now?'

'Because they are staking everything,' Blenkiron replied. 'It is the last desperate struggle of a wounded beast, and in these struggles sometimes the hunter perishes. Dick's right. We've got a wasting margin and every extra ounce of weight's going to tell. The battle's in the field, and it's also in every corner of every Allied land. That's why within the next two months we've got to get even with the Wild Birds.'

The French Colonel — his name was de Valliere — smiled at the name, and Blenkiron answered my unspoken question.

'I'm going to satisfy some of your curiosity, Dick, for I've put together considerable noos of the menagerie. Germany has a good army of spies outside her borders. We shoot a batch now and then, but the others go on working like beavers and they do a mighty deal of harm. They're beautifully organized, but they don't draw on such good human material as we, and I reckon they don't pay in results more than ten cents on a dollar of trouble. But there they are. They're the intelligence officers and their business is just to forward noos. They're the birds in the cage, the — what is it your friend called them?'

'*Die Stubenvogel*,' I said.

'Yes, but all the birds aren't caged. There's a few outside the bars and they don't collect noos. They do things. If there's anything desperate they're put on the job, and they've got power to act without waiting on instructions from home. I've investigated till my brain's tired and I haven't made out more than half a dozen whom I can say for certain are in the business. There's your pal, the Portuguese Jew, Dick. Another's a woman in Genoa, a princess of some sort married to a Greek financier. One's the editor of a pro-Ally up-country paper in the Argentine. One passes as a Baptist minister in Colorado. One was a police spy in the Tzar's Government and is now a red-hot revolutionary in the Caucasus. And the biggest, of course, is Moxon Ivery, who in happier times was the Graf von Schwabing. There aren't above a hundred people in the world know of their existence, and these hundred call them the Wild Birds.'

'Do they work together?' I asked.

'Yes. They each get their own jobs to do, but they're apt to flock together for a big piece of devilment. There were four of them in France a year ago before the battle of the Aisne, and they pretty near rotted the French Army. That's so, Colonel?'

The soldier nodded grimly. 'They seduced our weary troops and they bought many politicians. Almost they succeeded, but not quite. The nation is sane again, and is judging and shooting the accomplices at its leisure. But the principals we have never caught.'

'You hear that, Dick, said Blenkiron. 'You're satisfied this isn't a whimsy of a melodramatic old Yank? I'll tell you more. You know how Ivery worked the submarine business from England. Also, it was the Wild Birds that wrecked Russia. It was Ivery that paid the Bolsheviks to sedooce the Army, and the Bolsheviks took his money for their own purpose, thinking they were playing a deep game, when all the time he was grinning like Satan, for they were playing his. It was Ivery or some other of the bunch that doped the brigades that broke at Caporetto. If I started in to tell you the history of their doings you wouldn't go to bed, and if you did you wouldn't sleep . . . There's just this to it. Every finished subtle devilry that the Boche has wrought among the Allies since August 1914 has been the work of the Wild Birds and more or less organized by Ivery. They're worth half a dozen army corps to Ludendorff. They're the mightiest poison merchants the world ever saw, and they've the nerve of hell . . .'

'I don't know,' I interrupted. 'Ivery's got his soft spot. I saw him in the Tube station.'

'Maybe, but he's got the kind of nerve that's wanted. And now I rather fancy he's whistling in his flock.'

Blenkiron consulted a notebook. 'Pavia — that's the Argentine man — started last month for Europe. He transhipped from a coasting steamer in the West Indies and we've temporarily lost track of him, but he's left his hunting-ground. What do you reckon that means?'

'It means,' Blenkiron continued solemnly, 'that Ivery thinks the game's nearly over. The play's working up for the big climax . . . And that climax is going to be damnation for the Allies, unless we get a move on.'

'Right,' I said. 'That's what I'm here for. What's the move?'

‘The Wild Birds mustn’t ever go home, and the man they call Ivery or Bommaerts or Chelius has to de cease. It’s a cold-blooded proposition, but it’s him or the world that’s got to break. But before he quits this earth we’re bound to get wise about some of his plans, and that means that we can’t just shoot a pistol at his face. Also we’ve got to find him first. We reckon he’s in Switzerland, but that is a state with quite a lot of diversified scenery to lose a man in . . . Still I guess we’ll find him. But it’s the kind of business to plan out as carefully as a battle. I’m going back to Berne on my old stunt to boss the show, and I’m giving the orders. You’re an obedient child, Dick, so I don’t reckon on any trouble that way.’

Then Blenkiron did an ominous thing. He pulled up a little table and started to lay out Patience cards. Since his duodenum was cured he seemed to have dropped that habit, and from his resuming it I gathered that his mind was uneasy. I can see that scene as if it were yesterday — the French colonel in an armchair smoking a cigarette in a long amber holder, and Blenkiron sitting primly on the edge of a yellow silk ottoman, dealing his cards and looking guiltily towards me.

‘You’ll have Peter for company,’ he said. ‘Peter’s a sad man, but he has a great heart, and he’s been mighty useful to me already. They’re going to move him to England very soon. The authorities are afraid of him, for he’s apt to talk wild, his health having made him peevish about the British. But there’s a deal of red-tape in the world, and the orders for his repatriation are slow in coming.’ The speaker winked very slowly and deliberately with his left eye.

I asked if I was to be with Peter, much cheered at the prospect.

‘Why, yes. You and Peter are the collateral in the deal. But the big game’s not with you.’

I had a presentiment of something coming, something anxious and unpleasant.

‘Is Mary in it?’ I asked.

He nodded and seemed to pull himself together for an explanation.

‘See here, Dick. Our main job is to get Ivery back to Allied soil where we can handle him. And there’s just the one magnet that can fetch him back. You aren’t going to deny that.’

I felt my face getting very red, and that ugly hammer began beating in my forehead. Two grave, patient eyes met my glare.

‘I’m damned if I’ll allow it!’ I cried. ‘I’ve some right to a say in the thing. I won’t have Mary made a decoy. It’s too infernally degrading.’

‘It isn’t pretty, but war isn’t pretty, and nothing we do is pretty. I’d have blushed like a rose when I was young and innocent to imagine the things I’ve put my hand to in the last three years. But have you any other way, Dick? I’m not proud, and I’ll scrap the plan if you can show me another . . . Night after night I’ve hammered the thing out, and I can’t hit on a better . . . Heigh-ho, Dick, this isn’t like you,’ and he grinned ruefully. ‘You’re making yourself a fine argument in favour of celibacy — in time of war, anyhow. What is it the poet sings? —

White hands cling to the bridle rein,
Slipping the spur from the booted heel —’

I was as angry as sin, but I felt all the time I had no case. Blenkiron stopped his game of Patience, sending the cards flying over the carpet, and straddled on the hearthrug.

‘You’re never going to be a piker. What’s dooty, if you won’t carry it to the other side of Hell? What’s the use of yapping about your country if you’re going to keep anything back when she calls for it? What’s the good of meaning to win the war if you don’t put every cent you’ve got on your stake? You’ll make me think you’re like the jacks in your English novels that chuck in their hand and say it’s up to God, and call that “seeing it through” . . . No, Dick, that kind of dooty don’t deserve a blessing. You dursn’t keep back anything if you want to save your soul.

‘Besides,’ he went on, ‘what a girl it is! She can’t scare and she can’t soil. She’s white-hot youth and innocence, and she’d take no more harm than clean steel from a muck-heap.’

I knew I was badly in the wrong, but my pride was all raw.

‘I’m not going to agree till I’ve talked to Mary.’

‘But Miss Mary has consented,’ he said gently. ‘She made the plan.’

Next day, in clear blue weather that might have been May, I drove Mary down to Fontainebleau. We lunched in the inn by the bridge and walked into the forest. I hadn’t slept much, for I was tortured by what I thought was anxiety for her, but

which was in truth jealousy of Ivery. I don't think that I would have minded her risking her life, for that was part of the game we were both in, but I jibbed at the notion of Ivery coming near her again. I told myself it was honourable pride, but I knew deep down in me that it was jealousy.

I asked her if she had accepted Blenkiron's plan, and she turned mischievous eyes on me.

'I knew I should have a scene with you, Dick. I told Mr Blenkiron so . . . Of course I agreed. I'm not even very much afraid of it. I'm a member of the team, you know, and I must play up to my form. I can't do a man's work, so all the more reason why I should tackle the thing I can do.'

'But,' I stammered, 'it's such a . . . such a degrading business for a child like you. I can't bear . . . It makes me hot to think of it.'

Her reply was merry laughter.

'You're an old Ottoman, Dick. You haven't doubled Cape Turk yet, and I don't believe you're round Seraglio Point. Why, women aren't the brittle things men used to think them. They never were, and the war has made them like whipcord. Bless you, my dear, we're the tougher sex now. We've had to wait and endure, and we've been so beaten on the anvil of patience that we've lost all our megrims.'

She put her hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eyes.

'Look at me, Dick, look at your someday-to-be espoused saint. I'm nineteen years of age next August. Before the war I should have only just put my hair up. I should have been the kind of shivering debutante who blushes when she's spoken to, and oh! I should have thought such silly, silly things about life . . . Well, in the last two years I've been close to it, and to death. I've nursed the dying. I've seen souls in agony and in triumph. England has allowed me to serve her as she allows her sons. Oh, I'm a robust young woman now, and indeed I think women were always robuster than men . . . Dick, dear Dick, we're lovers, but we're comrades too — always comrades, and comrades trust each other.'

I hadn't anything to say, except contrition, for I had my lesson. I had been slipping away in my thoughts from the gravity of our task, and Mary had brought me back to it. I remember that as we walked through the woodland we came to a place where there were no signs of war. Elsewhere there were men busy felling trees, and anti-aircraft guns, and an occasional transport wagon, but here there was only a shallow grassy vale, and in the distance, bloomed over like a plum in the evening haze, the roofs of an old dwelling-house among gardens.

Mary clung to my arm as we drank in the peace of it.

'That is what lies for us at the end of the road, Dick,' she said softly.

And then, as she looked, I felt her body shiver. She returned to the strange fancy she had had in the St Germaines woods three days before.

'Somewhere it's waiting for us and we shall certainly find it . . . But first we must go through the Valley of the Shadow . . . And there is the sacrifice to be made . . . the best of us.'



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ST ANTON

Ten days later the porter Joseph Zimmer of Arosa, clad in the tough and shapeless trousers of his class, but sporting an old velveteen shooting-coat bequeathed to him by a former German master — speaking the guttural tongue of the Grisons, and with all his belongings in one massive rucksack, came out of the little station of St Anton and blinked in the frosty sunshine. He looked down upon the little old village beside its icebound lake, but his business was with the new village of hotels and villas which had sprung up in the last ten years south of the station. He made some halting inquiries of the station people, and a cab-driver outside finally directed him to the place he sought — the cottage of the Widow Summermatter, where resided an English intern, one Peter Pienaar.

The porter Joseph Zimmer had had a long and roundabout journey. A fortnight before he had worn the uniform of a British major-general. As such he had been the inmate of an expensive Paris hotel, till one morning, in grey tweed clothes and with a limp, he had taken the Paris–Mediterranean Express with a ticket for an officers' convalescent home at Cannes. Thereafter he had declined in the social scale. At Dijon he had been still an Englishman, but at Pontarlier he had become an American bagman of Swiss parentage, returning to wind up his father's estate. At Berne he limped excessively, and at Zurich, at a little back-street hotel, he became frankly the peasant. For he met a friend there from whom he acquired clothes with that odd rank smell, far stronger than Harris tweed, which marks the raiment of most Swiss guides and all Swiss porters. He also acquired a new name and an old aunt, who a little later received him with open arms and explained to her friends that he was her brother's son from Arosa who three winters ago had hurt his leg wood-cutting and had been discharged from the levy.

A kindly Swiss gentleman, as it chanced, had heard of the deserving Joseph and interested himself to find him employment. The said philanthropist made a hobby of the French and British prisoners returned from Germany, and had in mind an officer, a crabbed South African with a bad leg, who needed a servant. He was, it seemed, an ill-tempered old fellow who had to be billeted alone, and since he could speak German, he would be happier with a Swiss native. Joseph haggled somewhat over the wages, but on his aunt's advice he accepted the job, and, with a very complete set of papers and a store of ready-made reminiscences (it took him some time to swot up the names of the peaks and passes he had traversed) set out for St Anton, having dispatched beforehand a monstrously ill-spelt letter announcing his coming. He could barely read and write, but he was good at maps, which he had studied carefully, and he noticed with satisfaction that the valley of St Anton gave easy access to Italy.

As he journeyed south the reflections of that porter would have surprised his fellow travellers in the stuffy third-class carriage. He was thinking of a conversation he had had some days before in a cafe at Dijon with a young Englishman bound for Modane . . .

We had bumped up against each other by chance in that strange flitting when all went to different places at different times, asking nothing of each other's business. Wake had greeted me rather shamefacedly and had proposed dinner together.

I am not good at receiving apologies, and Wake's embarrassed me more than they embarrassed him. 'I'm a bit of a cad sometimes,' he said. 'You know I'm a better fellow than I sounded that night, Hannay.'

I mumbled something about not talking rot — the conventional phrase. What worried me was that the man was suffering. You could see it in his eyes. But that evening I got nearer Wake than ever before, and he and I became true friends, for he laid bare his soul before me. That was his trouble, that he could lay bare his soul, for ordinary healthy folk don't analyse their feelings. Wake did, and I think it brought him relief.

'Don't think I was ever your rival. I would no more have proposed to Mary than I would have married one of her aunts. She was so sure of herself, so happy in her single-heartedness that she terrified me. My type of man is not meant for marriage, for women must be in the centre of life, and we must always be standing aside and looking on. It is a damnable thing to be left-handed.'

'The trouble about you, my dear chap,' I said, 'is that you're too hard to please.'

‘That’s one way of putting it. I should put it more harshly. I hate more than I love. All we humanitarians and pacifists have hatred as our mainspring. Odd, isn’t it, for people who preach brotherly love? But it’s the truth. We’re full of hate towards everything that doesn’t square in with our ideas, everything that jars on our lady-like nerves. Fellows like you are so in love with their cause that they’ve no time or inclination to detest what thwarts them. We’ve no cause — only negatives, and that means hatred, and self-torture, and a beastly jaundice of soul.’

Then I knew that Wake’s fault was not spiritual pride, as I had diagnosed it at Biggleswick. The man was abased with humility.

‘I see more than other people see,’ he went on, ‘and I feel more. That’s the curse on me. You’re a happy man and you get things done, because you only see one side of a case, one thing at a time. How would you like it if a thousand strings were always tugging at you, if you saw that every course meant the sacrifice of lovely and desirable things, or even the shattering of what you know to be unreplaceable? I’m the kind of stuff poets are made of, but I haven’t the poet’s gift, so I stagger about the world left-handed and game-legged . . . Take the war. For me to fight would be worse than for another man to run away. From the bottom of my heart I believe that it needn’t have happened, and that all war is a blistering iniquity. And yet belief has got very little to do with virtue. I’m not as good a man as you, Hannay, who have never thought out anything in your life. My time in the Labour battalion taught me something. I knew that with all my fine aspirations I wasn’t as true a man as fellows whose talk was silly oaths and who didn’t care a tinker’s curse about their soul.’

I remember that I looked at him with a sudden understanding. ‘I think I know you. You’re the sort of chap who won’t fight for his country because he can’t be sure that she’s altogether in the right. But he’d cheerfully die for her, right or wrong.’

His face relaxed in a slow smile. ‘Queer that you should say that. I think it’s pretty near the truth. Men like me aren’t afraid to die, but they haven’t quite the courage to live. Every man should be happy in a service like you, when he obeys orders. I couldn’t get on in any service. I lack the bump of veneration. I can’t swallow things merely because I’m told to. My sort are always talking about “service”, but we haven’t the temperament to serve. I’d give all I have to be an ordinary cog in the wheel, instead of a confounded outsider who finds fault with the machinery . . . Take a great violent high-handed fellow like you. You can sink yourself till you become only a name and a number. I couldn’t if I tried. I’m not sure if I want to either. I cling to the odds and ends that are my own.’

‘I wish I had had you in my battalion a year ago,’ I said.

‘No, you don’t. I’d only have been a nuisance. I’ve been a Fabian since Oxford, but you’re a better socialist than me. I’m a rancid individualist.’

‘But you must be feeling better about the war?’ I asked.

‘Not a bit of it. I’m still lusting for the heads of the politicians that made it and continue it. But I want to help my country. Honestly, Hannay, I love the old place. More, I think, than I love myself, and that’s saying a devilish lot. Short of fighting — which would be the sin against the Holy Spirit for me — I’ll do my damndest. But you’ll remember I’m not used to team work. If I’m a jealous player, beat me over the head.’

His voice was almost wistful, and I liked him enormously.

‘Blenkiron will see to that,’ I said. ‘We’re going to break you to harness, Wake, and then you’ll be a happy man. You keep your mind on the game and forget about yourself. That’s the cure for jibbers.’

As I journeyed to St Anton I thought a lot about that talk. He was quite right about Mary, who would never have married him. A man with such an angular soul couldn’t fit into another’s. And then I thought that the chief thing about Mary was just her serene certainty. Her eyes had that settled happy look that I remembered to have seen only in one other human face, and that was Peter’s . . . But I wondered if Peter’s eyes were still the same.

I found the cottage, a little wooden thing which had been left perched on its knoll when the big hotels grew around it. It had a fence in front, but behind it was open to the hillside. At the gate stood a bent old woman with a face like a pippin. My make-up must have been good, for she accepted me before I introduced myself.

‘God be thanked you are come,’ she cried. ‘The poor lieutenant needed a man to keep him company. He sleeps now, as he does always in the afternoon, for his leg wearies him in the night . . . But he is brave, like a soldier . . . Come, I will show you the house, for you two will be alone now.’

Stepping softly she led me indoors, pointing with a warning finger to the little bedroom where Peter slept. I found a

kitchen with a big stove and a rough floor of planking, on which lay some badly cured skins. Off it was a sort of pantry with a bed for me. She showed me the pots and pans for cooking and the stores she had laid in, and where to find water and fuel. 'I will do the marketing daily,' she said, 'and if you need me, my dwelling is half a mile up the road beyond the new church. God be with you, young man, and be kind to that wounded one.'

When the Widow Summermatter had departed I sat down in Peter's arm-chair and took stock of the place. It was quiet and simple and homely, and through the window came the gleam of snow on the diamond hills. On the table beside the stove were Peter's cherished belongings — his buck-skin pouch and the pipe which Jannie Grobelaar had carved for him in St Helena, an aluminium field match-box I had given him, a cheap large-print Bible such as padres present to well-disposed privates, and an old battered *Pilgrim's Progress* with gaudy pictures. The illustration at which I opened showed Faithful going up to Heaven from the fire of Vanity Fair like a woodcock that has just been flushed. Everything in the room was exquisitely neat, and I knew that that was Peter and not the Widow Summermatter. On a peg behind the door hung his much-mended coat, and sticking out of a pocket I recognized a sheaf of my own letters. In one corner stood something which I had forgotten about — an invalid chair.

The sight of Peter's plain little oddments made me feel solemn. I wondered if his eyes would be like Mary's now, for I could not conceive what life would be for him as a cripple. Very silently I opened the bedroom door and slipped inside.

He was lying on a camp bedstead with one of those striped Swiss blankets pulled up round his ears, and he was asleep. It was the old Peter beyond doubt. He had the hunter's gift of breathing evenly through his nose, and the white scar on the deep brown of his forehead was what I had always remembered. The only change since I last saw him was that he had let his beard grow again, and it was grey.

As I looked at him the remembrance of all we had been through together flooded back upon me, and I could have cried with joy at being beside him. Women, bless their hearts! can never know what long comradeship means to men; it is something not in their lives — something that belongs only to that wild, undomesticated world which we forswear when we find our mates. Even Mary understood only a bit of it. I had just won her love, which was the greatest thing that ever came my way, but if she had entered at that moment I would scarcely have turned my head. I was back again in the old life and was not thinking of the new.

Suddenly I saw that Peter was awake and was looking at me.

'Dick,' he said in a whisper, 'Dick, my old friend.'

The blanket was tossed off, and his long, lean arms were stretched out to me. I gripped his hands, and for a little we did not speak. Then I saw how woefully he had changed. His left leg had shrunk, and from the knee down was like a pipe stem. His face, when awake, showed the lines of hard suffering and he seemed shorter by half a foot. But his eyes were still like Mary's. Indeed they seemed to be more patient and peaceful than in the days when he sat beside me on the buck-waggon and peered over the hunting-veld.

I picked him up — he was no heavier than Mary — and carried him to his chair beside the stove. Then I boiled water and made tea, as we had so often done together.

'Peter, old man,' I said, 'we're on trek again, and this is a very snug little *rondavel*. We've had many good yarns, but this is going to be the best. First of all, how about your health?'

'Good, I'm a strong man again, but slow like a hippo cow. I have been lonely sometimes, but that is all by now. Tell me of the big battles.'

But I was hungry for news of him and kept him to his own case. He had no complaint of his treatment except that he did not like Germans. The doctors at the hospital had been clever, he said, and had done their best for him, but nerves and sinews and small bones had been so wrecked that they could not mend his leg, and Peter had all the Boer's dislike of amputation. One doctor had been in Damaraland and talked to him of those baked sunny places and made him homesick. But he returned always to his dislike of Germans. He had seen them herding our soldiers like brute beasts, and the commandant had a face like Stumm and a chin that stuck out and wanted hitting. He made an exception for the great airman Lensch, who had downed him.

'He is a white man, that one,' he said. 'He came to see me in hospital and told me a lot of things. I think he made them treat me well. He is a big man, Dick, who would make two of me, and he has a round, merry face and pale eyes like Frickie Celliers who could put a bullet through a pauw's head at two hundred yards. He said he was sorry I was lame, for he hoped

to have more fights with me. Some woman that tells fortunes had said that I would be the end of him, but he reckoned she had got the thing the wrong way on. I hope he will come through this war, for he is a good man, though a German . . . But the others! They are like the fool in the Bible, fat and ugly in good fortune and proud and vicious when their luck goes. They are not a people to be happy with.'

Then he told me that to keep up his spirits he had amused himself with playing a game. He had prided himself on being a Boer, and spoken coldly of the British. He had also, I gathered, imparted many things calculated to deceive. So he left Germany with good marks, and in Switzerland had held himself aloof from the other British wounded, on the advice of Blenkiron, who had met him as soon as he crossed the frontier. I gathered it was Blenkiron who had had him sent to St Anton, and in his time there, as a disgruntled Boer, he had mixed a good deal with Germans. They had pumped him about our air service, and Peter had told them many ingenious lies and heard curious things in return.

'They are working hard, Dick,' he said. 'Never forget that. The German is a stout enemy, and when we beat him with a machine he sweats till he has invented a new one. They have great pilots, but never so many good ones as we, and I do not think in ordinary fighting they can ever beat us. But you must watch Lensch, for I fear him. He has a new machine, I hear, with great engines and a short wingspread, but the wings so cambered that he can climb fast. That will be a surprise to spring upon us. You will say that we'll soon better it. So we shall, but if it was used at a time when we were pushing hard it might make the little difference that loses battles.'

'You mean,' I said, 'that if we had a great attack ready and had driven all the Boche planes back from our front, Lensch and his circus might get over in spite of us and blow the gaff?'

'Yes,' he said solemnly. 'Or if we were attacked, and had a weak spot, Lensch might show the Germans where to get through. I do not think we are going to attack for a long time; but I am pretty sure that Germany is going to fling every man against us. That is the talk of my friends, and it is not bluff.'

That night I cooked our modest dinner, and we smoked our pipes with the stove door open and the good smell of woodsmoke in our nostrils. I told him of all my doings and of the Wild Birds and Ivery and the job we were engaged on. Blenkiron's instructions were that we two should live humbly and keep our eyes and ears open, for we were outside suspicion — the cantankerous lame Boer and his loutish servant from Arosa. Somewhere in the place was a rendezvous of our enemies, and thither came Chelius on his dark errands.

Peter nodded his head sagely, 'I think I have guessed the place. The daughter of the old woman used to pull my chair sometimes down to the village, and I have sat in cheap inns and talked to servants. There is a fresh-water pan there, it is all covered with snow now, and beside it there is a big house that they call the Pink Chalet. I do not know much about it, except that rich folk live in it, for I know the other houses and they are harmless. Also the big hotels, which are too cold and public for strangers to meet in.'

I put Peter to bed, and it was a joy to me to look after him, to give him his tonic and prepare the hot water bottle that comforted his neuralgia. His behaviour was like a docile child's, and he never lapsed from his sunny temper, though I could see how his leg gave him hell. They had tried massage for it and given it up, and there was nothing for him but to endure till nature and his tough constitution deadened the tortured nerves again. I shifted my bed out of the pantry and slept in the room with him, and when I woke in the night, as one does the first time in a strange place, I could tell by his breathing that he was wakeful and suffering.

Next day a bath chair containing a grizzled cripple and pushed by a limping peasant might have been seen descending the long hill to the village. It was clear frosty weather which makes the cheeks tingle, and I felt so full of beans that it was hard to remember my game leg. The valley was shut in on the east by a great mass of rocks and glaciers, belonging to a mountain whose top could not be seen. But on the south, above the snowy fir-woods, there was a most delicate lace-like peak with a point like a needle. I looked at it with interest, for beyond it lay the valley which led to the Staub pass, and beyond that was Italy — and Mary.

The old village of St Anton had one long, narrow street which bent at right angles to a bridge which spanned the river flowing from the lake. Thence the road climbed steeply, but at the other end of the street it ran on the level by the water's edge, lined with gimcrack boarding-houses, now shuttered to the world, and a few villas in patches of garden. At the far end, just before it plunged into a pine-wood, a promontory jutted into the lake, leaving a broad space between the road and the water. Here were the grounds of a more considerable dwelling — snow-covered laurels and rhododendrons with one or

two bigger trees — and just on the water-edge stood the house itself, called the Pink Chalet.

I wheeled Peter past the entrance on the crackling snow of the highway. Seen through the gaps of the trees the front looked new, but the back part seemed to be of some age, for I could see high walls, broken by few windows, hanging over the water. The place was no more a chalet than a donjon, but I suppose the name was given in honour of a wooden gallery above the front door. The whole thing was washed in an ugly pink. There were outhouses — garage or stables among the trees — and at the entrance there were fairly recent tracks of an automobile.

On our way back we had some very bad beer in a cafe and made friends with the woman who kept it. Peter had to tell her his story, and I trotted out my aunt in Zurich, and in the end we heard her grievances. She was a true Swiss, angry at all the belligerents who had spoiled her livelihood, hating Germany most but also fearing her most. Coffee, tea, fuel, bread, even milk and cheese were hard to get and cost a ransom. It would take the land years to recover, and there would be no more tourists, for there was little money left in the world. I dropped a question about the Pink Chalet, and was told that it belonged to one Schweigler, a professor of Berne, an old man who came sometimes for a few days in the summer. It was often let, but not now. Asked if it was occupied, she remarked that some friends of the Schweiglers — rich people from Basle — had been there for the winter. 'They come and go in great cars,' she said bitterly, 'and they bring their food from the cities. They spend no money in this poor place.'

Presently Peter and I fell into a routine of life, as if we had always kept house together. In the morning he went abroad in his chair, in the afternoon I would hobble about on my own errands. We sank into the background and took its colour, and a less conspicuous pair never faced the eye of suspicion. Once a week a young Swiss officer, whose business it was to look after British wounded, paid us a hurried visit. I used to get letters from my aunt in Zurich, Sometimes with the postmark of Arosa, and now and then these letters would contain curiously worded advice or instructions from him whom my aunt called 'the kind patron'. Generally I was told to be patient. Sometimes I had word about the health of 'my little cousin across the mountains'. Once I was bidden expect a friend of the patron's, the wise doctor of whom he had often spoken, but though after that I shadowed the Pink Chalet for two days no doctor appeared.

My investigations were a barren business. I used to go down to the village in the afternoon and sit in an out-of-the-way cafe, talking slow German with peasants and hotel porters, but there was little to learn. I knew all there was to hear about the Pink Chalet, and that was nothing. A young man who ski-ed stayed for three nights and spent his days on the alps above the fir-woods. A party of four, including two women, was reported to have been there for a night — all ramifications of the rich family of Basle. I studied the house from the lake, which should have been nicely swept into ice-rinks, but from lack of visitors was a heap of blown snow. The high old walls of the back part were built straight from the water's edge. I remember I tried a short cut through the grounds to the high-road and was given 'Good afternoon' by a smiling German manservant. One way and another I gathered there were a good many serving-men about the place — too many for the infrequent guests. But beyond this I discovered nothing.

Not that I was bored, for I had always Peter to turn to. He was thinking a lot about South Africa, and the thing he liked best was to go over with me every detail of our old expeditions. They belonged to a life which he could think about without pain, whereas the war was too near and bitter for him. He liked to hobble out-of-doors after the darkness came and look at his old friends, the stars. He called them by the words they use on the veld, and the first star of morning he called the *voorlooper*— the little boy who inspanns the oxen — a name I had not heard for twenty years. Many a great yarn we spun in the long evenings, but I always went to bed with a sore heart. The longing in his eyes was too urgent, longing not for old days or far countries, but for the health and strength which had once been his pride.

One night I told him about Mary.

'She will be a happy *mysie*,' he said, 'but you will need to be very clever with her, for women are queer cattle and you and I don't know their ways. They tell me English women do not cook and make clothes like our vrouwen, so what will she find to do? I doubt an idle woman will be like a mealie-fed horse.'

It was no good explaining to him the kind of girl Mary was, for that was a world entirely beyond his ken. But I could see that he felt lonelier than ever at my news. So I told him of the house I meant to have in England when the war was over — an old house in a green hilly country, with fields that would carry four head of cattle to the Morgan and furrows of clear water, and orchards of plums and apples. 'And you will stay with us all the time,' I said. 'You will have your own rooms and your own boy to look after you, and you will help me to farm, and we will catch fish together, and shoot the wild ducks

when they come up from the pans in the evening. I have found a better countryside than the Houtbosch, where you and I planned to have a farm. It is a blessed and happy place, England.'

He shook his head. 'You are a kind man, Dick, but your pretty *mysie* won't want an ugly old fellow like me hobbling about her house . . . I do not think I will go back to Africa, for I should be sad there in the sun. I will find a little place in England, and some day I will visit you, old friend.'

That night his stoicism seemed for the first time to fail him. He was silent for a long time and went early to bed, where I can vouch for it he did not sleep. But he must have thought a lot in the night time, for in the morning he had got himself in hand and was as cheerful as a sandboy.

I watched his philosophy with amazement. It was far beyond anything I could have compassed myself. He was so frail and so poor, for he had never had anything in the world but his bodily fitness, and he had lost that now. And remember, he had lost it after some months of glittering happiness, for in the air he had found the element for which he had been born. Sometimes he dropped a hint of those days when he lived in the clouds and invented a new kind of battle, and his voice always grew hoarse. I could see that he ached with longing for their return. And yet he never had a word of complaint. That was the ritual he had set himself, his point of honour, and he faced the future with the same kind of courage as that with which he had tackled a wild beast or Lensch himself. Only it needed a far bigger brand of fortitude.

Another thing was that he had found religion. I doubt if that is the right way to put it, for he had always had it. Men who live in the wilds know they are in the hands of God. But his old kind had been a tattered thing, more like heathen superstition, though it had always kept him humble. But now he had taken to reading the Bible and to thinking in his lonely nights, and he had got a creed of his own. I dare say it was crude enough, I am sure it was unorthodox; but if the proof of religion is that it gives a man a prop in bad days, then Peter's was the real thing. He used to ferret about in the Bible and the *Pilgrim's Progress*— they were both equally inspired in his eyes — and find texts which he interpreted in his own way to meet his case. He took everything quite literally. What happened three thousand years ago in Palestine might, for all he minded, have been going on next door. I used to chaff him and tell him that he was like the Kaiser, very good at fitting the Bible to his purpose, but his sincerity was so complete that he only smiled. I remember one night, when he had been thinking about his flying days, he found a passage in Thessalonians about the dead rising to meet their Lord in the air, and that cheered him a lot. Peter, I could see, had the notion that his time here wouldn't be very long, and he liked to think that when he got his release he would find once more the old rapture.

Once, when I said something about his patience, he said he had got to try to live up to Mr Standfast. He had fixed on that character to follow, though he would have preferred Mr Valiant-for-Truth if he had thought himself good enough. He used to talk about Mr Standfast in his queer way as if he were a friend of us both, like Blenkiron . . . I tell you I was humbled out of all my pride by the sight of Peter, so uncomplaining and gentle and wise. The Almighty Himself couldn't have made a prig out of him, and he never would have thought of preaching. Only once did he give me advice. I had always a liking for short cuts, and I was getting a bit restive under the long inaction. One day when I expressed my feelings on the matter, Peter upped and read from the *Pilgrim's Progress*: 'Some also have wished that the next way to their Father's house were here, that they might be troubled no more with either hills or mountains to go over, but the Way is the Way, and there is an end.'

All the same when we got into March and nothing happened I grew pretty anxious. Blenkiron had said we were fighting against time, and here were the weeks slipping away. His letters came occasionally, always in the shape of communications from my aunt. One told me that I would soon be out of a job, for Peter's repatriation was just about through, and he might get his movement order any day. Another spoke of my little cousin over the hills, and said that she hoped soon to be going to a place called Santa Chiara in the Val Saluzzana. I got out the map in a hurry and measured the distance from there to St Anton and pored over the two roads thither — the short one by the Staub Pass and the long one by the Marjolana. These letters made me think that things were nearing a climax, but still no instructions came. I had nothing to report in my own messages, I had discovered nothing in the Pink Chalet but idle servants, I was not even sure if the Pink Chalet were not a harmless villa, and I hadn't come within a thousand miles of finding Chelius. All my desire to imitate Peter's stoicism didn't prevent me from getting occasionally rattled and despondent.

The one thing I could do was to keep fit, for I had a notion I might soon want all my bodily strength. I had to keep up my pretence of lameness in the daytime, so I used to take my exercise at night. I would sleep in the afternoon, when Peter had his siesta, and then about ten in the evening, after putting him to bed, I would slip out-of-doors and go for a four or

five hours' tramp. Wonderful were those midnight wanderings. I pushed up through the snow-laden pines to the ridges where the snow lay in great wreaths and scallops, till I stood on a crest with a frozen world at my feet and above me a host of glittering stars. Once on a night of full moon I reached the glacier at the valley head, scrambled up the moraine to where the ice began, and peered fearfully into the spectral crevasses. At such hours I had the earth to myself, for there was not a sound except the slipping of a burden of snow from the trees or the crack and rustle which reminded me that a glacier was a moving river. The war seemed very far away, and I felt the littleness of our human struggles, till I thought of Peter turning from side to side to find ease in the cottage far below me. Then I realized that the spirit of man was the greatest thing in this spacious world . . . I would get back about three or four, have a bath in the water which had been warming in my absence, and creep into bed, almost ashamed of having two sound legs, when a better man a yard away had but one.

Oddly enough at these hours there seemed more life in the Pink Chalet than by day. Once, tramping across the lake long after midnight, I saw lights in the lake-front in windows which for ordinary were blank and shuttered. Several times I cut across the grounds, when the moon was dark. On one such occasion a great car with no lights swept up the drive, and I heard low voices at the door. Another time a man ran hastily past me, and entered the house by a little door on the eastern side, which I had not before noticed . . . Slowly the conviction began to grow on me that we were not wrong in marking down this place, that things went on within it which it deeply concerned us to discover. But I was puzzled to think of a way. I might butt inside, but for all I knew it would be upsetting Blenkiron's plans, for he had given me no instructions about housebreaking. All this unsettled me worse than ever. I began to lie awake planning some means of entrance . . . I would be a peasant from the next valley who had twisted his ankle . . . I would go seeking an imaginary cousin among the servants . . . I would start a fire in the place and have the doors flung open to zealous neighbours . . .

And then suddenly I got instructions in a letter from Blenkiron.

It came inside a parcel of warm socks that arrived from my kind aunt. But the letter for me was not from her. It was in Blenkiron's large sprawling hand and the style of it was all his own. He told me that he had about finished his job. He had got his line on Chelius, who was the bird he expected, and that bird would soon wing its way southward across the mountains for the reason I knew of.

'We've got an almighty move on,' he wrote, 'and please God you're going to hustle some in the next week. It's going better than I ever hoped.' But something was still to be done. He had struck a countryman, one Clarence Donne, a journalist of Kansas City, whom he had taken into the business. Him he described as a 'crackerjack' and commended to my esteem. He was coming to St Anton, for there was a game afoot at the Pink Chalet, which he would give me news of. I was to meet him next evening at nine-fifteen at the little door in the east end of the house. 'For the love of Mike, Dick,' he concluded, 'be on time and do everything Clarence tells you as if he was me. It's a mighty complex affair, but you and he have sand enough to pull through. Don't worry about your little cousin. She's safe and out of the job now.'

My first feeling was one of immense relief, especially at the last words. I read the letter a dozen times to make sure I had its meaning. A flash of suspicion crossed my mind that it might be a fake, principally because there was no mention of Peter, who had figured large in the other missives. But why should Peter be mentioned when he wasn't on in this piece? The signature convinced me. Ordinarily Blenkiron signed himself in full with a fine commercial flourish. But when I was at the Front he had got into the habit of making a kind of hieroglyphic of his surname to me and sticking J.S. after it in a bracket. That was how this letter was signed, and it was sure proof it was all right.

I spent that day and the next in wild spirits. Peter spotted what was on, though I did not tell him for fear of making him envious. I had to be extra kind to him, for I could see that he ached to have a hand in the business. Indeed he asked shyly if I couldn't fit him in, and I had to lie about it and say it was only another of my aimless circumnavigations of the Pink Chalet.

'Try and find something where I can help,' he pleaded. 'I'm pretty strong still, though I'm lame, and I can shoot a bit.'

I declared that he would be used in time, that Blenkiron had promised he would be used, but for the life of me I couldn't see how.

At nine o'clock on the evening appointed I was on the lake opposite the house, close in under the shore, making my way to the rendezvous. It was a coal-black night, for though the air was clear the stars were shining with little light, and the moon had not yet risen. With a premonition that I might be long away from food, I had brought some slabs of chocolate, and my pistol and torch were in my pocket. It was bitter cold, but I had ceased to mind weather, and I wore my one suit

and no overcoat.

The house was like a tomb for silence. There was no crack of light anywhere, and none of those smells of smoke and food which proclaim habitation. It was an eerie job scrambling up the steep bank east of the place, to where the flat of the garden started, in a darkness so great that I had to grope my way like a blind man.

I found the little door by feeling along the edge of the building. Then I stepped into an adjacent clump of laurels to wait on my companion. He was there before me.

‘Say,’ I heard a rich Middle West voice whisper, ‘are you Joseph Zimmer? I’m not shouting any names, but I guess you are the guy I was told to meet here.’

‘Mr Donne?’ I whispered back.

‘The same,’ he replied. ‘Shake.’

I gripped a gloved and mittened hand which drew me towards the door.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I LIE ON A HARD BED

The journalist from Kansas City was a man of action. He wasted no words in introducing himself or unfolding his plan of campaign. 'You've got to follow me, mister, and not deviate one inch from my tracks. The explaining part will come later. There's big business in this shack tonight.' He unlocked the little door with scarcely a sound, slid the crust of snow from his boots, and preceded me into a passage as black as a cellar. The door swung smoothly behind us, and after the sharp out-of-doors the air smelt stuffy as the inside of a safe.

A hand reached back to make sure that I followed. We appeared to be in a flagged passage under the main level of the house. My hobnailed boots slipped on the floor, and I steadied myself on the wall, which seemed to be of undressed stone. Mr Donne moved softly and assuredly, for he was better shod for the job than me, and his guiding hand came back constantly to make sure of my whereabouts.

I remember that I felt just as I had felt when on that August night I had explored the crevice of the Coolin — the same sense that something queer was going to happen, the same recklessness and contentment. Moving a foot at a time with immense care, we came to a right-hand turning. Two shallow steps led us to another passage, and then my groping hands struck a blind wall. The American was beside me, and his mouth was close to my ear.

'Got to crawl now,' he whispered. 'You lead, mister, while I shed this coat of mine. Eight feet on your stomach and then upright.'

I wriggled through a low tunnel, broad enough to take three men abreast, but not two feet high. Half-way through I felt suffocated, for I never liked holes, and I had a momentary anxiety as to what we were after in this cellar pilgrimage. Presently I smelt free air and got on to my knees.

'Right, mister?' came a whisper from behind. My companion seemed to be waiting till I was through before he followed.

'Right,' I answered, and very carefully rose to my feet.

Then something happened behind me. There was a jar and a bump as if the roof of the tunnel had subsided. I turned sharply and groped at the mouth. I stuck my leg down and found a block.

'Donne,' I said, as loud as I dared, 'are you hurt? Where are you?'

But no answer came.

Even then I thought only of an accident. Something had miscarried, and I was cut off in the cellars of an unfriendly house away from the man who knew the road and had a plan in his head. I was not so much frightened as exasperated. I turned from the tunnel-mouth and groped into the darkness before me. I might as well prospect the kind of prison into which I had blundered.

I took three steps — no more. My feet seemed suddenly to go from me and fly upward. So sudden was it that I fell heavy and dead like a log, and my head struck the floor with a crash that for a moment knocked me senseless. I was conscious of something falling on me and of an intolerable pressure on my chest. I struggled for breath, and found my arms and legs pinned and my whole body in a kind of wooden vice. I was sick with concussion, and could do nothing but gasp and choke down my nausea. The cut in the back of my head was bleeding freely and that helped to clear my wits, but I lay for a minute or two incapable of thought. I shut my eyes tight, as a man does when he is fighting with a swoon.

When I opened them there was light. It came from the left side of the room, the broad glare of a strong electric torch. I watched it stupidly, but it gave me the fillip needed to pick up the threads. I remembered the tunnel now and the Kansas journalist. Then behind the light I saw a face which pulled my flickering senses out of the mire.

I saw the heavy ulster and the cap, which I had realized, though I had not seen, outside in the dark laurels. They belonged to the journalist, Clarence Donne, the trusted emissary of Blenkiron. But I saw his face now, and it was that face which I had boasted to Bullivant I could never mistake again upon earth. I did not mistake it now, and I remember I had a faint satisfaction that I had made good my word. I had not mistaken it, for I had not had the chance to look at it till this moment. I saw with acid clearness the common denominator of all its disguises — the young man who lisped in the seaside

villa, the stout philanthropist of Biggleswick, the pulpy panic-stricken creature of the Tube station, the trim French staff officer of the Picardy chateau . . . I saw more, for I saw it beyond the need of disguise. I was looking at von Schwabing, the exile, who had done more for Germany than any army commander . . . Mary's words came back to me — 'the most dangerous man in the world' . . . I was not afraid, or broken-hearted at failure, or angry — not yet, for I was too dazed and awestruck. I looked at him as one might look at some cataclysm of nature which had destroyed a continent.

The face was smiling.

'I am happy to offer you hospitality at last,' it said.

I pulled my wits farther out of the mud to attend to him. The cross-bar on my chest pressed less hard and I breathed better. But when I tried to speak, the words would not come.

'We are old friends,' he went on. 'We have known each other quite intimately for four years, which is a long time in war. I have been interested in you, for you have a kind of crude intelligence, and you have compelled me to take you seriously. If you were cleverer you would appreciate the compliment. But you were fool enough to think you could beat me, and for that you must be punished. Oh no, don't flatter yourself you were ever dangerous. You were only troublesome and presumptuous like a mosquito one flicks off one's sleeve.'

He was leaning against the side of a heavy closed door. He lit a cigar from a little gold tinder box and regarded me with amused eyes.

'You will have time for reflection, so I propose to enlighten you a little. You are an observer of little things. So? Did you ever see a cat with a mouse? The mouse runs about and hides and manoeuvres and thinks it is playing its own game. But at any moment the cat can stretch out its paw and put an end to it. You are the mouse, my poor General — for I believe you are one of those funny amateurs that the English call Generals. At any moment during the last nine months I could have put an end to you with a nod.'

My nausea had stopped and I could understand what he said, though I had still no power to reply.

'Let me explain,' he went on. 'I watched with amusement your gambols at Biggleswick. My eyes followed you when you went to the Clyde and in your stupid twistings in Scotland. I gave you rope, because you were futile, and I had graver things to attend to. I allowed you to amuse yourself at your British Front with childish investigations and to play the fool in Paris. I have followed every step of your course in Switzerland, and I have helped your idiotic Yankee friend to plot against myself. While you thought you were drawing your net around me, I was drawing mine around you. I assure you, it has been a charming relaxation from serious business.'

I knew the man was lying. Some part was true, for he had clearly fooled Blenkiron; but I remembered the hurried flight from Biggleswick and Eaucourt Sainte-Anne when the game was certainly against him. He had me at his mercy, and was wreaking his vanity on me. That made him smaller in my eyes, and my first awe began to pass.

'I never cherish rancour, you know,' he said. 'In my business it is silly to be angry, for it wastes energy. But I do not tolerate insolence, my dear General. And my country has the habit of doing justice on her enemies. It may interest you to know that the end is not far off. Germany has faced a jealous world in arms and she is about to be justified of her great courage. She has broken up bit by bit the clumsy organization of her opponents. Where is Russia today, the steam-roller that was to crush us? Where is the poor dupe Rumania? Where is the strength of Italy, who was once to do wonders for what she called Liberty? Broken, all of them. I have played my part in that work and now the need is past. My country with free hands is about to turn upon your armed rabble in the West and drive it into the Atlantic. Then we shall deal with the ragged remains of France and the handful of noisy Americans. By midsummer there will be peace dictated by triumphant Germany.'

'By God, there won't!' I had found my voice at last.

'By God, there will,' he said pleasantly. 'It is what you call a mathematical certainty. You will no doubt die bravely, like the savage tribes that your Empire used to conquer. But we have the greater discipline and the stronger spirit and the bigger brain. Stupidity is always punished in the end, and you are a stupid race. Do not think that your kinsmen across the Atlantic will save you. They are a commercial people and by no means sure of themselves. When they have blustered a little they will see reason and find some means of saving their faces. Their comic President will make a speech or two and write us a solemn note, and we will reply with the serious rhetoric which he loves, and then we shall kiss and be friends. You know in your heart that it will be so.'

A great apathy seemed to settle on me. This bragging did not make me angry, and I had no longer any wish to contradict him. It may have been the result of the fall, but my mind had stopped working. I heard his voice as one listens casually to the ticking of a clock.

'I will tell you more,' he was saying. 'This is the evening of the 18th day of March. Your generals in France expect an attack, but they are not sure where it will come. Some think it may be in Champagne or on the Aisne, some at Ypres, some at St Quentin. Well, my dear General, you alone will I take into our confidence. On the morning of the 21st, three days from now, we attack the right wing of the British Army. In two days we shall be in Amiens. On the third we shall have driven a wedge as far as the sea. Then in a week or so we shall have rolled up your army from the right, and presently we shall be in Boulogne and Calais. After that Paris falls, and then Peace.'

I made no answer. The word 'Amiens' recalled Mary, and I was trying to remember the day in January when she and I had motored south from that pleasant city.

'Why do I tell you these things? Your intelligence, for you are not altogether foolish, will have supplied the answer. It is because your life is over. As your Shakespeare says, the rest is silence . . . No, I am not going to kill you. That would be crude, and I hate crudities. I am going now on a little journey, and when I return in twenty-four hours' time you will be my companion. You are going to visit Germany, my dear General.'

That woke me to attention, and he noticed it, for he went on with gusto.

'You have heard of the *Untergrundbahn*? No? And you boast of an Intelligence service! Yet your ignorance is shared by the whole of your General Staff. It is a little organization of my own. By it we can take unwilling and dangerous people inside our frontier to be dealt with as we please. Some have gone from England and many from France. Officially I believe they are recorded as "missing", but they did not go astray on any battle-field. They have been gathered from their homes or from hotels or offices or even the busy streets. I will not conceal from you that the service of our Underground Railway is a little irregular from England and France. But from Switzerland it is smooth as a trunk line. There are unwatched spots on the frontier, and we have our agents among the frontier guards, and we have no difficulty about passes. It is a pretty device, and you will soon be privileged to observe its working . . . In Germany I cannot promise you comfort, but I do not think your life will be dull.'

As he spoke these words, his urbane smile changed to a grin of impish malevolence. Even through my torpor I felt the venom and I shivered.

'When I return I shall have another companion.' His voice was honeyed again. 'There is a certain pretty lady who was to be the bait to entice me into Italy. It was so? Well, I have fallen to the bait. I have arranged that she shall meet me this very night at a mountain inn on the Italian side. I have arranged, too, that she shall be alone. She is an innocent child, and I do not think that she has been more than a tool in the clumsy hands of your friends. She will come with me when I ask her, and we shall be a merry party in the Underground Express.'

My apathy vanished, and every nerve in me was alive at the words.

'You cur!' I cried. 'She loathes the sight of you. She wouldn't touch you with the end of a barge-pole.'

He flicked the ash from his cigar. 'I think you are mistaken. I am very persuasive, and I do not like to use compulsion with a woman. But, willing or not, she will come with me. I have worked hard and I am entitled to my pleasure, and I have set my heart on that little lady.'

There was something in his tone, gross, leering, assured, half contemptuous, that made my blood boil. He had fairly got me on the raw, and the hammer beat violently in my forehead. I could have wept with sheer rage, and it took all my fortitude to keep my mouth shut. But I was determined not to add to his triumph.

He looked at his watch. 'Time passes,' he said. 'I must depart to my charming assignation. I will give your remembrances to the lady. Forgive me for making no arrangements for your comfort till I return. Your constitution is so sound that it will not suffer from a day's fasting. To set your mind at rest I may tell you that escape is impossible. This mechanism has been proved too often, and if you did break loose from it my servants would deal with you. But I must speak a word of caution. If you tamper with it or struggle too much it will act in a curious way. The floor beneath you covers a shaft which runs to the lake below. Set a certain spring at work and you may find yourself shot down into the water far below the ice, where your body will rot till the spring . . . That, of course, is an alternative open to you, if you do not care to wait for my return.'

He lit a fresh cigar, waved his hand, and vanished through the doorway. As it shut behind him, the sound of his footsteps instantly died away. The walls must have been as thick as a prison's.

I suppose I was what people in books call 'stunned'. The illumination during the past few minutes had been so dazzling that my brain could not master it. I remember very clearly that I did not think about the ghastly failure of our scheme, or the German plans which had been insolently unfolded to me as to one dead to the world. I saw a single picture — an inn in a snowy valley (I saw it as a small place like Peter's cottage), a solitary girl, that smiling devil who had left me, and then the unknown terror of the Underground Railway. I think my courage went for a bit, and I cried with feebleness and rage. The hammer in my forehead had stopped for it only beat when I was angry in action. Now that I lay trapped, the manhood had slipped out of my joints, and if Ivery had still been in the doorway, I think I would have whined for mercy. I would have offered him all the knowledge I had in the world if he had promised to leave Mary alone.

Happily he wasn't there, and there was no witness of my cowardice. Happily, too, it is just as difficult to be a coward for long as to be a hero. It was Blenkiron's phrase about Mary that pulled me together — 'She can't scare and she can't soil'. No, by heavens, she couldn't. I could trust my lady far better than I could trust myself. I was still sick with anxiety, but I was getting a pull on myself. I was done in, but Ivery would get no triumph out of me. Either I would go under the ice, or I would find a chance of putting a bullet through my head before I crossed the frontier. If I could do nothing else I could perish decently . . . And then I laughed, and I knew I was past the worst. What made me laugh was the thought of Peter. I had been pitying him an hour ago for having only one leg, but now he was abroad in the living, breathing world with years before him, and I lay in the depths, limbless and lifeless, with my number up.

I began to muse on the cold water under the ice where I could go if I wanted. I did not think that I would take that road, for a man's chances are not gone till he is stone dead, but I was glad the way existed . . . And then I looked at the wall in front of me, and, very far up, I saw a small square window.

The stars had been clouded when I entered that accursed house, but the mist must have cleared. I saw my old friend Orion, the hunter's star, looking through the bars. And that suddenly made me think.

Peter and I had watched them by night, and I knew the place of all the chief constellations in relation to the St Anton valley. I believed that I was in a room on the lake side of the Pink Chalet: I must be, if Ivery had spoken the truth. But if so, I could not conceivably see Orion from its window . . . There was no other possible conclusion, I must be in a room on the east side of the house, and Ivery had been lying. He had already lied in his boasting of how he had outwitted me in England and at the Front. He might be lying about Mary . . . No, I dismissed that hope. Those words of his had rung true enough.

I thought for a minute and concluded that he had lied to terrorize me and keep me quiet; therefore this infernal contraption had probably its weak point. I reflected, too, that I was pretty strong, far stronger probably than Ivery imagined, for he had never seen me stripped. Since the place was pitch dark I could not guess how the thing worked, but I could feel the cross-bars rigid on my chest and legs and the side-bars which pinned my arms to my sides . . . I drew a long breath and tried to force my elbows apart. Nothing moved, nor could I raise the bars on my legs the smallest fraction.

Again I tried, and again. The side-bar on my right seemed to be less rigid than the others. I managed to get my right hand raised above the level of my thigh, and then with a struggle I got a grip with it on the cross-bar, which gave me a small leverage. With a mighty effort I drove my right elbow and shoulder against the side-bar. It seemed to give slightly . . . I summoned all my strength and tried again. There was a crack and then a splintering, the massive bar shuffled limply back, and my right arm was free to move laterally, though the cross-bar prevented me from raising it.

With some difficulty I got at my coat pocket where reposed my electric torch and my pistol. With immense labour and no little pain I pulled the former out and switched it on by drawing the catch against the cross-bar. Then I saw my prison house.

It was a little square chamber, very high, with on my left the massive door by which Ivery had departed. The dark baulks of my rack were plain, and I could roughly make out how the thing had been managed. Some spring had tilted up the flooring, and dropped the framework from its place in the right-hand wall. It was clamped, I observed, by an arrangement in the floor just in front of the door. If I could get rid of that catch it would be easy to free myself, for to a man of my strength the weight would not be impossibly heavy.

My fortitude had come back to me, and I was living only in the moment, choking down any hope of escape. My first job was to destroy the catch that clamped down the rack, and for that my only weapon was my pistol. I managed to get the

little electric torch jammed in the corner of the cross-bar, where it lit up the floor towards the door. Then it was hell's own business extricating the pistol from my pocket. Wrist and fingers were always cramping, and I was in terror that I might drop it where I could not retrieve it.

I forced myself to think out calmly the question of the clamp, for a pistol bullet is a small thing, and I could not afford to miss. I reasoned it out from my knowledge of mechanics, and came to the conclusion that the centre of gravity was a certain bright spot of metal which I could just see under the cross-bars. It was bright and so must have been recently repaired, and that was another reason for thinking it important. The question was how to hit it, for I could not get the pistol in line with my eye. Let anyone try that kind of shooting, with a bent arm over a bar, when you are lying flat and looking at the mark from under the bar, and he will understand its difficulties. I had six shots in my revolver, and I must fire two or three ranging shots in any case. I must not exhaust all my cartridges, for I must have a bullet left for any servant who came to pry, and I wanted one in reserve for myself. But I did not think shots would be heard outside the room; the walls were too thick.

I held my wrist rigid above the cross-bar and fired. The bullet was an inch to the right of the piece of bright steel. Moving a fraction I fired again. I had grazed it on the left. With aching eyes glued on the mark, I tried a third time. I saw something leap apart, and suddenly the whole framework under which I lay fell loose and mobile . . . I was very cool and restored the pistol to my pocket and took the torch in my hand before I moved . . . Fortune had been kind, for I was free. I turned on my face, humped my back, and without much trouble crawled out from under the contraption.

I did not allow myself to think of ultimate escape, for that would only flurry me, and one step at a time was enough. I remember that I dusted my clothes, and found that the cut in the back of my head had stopped bleeding. I retrieved my hat, which had rolled into a corner when I fell . . . Then I turned my attention to the next step.

The tunnel was impossible, and the only way was the door. If I had stopped to think I would have known that the chances against getting out of such a house were a thousand to one. The pistol shots had been muffled by the cavernous walls, but the place, as I knew, was full of servants and, even if I passed the immediate door, I would be collared in some passage. But I had myself so well in hand that I tackled the door as if I had been prospecting to sink a new shaft in Rhodesia.

It had no handle nor, so far as I could see, a keyhole . . . But I noticed, as I turned my torch on the ground, that from the clamp which I had shattered a brass rod sunk in the floor led to one of the door-posts. Obviously the thing worked by a spring and was connected with the mechanism of the rack.

A wild thought entered my mind and brought me to my feet. I pushed the door and it swung slowly open. The bullet which freed me had released the spring which controlled it.

Then for the first time, against all my maxims of discretion, I began to hope. I took off my hat and felt my forehead burning, so that I rested it for a moment on the cool wall . . . Perhaps my luck still held. With a rush came thoughts of Mary and Blenkiron and Peter and everything we had laboured for, and I was mad to win.

I had no notion of the interior of the house or where lay the main door to the outer world. My torch showed me a long passage with something like a door at the far end, but I clicked it off, for I did not dare to use it now. The place was deadly quiet. As I listened I seemed to hear a door open far away, and then silence fell again.

I groped my way down the passage till I had my hands on the far door. I hoped it might open on the hall, where I could escape by a window or a balcony, for I judged the outer door would be locked. I listened, and there came no sound from within. It was no use lingering, so very stealthily I turned the handle and opened it a crack.

It creaked and I waited with beating heart on discovery, for inside I saw the glow of light. But there was no movement, so it must be empty. I poked my head in and then followed with my body.

It was a large room, with logs burning in a stove, and the floor thick with rugs. It was lined with books, and on a table in the centre a reading-lamp was burning. Several dispatch-boxes stood on the table, and there was a little pile of papers. A man had been here a minute before, for a half-smoked cigar was burning on the edge of the inkstand.

At that moment I recovered complete use of my wits and all my self-possession. More, there returned to me some of the old devil-may-care which before had served me well. Ivery had gone, but this was his sanctum. Just as on the roofs of Erzerum I had burned to get at Stumm's papers, so now it was borne in on me that at all costs I must look at that pile.

I advanced to the table and picked up the topmost paper. It was a little typewritten blue slip with the lettering in

italics, and in a corner a curious, involved stamp in red ink. On it I read:

‘Die Wildvogel missen beimkehren.’

At the same moment I heard steps and the door opened on the far side, I stepped back towards the stove, and fingered the pistol in my pocket.

A man entered, a man with a scholar’s stoop, an unkempt beard, and large sleepy dark eyes. At the sight of me he pulled up and his whole body grew taut. It was the Portuguese Jew, whose back I had last seen at the smithy door in Skye, and who by the mercy of God had never seen my face.

I stopped fingering my pistol, for I had an inspiration. Before he could utter a word I got in first.

‘Die Vogelein schwei igem im Walde,’ I said.

His face broke into a pleasant smile, and he replied:

‘Warte nur, balde rubest du auch.’

‘Ach,’ he said in German, holding out his hand, ‘you have come this way, when we thought you would go by Modane. I welcome you, for I know your exploits. You are Conradi, who did so nobly in Italy?’

I bowed. ‘Yes, I am Conradi,’ I said.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE COL OF THE SWALLOWS

He pointed to the slip on the table.
‘You have seen the orders?’
I nodded.

‘The long day’s work is over. You must rejoice, for your part has been the hardest, I think. Some day you will tell me about it?’

The man’s face was honest and kindly, rather like that of the engineer Gaudian, whom two years before I had met in Germany. But his eyes fascinated me, for they were the eyes of the dreamer and fanatic, who would not desist from his quest while life lasted. I thought that Ivery had chosen well in his colleague.

‘My task is not done yet,’ I said. ‘I came here to see Chelius.’

‘He will be back tomorrow evening.’

‘Too late. I must see him at once. He has gone to Italy, and I must overtake him.’

‘You know your duty best,’ he said gravely.

‘But you must help me. I must catch him at Santa Chiara, for it is a business of life and death. Is there a car to be had?’

‘There is mine. But there is no chauffeur. Chelius took him.’

‘I can drive myself and I know the road. But I have no pass to cross the frontier.’

‘That is easily supplied,’ he said, smiling.

In one bookcase there was a shelf of dummy books. He unlocked this and revealed a small cupboard, whence he took a tin dispatch-box. From some papers he selected one, which seemed to be already signed.

‘Name?’ he asked.

‘Call me Hans Gruber of Brieg,’ I said. ‘I travel to pick up my master, who is in the timber trade.’

‘And your return?’

‘I will come back by my old road,’ I said mysteriously; and if he knew what I meant it was more than I did myself.

He completed the paper and handed it to me. ‘This will take you through the frontier posts. And now for the car. The servants will be in bed, for they have been preparing for a long journey, but I will myself show it you. There is enough petrol on board to take you to Rome.’

He led me through the hall, unlocked the front door, and we crossed the snowy lawn to the garage. The place was empty but for a great car, which bore the marks of having come from the muddy lowlands. To my joy I saw that it was a Daimler, a type with which I was familiar. I lit the lamps, started the engine, and ran it out on to the road.

‘You will want an overcoat,’ he said.

‘I never wear them.’

‘Food?’

‘I have some chocolate. I will breakfast at Santa Chiara.’

‘Well, God go with you!’

A minute later I was tearing along the lake-side towards St Anton village.

I stopped at the cottage on the hill. Peter was not yet in bed. I found him sitting by the fire, trying to read, but I saw by his face that he had been waiting anxiously on my coming.

‘We’re in the soup, old man,’ I said as I shut the door. In a dozen sentences I told him of the night’s doings, of Ivery’s plan and my desperate errand.

‘You wanted a share,’ I cried. ‘Well, everything depends on you now. I’m off after Ivery, and God knows what will happen. Meantime, you have got to get on to Blenkiron, and tell him what I’ve told you. He must get the news through to G.H.Q. somehow. He must trap the Wild Birds before they go. I don’t know how, but he must. Tell him it’s all up to him

and you, for I'm out of it. I must save Mary, and if God's willing I'll settle with Ivery. But the big job is for Blenkiron — and you. Somehow he has made a bad break, and the enemy has got ahead of him. He must sweat blood to make up. My God, Peter, it's the solemnest moment of our lives. I don't see any light, but we mustn't miss any chances. I'm leaving it all to you.'

I spoke like a man in a fever, for after what I had been through I wasn't quite sane. My coolness in the Pink Chalet had given place to a crazy restlessness. I can see Peter yet, standing in the ring of lamplight, supporting himself by a chair back, wrinkling his brows and, as he always did in moments of excitement, scratching gently the tip of his left ear. His face was happy.

'Never fear, Dick,' he said. 'It will all come right. *Ons sal 'n plan maak.*'

And then, still possessed with a demon of disquiet, I was on the road again, heading for the pass that led to Italy.

The mist had gone from the sky, and the stars were shining brightly. The moon, now at the end of its first quarter, was setting in a gap of the mountains, as I climbed the low col from the St Anton valley to the greater Staubthal. There was frost and the hard snow crackled under my wheels, but there was also that feel in the air which preludes storm. I wondered if I should run into snow in the high hills. The whole land was deep in peace. There was not a light in the hamlets I passed through, not a soul on the highway.

In the Staubthal I joined the main road and swung to the left up the narrowing bed of the valley. The road was in noble condition, and the car was running finely, as I mounted through forests of snowy Pines to a land where the mountains crept close together, and the highway coiled round the angles of great crags or skirted perilously some profound gorge, with only a line of wooden posts to defend it from the void. In places the snow stood in walls on either side, where the road was kept open by man's labour. In other parts it lay thin, and in the dim light one might have fancied that one was running through open meadowlands.

Slowly my head was getting clearer, and I was able to look round my problem. I banished from my mind the situation I had left behind me. Blenkiron must cope with that as best he could. It lay with him to deal with the Wild Birds, my job was with Ivery alone. Sometime in the early morning he would reach Santa Chiara, and there he would find Mary. Beyond that my imagination could forecast nothing. She would be alone — I could trust his cleverness for that; he would try to force her to come with him, or he might persuade her with some lying story. Well, please God, I should come in for the tail end of the interview, and at the thought I cursed the steep gradients I was climbing, and longed for some magic to lift the Daimler beyond the summit and set it racing down the slope towards Italy.

I think it was about half-past three when I saw the lights of the frontier post. The air seemed milder than in the valleys, and there was a soft scurry of snow on my right cheek. A couple of sleepy Swiss sentries with their rifles in their hands stumbled out as I drew up.

They took my pass into the hut and gave me an anxious quarter of an hour while they examined it. The performance was repeated fifty yards on at the Italian post, where to my alarm the sentries were inclined to conversation. I played the part of the sulky servant, answering in monosyllables and pretending to immense stupidity.

'You are only just in time, friend,' said one in German. 'The weather grows bad and soon the pass will close. Ugh, it is as cold as last winter on the Tonale. You remember, Giuseppe?'

But in the end they let me move on. For a little I felt my way gingerly, for on the summit the road had many twists and the snow was confusing to the eyes. Presently came a sharp drop and I let the Daimler go. It grew colder, and I shivered a little; the snow became a wet white fog around the glowing arc of the headlights; and always the road fell, now in long curves, now in steep short dips, till I was aware of a glen opening towards the south. From long living in the wilds I have a kind of sense for landscape without the testimony of the eyes, and I knew where the ravine narrowed or widened though it was black darkness.

In spite of my restlessness I had to go slowly, for after the first rush downhill I realized that, unless I was careful, I might wreck the car and spoil everything. The surface of the road on the southern slope of the mountains was a thousand per cent worse than that on the other. I skidded and side-slipped, and once grazed the edge of the gorge. It was far more maddening than the climb up, for then it had been a straight-forward grind with the Daimler doing its utmost, whereas now I had to hold her back because of my own lack of skill. I reckon that time crawling down from the summit of the Staub as some of the weariest hours I ever spent.

Quite suddenly I ran out of the ill weather into a different climate. The sky was clear above me, and I saw that dawn was very near. The first pinewoods were beginning, and at last came a straight slope where I could let the car out. I began to recover my spirits, which had been very dashed, and to reckon the distance I had still to travel . . . And then, without warning, a new world sprang up around me. Out of the blue dusk white shapes rose like ghosts, peaks and needles and domes of ice, their bases fading mistily into shadow, but the tops kindling till they glowed like jewels. I had never seen such a sight, and the wonder of it for a moment drove anxiety from my heart. More, it gave me an earnest of victory. I was in clear air once more, and surely in this diamond ether the foul things which loved the dark must be worsted . . .

And then I saw, a mile ahead, the little square red-roofed building which I knew to be the inn of Santa Chiara.

It was here that misfortune met me. I had grown careless now, and looked rather at the house than the road. At one point the hillside had slipped down — it must have been recent, for the road was well kept — and I did not notice the landslide till I was on it. I slewed to the right, took too wide a curve, and before I knew the car was over the far edge. I slapped on the brakes, but to avoid turning turtle I had to leave the road altogether. I slithered down a steep bank into a meadow, where for my sins I ran into a fallen tree trunk with a jar that shook me out of my seat and nearly broke my arm. Before I examined the car I knew what had happened. The front axle was bent, and the off front wheel badly buckled.

I had not time to curse my stupidity. I clambered back to the road and set off running down it at my best speed. I was mortally stiff, for Ivery's rack was not good for the joints, but I realized it only as a drag on my pace, not as an affliction in itself. My whole mind was set on the house before me and what might be happening there.

There was a man at the door of the inn, who, when he caught sight of my figure, began to move to meet me. I saw that it was Launcelot Wake, and the sight gave me hope.

But his face frightened me. It was drawn and haggard like one who never sleeps, and his eyes were hot coals.

'Hannay,' he cried, 'for God's sake what does it mean?'

'Where is Mary?' I gasped, and I remember I clutched at a lapel of his coat.

He pulled me to the low stone wall by the roadside.

'I don't know,' he said hoarsely. 'We got your orders to come here this morning. We were at Chiavagno, where Blenkiron told us to wait. But last night Mary disappeared . . . I found she had hired a carriage and come on ahead. I followed at once, and reached here an hour ago to find her gone . . . The woman who keeps the place is away and there are only two old servants left. They tell me that Mary came here late, and that very early in the morning a closed car came over the Staub with a man in it. They say he asked to see the young lady, and that they talked together for some time, and that then she went off with him in the car down the valley . . . I must have passed it on my way up . . . There's been some black devilment that I can't follow. Who was the man? Who was the man?'

He looked as if he wanted to throttle me.

'I can tell you that,' I said. 'It was Ivery.'

He stared for a second as if he didn't understand. Then he leaped to his feet and cursed like a trooper. 'You've botched it, as I knew you would. I knew no good would come of your infernal subtleties.' And he consigned me and Blenkiron and the British army and Ivery and everybody else to the devil.

I was past being angry. 'Sit down, man,' I said, 'and listen to me.' I told him of what had happened at the Pink Chalet. He heard me out with his head in his hands. The thing was too bad for cursing.

'The Underground Railway!' he groaned. 'The thought of it drives me mad. Why are you so calm, Hannay? She's in the hands of the cleverest devil in the world, and you take it quietly. You should be a raving lunatic.'

'I would be if it were any use, but I did all my raving last night in that den of Ivery's. We've got to pull ourselves together, Wake. First of all, I trust Mary to the other side of eternity. She went with him of her own free will. I don't know why, but she must have had a reason, and be sure it was a good one, for she's far cleverer than you or me . . . We've got to follow her somehow. Ivery's bound for Germany, but his route is by the Pink Chalet, for he hopes to pick me up there. He went down the valley; therefore he is going to Switzerland by the Marjolana. That is a long circuit and will take him most of the day. Why he chose that way I don't know, but there it is. We've got to get back by the Staub.'

'How did you come?' he asked.

'That's our damnable luck. I came in a first-class six-cylinder Daimler, which is now lying a wreck in a meadow a mile

up the road. We've got to foot it.'

'We can't do it. It would take too long. Besides, there's the frontier to pass.'

I remembered ruefully that I might have got a return passport from the Portuguese Jew, if I had thought of anything at the time beyond getting to Santa Chiara.

'Then we must make a circuit by the hillside and dodge the guards. It's no use making difficulties, Wake. We're fairly up against it, but we've got to go on trying till we drop. Otherwise I'll take your advice and go mad.'

'And supposing you get back to St Anton, you'll find the house shut up and the travellers gone hours before by the Underground Railway.'

'Very likely. But, man, there's always the glimmering of a chance. It's no good chucking in your hand till the game's out.'

'Drop your proverbial philosophy, Mr Martin Tupper, and look up there.'

He had one foot on the wall and was staring at a cleft in the snow-line across the valley. The shoulder of a high peak dropped sharply to a kind of nick and rose again in a long graceful curve of snow. All below the nick was still in deep shadow, but from the configuration of the slopes I judged that a tributary glacier ran from it to the main glacier at the river head.

'That's the Colle delle Rondini,' he said, 'the Col of the Swallows. It leads straight to the Staubthal near Grunewald. On a good day I have done it in seven hours, but it's not a pass for winter-time. It has been done of course, but not often. . . . Yet, if the weather held, it might go even now, and that would bring us to St Anton by the evening. I wonder'— and he looked me over with an appraising eye —'I wonder if you're up to it.'

My stiffness had gone and I burned to set my restlessness to physical toil.

'If you can do it, I can,' I said.

'No. There you're wrong. You're a hefty fellow, but you're no mountaineer, and the ice of the Colle delle Rondini needs knowledge. It would be insane to risk it with a novice, if there were any other way. But I'm damned if I see any, and I'm going to chance it. We can get a rope and axes in the inn. Are you game?'

'Right you are. Seven hours, you say. We've got to do it in six.'

'You will be humbler when you get on the ice,' he said grimly. 'We'd better breakfast, for the Lord knows when we shall see food again.'

We left the inn at five minutes to nine, with the sky cloudless and a stiff wind from the north-west, which we felt even in the deep-cut valley. Wake walked with a long, slow stride that tried my patience. I wanted to hustle, but he bade me keep in step. 'You take your orders from me, for I've been at this job before. Discipline in the ranks, remember.'

We crossed the river gorge by a plank bridge, and worked our way up the right bank, past the moraine, to the snout of the glacier. It was bad going, for the snow concealed the boulders, and I often floundered in holes. Wake never relaxed his stride, but now and then he stopped to sniff the air.

I observed that the weather looked good, and he differed. 'It's too clear. There'll be a full-blown gale on the Col and most likely snow in the afternoon.' He pointed to a fat yellow cloud that was beginning to bulge over the nearest peak. After that I thought he lengthened his stride.

'Lucky I had these boots resoled and nailed at Chiavagno,' was the only other remark he made till we had passed the seracs of the main glacier and turned up the lesser ice-stream from the Colle delle Rondini.

By half-past ten we were near its head, and I could see clearly the ribbon of pure ice between black crags too steep for snow to lie on, which was the means of ascent to the Col. The sky had clouded over, and ugly streamers floated on the high slopes. We tied on the rope at the foot of the bergschrund, which was easy to pass because of the winter's snow. Wake led, of course, and presently we came on to the icefall.

In my time I had done a lot of scrambling on rocks and used to promise myself a season in the Alps to test myself on the big peaks. If I ever go it will be to climb the honest rock towers around Chamonix, for I won't have anything to do with snow mountains. That day on the Colle delle Rondini fairly sickened me of ice. I daresay I might have liked it if I had done it in a holiday mood, at leisure and in good spirits. But to crawl up that couloir with a sick heart and a desperate impulse to hurry was the worst sort of nightmare. The place was as steep as a wall of smooth black ice that seemed hard as granite.

Wake did the step-cutting, and I admired him enormously. He did not seem to use much force, but every step was hewn cleanly the right size, and they were spaced the right distance. In this job he was the true professional. I was thankful Blenkiron was not with us, for the thing would have given a squirrel vertigo. The chips of ice slithered between my legs and I could watch them till they brought up just above the bergschrund.

The ice was in shadow and it was bitterly cold. As we crawled up I had not the exercise of using the axe to warm me, and I got very numb standing on one leg waiting for the next step. Worse still, my legs began to cramp. I was in good condition, but that time under Ivery's rack had played the mischief with my limbs. Muscles got out of place in my calves and stood in aching lumps, till I almost squealed with the pain of it. I was mortally afraid I should slip, and every time I moved I called out to Wake to warn him. He saw what was happening and got the pick of his axe fixed in the ice before I was allowed to stir. He spoke often to cheer me up, and his voice had none of its harshness. He was like some ill-tempered generals I have known, very gentle in a battle.

At the end the snow began to fall, a soft powder like the overspill of a storm raging beyond the crest. It was just after that that Wake cried out that in five minutes we would be at the summit. He consulted his wrist-watch. 'Jolly good time, too. Only twenty-five minutes behind my best. It's not one o'clock.'

The next I knew I was lying flat on a pad of snow easing my cramped legs, while Wake shouted in my ear that we were in for something bad. I was aware of a driving blizzard, but I had no thought of anything but the blessed relief from pain. I lay for some minutes on my back with my legs stiff in the air and the toes turned inwards, while my muscles fell into their proper place.

It was certainly no spot to linger in. We looked down into a trough of driving mist, which sometimes swirled aside and showed a knuckle of black rock far below. We ate some chocolate, while Wake shouted in my ear that now we had less step-cutting. He did his best to cheer me, but he could not hide his anxiety. Our faces were frosted over like a wedding-cake and the sting of the wind was like a whiplash on our eyelids.

The first part was easy, down a slope of firm snow where steps were not needed. Then came ice again, and we had to cut into it below the fresh surface snow. This was so laborious that Wake took to the rocks on the right side of the couloir, where there was some shelter from the main force of the blast. I found it easier, for I knew something about rocks, but it was difficult enough with every handhold and foothold glazed. Presently we were driven back again to the ice, and painfully cut our way through a throat of the ravine where the sides narrowed. There the wind was terrible, for the narrows made a kind of funnel, and we descended, plastered against the wall, and scarcely able to breathe, while the tornado plucked at our bodies as if it would whisk us like wisps of grass into the abyss.

After that the gorge widened and we had an easier slope, till suddenly we found ourselves perched on a great tongue of rock round which the snow blew like the froth in a whirlpool. As we stopped for breath, Wake shouted in my ear that this was the Black Stone.

'The what?' I yelled.

'The Schwarzstein. The Swiss call the pass the Schwarzsteinthor. You can see it from Grunewald.'

I suppose every man has a tinge of superstition in him. To hear that name in that ferocious place gave me a sudden access of confidence. I seemed to see all my doings as part of a great predestined plan. Surely it was not for nothing that the word which had been the key of my first adventure in the long tussle should appear in this last phase. I felt new strength in my legs and more vigour in my lungs. 'A good omen,' I shouted. 'Wake, old man, we're going to win out.'

'The worst is still to come,' he said.

He was right. To get down that tongue of rock to the lower snows of the couloir was a job that fairly brought us to the end of our tether. I can feel yet the sour, bleak smell of wet rock and ice and the hard nerve pain that racked my forehead. The Kaffirs used to say that there were devils in the high berg, and this place was assuredly given over to the powers of the air who had no thought of human life. I seemed to be in the world which had endured from the eternity before man was dreamed of. There was no mercy in it, and the elements were pitting their immortal strength against two pigmies who had profaned their sanctuary. I yearned for warmth, for the glow of a fire, for a tree or blade of grass or anything which meant the sheltered homeliness of mortality. I knew then what the Greeks meant by panic, for I was scared by the apathy of nature. But the terror gave me a kind of comfort, too. Ivery and his doings seemed less formidable. Let me but get out of this cold hell and I could meet him with a new confidence.

Wake led, for he knew the road and the road wanted knowing. Otherwise he should have been last on the rope, for that is the place of the better man in a descent. I had some horrible moments following on when the rope grew taut, for I had no help from it. We zigzagged down the rock, sometimes driven to the ice of the adjacent couloirs, sometimes on the outer ridge of the Black Stone, sometimes wriggling down little cracks and over evil boiler-plates. The snow did not lie on it, but the rock crackled with thin ice or oozed ice water. Often it was only by the grace of God that I did not fall headlong, and pull Wake out of his hold to the bergschrund far below. I slipped more than once, but always by a miracle recovered myself. To make things worse, Wake was tiring. I could feel him drag on the rope, and his movements had not the precision they had had in the morning. He was the mountaineer, and I the novice. If he gave out, we should never reach the valley.

The fellow was clear grit all through. When we reached the foot of the tooth and sat huddled up with our faces away from the wind, I saw that he was on the edge of fainting. What that effort must have cost him in the way of resolution you may guess, but he did not fail till the worst was past. His lips were colourless, and he was choking with the nausea of fatigue. I found a flask of brandy in his pocket, and a mouthful revived him.

‘I’m all out,’ he said. ‘The road’s easier now, and I can direct YOU about the rest . . . You’d better leave me. I’ll only be a drag. I’ll come on when I feel better.’

‘No, you don’t, you old fool. You’ve got me over that infernal iceberg, and I’m going to see you home.’

I rubbed his arms and legs and made him swallow some chocolate. But when he got on his feet he was as dodderly as an old man. Happily we had an easy course down a snow gradient, which we glissaded in very unorthodox style. The swift motion freshened him up a little, and he was able to put on the brake with his axe to prevent us cascading into the bergschrund. We crossed it by a snow bridge, and started out on the seracs of the Schwarzstein glacier.

I am no mountaineer — not of the snow and ice kind, anyway — but I have a big share of physical strength and I wanted it all now. For those seracs were an invention of the devil. To traverse that labyrinth in a blinding snowstorm, with a fainting companion who was too weak to jump the narrowest crevasse, and who hung on the rope like lead when there was occasion to use it, was more than I could manage. Besides, every step that brought us nearer to the valley now increased my eagerness to hurry, and wandering in that maze of clotted ice was like the nightmare when you stand on the rails with the express coming and are too weak to climb on the platform. As soon as possible I left the glacier for the hillside, and though that was laborious enough in all conscience, yet it enabled me to steer a straight course. Wake never spoke a word. When I looked at him his face was ashen under a gale which should have made his cheeks glow, and he kept his eyes half closed. He was staggering on at the very limits of his endurance . . .

By and by we were on the moraine, and after splashing through a dozen little glacier streams came on a track which led up the hillside. Wake nodded feebly when I asked if this was right. Then to my joy I saw a gnarled pine.

I untied the rope and Wake dropped like a log on the ground. ‘Leave me,’ he groaned. ‘I’m fairly done. I’ll come on later.’ And he shut his eyes.

My watch told me that it was after five o’clock.

‘Get on my back,’ I said. ‘I won’t part from you till I’ve found a cottage. You’re a hero. You’ve brought me over those damned mountains in a blizzard, and that’s what no other man in England would have done. Get up.’

He obeyed, for he was too far gone to argue. I tied his wrists together with a handkerchief below my chin, for I wanted my arms to hold up his legs. The rope and axes I left in a cache beneath the pine-tree. Then I started trotting down the track for the nearest dwelling.

My strength felt inexhaustible and the quicksilver in my bones drove me forward. The snow was still falling, but the wind was dying down, and after the inferno of the pass it was like summer. The road wound over the shale of the hillside and then into what in spring must have been upland meadows. Then it ran among trees, and far below me on the right I could hear the glacier river churning in its gorge. Soon little empty huts appeared, and rough enclosed paddocks, and presently I came out on a shelf above the stream and smelt the wood-smoke of a human habitation.

I found a middle-aged peasant in the cottage, a guide by profession in summer and a woodcutter in winter.

‘I have brought my Herr from Santa Chiara,’ I said, ‘over the Schwarzsteinthor. He is very weary and must sleep.’

I decanted Wake into a chair, and his head nodded on his chest. But his colour was better.

‘You and your Herr are fools,’ said the man gruffly, but not unkindly. ‘He must sleep or he will have a fever. The Schwarzsteinthor in this devil’s weather! Is he English?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘like all madmen. But he’s a good Herr, and a brave mountaineer.’

We stripped Wake of his Red Cross uniform, now a collection of sopping rags, and got him between blankets with a huge earthenware bottle of hot water at his feet. The woodcutter’s wife boiled milk, and this, with a little brandy added, we made him drink. I was quite easy in my mind about him, for I had seen this condition before. In the morning he would be as stiff as a poker, but recovered.

‘Now I’m off for St Anton,’ I said. ‘I must get there tonight.’

‘You are the hardy one,’ the man laughed. ‘I will show you the quick road to Grunewald, where is the railway. With good fortune you may get the last train.’

I gave him fifty francs on my Herr’s behalf, learned his directions for the road, and set off after a draught of goat’s milk, munching my last slab of chocolate. I was still strung up to a mechanical activity, and I ran every inch of the three miles to the Staubthal without consciousness of fatigue. I was twenty minutes too soon for the train, and, as I sat on a bench on the platform, my energy suddenly ebbed away. That is what happens after a great exertion. I longed to sleep, and when the train arrived I crawled into a carriage like a man with a stroke. There seemed to be no force left in my limbs. I realized that I was leg-weary, which is a thing you see sometimes with horses, but not often with men.

All the journey I lay like a log in a kind of coma, and it was with difficulty that I recognized my destination, and stumbled out of the train. But I had no sooner emerged from the station of St Anton than I got my second wind. Much snow had fallen since yesterday, but it had stopped now, the sky was clear, and the moon was riding. The sight of the familiar place brought back all my anxieties. The day on the Col of the Swallows was wiped out of my memory, and I saw only the inn at Santa Chiara, and heard Wake’s hoarse voice speaking of Mary. The lights were twinkling from the village below, and on the right I saw the clump of trees which held the Pink Chalet.

I took a short cut across the fields, avoiding the little town. I ran hard, stumbling often, for though I had got my mental energy back my legs were still precarious. The station clock had told me that it was nearly half-past nine.

Soon I was on the high-road, and then at the Chalet gates. I heard as in a dream what seemed to be three shrill blasts on a whistle. Then a big car passed me, making for St Anton. For a second I would have hailed it, but it was past me and away. But I had a conviction that my business lay in the house, for I thought Ivery was there, and Ivery was what mattered.

I marched up the drive with no sort of plan in my head, only a blind rushing on fate. I remembered dimly that I had still three cartridges in my revolver.

The front door stood open and I entered and tiptoed down the passage to the room where I had found the Portuguese Jew. No one hindered me, but it was not for lack of servants. I had the impression that there were people near me in the darkness, and I thought I heard German softly spoken. There was someone ahead of me, perhaps the speaker, for I could hear careful footsteps. It was very dark, but a ray of light came from below the door of the room. Then behind me I heard the hall door clang, and the noise of a key turned in its lock. I had walked straight into a trap and all retreat was cut off.

My mind was beginning to work more clearly, though my purpose was still vague. I wanted to get at Ivery and I believed that he was somewhere in front of me. And then I thought of the door which led from the chamber where I had been imprisoned. If I could enter that way I would have the advantage of surprise.

I groped on the right-hand side of the passage and found a handle. It opened upon what seemed to be a dining-room, for there was a faint smell of food. Again I had the impression of people near, who for some unknown reason did not molest me. At the far end I found another door, which led to a second room, which I guessed to be adjacent to the library. Beyond it again must lie the passage from the chamber with the rack. The whole place was as quiet as a shell.

I had guessed right. I was standing in the passage where I had stood the night before. In front of me was the library, and there was the same chink of light showing. Very softly I turned the handle and opened it a crack . . .

The first thing that caught my eye was the profile of Ivery. He was looking towards the writing-table, where someone was sitting.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE UNDERGROUND RAILWAY

This is the story which I heard later from Mary . . .

She was at Milan with the new Anglo-American hospital when she got Blenkiron's letter. Santa Chiara had always been the place agreed upon, and this message mentioned specifically Santa Chiara, and fixed a date for her presence there. She was a little puzzled by it, for she had not yet had a word from Ivery, to whom she had written twice by the roundabout address in France which Bommaerts had given her. She did not believe that he would come to Italy in the ordinary course of things, and she wondered at Blenkiron's certainty about the date.

The following morning came a letter from Ivery in which he ardently pressed for a meeting. It was the first of several, full of strange talk about some approaching crisis, in which the forebodings of the prophet were mingled with the solicitude of a lover.

'The storm is about to break,' he wrote, 'and I cannot think only of my own fate. I have something to tell you which vitally concerns yourself. You say you are in Lombardy. The Chiavagno valley is within easy reach, and at its head is the inn of Santa Chiara, to which I come on the morning of March 19th. Meet me there even if only for half an hour, I implore you. We have already shared hopes and confidences, and I would now share with you a knowledge which I alone in Europe possess. You have the heart of a lion, my lady, worthy of what I can bring you.'

Wake was summoned from the *Croce Rossa* unit with which he was working at Vicenza, and the plan arranged by Blenkiron was faithfully carried out. Four officers of the Alpini, in the rough dress of peasants of the hills, met them in Chiavagno on the morning of the 18th. It was arranged that the hostess of Santa Chiara should go on a visit to her sister's son, leaving the inn, now in the shuttered quiet of wintertime, under the charge of two ancient servants. The hour of Ivery's coming on the 19th had been fixed by him for noon, and that morning Mary would drive up the valley, while Wake and the Alpini went inconspicuously by other routes so as to be in station around the place before midday.

But on the evening of the 18th at the Hotel of the Four Kings in Chiavagno Mary received another message. It was from me and told her that I was crossing the Staub at midnight and would be at the inn before dawn. It begged her to meet me there, to meet me alone without the others, because I had that to say to her which must be said before Ivery's coming. I have seen the letter. It was written in a hand which I could not have distinguished from my own scrawl. It was not exactly what I would myself have written, but there were phrases in it which to Mary's mind could have come only from me. Oh, I admit it was cunningly done, especially the love-making, which was just the kind of stammering thing which I would have achieved if I had tried to put my feelings on paper. Anyhow, Mary had no doubt of its genuineness. She slipped off after dinner, hired a carriage with two broken-winded screws and set off up the valley. She left a line for Wake telling him to follow according to the plan — a line which he never got, for his anxiety when he found she had gone drove him to immediate pursuit.

At about two in the morning of the 19th after a slow and icy journey she arrived at the inn, knocked up the aged servants, made herself a cup of chocolate out of her tea-basket and sat down to wait on my coming.

She has described to me that time of waiting. A home-made candle in a tall earthenware candlestick lit up the little *salle-a-manger*, which was the one room in use. The world was very quiet, the snow muffled the roads, and it was cold with the penetrating chill of the small hours of a March night. Always, she has told me, will the taste of chocolate and the smell of burning tallow bring back to her that strange place and the flutter of the heart with which she waited. For she was on the eve of the crisis of all our labours, she was very young, and youth has a quick fancy which will not be checked. Moreover, it was I who was coming, and save for the scrawl of the night before, we had had no communication for many weeks . . . She tried to distract her mind by repeating poetry, and the thing that came into her head was Keats's 'Nightingale', an odd poem for the time and place.

There was a long wicker chair among the furnishings of the room, and she lay down on it with her fur cloak muffled around her. There were sounds of movement in the inn. The old woman who had let her in, with the scent of intrigue of her kind, had brightened when she heard that another guest was coming. Beautiful women do not travel at midnight for

nothing. She also was awake and expectant.

Then quite suddenly came the sound of a car slowing down outside. She sprang to her feet in a tremor of excitement. It was like the Picardy chateau again — the dim room and a friend coming out of the night. She heard the front door open and a step in the little hall . . .

She was looking at Ivery. . . . He slipped his driving-coat off as he entered, and bowed gravely. He was wearing a green hunting suit which in the dusk seemed like khaki, and, as he was about my own height, for a second she was misled. Then she saw his face and her heart stopped.

‘You!’ she cried. She had sunk back again on the wicker chair.

‘I have come as I promised,’ he said, ‘but a little earlier. You will forgive me my eagerness to be with you.’

She did not heed his words, for her mind was feverishly busy. My letter had been a fraud and this man had discovered our plans. She was alone with him, for it would be hours before her friends came from Chiavagno. He had the game in his hands, and of all our confederacy she alone remained to confront him. Mary’s courage was pretty near perfect, and for the moment she did not think of herself or her own fate. That came later. She was possessed with poignant disappointment at our failure. All our efforts had gone to the winds, and the enemy had won with contemptuous ease. Her nervousness disappeared before the intense regret, and her brain set coolly and busily to work.

It was a new Ivery who confronted her, a man with vigour and purpose in every line of him and the quiet confidence of power. He spoke with a serious courtesy.

‘The time for make-believe is past,’ he was saying. ‘We have fenced with each other. I have told you only half the truth, and you have always kept me at arm’s length. But you knew in your heart, my dearest lady, that there must be the full truth between us some day, and that day has come. I have often told you that I love you. I do not come now to repeat that declaration. I come to ask you to entrust yourself to me, to join your fate to mine, for I can promise you the happiness which you deserve.’

He pulled up a chair and sat beside her. I cannot put down all that he said, for Mary, once she grasped the drift of it, was busy with her own thoughts and did not listen. But I gather from her that he was very candid and seemed to grow as he spoke in mental and moral stature. He told her who he was and what his work had been. He claimed the same purpose as hers, a hatred of war and a passion to rebuild the world into decency. But now he drew a different moral. He was a German: it was through Germany alone that peace and regeneration could come. His country was purged from her faults, and the marvellous German discipline was about to prove itself in the eye of gods and men. He told her what he had told me in the room at the Pink Chalet, but with another colouring. Germany was not vengeful or vainglorious, only patient and merciful. God was about to give her the power to decide the world’s fate, and it was for him and his kind to see that the decision was beneficent. The greater task of his people was only now beginning.

That was the gist of his talk. She appeared to listen, but her mind was far away. She must delay him for two hours, three hours, four hours. If not, she must keep beside him. She was the only one of our company left in touch with the enemy . . .

‘I go to Germany now,’ he was saying. ‘I want you to come with me — to be my wife.’

He waited for an answer, and got it in the form of a startled question.

‘To Germany? How?’

‘It is easy,’ he said, smiling. ‘The car which is waiting outside is the first stage of a system of travel which we have perfected.’ Then he told her about the Underground Railway — not as he had told it to me, to scare, but as a proof of power and forethought.

His manner was perfect. He was respectful, devoted, thoughtful of all things. He was the suppliant, not the master. He offered her power and pride, a dazzling career, for he had deserved well of his country, the devotion of the faithful lover. He would take her to his mother’s house, where she would be welcomed like a princess. I have no doubt he was sincere, for he had many moods, and the libertine whom he had revealed to me at the Pink Chalet had given place to the honourable gentleman. He could play all parts well because he could believe in himself in them all.

Then he spoke of danger, not so as to slight her courage, but to emphasize his own thoughtfulness. The world in which she had lived was crumbling, and he alone could offer a refuge. She felt the steel gauntlet through the texture of the velvet glove.

All the while she had been furiously thinking, with her chin in her hand in the old way . . . She might refuse to go. He could compel her, no doubt, for there was no help to be got from the old servants. But it might be difficult to carry an unwilling woman over the first stages of the Underground Railway. There might be chances . . . Supposing he accepted her refusal and left her. Then indeed he would be gone for ever and our game would have closed with a fiasco. The great antagonist of England would go home rejoicing, taking his sheaves with him.

At this time she had no personal fear of him. So curious a thing is the human heart that her main preoccupation was with our mission, not with her own fate. To fail utterly seemed too bitter. Supposing she went with him. They had still to get out of Italy and cross Switzerland. If she were with him she would be an emissary of the Allies in the enemy's camp. She asked herself what could she do, and told herself 'Nothing.' She felt like a small bird in a very large trap, and her chief sensation was that of her own powerlessness. But she had learned Blenkiron's gospel and knew that Heaven sends amazing chances to the bold. And, even as she made her decision, she was aware of a dark shadow lurking at the back of her mind, the shadow of the fear which she knew was awaiting her. For she was going into the unknown with a man whom she hated, a man who claimed to be her lover.

It was the bravest thing I have ever heard of, and I have lived my life among brave men.

'I will come with you,' she said. 'But you mustn't speak to me, please. I am tired and troubled and I want peace to think.'

As she rose weakness came over her and she swayed till his arm caught her. 'I wish I could let you rest for a little,' he said tenderly, 'but time presses. The car runs smoothly and you can sleep there.'

He summoned one of the servants to whom he handed Mary. 'We leave in ten minutes,' he said, and he went out to see to the car.

Mary's first act in the bedroom to which she was taken was to bathe her eyes and brush her hair. She felt dimly that she must keep her head clear. Her second was to scribble a note to Wake, telling him what had happened, and to give it to the servant with a tip.

'The gentleman will come in the morning,' she said. 'You must give it him at once, for it concerns the fate of your country.' The woman grinned and promised. It was not the first time she had done errands for pretty ladies.

Ivery settled her in the great closed car with much solicitude, and made her comfortable with rugs. Then he went back to the inn for a second, and she saw a light move in the *salle-a-manger*. He returned and spoke to the driver in German, taking his seat beside him.

But first he handed Mary her note to Wake. 'I think you left this behind you,' he said. He had not opened it.

Alone in the car Mary slept. She saw the figures of Ivery and the chauffeur in the front seat dark against the headlights, and then they dislimned into dreams. She had undergone a greater strain than she knew, and was sunk in the heavy sleep of weary nerves.

When she woke it was daylight. They were still in Italy, as her first glance told her, so they could not have taken the Staub route. They seemed to be among the foothills, for there was little snow, but now and then up tributary valleys she had glimpses of the high peaks. She tried hard to think what it could mean, and then remembered the Marjolana. Wake had laboured to instruct her in the topography of the Alps, and she had grasped the fact of the two open passes. But the Marjolana meant a big circuit, and they would not be in Switzerland till the evening. They would arrive in the dark, and pass out of it in the dark, and there would be no chance of succour. She felt very lonely and very weak.

Throughout the morning her fear grew. The more hopeless her chance of defeating Ivery became the more insistently the dark shadow crept over her mind. She tried to steady herself by watching the show from the windows. The car swung through little villages, past vineyards and pine-woods and the blue of lakes, and over the gorges of mountain streams. There seemed to be no trouble about passports. The sentries at the controls waved a reassuring hand when they were shown some card which the chauffeur held between his teeth. In one place there was a longish halt, and she could hear Ivery talking Italian with two officers of Bersaglieri, to whom he gave cigars. They were fresh-faced, upstanding boys, and for a second she had an idea of flinging open the door and appealing to them to save her. But that would have been futile, for Ivery was clearly amply certificated. She wondered what part he was now playing.

The Marjolana route had been chosen for a purpose. In one town Ivery met and talked to a civilian official, and more than once the car slowed down and someone appeared from the wayside to speak a word and vanish. She was assisting at

the last gathering up of the threads of a great plan, before the Wild Birds returned to their nest. Mostly these conferences seemed to be in Italian, but once or twice she gathered from the movement of the lips that German was spoken and that this rough peasant or that black-hatted bourgeois was not of Italian blood.

Early in the morning, soon after she awoke, Ivery had stopped the car and offered her a well-provided luncheon basket. She could eat nothing, and watched him breakfast off sandwiches beside the driver. In the afternoon he asked her permission to sit with her. The car drew up in a lonely place, and a tea-basket was produced by the chauffeur. Ivery made tea, for she seemed too listless to move, and she drank a cup with him. After that he remained beside her.

'In half an hour we shall be out of Italy,' he said. The car was running up a long valley to the curious hollow between snowy saddles which is the crest of the Marjolana. He showed her the place on a road map. As the altitude increased and the air grew colder he wrapped the rugs closer around her and apologized for the absence of a foot-warmer. 'In a little,' he said, 'we shall be in the land where your slightest wish will be law.'

She dozed again and so missed the frontier post. When she woke the car was slipping down the long curves of the Weiss valley, before it narrows to the gorge through which it debouches on Grunewald.

'We are in Switzerland now,' she heard his voice say. It may have been fancy, but it seemed to her that there was a new note in it. He spoke to her with the assurance of possession. They were outside the country of the Allies, and in a land where his web was thickly spread.

'Where do we stop tonight?' she asked timidly.

'I fear we cannot stop. Tonight also you must put up with the car. I have a little errand to do on the way, which will delay us a few minutes, and then we press on. Tomorrow, my fairest one, fatigue will be ended.'

There was no mistake now about the note of possession in his voice. Mary's heart began to beat fast and wild. The trap had closed down on her and she saw the folly of her courage. It had delivered her bound and gagged into the hands of one whom she loathed more deeply every moment, whose proximity was less welcome than a snake's. She had to bite hard on her lip to keep from screaming.

The weather had changed and it was snowing hard, the same storm that had greeted us on the Col of the Swallows. The pace was slower now, and Ivery grew restless. He looked frequently at his watch, and snatched the speaking-tube to talk to the driver. Mary caught the word 'St Anton'.

'Do we go by St Anton?' she found voice to ask.

'Yes,' he said shortly.

The word gave her the faintest glimmering of hope, for she knew that Peter and I had lived at St Anton. She tried to look out of the blurred window, but could see nothing except that the twilight was falling. She begged for the road-map, and saw that so far as she could make out they were still in the broad Grunewald valley and that to reach St Anton they had to cross the low pass from the Staubthal. The snow was still drifting thick and the car crawled.

Then she felt the rise as they mounted to the pass. Here the going was bad, very different from the dry frost in which I had covered the same road the night before. Moreover, there seemed to be curious obstacles. Some careless wood-cart had dropped logs on the highway, and more than once both Ivery and the chauffeur had to get out to shift them. In one place there had been a small landslide which left little room to pass, and Mary had to descend and cross on foot while the driver took the car over alone. Ivery's temper seemed to be souring. To the girl's relief he resumed the outside seat, where he was engaged in constant argument with the chauffeur.

At the head of the pass stands an inn, the comfortable hostelry of Herr Kronig, well known to all who clamber among the lesser peaks of the Staubthal. There in the middle of the way stood a man with a lantern.

'The road is blocked by a snowfall,' he cried. 'They are clearing it now. It will be ready in half an hour's time.'

Ivery sprang from his seat and darted into the hotel. His business was to speed up the clearing party, and Herr Kronig himself accompanied him to the scene of the catastrophe. Mary sat still, for she had suddenly become possessed of an idea. She drove it from her as foolishness, but it kept returning. Why had those tree-trunks been spilt on the road? Why had an easy pass after a moderate snowfall been suddenly closed?

A man came out of the inn-yard and spoke to the chauffeur. It seemed to be an offer of refreshment, for the latter left his seat and disappeared inside. He was away for some time and returned shivering and grumbling at the weather, with the

collar of his greatcoat turned up around his ears. A lantern had been hung in the porch and as he passed Mary saw the man. She had been watching the back of his head idly during the long drive, and had observed that it was of the round bullet type, with no nape to the neck, which is common in the Fatherland. Now she could not see his neck for the coat collar, but she could have sworn that the head was a different shape. The man seemed to suffer acutely from the cold, for he buttoned the collar round his chin and pulled his cap far over his brows.

Ivery came back, followed by a dragging line of men with spades and lanterns. He flung himself into the front seat and nodded to the driver to start. The man had his engine going already so as to lose no time. He bumped over the rough debris of the snowfall and then fairly let the car hum. Ivery was anxious for speed, but he did not want his neck broken and he yelled out to take care. The driver nodded and slowed down, but presently he had got up speed again.

If Ivery was restless, Mary was worse. She seemed suddenly to have come on the traces of her friends. In the St Anton valley the snow had stopped and she let down the window for air, for she was choking with suspense. The car rushed past the station, down the hill by Peter's cottage, through the village, and along the lake shore to the Pink Chalet.

Ivery halted it at the gate. 'See that you fill up with petrol,' he told the man. 'Bid Gustav get the Daimler and be ready to follow in half an hour.'

He spoke to Mary through the open window.

'I will keep you only a very little time. I think you had better wait in the car, for it will be more comfortable than a dismantled house. A servant will bring you food and more rugs for the night journey.'

Then he vanished up the dark avenue.

Mary's first thought was to slip out and get back to the village and there to find someone who knew me or could take her where Peter lived. But the driver would prevent her, for he had been left behind on guard. She looked anxiously at his back, for he alone stood between her and liberty.

That gentleman seemed to be intent on his own business. As soon as Ivery's footsteps had grown faint, he had backed the car into the entrance, and turned it so that it faced towards St Anton. Then very slowly it began to move.

At the same moment a whistle was blown shrilly three times. The door on the right had opened and someone who had been waiting in the shadows climbed painfully in. Mary saw that it was a little man and that he was a cripple. She reached a hand to help him, and he fell on to the cushions beside her. The car was gathering speed.

Before she realized what was happening the new-comer had taken her hand and was patting it.

About two minutes later I was entering the gate of the Pink Chalet.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE CAGE OF THE WILD BIRDS

‘Why, Mr Ivery, come right in,’ said the voice at the table. There was a screen before me, stretching from the fireplace to keep off the draught from the door by which I had entered. It stood higher than my head but there were cracks in it through which I could watch the room. I found a little table on which I could lean my back, for I was dropping with fatigue.

Blenkiron sat at the writing-table and in front of him were little rows of Patience cards. Wood ashes still smouldered in the stove, and a lamp stood at his right elbow which lit up the two figures. The bookshelves and the cabinets were in twilight.

‘I’ve been hoping to see you for quite a time.’ Blenkiron was busy arranging the little heaps of cards, and his face was wreathed in hospitable smiles. I remember wondering why he should play the host to the true master of the house.

Ivery stood erect before him. He was rather a splendid figure now that he had sloughed all disguises and was on the threshold of his triumph. Even through the fog in which my brain worked it was forced upon me that here was a man born to play a big part. He had a jowl like a Roman king on a coin, and scornful eyes that were used to mastery. He was younger than me, confound him, and now he looked it.

He kept his eyes on the speaker, while a smile played round his mouth, a very ugly smile.

‘So,’ he said. ‘We have caught the old crow too. I had scarcely hoped for such good fortune, and, to speak the truth, I had not concerned myself much about you. But now we shall add you to the bag. And what a bag of vermin to lay out on the lawn!’ He flung back his head and laughed.

‘Mr Ivery —’ Blenkiron began, but was cut short.

‘Drop that name. All that is past, thank God! I am the Graf von Schwabing, an officer of the Imperial Guard. I am not the least of the weapons that Germany has used to break her enemies.’

‘You don’t say,’ drawled Blenkiron, still fiddling with his Patience cards.

The man’s moment had come, and he was minded not to miss a jot of his triumph. His figure seemed to expand, his eye kindled, his voice rang with pride. It was melodrama of the best kind and he fairly rolled it round his tongue. I don’t think I grudged it him, for I was fingering something in my pocket. He had won all right, but he wouldn’t enjoy his victory long, for soon I would shoot him. I had my eye on the very spot above his right ear where I meant to put my bullet . . . For I was very clear that to kill him was the only way to protect Mary. I feared the whole seventy millions of Germany less than this man. That was the single idea that remained firm against the immense fatigue that pressed down on me.

‘I have little time to waste on you,’ said he who had been called Ivery. ‘But I will spare a moment to tell you a few truths. Your childish game never had a chance. I played with you in England and I have played with you ever since. You have never made a move but I have quietly countered it. Why, man, you gave me your confidence. The American Mr Donne . . .’

‘What about Clarence?’ asked Blenkiron. His face seemed a study in pure bewilderment.

‘I was that interesting journalist.’

‘Now to think of that!’ said Blenkiron in a sad, gentle voice. ‘I thought I was safe with Clarence. Why, he brought me a letter from old Joe Hooper and he knew all the boys down Emporia way.’

Ivery laughed. ‘You have never done me justice, I fear; but I think you will do it now. Your gang is helpless in my hands. General Hannay . . .’ And I wish I could give you a notion of the scorn with which he pronounced the word ‘General’.

‘Yes — Dick?’ said Blenkiron intently.

‘He has been my prisoner for twenty-four hours. And the pretty Miss Mary, too. You are all going with me in a little to my own country. You will not guess how. We call it the Underground Railway, and you will have the privilege of studying its working. . . . I had not troubled much about you, for I had no special dislike of you. You are only a blundering fool, what

you call in your country easy fruit.'

'I thank you, Graf,' Blenkiron said solemnly.

'But since you are here you will join the others . . . One last word. To beat inepts such as you is nothing. There is a far greater thing. My country has conquered. You and your friends will be dragged at the chariot wheels of a triumph such as Rome never saw. Does that penetrate your thick skull? Germany has won, and in two days the whole round earth will be stricken dumb by her greatness.'

As I watched Blenkiron a grey shadow of hopelessness seemed to settle on his face. His big body drooped in his chair, his eyes fell, and his left hand shuffled limply among his Patience cards. I could not get my mind to work, but I puzzled miserably over his amazing blunders. He had walked blindly into the pit his enemies had dug for him. Peter must have failed to get my message to him, and he knew nothing of last night's work or my mad journey to Italy. We had all bungled, the whole wretched bunch of us, Peter and Blenkiron and myself . . . I had a feeling at the back of my head that there was something in it all that I couldn't understand, that the catastrophe could not be quite as simple as it seemed. But I had no power to think, with the insolent figure of Ivery dominating the room . . . Thank God I had a bullet waiting for him. That was the one fixed point in the chaos of my mind. For the first time in my life I was resolute on killing one particular man, and the purpose gave me a horrid comfort.

Suddenly Ivery's voice rang out sharp. 'Take your hand out of your pocket. You fool, you are covered from three points in the walls. A movement and my men will make a sieve of you. Others before you have sat in that chair, and I am used to take precautions. Quick. Both hands on the table.'

There was no mistake about Blenkiron's defeat. He was done and out, and I was left with the only card. He leaned wearily on his arms with the palms of his hands spread out.

'I reckon you've gotten a strong hand, Graf,' he said, and his voice was flat with despair.

'I hold a royal flush,' was the answer.

And then suddenly came a change. Blenkiron raised his head, and his sleepy, ruminating eyes looked straight at Ivery.

'I call you,' he said.

I didn't believe my ears. Nor did Ivery.

'The hour for bluff is past,' he said.

'Nevertheless I call you.'

At that moment I felt someone squeeze through the door behind me and take his place at my side. The light was so dim that I saw only a short, square figure, but a familiar voice whispered in my ear. 'It's me — Andra Amos. Man, this is a great ploy. I'm here to see the end o't.'

No prisoner waiting on the finding of the jury, no commander expecting news of a great battle, ever hung in more desperate suspense than I did during the next seconds. I had forgotten my fatigue; my back no longer needed support. I kept my eyes glued to the crack in the screen and my ears drank in greedily every syllable.

Blenkiron was now sitting bolt upright with his chin in his hands. There was no shadow of melancholy in his lean face.

'I say I call you, Herr Graf von Schwabing. I'm going to put you wise about some little things. You don't carry arms, so I needn't warn you against monkeying with a gun. You're right in saying that there are three places in these walls from which you can shoot. Well, for your information I may tell you that there's guns in all three, but they're covering *you* at this moment. So you'd better be good.'

Ivery sprang to attention like a ramrod. 'Karl,' he cried. 'Gustav!'

As if by magic figures stood on either side of him, like warders by a criminal. They were not the sleek German footmen whom I had seen at the Chalet. One I did not recognize. The other was my servant, Geordie Hamilton.

He gave them one glance, looked round like a hunted animal, and then steadied himself. The man had his own kind of courage.

'I've gotten something to say to you,' Blenkiron drawled. 'It's been a tough fight, but I reckon the hot end of the poker is with you. I compliment you on Clarence Donne. You fooled me fine over that business, and it was only by the mercy of God you didn't win out. You see, there was just the one of us who was liable to recognize you whatever way you twisted your face, and that was Dick Hannay. I give you good marks for Clarence . . . For the rest, I had you beaten flat.'

He looked steadily at him. 'You don't believe it. Well, I'll give you proof. I've been watching your Underground Railway for quite a time. I've had my men on the job, and I reckon most of the lines are now closed for repairs. All but the trunk line into France. That I'm keeping open, for soon there's going to be some traffic on it.'

At that I saw Ivery's eyelids quiver. For all his self-command he was breaking.

'I admit we cut it mighty fine, along of your fooling me about Clarence. But you struck a bad snag in General Hannay, Graf. Your heart-to-heart talk with him was poor business. You reckoned you had him safe, but that was too big a risk to take with a man like Dick, unless you saw him cold before you left him . . . He got away from this place, and early this morning I knew all he knew. After that it was easy. I got the telegram you had sent this morning in the name of Clarence Donne and it made me laugh. Before midday I had this whole outfit under my hand. Your servants have gone by the Underground Railway — to France. Ehrlich — well, I'm sorry about Ehrlich.'

I knew now the name of the Portuguese Jew.

'He wasn't a bad sort of man,' Blenkiron said regretfully, 'and he was plumb honest. I couldn't get him to listen to reason, and he would play with firearms. So I had to shoot.'

'Dead?' asked Ivery sharply.

'Ye-es. I don't miss, and it was him or me. He's under the ice now — where you wanted to send Dick Hannay. He wasn't your kind, Graf, and I guess he has some chance of getting into Heaven. If I weren't a hard-shell Presbyterian I'd say a prayer for his soul.'

I looked only at Ivery. His face had gone very pale, and his eyes were wandering. I am certain his brain was working at lightning speed, but he was a rat in a steel trap and the springs held him. If ever I saw a man going through hell it was now. His pasteboard castle had crumbled about his ears and he was giddy with the fall of it. The man was made of pride, and every proud nerve of him was caught on the raw.

'So much for ordinary business,' said Blenkiron. 'There's the matter of a certain lady. You haven't behaved over-nice about her, Graf, but I'm not going to blame you. You maybe heard a whistle blow when you were coming in here? No! Why, it sounded like Gabriel's trump. Peter must have put some lung power into it. Well, that was the signal that Miss Mary was safe in your car . . . but in our charge. D'you comprehend?'

He did. The ghost of a flush appeared in his cheeks.

'You ask about General Hannay? I'm not just exactly sure where Dick is at the moment, but I opine he's in Italy.'

I kicked aside the screen, thereby causing Amos almost to fall on his face.

'I'm back,' I said, and pulled up an arm-chair, and dropped into it.

I think the sight of me was the last straw for Ivery. I was a wild enough figure, grey with weariness, soaked, dirty, with the clothes of the porter Joseph Zimmer in rags from the sharp rocks of the Schwarzsteinthor. As his eyes caught mine they wavered, and I saw terror in them. He knew he was in the presence of a mortal enemy.

'Why, Dick,' said Blenkiron with a beaming face, 'this is mighty opportune. How in creation did you get here?'

'I walked,' I said. I did not want to have to speak, for I was too tired. I wanted to watch Ivery's face.

Blenkiron gathered up his Patience cards, slipped them into a little leather case and put it in his pocket.

'I've one thing more to tell you. The Wild Birds have been summoned home, but they won't ever make it. We've gathered them in — Pavia, and Hofgaard, and Conradi. Ehrlich is dead. And you are going to join the rest in our cage.'

As I looked at my friend, his figure seemed to gain in presence. He sat square in his chair with a face like a hanging judge, and his eyes, sleepy no more, held Ivery as in a vice. He had dropped, too, his drawl and the idioms of his ordinary speech, and his voice came out hard and massive like the clash of granite blocks.

'You're at the bar now, Graf von Schwabing. For years you've done your best against the decencies of life. You have deserved well of your country, I don't doubt it. But what has your country deserved of the world? One day soon Germany has to do some heavy paying, and you are the first instalment.'

'I appeal to the Swiss law. I stand on Swiss soil, and I demand that I be surrendered to the Swiss authorities.' Ivery spoke with dry lips and the sweat was on his brow.

'Oh, no, no,' said Blenkiron soothingly. 'The Swiss are a nice people, and I would hate to add to the worries of a poor little neutral state . . . All along both sides have been outside the law in this game, and that's going to continue. We've

abode by the rules and so must you . . . For years you've murdered and kidnapped and seduced the weak and ignorant, but we're not going to judge your morals. We leave that to the Almighty when you get across Jordan. We're going to wash our hands of you as soon as we can. You'll travel to France by the Underground Railway and there be handed over to the French Government. From what I know they've enough against you to shoot you every hour of the day for a twelvemonth.'

I think he had expected to be condemned by us there and then and sent to join Ehrlich beneath the ice. Anyhow, there came a flicker of hope into his eyes. I daresay he saw some way to dodge the French authorities if he once got a chance to use his miraculous wits. Anyhow, he bowed with something very like self-possession, and asked permission to smoke. As I have said, the man had his own courage.

'Blenkiron,' I cried, 'we're going to do nothing of the kind.'

He inclined his head gravely towards me. 'What's your notion, Dick?'

'We've got to make the punishment fit the crime,' I said. I was so tired that I had to form my sentences laboriously, as if I were speaking a half-understood foreign tongue.

'Meaning?'

'I mean that if you hand him over to the French he'll either twist out of their hands somehow or get decently shot, which is far too good for him. This man and his kind have sent millions of honest folk to their graves. He has sat spinning his web like a great spider and for every thread there has been an ocean of blood spilled. It's his sort that made the war, not the brave, stupid, fighting Boche. It's his sort that's responsible for all the clotted beastliness . . . And he's never been in sight of a shell. I'm for putting him in the front line. No, I don't mean any Uriah the Hittite business. I want him to have a sporting chance, just what other men have. But, by God, he's going to learn what is the upshot of the strings he's been pulling so merrily . . . He told me in two days' time Germany would smash our armies to hell. He boasted that he would be mostly responsible for it. Well, let him be there to see the smashing.'

'I reckon that's just,' said Blenkiron.

Ivery's eyes were on me now, fascinated and terrified like those of a bird before a rattlesnake. I saw again the shapeless features of the man in the Tube station, the residuum of shrinking mortality behind his disguises. He seemed to be slipping something from his pocket towards his mouth, but Geordie Hamilton caught his wrist.

'Wad ye offer?' said the scandalized voice of my servant. 'Sirr, the prisoner would appear to be trying to puishon hisself. Wull I search him?'

After that he stood with each arm in the grip of a warder.

'Mr Ivery,' I said, 'last night, when I was in your power, you indulged your vanity by gloating over me. I expected it, for your class does not breed gentlemen. We treat our prisoners differently, but it is fair that you should know your fate. You are going into France, and I will see that you are taken to the British front. There with my old division you will learn something of the meaning of war. Understand that by no conceivable chance can you escape. Men will be detailed to watch you day and night and to see that you undergo the full rigour of the battlefield. You will have the same experience as other people, no more, no less. I believe in a righteous God and I know that sooner or later you will find death — death at the hands of your own people — an honourable death which is far beyond your deserts. But before it comes you will have understood the hell to which you have condemned honest men.'

In moments of great fatigue, as in moments of great crisis, the mind takes charge and may run on a track independent of the will. It was not myself that spoke, but an impersonal voice which I did not know, a voice in whose tones rang a strange authority. Ivery recognized the icy finality of it, and his body seemed to wilt, and droop. Only the hold of the warders kept him from falling.

I, too, was about at the end of my endurance. I felt dimly that the room had emptied except for Blenkiron and Amos, and that the former was trying to make me drink brandy from the cup of a flask. I struggled to my feet with the intention of going to Mary, but my legs would not carry me . . . I heard as in a dream Amos giving thanks to an Omnipotence in whom he officially disbelieved. 'What's that the auld man in the Bible said? Now let thou thy servant depart in peace. That's the way I'm feelin' mysel'.' And then slumber came on me like an armed man, and in the chair by the dying wood-ash I slept off the ache of my limbs, the tension of my nerves, and the confusion of my brain.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE STORM BREAKS IN THE WEST

The following evening — it was the 20th day of March — I started for France after the dark fell. I drove Ivery's big closed car, and within sat its owner, bound and gagged, as others had sat before him on the same errand. Geordie Hamilton and Amos were his companions. From what Blenkiron had himself discovered and from the papers seized in the Pink Chalet I had full details of the road and its mysterious stages. It was like the journey of a mad dream. In a back street of a little town I would exchange passwords with a nameless figure and be given instructions. At a wayside inn at an appointed hour a voice speaking a thick German would advise that this bridge or that railway crossing had been cleared. At a hamlet among pine woods an unknown man would clamber up beside me and take me past a sentry-post. Smooth as clockwork was the machine, till in the dawn of a spring morning I found myself dropping into a broad valley through little orchards just beginning to blossom, and I knew that I was in France. After that, Blenkiron's own arrangements began, and soon I was drinking coffee with a young lieutenant of Chasseurs, and had taken the gag from Ivery's mouth. The bluecoats looked curiously at the man in the green ulster whose face was the colour of clay and who lit cigarette from cigarette with a shaky hand.

The lieutenant rang up a General of Division who knew all about us. At his headquarters I explained my purpose, and he telegraphed to an Army Headquarters for a permission which was granted. It was not for nothing that in January I had seen certain great personages in Paris, and that Blenkiron had wired ahead of me to prepare the way. Here I handed over Ivery and his guard, for I wanted them to proceed to Amiens under French supervision, well knowing that the men of that great army are not used to let slip what they once hold.

It was a morning of clear spring sunlight when we breakfasted in that little red-roofed town among vineyards with a shining river looping at our feet. The General of Division was an Algerian veteran with a brush of grizzled hair, whose eye kept wandering to a map on the wall where pins and stretched thread made a spider's web.

'Any news from the north?' I asked.

'Not yet,' he said. 'But the attack comes soon. It will be against our army in Champagne.' With a lean finger he pointed out the enemy dispositions.

'Why not against the British?' I asked. With a knife and fork I made a right angle and put a salt dish in the centre. 'That is the German concentration. They can so mass that we do not know which side of the angle they will strike till the blow falls.'

'It is true,' he replied. 'But consider. For the enemy to attack towards the Somme would be to fight over many miles of an old battle-ground where all is still desert and every yard of which you British know. In Champagne at a bound he might enter unbroken country. It is a long and difficult road to Amiens, but not so long to Chilons. Such is the view of Petain. Does it convince you?'

'The reasoning is good. Nevertheless he will strike at Amiens, and I think he will begin today.'

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. '*Nous verrons*. You are obstinate, my general, like all your excellent countrymen.'

But as I left his headquarters an aide-de-camp handed him a message on a pink slip. He read it, and turned to me with a grave face.

'You have a flair, my friend. I am glad we did not wager. This morning at dawn there is great fighting around St Quentin. Be comforted, for they will not pass. Your *Marechal* will hold them.'

That was the first news I had of the battle.

At Dijon according to plan I met the others. I only just caught the Paris train, and Blenkiron's great wrists lugged me into the carriage when it was well in motion. There sat Peter, a docile figure in a carefully patched old R.F.C. uniform. Wake was reading a pile of French papers, and in a corner Mary, with her feet up on the seat, was sound asleep.

We did not talk much, for the life of the past days had been so hectic that we had no wish to recall it. Blenkiron's face wore an air of satisfaction, and as he looked out at the sunny spring landscape he hummed his only tune. Even Wake had

lost his restlessness. He had on a pair of big tortoiseshell reading glasses, and when he looked up from his newspaper and caught my eye he smiled. Mary slept like a child, delicately flushed, her breath scarcely stirring the collar of the greatcoat which was folded across her throat. I remember looking with a kind of awe at the curve of her young face and the long lashes that lay so softly on her cheek, and wondering how I had borne the anxiety of the last months. Wake raised his head from his reading, glanced at Mary and then at me, and his eyes were kind, almost affectionate. He seemed to have won peace of mind among the hills.

Only Peter was out of the picture. He was a strange, disconsolate figure, as he shifted about to ease his leg, or gazed incuriously from the window. He had shaved his beard again, but it did not make him younger, for his face was too lined and his eyes too old to change. When I spoke to him he looked towards Mary and held up a warning finger.

'I go back to England,' he whispered. 'Your little *mysie* is going to take care of me till I am settled. We spoke of it yesterday at my cottage. I will find a lodging and be patient till the war is over. And you, Dick?'

'Oh, I rejoin my division. Thank God, this job is over. I have an easy *trund* now and can turn my attention to straightforward soldiering. I don't mind telling you that I'll be glad to think that you and Mary and Blenkiron are safe at home. What about you, Wake?'

'I go back to my Labour battalion,' he said cheerfully. 'Like you, I have an easier mind.'

I shook my head. 'We'll see about that. I don't like such sinful waste. We've had a bit of campaigning together and I know your quality.'

'The battalion's quite good enough for me,' and he relapsed into a day-old *Temps*.

Mary had suddenly woke, and was sitting upright with her fists in her eyes like a small child. Her hand flew to her hair, and her eyes ran over us as if to see that we were all there. As she counted the four of us she seemed relieved.

'I reckon you feel refreshed, Miss Mary,' said Blenkiron. 'It's good to think that now we can sleep in peace, all of us. Pretty soon you'll be in England and spring will be beginning, and please God it'll be the start of a better world. Our work's over, anyhow.'

'I wonder,' said the girl gravely. 'I don't think there's any discharge in this war. Dick, have you news of the battle? This was the day.'

'It's begun,' I said, and told them the little I had learned from the French General. 'I've made a reputation as a prophet, for he thought the attack was coming in Champagne. It's St Quentin right enough, but I don't know what has happened. We'll hear in Paris.'

Mary had woke with a startled air as if she remembered her old instinct that our work would not be finished without a sacrifice, and that sacrifice the best of us. The notion kept recurring to me with an uneasy insistence. But soon she appeared to forget her anxiety. That afternoon as we journeyed through the pleasant land of France she was in holiday mood, and she forced all our spirits up to her level. It was calm, bright weather, the long curves of ploughland were beginning to quicken into green, the catkins made a blue mist on the willows by the watercourses, and in the orchards by the red-roofed hamlets the blossom was breaking. In such a scene it was hard to keep the mind sober and grey, and the pall of war slid from us. Mary cosseted and fussed over Peter like an elder sister over a delicate little boy. She made him stretch his bad leg full length on the seat, and when she made tea for the party of us it was a protesting Peter who had the last sugar biscuit. Indeed, we were almost a merry company, for Blenkiron told stories of old hunting and engineering days in the West, and Peter and I were driven to cap them, and Mary asked provocative questions, and Wake listened with amused interest. It was well that we had the carriage to ourselves, for no queerer rigs were ever assembled. Mary, as always, was neat and workmanlike in her dress; Blenkiron was magnificent in a suit of russet tweed with a pale-blue shirt and collar, and well-polished brown shoes; but Peter and Wake were in uniforms which had seen far better days, and I wore still the boots and the shapeless and ragged clothes of Joseph Zimmer, the porter from Arosa.

We appeared to forget the war, but we didn't, for it was in the background of all our minds. Somewhere in the north there was raging a desperate fight, and its issue was the true test of our success or failure. Mary showed it by bidding me ask for news at every stopping-place. I asked gendarmes and *Permissionnaires*, but I learned nothing. Nobody had ever heard of the battle. The upshot was that for the last hour we all fell silent, and when we reached Paris about seven o'clock my first errand was to the bookstall.

I bought a batch of evening papers, which we tried to read in the taxis that carried us to our hotel. Sure enough there

was the announcement in big headlines. The enemy had attacked in great strength from south of Arras to the Oise; but everywhere he had been repulsed and held in our battle-zone. The leading articles were confident, the notes by the various military critics were almost braggart. At last the German had been driven to an offensive, and the Allies would have the opportunity they had longed for of proving their superior fighting strength. It was, said one and all, the opening of the last phase of the war.

I confess that as I read my heart sank. If the civilians were so over-confident, might not the generals have fallen into the same trap? Blenkiron alone was unperturbed. Mary said nothing, but she sat with her chin in her hands, which with her was a sure sign of deep preoccupation.

Next morning the papers could tell us little more. The main attack had been on both sides of St Quentin, and though the British had given ground it was only the outposts line that had gone. The mist had favoured the enemy, and his bombardment had been terrific, especially the gas shells. Every journal added the old old comment — that he had paid heavily for his temerity, with losses far exceeding those of the defence.

Wake appeared at breakfast in his private's uniform. He wanted to get his railway warrant and be off at once, but when I heard that Amiens was his destination I ordered him to stay and travel with me in the afternoon. I was in uniform myself now and had taken charge of the outfit. I arranged that Blenkiron, Mary, and Peter should go on to Boulogne and sleep the night there, while Wake and I would be dropped at Amiens to await instructions.

I spent a busy morning. Once again I visited with Blenkiron the little cabinet in the Boulevard St Germain, and told in every detail our work of the past two months. Once again I sat in the low building beside the Invalides and talked to staff officers. But some of the men I had seen on the first visit were not there. The chiefs of the French Army had gone north.

We arranged for the handling of the Wild Birds, now safely in France, and sanction was given to the course I had proposed to adopt with Ivery. He and his guard were on their way to Amiens, and I would meet them there on the morrow. The great men were very complimentary to us, so complimentary that my knowledge of grammatical French ebbed away and I could only stutter in reply. That telegram sent by Blenkiron on the night of the 18th, from the information given me in the Pink Chalet, had done wonders in clearing up the situation.

But when I asked them about the battle they could tell me little. It was a very serious attack in tremendous force, but the British line was strong and the reserves were believed to be sufficient. Petain and Foch had gone north to consult with Haig. The situation in Champagne was still obscure, but some French reserves were already moving thence to the Somme sector. One thing they did show me, the British dispositions. As I looked at the plan I saw that my old division was in the thick of the fighting.

'Where do you go now?' I was asked.

'To Amiens, and then, please God, to the battle front,' I said.

'Good fortune to you. You do not give body or mind much rest, my general.'

After that I went to the *Mission Anglaise*, but they had nothing beyond Haig's communique and a telephone message from G.H.Q. that the critical sector was likely to be that between St Quentin and the Oise. The northern pillar of our defence, south of Arras, which they had been nervous about, had stood like a rock. That pleased me, for my old battalion of the Lennox Highlanders was there.

Crossing the Place de la Concorde, we fell in with a British staff officer of my acquaintance, who was just starting to motor back to G.H.Q. from Paris leave. He had a longer face than the people at the Invalides.

'I don't like it, I tell you,' he said. 'It's this mist that worries me. I went down the whole line from Arras to the Oise ten days ago. It was beautifully sited, the cleverest thing you ever saw. The outpost line was mostly a chain of blobs — redoubts, you know, with machine-guns — so arranged as to bring flanking fire to bear on the advancing enemy. But mist would play the devil with that scheme, for the enemy would be past the place for flanking fire before we knew it . . . Oh, I know we had good warning, and had the battle-zone manned in time, but the outpost line was meant to hold out long enough to get everything behind in apple-pie order, and I can't see but how big chunks of it must have gone in the first rush. . . . Mind you, we've banked everything on that battle-zone. It's damned good, but if it's gone —' He flung up his hands.

'Have we good reserves?' I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘Have we positions prepared behind the battle-zone?’

‘I didn’t notice any,’ he said dryly, and was off before I could get more out of him.

‘You look rattled, Dick,’ said Blenkiron as we walked to the hotel.

‘I seem to have got the needle. It’s silly, but I feel worse about this show than I’ve ever felt since the war started. Look at this city here. The papers take it easily, and the people are walking about as if nothing was happening. Even the soldiers aren’t worried. You may call me a fool to take it so hard, but I’ve a sense in my bones that we’re in for the bloodiest and darkest fight of our lives, and that soon Paris will be hearing the Boche guns as she did in 1914.’

‘You’re a cheerful old Jeremiah. Well, I’m glad Miss Mary’s going to be in England soon. Seems to me she’s right and that this game of ours isn’t quite played out yet. I’m envying you some, for there’s a place waiting for you in the fighting line.’

‘You’ve got to get home and keep people’s heads straight there. That’s the weak link in our chain and there’s a mighty lot of work before you.’

‘Maybe,’ he said abstractedly, with his eye on the top of the Vendome column.

The train that afternoon was packed with officers recalled from leave, and it took all the combined purchase of Blenkiron and myself to get a carriage reserved for our little party. At the last moment I opened the door to admit a warm and agitated captain of the R.F.C. in whom I recognized my friend and benefactor, Archie Roylance.

‘Just when I was gettin’ nice and clean and comfy a wire comes tellin’ me to bundle back, all along of a new battle. It’s a cruel war, Sir.’ The afflicted young man mopped his forehead, grinned cheerfully at Blenkiron, glanced critically at Peter, then caught sight of Mary and grew at once acutely conscious of his appearance. He smoothed his hair, adjusted his tie and became desperately sedate.

I introduced him to Peter and he promptly forgot Mary’s existence. If Peter had had any vanity in him it would have been flattered by the frank interest and admiration in the boy’s eyes. ‘I’m tremendously glad to see you safe back, sir. I’ve always hoped I might have a chance of meeting you. We want you badly now on the front. Lensch is gettin’ a bit uppish.’

Then his eye fell on Peter’s withered leg and he saw that he had blundered. He blushed scarlet and looked his apologies. But they weren’t needed, for it cheered Peter to meet someone who talked of the possibility of his fighting again. Soon the two were deep in technicalities, the appalling technicalities of the airman. It was no good listening to their talk, for you could make nothing of it, but it was bracing up Peter like wine. Archie gave him a minute description of Lensch’s latest doings and his new methods. He, too, had heard the rumour that Peter had mentioned to me at St Anton, of a new Boche plane, with mighty engines and stumpy wings cunningly cambered, which was a devil to climb; but no specimens had yet appeared over the line. They talked of Bali, and Rhys Davids, and Bishop, and McCudden, and all the heroes who had won their spurs since the Somme, and of the new British makes, most of which Peter had never seen and had to have explained to him.

Outside a haze had drawn over the meadows with the twilight. I pointed it out to Blenkiron.

‘There’s the fog that’s doing us. This March weather is just like October, mist morning and evening. I wish to Heaven we could have some good old drenching spring rain.’

Archie was discoursing of the Shark–Gladas machine.

‘I’ve always stuck to it, for it’s a marvel in its way, but it has my heart fairly broke. The General here knows its little tricks. Don’t you, sir? Whenever things get really excitin’, the engine’s apt to quit work and take a rest.’

‘The whole make should be publicly burned,’ I said, with gloomy recollections.

‘I wouldn’t go so far, sir. The old Gladas has surprisin’ merits. On her day there’s nothing like her for pace and climbing-power, and she steers as sweet as a racin’ cutter. The trouble about her is she’s too complicated. She’s like some breeds of car — you want to be a mechanical genius to understand her . . . If they’d only get her a little simpler and safer, there wouldn’t be her match in the field. I’m about the only man that has patience with her and knows her merits, but she’s often been nearly the death of me. All the same, if I were in for a big fight against some fellow like Lensch, where it was neck or nothing, I’m hanged if I wouldn’t pick the Gladas.’

Archie laughed apologetically. ‘The subject is banned for me in our mess. I’m the old thing’s only champion, and she’s like a mare I used to hunt that loved me so much she was always tryin’ to chew the arm off me. But I wish I could get her a

fair trial from one of the big pilots. I'm only in the second class myself after all.'

We were running north of St just when above the rattle of the train rose a curious dull sound. It came from the east, and was like the low growl of a veld thunderstorm, or a steady roll of muffled drums.

'Hark to the guns!' cried Archie. 'My aunt, there's a tidy bombardment goin' on somewhere.'

I had been listening on and off to guns for three years. I had been present at the big preparations before Loos and the Somme and Arras, and I had come to accept the racket of artillery as something natural and inevitable like rain or sunshine. But this sound chilled me with its eeriness, I don't know why. Perhaps it was its unexpectedness, for I was sure that the guns had not been heard in this area since before the Marne. The noise must be travelling down the Oise valley, and I judged there was big fighting somewhere about Chauny or La Fere. That meant that the enemy was pressing hard on a huge front, for here was clearly a great effort on his extreme left wing. Unless it was our counter-attack. But somehow I didn't think so.

I let down the window and stuck my head into the night. The fog had crept to the edge of the track, a gossamer mist through which houses and trees and cattle could be seen dim in the moonlight. The noise continued — not a mutter, but a steady rumbling flow as solid as the blare of a trumpet. Presently, as we drew nearer Amiens, we left it behind us, for in all the Somme valley there is some curious configuration which blankets sound. The countryfolk call it the 'Silent Land', and during the first phase of the Somme battle a man in Amiens could not hear the guns twenty miles off at Albert.

As I sat down again I found that the company had fallen silent, even the garrulous Archie. Mary's eyes met mine, and in the indifferent light of the French railway-carriage I could see excitement in them — I knew it was excitement, not fear. She had never heard the noise of a great barrage before. Blenkinsop was restless, and Peter was sunk in his own thoughts. I was growing very depressed, for in a little I would have to part from my best friends and the girl I loved. But with the depression was mixed an odd expectation, which was almost pleasant. The guns had brought back my profession to me, I was moving towards their thunder, and God only knew the end of it. The happy dream I had dreamed of the Cotswolds and a home with Mary beside me seemed suddenly to have fallen away to an infinite distance. I felt once again that I was on the razor-edge of life.

The last part of the journey I was casting back to rake up my knowledge of the countryside. I saw again the stricken belt from Serre to Combles where we had fought in the summer of '17. I had not been present in the advance of the following spring, but I had been at Cambrai and I knew all the down country from Lagnicourt to St Quentin. I shut my eyes and tried to picture it, and to see the roads running up to the line, and wondered just at what points the big pressure had come. They had told me in Paris that the British were as far south as the Oise, so the bombardment we had heard must be directed to our address. With Passchendaele and Cambrai in my mind, and some notion of the difficulties we had always had in getting drafts, I was puzzled to think where we could have found the troops to man the new front. We must be unholily thin on that long line. And against that awesome bombardment! And the masses and the new tactics that Ivery had bragged of!

When we ran into the dingy cavern which is Amiens station I seemed to note a new excitement. I felt it in the air rather than deduced it from any special incident, except that the platform was very crowded with civilians, most of them with an extra amount of baggage. I wondered if the place had been bombed the night before.

'We won't say goodbye yet,' I told the others. 'The train doesn't leave for half an hour. I'm off to try and get news.'

Accompanied by Archie, I hunted out an R.T.O. of my acquaintance. To my questions he responded cheerfully.

'Oh, we're doing famously, sir. I heard this afternoon from a man in Operations that G.H.Q. was perfectly satisfied. We've killed a lot of Huns and only lost a few kilometres of ground . . . You're going to your division? Well, it's up Peronne way, or was last night. Cheyne and Dunthorpe came back from leave and tried to steal a car to get up to it . . . Oh, I'm having the deuce of a time. These blighted civilians have got the wind up, and a lot are trying to clear out. The idiots say the Huns will be in Amiens in a week. What's the phrase? "*Pourvu que les civils tiennent.*"' 'Fraid I must push on, Sir.'

I sent Archie back with these scraps of news and was about to make a rush for the house of one of the Press officers, who would, I thought, be in the way of knowing things, when at the station entrance I ran across Laidlaw. He had been B.G.G.S. in the corps to which my old brigade belonged, and was now on the staff of some army. He was striding towards a car when I grabbed his arm, and he turned on me a very sick face.

'Good Lord, Hannay! Where did you spring from? The news, you say?' He sank his voice, and drew me into a quiet

corner. 'The news is hellish.'

'They told me we were holding,' I observed.

'Holding be damned! The Boche is clean through on a broad front. He broke us today at Maissemy and Essigny. Yes, the battle-zone. He's flinging in division after division like the blows of a hammer. What else could you expect?' And he clutched my arm fiercely. 'How in God's name could eleven divisions hold a front of forty miles? And against four to one in numbers? It isn't war, it's naked lunacy.'

I knew the worst now, and it didn't shock me, for I had known it was coming. Laidlaw's nerves were pretty bad, for his face was pale and his eyes bright like a man with a fever.

'Reserves!' and he laughed bitterly. 'We have three infantry divisions and two cavalry. They're into the mill long ago. The French are coming up on our right, but they've the devil of a way to go. That's what I'm down here about. And we're getting help from Horne and Plumer. But all that takes days, and meantime we're walking back like we did at Mons. And at this time of day, too . . . Oh, yes, the whole line's retreating. Parts of it were pretty comfortable, but they had to get back or be put in the bag. I wish to Heaven I knew where our right divisions have got to. For all I know they're at Compiègne by now. The Boche was over the canal this morning, and by this time most likely he's across the Somme.'

At that I exclaimed. 'D'you mean to tell me we're going to lose Peronne?'

'Peronne!' he cried. 'We'll be lucky not to lose Amiens! . . . And on the top of it all I've got some kind of blasted fever. I'll be raving in an hour.'

He was rushing off, but I held him.

'What about my old lot?' I asked.

'Oh, damned good, but they're shot all to bits. Every division did well. It's a marvel they weren't all scuppered, and it'll be a flaming miracle if they find a line they can stand on. Westwater's got a leg smashed. He was brought down this evening, and you'll find him in the hospital. Fraser's killed and Lefroy's a prisoner — at least, that was my last news. I don't know who's got the brigades, but Masterton's carrying on with the division . . . You'd better get up the line as fast as you can and take over from him. See the Army Commander. He'll be in Amiens tomorrow morning for a pow-wow.'

Laidlaw lay wearily back in his car and disappeared into the night, while I hurried to the train.

The others had descended to the platform and were grouped round Archie, who was discoursing optimistic nonsense. I got them into the carriage and shut the door.

'It's pretty bad,' I said. 'The front's pierced in several places and we're back to the Upper Somme. I'm afraid it isn't going to stop there. I'm off up the line as soon as I can get my orders. Wake, you'll come with me, for every man will be wanted. Blenkiron, you'll see Mary and Peter safe to England. We're just in time, for tomorrow it mightn't be easy to get out of Amiens.'

I can see yet the anxious faces in that ill-lit compartment. We said goodbye after the British style without much to-do. I remember that old Peter gripped my hand as if he would never release it, and that Mary's face had grown very pale. If I delayed another second I should have howled, for Mary's lips were trembling and Peter had eyes like a wounded stag. 'God bless you,' I said hoarsely, and as I went off I heard Peter's voice, a little cracked, saying 'God bless you, my old friend.'

I spent some weary hours looking for Westwater. He was not in the big clearing station, but I ran him to earth at last in the new hospital which had just been got going in the Ursuline convent. He was the most sterling little man, in ordinary life rather dry and dogmatic, with a trick of taking you up sharply which didn't make him popular. Now he was lying very stiff and quiet in the hospital bed, and his blue eyes were solemn and pathetic like a sick dog's.

'There's nothing much wrong with me,' he said, in reply to my question. 'A shell dropped beside me and damaged my foot. They say they'll have to cut it off . . . I've an easier mind now you're here, Hannay. Of course you'll take over from Masterton. He's a good man but not quite up to his job. Poor Fraser — you've heard about Fraser. He was done in at the very start. Yes, a shell. And Lefroy. If he's alive and not too badly smashed the Hun has got a troublesome prisoner.'

He was too sick to talk, but he wouldn't let me go.

'The division was all right. Don't you believe anyone who says we didn't fight like heroes. Our outpost line held up the Hun for six hours, and only about a dozen men came back. We could have stuck it out in the battle-zone if both flanks hadn't been turned. They got through Crabbe's left and came down the Veréy ravine, and a big wave rushed Shropshire

Wood . . . We fought it out yard by yard and didn't budge till we saw the Plessis dump blazing in our rear. Then it was about time to go . . . We haven't many battalion commanders left. Watson, Endicot, Crawshay . . . ' He stammered out a list of gallant fellows who had gone.

'Get back double quick, Hannay. They want you. I'm not happy about Masterton. He's too young for the job.' And then a nurse drove me out, and I left him speaking in the strange forced voice of great weakness.

At the foot of the staircase stood Mary.

'I saw you go in,' she said, 'so I waited for you.'

'Oh, my dear,' I cried, 'you should have been in Boulogne by now. What madness brought you here?'

'They know me here and they've taken me on. You couldn't expect me to stay behind. You said yourself everybody was wanted, and I'm in a Service like you. Please don't be angry, Dick.'

I wasn't angry, I wasn't even extra anxious. The whole thing seemed to have been planned by fate since the creation of the world. The game we had been engaged in wasn't finished and it was right that we should play it out together. With that feeling came a conviction, too, of ultimate victory. Somehow or sometime we should get to the end of our pilgrimage. But I remembered Mary's forebodings about the sacrifice required. The best of us. That ruled me out, but what about her?

I caught her to my arms. 'Goodbye, my very dearest. Don't worry about me, for mine's a soft job and I can look after my skin. But oh! take care of yourself, for you are all the world to me.'

She kissed me gravely like a wise child.

'I am not afraid for you,' she said. 'You are going to stand in the breach, and I know — I know you will win. Remember that there is someone here whose heart is so full of pride of her man that it hasn't room for fear.'

As I went out of the convent door I felt that once again I had been given my orders.

It did not surprise me that, when I sought out my room on an upper floor of the Hotel de France, I found Blenkiron in the corridor. He was in the best of spirits.

'You can't keep me out of the show, Dick,' he said, 'so you needn't start arguing. Why, this is the one original chance of a lifetime for John S. Blenkiron. Our little fight at Erzerum was only a side-show, but this is a real high-class Armageddon. I guess I'll find a way to make myself useful.'

I had no doubt he would, and I was glad he had stayed behind. But I felt it was hard on Peter to have the job of returning to England alone at such a time, like useless flotsam washed up by a flood.

'You needn't worry,' said Blenkiron. 'Peter's not making England this trip. To the best of my knowledge he has beat it out of this township by the eastern postern. He had some talk with Sir Archibald Roylance, and presently other gentlemen of the Royal Flying Corps appeared, and the upshot was that Sir Archibald hitched on to Peter's grip and departed without saying farewell. My notion is that he's gone to have a few words with his old friends at some flying station. Or he might have the idea of going back to England by aeroplane, and so having one last flutter before he folds his wings. Anyhow, Peter looked a mighty happy man. The last I saw he was smoking his pipe with a batch of young lads in a Flying Corps waggon and heading straight for Germany.'



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HOW AN EXILE RETURNED TO HIS OWN PEOPLE

Next morning I found the Army Commander on his way to Doullens.

‘Take over the division?’ he said. ‘Certainly. I’m afraid there isn’t much left of it. I’ll tell Carr to get through to the Corps Headquarters, when he can find them. You’ll have to nurse the remnants, for they can’t be pulled out yet — not for a day or two. Bless me, Hannay, there are parts of our line which we’re holding with a man and a boy. You’ve got to stick it out till the French take over. We’re not hanging on by our eyelids — it’s our eyelashes now.’

‘What about positions to fall back on, sir?’ I asked.

‘We’re doing our best, but we haven’t enough men to prepare them.’ He plucked open a map. ‘There we’re digging a line — and there. If we can hold that bit for two days we shall have a fair line resting on the river. But we mayn’t have time.’

Then I told him about Blenkiron, whom of course he had heard of. ‘He was one of the biggest engineers in the States, and he’s got a nailing fine eye for country. He’ll make good somehow if you let him help in the job.’

‘The very fellow,’ he said, and he wrote an order. ‘Take this to Jacks and he’ll fix up a temporary commission. Your man can find a uniform somewhere in Amiens.’

After that I went to the detail camp and found that Ivery had duly arrived.

‘The prisoner has given no trouble, sir,’ Hamilton reported. ‘But he’s a wee thing peevish. They’re saying that the Gairmans is gettin’ on fine, and I was tellin’ him that he should be proud of his ain folk. But he wasn’t verra weel pleased.’

Three days had wrought a transformation in Ivery. That face, once so cool and capable, was now sharpened like a hunted beast’s. His imagination was preying on him and I could picture its torture. He, who had been always at the top directing the machine, was now only a cog in it. He had never in his life been anything but powerful; now he was impotent. He was in a hard, unfamiliar world, in the grip of something which he feared and didn’t understand, in the charge of men who were in no way amenable to his persuasiveness. It was like a proud and bullying manager suddenly forced to labour in a squad of navvies, and worse, for there was the gnawing physical fear of what was coming.

He made an appeal to me.

‘Do the English torture their prisoners?’ he asked. ‘You have beaten me. I own it, and I plead for mercy. I will go on my knees if you like. I am not afraid of death — in my own way.’

‘Few people are afraid of death — in their own way.’

‘Why do you degrade me? I am a gentleman.’

‘Not as we define the thing,’ I said.

His jaw dropped. ‘What are you going to do with me?’ he quavered.

‘You have been a soldier,’ I said. ‘You are going to see a little fighting — from the ranks. There will be no brutality, you will be armed if you want to defend yourself, you will have the same chance of survival as the men around you. You may have heard that your countrymen are doing well. It is even possible that they may win the battle. What was your forecast to me? Amiens in two days, Abbeville in three. Well, you are a little behind scheduled time, but still you are prospering. You told me that you were the chief architect of all this, and you are going to be given the chance of seeing it, perhaps of sharing in it — from the other side. Does it not appeal to your sense of justice?’

He groaned and turned away. I had no more pity for him than I would have had for a black mamba that had killed my friend and was now caught to a cleft tree. Nor, oddly enough, had Wake. If we had shot Ivery outright at St Anton, I am certain that Wake would have called us murderers. Now he was in complete agreement. His passionate hatred of war made him rejoice that a chief contriver of war should be made to share in its terrors.

‘He tried to talk me over this morning,’ he told me. ‘Claimed he was on my side and said the kind of thing I used to say last year. It made me rather ashamed of some of my past performances to hear that scoundrel imitating them . . . By the way, Hannay, what are you going to do with me?’

‘You’re coming on my staff. You’re a stout fellow and I can’t do without you.’

‘Remember I won’t fight.’

‘You won’t be asked to. We’re trying to stem the tide which wants to roll to the sea. You know how the Boche behaves in occupied country, and Mary’s in Amiens.’

At that news he shut his lips.

‘Still —’ he began.

‘Still,’ I said. ‘I don’t ask you to forfeit one of your blessed principles. You needn’t fire a shot. But I want a man to carry orders for me, for we haven’t a line any more, only a lot of blobs like quicksilver. I want a clever man for the job and a brave one, and I know that you’re not afraid.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I don’t think I am — much. Well. I’m content!’

I started Blenkiron off in a car for Corps Headquarters, and in the afternoon took the road myself. I knew every inch of the country — the lift of the hill east of Amiens, the Roman highway that ran straight as an arrow to St Quentin, the marshy lagoons of the Somme, and that broad strip of land wasted by battle between Dompierre and Peronne. I had come to Amiens through it in January, for I had been up to the line before I left for Paris, and then it had been a peaceful place, with peasants tilling their fields, and new buildings going up on the old battle-field, and carpenters busy at cottage roofs, and scarcely a transport waggon on the road to remind one of war. Now the main route was choked like the Albert road when the Somme battle first began — troops going up and troops coming down, the latter in the last stage of weariness; a ceaseless traffic of ambulances one way and ammunition waggons the other; busy staff cars trying to worm a way through the mass; strings of gun horses, oddments of cavalry, and here and there blue French uniforms. All that I had seen before; but one thing was new to me. Little country carts with sad-faced women and mystified children in them and piles of household plenishing were creeping westward, or stood waiting at village doors. Beside these tramped old men and boys, mostly in their Sunday best as if they were going to church. I had never seen the sight before, for I had never seen the British Army falling back. The dam which held up the waters had broken and the dwellers in the valley were trying to save their pitiful little treasures. And over everything, horse and man, cart and wheelbarrow, road and tillage, lay the white March dust, the sky was blue as June, small birds were busy in the copses, and in the corners of abandoned gardens I had a glimpse of the first violets.

Presently as we topped a rise we came within full noise of the guns. That, too, was new to me, for it was no ordinary bombardment. There was a special quality in the sound, something ragged, straggling, intermittent, which I had never heard before. It was the sign of open warfare and a moving battle.

At Peronne, from which the newly returned inhabitants had a second time fled, the battle seemed to be at the doors. There I had news of my division. It was farther south towards St Christ. We groped our way among bad roads to where its headquarters were believed to be, while the voice of the guns grew louder. They turned out to be those of another division, which was busy getting ready to cross the river. Then the dark fell, and while airplanes flew west into the sunset there was a redder sunset in the east, where the unceasing flashes of gunfire were pale against the angry glow of burning dumps. The sight of the bonnet-badge of a Scots Fusilier made me halt, and the man turned out to belong to my division. Half an hour later I was taking over from the much-relieved Masterton in the ruins of what had once been a sugar-beet factory.

There to my surprise I found Lefroy. The Boche had held him prisoner for precisely eight hours. During that time he had been so interested in watching the way the enemy handled an attack that he had forgotten the miseries of his position. He described with blasphemous admiration the endless wheel by which supplies and reserve troops move up, the silence, the smoothness, the perfect discipline. Then he had realized that he was a captive and unwounded, and had gone mad. Being a heavy-weight boxer of note, he had sent his two guards spinning into a ditch, dodged the ensuing shots, and found shelter in the lee of a blazing ammunition dump where his pursuers hesitated to follow. Then he had spent an anxious hour trying to get through an outpost line, which he thought was Boche. Only by overhearing an exchange of oaths in the accents of Dundee did he realize that it was our own . . . It was a comfort to have Lefroy back, for he was both stout-hearted and resourceful. But I found that I had a division only on paper. It was about the strength of a brigade, the brigades battalions, and the battalions companies.

This is not the place to write the story of the week that followed. I could not write it even if I wanted to, for I don’t know it. There was a plan somewhere, which you will find in the history books, but with me it was blank chaos. Orders came, but long before they arrived the situation had changed, and I could no more obey them than fly to the moon. Often I

had lost touch with the divisions on both flanks. Intelligence arrived erratically out of the void, and for the most part we worried along without it. I heard we were under the French — first it was said to be Foch, and then Fayolle, whom I had met in Paris. But the higher command seemed a million miles away, and we were left to use our mother wits. My problem was to give ground as slowly as possible and at the same time not to delay too long, for retreat we must, with the Boche sending in brand-new divisions each morning. It was a kind of war worlds distant from the old trench battles, and since I had been taught no other I had to invent rules as I went along. Looking back, it seems a miracle that any of us came out of it. Only the grace of God and the uncommon toughness of the British soldier bluffed the Hun and prevented him pouring through the breach to Abbeville and the sea. We were no better than a mosquito curtain stuck in a doorway to stop the advance of an angry bull.

The Army Commander was right; we were hanging on with our eyelashes. We must have been easily the weakest part of the whole front, for we were holding a line which was never less than two miles and was often, as I judged, nearer five, and there was nothing in reserve to us except some oddments of cavalry who chased about the whole battle-field under vague orders. Mercifully for us the Boche blundered. Perhaps he did not know our condition, for our airmen were magnificent and you never saw a Boche plane over our line by day, though they bombed us merrily by night. If he had called our bluff we should have been done, but he put his main strength to the north and the south of us. North he pressed hard on the Third Army, but he got well hammered by the Guards north of Bapaume and he could make no headway at Arras. South he drove at the Paris railway and down the Oise valley, but there Petain's reserves had arrived, and the French made a noble stand.

Not that he didn't fight hard in the centre where we were, but he hadn't his best troops, and after we got west of the bend of the Somme he was outrunning his heavy guns. Still, it was a desperate enough business, for our flanks were all the time falling back, and we had to conform to movements we could only guess at. After all, we were on the direct route to Amiens, and it was up to us to yield slowly so as to give Haig and Petain time to get up supports. I was a miser about every yard of ground, for every yard and every minute were precious. We alone stood between the enemy and the city, and in the city was Mary.

If you ask me about our plans I can't tell you. I had a new one every hour. I got instructions from the Corps, but, as I have said, they were usually out of date before they arrived, and most of my tactics I had to invent myself. I had a plain task, and to fulfil it I had to use what methods the Almighty allowed me. I hardly slept, I ate little, I was on the move day and night, but I never felt so strong in my life. It seemed as if I couldn't tire, and, oddly enough, I was happy. If a man's whole being is focused on one aim, he has no time to worry . . . I remember we were all very gentle and soft-spoken those days. Lefroy, whose tongue was famous for its edge, now cooed like a dove. The troops were on their uppers, but as steady as rocks. We were against the end of the world, and that stiffens a man . . .

Day after day saw the same performance. I held my wavering front with an outpost line which delayed each new attack till I could take its bearings. I had special companies for counter-attack at selected points, when I wanted time to retire the rest of the division. I think we must have fought more than a dozen of such little battles. We lost men all the time, but the enemy made no big scoop, though he was always on the edge of one. Looking back, it seems like a succession of miracles. Often I was in one end of a village when the Boche was in the other. Our batteries were always on the move, and the work of the gunners was past praising. Sometimes we faced east, sometimes north, and once at a most critical moment due south, for our front waved and blew like a flag at a masthead . . . Thank God, the enemy was getting away from his big engine, and his ordinary troops were fagged and poor in quality. It was when his fresh shock battalions came on that I held my breath . . . He had a heathenish amount of machine-guns and he used them beautifully. Oh, I take my hat off to the Boche performance. He was doing what we had tried to do at the Somme and the Aisne and Arras and Ypres, and he was more or less succeeding. And the reason was that he was going bald-headed for victory.

The men, as I have said, were wonderfully steady and patient under the fiercest trial that soldiers can endure. I had all kinds in the division — old army, new army, Territorials — and you couldn't pick and choose between them. They fought like Trojans, and, dirty, weary, and hungry, found still some salt of humour in their sufferings. It was a proof of the rock-bottom sanity of human nature. But we had one man with us who was hardly sane. . . .

In the hustle of those days I now and then caught sight of Ivery. I had to be everywhere at all hours, and often visited that remnant of Scots Fusiliers into which the subtlest brain in Europe had been drafted. He and his keepers were never on outpost duty or in any counter-attack. They were part of the mass whose only business was to retire discreetly. This was

child's play to Hamilton, who had been out since Mons; and Amos, after taking a day to get used to it, wrapped himself in his grim philosophy and rather enjoyed it. You couldn't surprise Amos any more than a Turk. But the man with them, whom they never left — that was another matter.

'For the first wee bit,' Hamilton reported, 'we thocht he was gaun daft. Every shell that came near he jumped like a young horse. And the gas! We had to tie on his mask for him, for his hands were fushionless. There was whiles when he wadna be hindered from standin' up and talkin' to hisself, though the bullets was spittin'. He was what ye call demoralized . . . Syne he got as though he didna hear or see onything. He did what we tell't him, and when we let him be he sat down and grat. He's aye greetin' . . . Queer thing, sirr, but the Gairmans canna hit him. I'm aye shakin' bullets out o' my claes, and I've got a hole in my shoulder, and Andra took a bash on his tin that wad hae felled onybody that hadna a heid like a stot. But, sirr, the prisoner taks no scaith. Our boys are feared of him. There was an Irishman says to me that he had the evil eye, and ye can see for yerself that he's no canny.'

I saw that his skin had become like parchment and that his eyes were glassy. I don't think he recognized me.

'Does he take his meals?' I asked.

'He doesna eat muckle. But he has an unco thirst. Ye canna keep him off the men's water-bottles.'

He was learning very fast the meaning of that war he had so confidently played with. I believe I am a merciful man, but as I looked at him I felt no vestige of pity. He was dreeing the weird he had prepared for others. I thought of Scudder, of the thousand friends I had lost, of the great seas of blood and the mountains of sorrow this man and his like had made for the world. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the long ridges above Combles and Longueval which the salt of the earth had fallen to win, and which were again under the hoof of the Boche. I thought of the distracted city behind us and what it meant to me, and the weak, the pitifully weak screen which was all its defence. I thought of the foul deeds which had made the German name to stink by land and sea, foulness of which he was the arch-begetter. And then I was amazed at our forbearance. He would go mad, and madness for him was more decent than sanity.

I had another man who wasn't what you might call normal, and that was Wake. He was the opposite of shell-shocked, if you understand me. He had never been properly under fire before, but he didn't give a straw for it. I had known the same thing with other men, and they generally ended by crumpling up, for it isn't natural that five or six feet of human flesh shouldn't be afraid of what can torture and destroy it. The natural thing is to be always a little scared, like me, but by an effort of the will and attention to work to contrive to forget it. But Wake apparently never gave it a thought. He wasn't foolhardy, only indifferent. He used to go about with a smile on his face, a smile of contentment. Even the horrors — and we had plenty of them — didn't affect him. His eyes, which used to be hot, had now a curious open innocence like Peter's. I would have been happier if he had been a little rattled.

One night, after we had had a bad day of anxiety, I talked to him as we smoked in what had once been a French dug-out. He was an extra right arm to me, and I told him so. 'This must be a queer experience for you,' I said.

'Yes,' he replied, 'it is very wonderful. I did not think a man could go through it and keep his reason. But I know many things I did not know before. I know that the soul can be reborn without leaving the body.'

I stared at him, and he went on without looking at me.

'You're not a classical scholar, Hannay? There was a strange cult in the ancient world, the worship of Magna Mater — the Great Mother. To enter into her mysteries the votary passed through a bath of blood — I think I am passing through that bath. I think that like the initiate I shall be *renatus in aeternum* — reborn into the eternal.'

I advised him to have a drink, for that talk frightened me. It looked as if he were becoming what the Scots call 'fey'. Lefroy noticed the same thing and was always speaking about it. He was as brave as a bull himself, and with very much the same kind of courage; but Wake's gallantry perturbed him. 'I can't make the chap out,' he told me. 'He behaves as if his mind was too full of better things to give a damn for Boche guns. He doesn't take foolish risks — I don't mean that, but he behaves as if risks didn't signify. It's positively eerie to see him making notes with a steady hand when shells are dropping like hailstones and we're all thinking every minute's our last. You've got to be careful with him, sir. He's a long sight too valuable for us to spare.'

Lefroy was right about that, for I don't know what I should have done without him. The worst part of our job was to keep touch with our flanks, and that was what I used Wake for. He covered country like a moss-trooper, sometimes on a rusty bicycle, oftener on foot, and you couldn't tire him. I wonder what other divisions thought of the grimy private who

was our chief means of communication. He knew nothing of military affairs before, but he got the hang of this rough-and-tumble fighting as if he had been born for it. He never fired a shot; he carried no arms; the only weapons he used were his brains. And they were the best conceivable. I never met a staff officer who was so quick at getting a point or at sizing up a situation. He had put his back into the business, and first-class talent is not common anywhere. One day a G. S. O. from a neighbouring division came to see me.

‘Where on earth did you pick up that man Wake?’ he asked.

‘He’s a conscientious objector and a non-combatant,’ I said.

‘Then I wish to Heaven we had a few more conscientious objectors in this show. He’s the only fellow who seems to know anything about this blessed battle. My general’s sending you a chit about him.’

‘No need,’ I said, laughing. ‘I know his value. He’s an old friend of mine.’

I used Wake as my link with Corps Headquarters, and especially with Blenkiron. For about the sixth day of the show I was beginning to get rather desperate. This kind of thing couldn’t go on for ever. We were miles back now, behind the old line of ‘17, and, as we rested one flank on the river, the immediate situation was a little easier. But I had lost a lot of men, and those that were left were blind with fatigue. The big bulges of the enemy to north and south had added to the length of the total front, and I found I had to fan out my thin ranks. The Boche was still pressing on, though his impetus was slacker. If he knew how little there was to stop him in my section he might make a push which would carry him to Amiens. Only the magnificent work of our airmen had prevented him getting that knowledge, but we couldn’t keep the secrecy up for ever. Some day an enemy plane would get over, and it only needed the drive of a fresh storm-battalion or two to scatter us. I wanted a good prepared position, with sound trenches and decent wiring. Above all I wanted reserves — reserves. The word was on my lips all day and it haunted my dreams. I was told that the French were to relieve us, but when — when? My reports to Corps Headquarters were one long wail for more troops. I knew there was a position prepared behind us, but I needed men to hold it.

Wake brought in a message from Blenkiron. ‘We’re waiting for you, Dick,’ he wrote, ‘and we’ve gotten quite a nice little home ready for you. This old man hasn’t hustled so hard since he struck copper in Montana in ‘92. We’ve dug three lines of trenches and made a heap of pretty redoubts, and I guess they’re well laid out, for the Army staff has supervised them and they’re no slouches at this brand of engineering. You would have laughed to see the labour we employed. We had all breeds of Dago and Chinaman, and some of your own South African blacks, and they got so busy on the job they forgot about bedtime. I used to be reckoned a bit of a slave driver, but my special talents weren’t needed with this push. I’m going to put a lot of money into foreign missions henceforward.’

I wrote back: ‘Your trenches are no good without men. For God’s sake get something that can hold a rifle. My lot are done to the world.’

Then I left Lefroy with the division and went down on the back of an ambulance to see for myself. I found Blenkiron, some of the Army engineers, and a staff officer from Corps Headquarters, and I found Archie Roylance.

They had dug a mighty good line and wired it nobly. It ran from the river to the wood of La Bruyere on the little hill above the Ablain stream. It was desperately long, but I saw at once it couldn’t well be shorter, for the division on the south of us had its hands full with the fringe of the big thrust against the French.

‘It’s no good blinking the facts,’ I told them. ‘I haven’t a thousand men, and what I have are at the end of their tether. If you put ‘em in these trenches they’ll go to sleep on their feet. When can the French take over?’

I was told that it had been arranged for next morning, but that it had now been put off twenty-four hours. It was only a temporary measure, pending the arrival of British divisions from the north.

Archie looked grave. ‘The Boche is pushin’ up new troops in this sector. We got the news before I left squadron headquarters. It looks as if it would be a near thing, sir.’

‘It won’t be a near thing. It’s an absolute black certainty. My fellows can’t carry on as they are another day. Great God, they’ve had a fortnight in hell! Find me more men or we buckle up at the next push.’ My temper was coming very near its limits.

‘We’ve raked the country with a small-tooth comb, sir,’ said one of the staff officers. ‘And we’ve raised a scratch pack. Best part of two thousand. Good men, but most of them know nothing about infantry fighting. We’ve put them into platoons, and done our best to give them some kind of training. There’s one thing may cheer you. We’ve plenty of machine-

guns. There's a machine-gun school near by and we got all the men who were taking the course and all the plant.'

I don't suppose there was ever such a force put into the field before. It was a wilder medley than Moussy's camp-followers at First Ypres. There was every kind of detail in the shape of men returning from leave, representing most of the regiments in the army. There were the men from the machine-gun school. There were Corps troops — sappers and A.S.C., and a handful of Corps cavalry. Above all, there was a batch of American engineers, fathered by Blenkiron. I inspected them where they were drilling and liked the look of them. 'Forty-eight hours,' I said to myself. 'With luck we may just pull it off.'

Then I borrowed a bicycle and went back to the division. But before I left I had a word with Archie. 'This is one big game of bluff, and it's you fellows alone that enable us to play it. Tell your people that everything depends on them. They mustn't stint the planes in this sector, for if the Boche once suspicions how little he's got before him the game's up. He's not a fool and he knows that this is the short road to Amiens, but he imagines we're holding it in strength. If we keep up the fiction for another two days the thing's done. You say he's pushing up troops?'

'Yes, and he's sendin' forward his tanks.'

'Well, that'll take time. He's slower now than a week ago and he's got a deuce of a country to march over. There's still an outside chance we may win through. You go home and tell the R.F.C. what I've told you.'

He nodded. 'By the way, sir, Pienaar's with the squadron. He would like to come up and see you.'

'Archie,' I said solemnly, 'be a good chap and do me a favour. If I think Peter's anywhere near the line I'll go off my head with worry. This is no place for a man with a bad leg. He should have been in England days ago. Can't you get him off — to Amiens, anyhow?'

'We scarcely like to. You see, we're all desperately sorry for him, his fun gone and his career over and all that. He likes bein' with us and listenin' to our yarns. He has been up once or twice too. The Shark—Gladas. He swears it's a great make, and certainly he knows how to handle the little devil.'

'Then for Heaven's sake don't let him do it again. I look to you, Archie, remember. Promise.'

'Funny thing, but he's always worryin' about you. He has a map on which he marks every day the changes in the position, and he'd hobble a mile to pump any of our fellows who have been up your way.'

That night under cover of darkness I drew back the division to the newly prepared lines. We got away easily, for the enemy was busy with his own affairs. I suspected a relief by fresh troops.

There was no time to lose, and I can tell you I toiled to get things straight before dawn. I would have liked to send my own fellows back to rest, but I couldn't spare them yet. I wanted them to stiffen the fresh lot, for they were veterans. The new position was arranged on the same principles as the old front which had been broken on March 21st. There was our forward zone, consisting of an outpost line and redoubts, very cleverly sited, and a line of resistance. Well behind it were the trenches which formed the battle-zone. Both zones were heavily wired, and we had plenty of machine-guns; I wish I could say we had plenty of men who knew how to use them. The outposts were merely to give the alarm and fall back to the line of resistance which was to hold out to the last. In the forward zone I put the freshest of my own men, the units being brought up to something like strength by the details returning from leave that the Corps had commandeered. With them I put the American engineers, partly in the redoubts and partly in companies for counter-attack. Blenkiron had reported that they could shoot like Dan'l Boone, and were simply spoiling for a fight. The rest of the force was in the battle-zone, which was our last hope. If that went the Boche had a clear walk to Amiens. Some additional field batteries had been brought up to support our very weak divisional artillery. The front was so long that I had to put all three of my emaciated brigades in the line, so I had nothing to speak of in reserve. It was a most almighty gamble.

We had found shelter just in time. At 6.30 next day — for a change it was a clear morning with clouds beginning to bank up from the west — the Boche let us know he was alive. He gave us a good drenching with gas shells which didn't do much harm, and then messed up our forward zone with his trench mortars. At 7.20 his men began to come on, first little bunches with machine-guns and then the infantry in waves. It was clear they were fresh troops, and we learned afterwards from prisoners that they were Bavarians — 6th or 7th, I forget which, but the division that hung us up at Monchy. At the same time there was the sound of a tremendous bombardment across the river. It looked as if the main battle had swung from Albert and Montdidier to a direct push for Amiens. I have often tried to write down the events of that day. I tried it in my report to the Corps; I tried it in my own diary; I tried it because Mary wanted it; but I have never been able to make any

story that hung together. Perhaps I was too tired for my mind to retain clear impressions, though at the time I was not conscious of special fatigue. More likely it is because the fight itself was so confused, for nothing happened according to the books and the orderly soul of the Boche must have been scarified . . . At first it went as I expected. The outpost line was pushed in, but the fire from the redoubts broke up the advance, and enabled the line of resistance in the forward zone to give a good account of itself. There was a check, and then another big wave, assisted by a barrage from field-guns brought far forward. This time the line of resistance gave at several points, and Lefroy flung in the Americans in a counter-attack. That was a mighty performance. The engineers, yelling like dervishes, went at it with the bayonet, and those that preferred swung their rifles as clubs. It was terribly costly fighting and all wrong, but it succeeded. They cleared the Boche out of a ruined farm he had rushed, and a little wood, and re-established our front. Blenkiron, who saw it all, for he went with them and got the tip of an ear picked off by a machine-gun bullet, hadn't any words wherewith to speak of it. 'And I once said those boys looked puffy,' he moaned.

The next phase, which came about midday, was the tanks. I had never seen the German variety, but had heard that it was speedier and heavier than ours, but unwieldy. We did not see much of their speed, but we found out all about their clumsiness. Had the things been properly handled they should have gone through us like rotten wood. But the whole outfit was bungled. It looked good enough country for the use of them, but the men who made our position had had an eye to this possibility. The great monsters, mounting a field-gun besides other contrivances, wanted something like a highroad to be happy in. They were useless over anything like difficult ground. The ones that came down the main road got on well enough at the start, but Blenkiron very sensibly had mined the highway, and we blew a hole like a diamond pit. One lay helpless at the foot of it, and we took the crew prisoner; another stuck its nose over and remained there till our field-guns got the range and knocked it silly. As for the rest — there is a marshy lagoon called the Patte d'Oie beside the farm of Gavrelle, which runs all the way north to the river, though in most places it only seems like a soft patch in the meadows. This the tanks had to cross to reach our line, and they never made it. Most got bogged, and made pretty targets for our gunners; one or two returned; and one the Americans, creeping forward under cover of a little stream, blew up with a time fuse.

By the middle of the afternoon I was feeling happier. I knew the big attack was still to come, but I had my forward zone intact and I hoped for the best. I remember I was talking to Wake, who had been going between the two zones, when I got the first warning of a new and unexpected peril. A dud shell plumped down a few yards from me.

'Those fools across the river are firing short and badly off the straight,' I said.

Wake examined the shell. 'No, it's a German one,' he said.

Then came others, and there could be no mistake about the direction — followed by a burst of machine-gun fire from the same quarter. We ran in cover to a point from which we could see the north bank of the river, and I got my glass on it. There was a lift of land from behind which the fire was coming. We looked at each other, and the same conviction stood in both faces. The Boche had pushed down the northern bank, and we were no longer in line with our neighbours. The enemy was in a situation to catch us with his fire on our flank and left rear. We couldn't retire to conform, for to retire meant giving up our prepared position.

It was the last straw to all our anxieties, and for a moment I was at the end of my wits. I turned to Wake, and his calm eyes pulled me together.

'If they can't retake that ground, we're fairly carted,' I said.

'We are. Therefore they must retake it.'

'I must get on to Mitchinson.' But as I spoke I realized the futility of a telephone message to a man who was pretty hard up against it himself. Only an urgent appeal could effect anything . . . I must go myself . . . No, that was impossible. I must send Lefroy . . . But he couldn't be spared. And all my staff officers were up to their necks in the battle. Besides, none of them knew the position as I knew it . . . And how to get there? It was a long way round by the bridge at Loisy.

Suddenly I was aware of Wake's voice. 'You had better send me,' he was saying. 'There's only one way — to swim the river a little lower down.'

'That's too damnably dangerous. I won't send any man to certain death.'

'But I volunteer,' he said. 'That, I believe, is always allowed in war.'

'But you'll be killed before you can cross.'

‘Send a man with me to watch. If I get over, you may be sure I’ll get to General Mitchinson. If not, send somebody else by Loisy. There’s desperate need for hurry, and you see yourself it’s the only way.’

The time was past for argument. I scribbled a line to Mitchinson as his credentials. No more was needed, for Wake knew the position as well as I did. I sent an orderly to accompany him to his starting-place on the bank.

‘Goodbye,’ he said, as we shook hands. ‘You’ll see, I’ll come back all right.’ His face, I remember, looked singularly happy. Five minutes later the Boche guns opened for the final attack.

I believe I kept a cool head; at least so Lefroy and the others reported. They said I went about all afternoon grinning as if I liked it, and that I never raised my voice once. (It’s rather a fault of mine that I bellow in a scrap.) But I know I was feeling anything but calm, for the problem was ghastly. It all depended on Wake and Mitchinson. The flanking fire was so bad that I had to give up the left of the forward zone, which caught it fairly, and retire the men there to the battle-zone. The latter was better protected, for between it and the river was a small wood and the bank rose into a bluff which sloped inwards towards us. This withdrawal meant a switch, and a switch isn’t a pretty thing when it has to be improvised in the middle of a battle.

The Boche had counted on that flanking fire. His plan was to break our two wings — the old Boche plan which crops up in every fight. He left our centre at first pretty well alone, and thrust along the river bank and to the wood of La Bruyere, where we linked up with the division on our right. Lefroy was in the first area, and Masterton in the second, and for three hours it was as desperate a business as I have ever faced . . . The improvised switch went, and more and more of the forward zone disappeared. It was a hot, clear spring afternoon, and in the open fighting the enemy came on like troops at manoeuvres. On the left they got into the battle-zone, and I can see yet Lefroy’s great figure leading a counter-attack in person, his face all puddled with blood from a scalp wound . . .

I would have given my soul to be in two places at once, but I had to risk our left and keep close to Masterton, who needed me most. The wood of La Bruyere was the maddest sight. Again and again the Boche was almost through it. You never knew where he was, and most of the fighting there was duels between machine-gun parties. Some of the enemy got round behind us, and only a fine performance of a company of Cheshires saved a complete breakthrough.

As for Lefroy, I don’t know how he stuck it out, and he doesn’t know himself, for he was galled all the time by that accursed flanking fire. I got a note about half past four saying that Wake had crossed the river, but it was some weary hours after that before the fire slackened. I tore back and forward between my wings, and every time I went north I expected to find that Lefroy had broken. But by some miracle he held. The Boches were in his battle-zone time and again, but he always flung them out. I have a recollection of Blenkiron, stark mad, encouraging his Americans with strange tongues. Once as I passed him I saw that he had his left arm tied up. His blackened face grinned at me. ‘This bit of landscape’s mighty unsafe for democracy,’ he croaked. ‘For the love of Mike get your guns on to those devils across the river. They’re plaguing my boys too bad.’

It was about seven o’clock, I think, when the flanking fire slacked off, but it was not because of our divisional guns. There was a short and very furious burst of artillery fire on the north bank, and I knew it was British. Then things began to happen. One of our planes — they had been marvels all day, swinging down like hawks for machine-gun bouts with the Boche infantry — reported that Mitchinson was attacking hard and getting on well. That eased my mind, and I started off for Masterton, who was in greater straits than ever, for the enemy seemed to be weakening on the river bank and putting his main strength in against our right . . . But my G.S.O.2 stopped me on the road. ‘Wake,’ he said. ‘He wants to see you.’

‘Not now,’ I cried.

‘He can’t live many minutes.’

I turned and followed him to the ruinous cowshed which was my divisional headquarters. Wake, as I heard later, had swum the river opposite to Mitchinson’s right, and reached the other shore safely, though the current was whipped with bullets. But he had scarcely landed before he was badly hit by shrapnel in the groin. Walking at first with support and then carried on a stretcher, he managed to struggle on to the divisional headquarters, where he gave my message and explained the situation. He would not let his wound be looked to till his job was done. Mitchinson told me afterwards that with a face grey from pain he drew for him a sketch of our position and told him exactly how near we were to our end . . . After that he asked to be sent back to me, and they got him down to Loisy in a crowded ambulance, and then up to us in a returning empty. The M.O. who looked at his wound saw that the thing was hopeless, and did not expect him to live beyond Loisy. He

was bleeding internally and no surgeon on earth could have saved him.

When he reached us he was almost pulseless, but he recovered for a moment and asked for me.

I found him, with blue lips and a face drained of blood, lying on my camp bed. His voice was very small and far away.

'How goes it?' he asked.

'Please God, we'll pull through . . . thanks to you, old man.'

'Good,' he said and his eyes shut.

He opened them once again.

'Funny thing life. A year ago I was preaching peace . . . I'm still preaching it . . . I'm not sorry.'

I held his hand till two minutes later he died.

In the press of a fight one scarcely realizes death, even the death of a friend. It was up to me to make good my assurance to Wake, and presently I was off to Masterton. There in that shambles of La Bruyere, while the light faded, there was a desperate and most bloody struggle. It was the last lap of the contest. Twelve hours now, I kept telling myself, and the French will be here and we'll have done our task. Alas! how many of us would go back to rest? . . . Hardly able to totter, our counter-attacking companies went in again. They had gone far beyond the limits of mortal endurance, but the human spirit can defy all natural laws. The balance trembled, hung, and then dropped the right way. The enemy impetus weakened, stopped, and the ebb began.

I wanted to complete the job. Our artillery put up a sharp barrage, and the little I had left comparatively fresh I sent in for a counter-stroke. Most of the men were untrained, but there was that in our ranks which dispensed with training, and we had caught the enemy at the moment of lowest vitality. We pushed him out of La Bruyere, we pushed him back to our old forward zone, we pushed him out of that zone to the position from which he had begun the day.

But there was no rest for the weary. We had lost at least a third of our strength, and we had to man the same long line. We consolidated it as best we could, started to replace the wiring that had been destroyed, found touch with the division on our right, and established outposts. Then, after a conference with my brigadiers, I went back to my headquarters, too tired to feel either satisfaction or anxiety. In eight hours the French would be here. The words made a kind of litany in my ears.

In the cowshed where Wake had lain, two figures awaited me. The talc-enclosed candle revealed Hamilton and Amos, dirty beyond words, smoke-blackened, blood-stained, and intricately bandaged. They stood stiffly to attention.

'Sirr, the prisoner,' said Hamilton. 'I have to report that the prisoner is deid.'

I stared at them, for I had forgotten Ivery. He seemed a creature of a world that had passed away.

'Sirr, it was like this. Ever sin' this mornin', the prisoner seemed to wake up. Ye'll mind that he was in a kind of dream all week. But he got some new notion in his heid, and when the battle began he exheebited signs of restlessness. Whiles he wad lie down in the trench, and whiles he was wantin' back to the dug-out. Accordin' to instructions I provided him wi' a rifle, but he didna seem to ken how to handle it. It was your orders, sirr, that he was to have means to defend hisself if the enemy cam on, so Amos gie'd him a trench knife. But verra soon he looked as if he was ettlin' to cut his throat, so I deprived him of it.'

Hamilton stopped for breath. He spoke as if he were reciting a lesson, with no stops between the sentences.

'I jaloused, sirr, that he wadna last oot the day, and Amos here was of the same opinion. The end came at twenty minutes past three — I ken the time, for I had just compared my watch with Amos. Ye'll mind that the Gairmans were beginning a big attack. We were in the front trench of what they ca' the battle-zone, and Amos and me was keepin' oor eyes on the enemy, who could be obsairved dribblin' ower the open. Just then the prisoner catches sight of the enemy and jumps up on the top. Amos tried to hold him, but he kicked him in the face. The next we kenned he was runnin' verra fast towards the enemy, holdin' his hands ower his heid and crying out loud in a foreign langwidgie.'

'It was German,' said the scholarly Amos through his broken teeth.

'It was Gairman,' continued Hamilton. 'It seemed as if he was appealin' to the enemy to help him. But they paid no attention, and he cam under the fire of their machine-guns. We watched him spin round like a teetotum and kenned that he was bye with it.'

'You are sure he was killed?' I asked.

'Yes, sirr. When we counter-attacked we fund his body.'

There is a grave close by the farm of Gavrelle, and a wooden cross at its head bears the name of the Graf von Schwabing and the date of his death. The Germans took Gavrelle a little later. I am glad to think that they read that inscription.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE SUMMONS COMES FOR MR STANDFAST

I slept for one and three-quarter hours that night, and when I awoke I seemed to emerge from deeps of slumber which had lasted for days. That happens sometimes after heavy fatigue and great mental strain. Even a short sleep sets up a barrier between past and present which has to be elaborately broken down before you can link on with what has happened before. As my wits groped at the job some drops of rain splashed on my face through the broken roof. That hurried me out-of-doors. It was just after dawn and the sky was piled with thick clouds, while a wet wind blew up from the southwest. The long-prayed-for break in the weather seemed to have come at last. A deluge of rain was what I wanted, something to soak the earth and turn the roads into water-courses and clog the enemy transport, something above all to blind the enemy's eyes . . . For I remembered what a preposterous bluff it all had been, and what a piteous broken handful stood between the Germans and their goal. If they knew, if they only knew, they would brush us aside like flies.

As I shaved I looked back on the events of yesterday as on something that had happened long ago. I seemed to judge them impersonally, and I concluded that it had been a pretty good fight. A scratch force, half of it dog-tired and half of it untrained, had held up at least a couple of fresh divisions . . . But we couldn't do it again, and there were still some hours before us of desperate peril. When had the Corps said that the French would arrive? . . . I was on the point of shouting for Hamilton to get Wake to ring up Corps Headquarters, when I remembered that Wake was dead. I had liked him and greatly admired him, but the recollection gave me scarcely a pang. We were all dying, and he had only gone on a stage ahead.

There was no morning strafe, such as had been our usual fortune in the past week. I went out-of-doors and found a noiseless world under the lowering sky. The rain had stopped falling, the wind of dawn had lessened, and I feared that the storm would be delayed. I wanted it at once to help us through the next hours of tension. Was it in six hours that the French were coming? No, it must be four. It couldn't be more than four, unless somebody had made an infernal muddle. I wondered why everything was so quiet. It would be breakfast time on both sides, but there seemed no stir of man's presence in that ugly strip half a mile off. Only far back in the German hinterland I seemed to hear the rumour of traffic.

An unslept and unshaven figure stood beside me which revealed itself as Archie Roylance.

'Been up all night,' he said cheerfully, lighting a cigarette. 'No, I haven't had breakfast. The skipper thought we'd better get another anti-aircraft battery up this way, and I was superintendin' the job. He's afraid of the Hun gettin' over your lines and spying out the nakedness of the land. For, you know, we're uncommon naked, sir. Also,' and Archie's face became grave, 'the Hun's pourin' divisions down on this sector. As I judge, he's blowin' up for a thunderin' big drive on both sides of the river. Our lads yesterday said all the country back of Peronne was lousy with new troops. And he's gettin' his big guns forward, too. You haven't been troubled with them yet, but he has got the roads mended and the devil of a lot of new light railways, and any moment we'll have the five-point-nines sayin' 'Good-mornin' . . . Pray Heaven you get relieved in time, sir. I take it there's not much risk of another push this mornin'?'

'I don't think so. The Boche took a nasty knock yesterday, and he must fancy we're pretty strong after that counter-attack. I don't think he'll strike till he can work both sides of the river, and that'll take time to prepare. That's what his fresh divisions are for . . . But remember, he can attack now, if he likes. If he knew how weak we were he's strong enough to send us all to glory in the next three hours. It's just that knowledge that you fellows have got to prevent his getting. If a single Hun plane crosses our lines and returns, we're wholly and utterly done. You've given us splendid help since the show began, Archie. For God's sake keep it up to the finish and put every machine you can spare in this sector.'

'We're doin' our best,' he said. 'We got some more fightin' scouts down from the north, and we're keepin' our eyes skinned. But you know as well as I do, sir, that it's never an ab-so-lute certainty. If the Hun sent over a squadron we might beat 'em all down but one, and that one might do the trick. It's a matter of luck. The Hun's got the wind up all right in the air just now and I don't blame the poor devil. I'm inclined to think we haven't had the pick of his push here. Jennings says he's doin' good work in Flanders, and they reckon there's the deuce of a thrust comin' there pretty soon. I think we can manage the kind of footler he's been sendin' over here lately, but if Lensch or some lad like that were to choose to turn up I

wouldn't say what might happen. The air's a big lottery,' and Archie turned a dirty face skyward where two of our planes were moving very high towards the east.

The mention of Lensch brought Peter to mind, and I asked if he had gone back.

'He won't go,' said Archie, 'and we haven't the heart to make him. He's very happy, and plays about with the Gladas single-seater. He's always speakin' about you, sir, and it'd break his heart if we shifted him.'

I asked about his health, and was told that he didn't seem to have much pain.

'But he's a bit queer,' and Archie shook a sage head. 'One of the reasons why he won't budge is because he says God has some work for him to do. He's quite serious about it, and ever since he got the notion he has perked up amazin'. He's always askin' about Lensch, too — not vindictive like, you understand, but quite friendly. Seems to take a sort of proprietary interest in him. I told him Lensch had had a far longer spell of first-class fightin' than anybody else and was bound by the law of averages to be downed soon, and he was quite sad about it.'

I had no time to worry about Peter. Archie and I swallowed breakfast and I had a pow-wow with my brigadiers. By this time I had got through to Corps H.Q. and got news of the French. It was worse than I expected. General Peguy would arrive about ten o'clock, but his men couldn't take over till well after midday. The Corps gave me their whereabouts and I found it on the map. They had a long way to cover yet, and then there would be the slow business of relieving. I looked at my watch. There were still six hours before us when the Boche might knock us to blazes, six hours of maddening anxiety . . . Lefroy announced that all was quiet on the front, and that the new wiring at the Bois de la Bruyere had been completed. Patrols had reported that during the night a fresh German division seemed to have relieved that which we had punished so stoutly yesterday. I asked him if he could stick it out against another attack. 'No,' he said without hesitation. 'We're too few and too shaky on our pins to stand any more. I've only a man to every three yards.' That impressed me, for Lefroy was usually the most devil-may-care optimist.

'Curse it, there's the sun,' I heard Archie cry. It was true, for the clouds were rolling back and the centre of the heavens was a patch of blue. The storm was coming — I could smell it in the air — but probably it wouldn't break till the evening. Where, I wondered, would we be by that time?

It was now nine o'clock, and I was keeping tight hold on myself, for I saw that I was going to have hell for the next hours. I am a pretty stolid fellow in some ways, but I have always found patience and standing still the most difficult job to tackle, and my nerves were all tattered from the long strain of the retreat. I went up to the line and saw the battalion commanders. Everything was unwholesomely quiet there. Then I came back to my headquarters to study the reports that were coming in from the air patrols. They all said the same thing — abnormal activity in the German back areas. Things seemed shaping for a new 21st of March, and, if our luck were out, my poor little remnant would have to take the shock. I telephoned to the Corps and found them as nervous as me. I gave them the details of my strength and heard an agonized whistle at the other end of the line. I was rather glad I had companions in the same purgatory.

I found I couldn't sit still. If there had been any work to do I would have buried myself in it, but there was none. Only this fearsome job of waiting. I hardly ever feel cold, but now my blood seemed to be getting thin, and I astonished my staff by putting on a British warm and buttoning up the collar. Round that derelict farm I ranged like a hungry wolf, cold at the feet, queasy in the stomach, and mortally edgy in the mind.

Then suddenly the cloud lifted from me, and the blood seemed to run naturally in my veins. I experienced the change of mood which a man feels sometimes when his whole being is fined down and clarified by long endurance. The fight of yesterday revealed itself as something rather splendid. What risks we had run and how gallantly we had met them! My heart warmed as I thought of that old division of mine, those ragged veterans that were never beaten as long as breath was left them. And the Americans and the boys from the machine-gun school and all the oddments we had commandeered! And old Blenkiron raging like a good-tempered lion! It was against reason that such fortitude shouldn't win out. We had snarled round and bitten the Boche so badly that he wanted no more for a little. He would come again, but presently we should be relieved and the gallant blue-coats, fresh as paint and burning for revenge, would be there to worry him.

I had no new facts on which to base my optimism, only a changed point of view. And with it came a recollection of other things. Wake's death had left me numb before, but now the thought of it gave me a sharp pang. He was the first of our little confederacy to go. But what an ending he had made, and how happy he had been in that mad time when he had come down from his pedestal and become one of the crowd! He had found himself at the last, and who could grudge him

such happiness? If the best were to be taken, he would be chosen first, for he was a big man, before whom I uncovered my head. The thought of him made me very humble. I had never had his troubles to face, but he had come clean through them, and reached a courage which was for ever beyond me. He was the Faithful among us pilgrims, who had finished his journey before the rest. Mary had foreseen it. 'There is a price to be paid,' she had said — 'the best of us.'

And at the thought of Mary a flight of warm and happy hopes seemed to settle on my mind. I was looking again beyond the war to that peace which she and I would some day inherit. I had a vision of a green English landscape, with its far-flung scents of wood and meadow and garden . . . And that face of all my dreams, with the eyes so childlike and brave and honest, as if they, too, saw beyond the dark to a radiant country. A line of an old song, which had been a favourite of my father's, sang itself in my ears:

*There's an eye that ever weeps and a fair face will be fain
When I ride through Annan Water wi' my bonny bands again!*

We were standing by the crumbling rails of what had once been the farm sheepfold. I looked at Archie and he smiled back at me, for he saw that my face had changed. Then he turned his eyes to the billowing clouds.

I felt my arm clutched.

'Look there!' said a fierce voice, and his glasses were turned upward.

I looked, and far up in the sky saw a thing like a wedge of wild geese flying towards us from the enemy's country. I made out the small dots which composed it, and my glass told me they were planes. But only Archie's practised eye knew that they were enemy.

'Boche?' I asked.

'Boche,' he said. 'My God, we're for it now.'

My heart had sunk like a stone, but I was fairly cool. I looked at my watch and saw that it was ten minutes to eleven.

'How many?'

'Five,' said Archie. 'Or there may be six — not more.'

'Listen!' I said. 'Get on to your headquarters. Tell them that it's all up with us if a single plane gets back. Let them get well over the line, the deeper in the better, and tell them to send up every machine they possess and down them all. Tell them it's life or death. Not one single plane goes back. Quick!'

Archie disappeared, and as he went our anti-aircraft guns broke out. The formation above opened and zigzagged, but they were too high to be in much danger. But they were not too high to see that which we must keep hidden or perish.

The roar of our batteries died down as the invaders passed westward. As I watched their progress they seemed to be dropping lower. Then they rose again and a bank of cloud concealed them.

I had a horrid certainty that they must beat us, that some at any rate would get back. They had seen thin lines and the roads behind us empty of supports. They would see, as they advanced, the blue columns of the French coming up from the south-west, and they would return and tell the enemy that a blow now would open the road to Amiens and the sea. He had plenty of strength for it, and presently he would have overwhelming strength. It only needed a spear-point to burst the jerry-built dam and let the flood through . . . They would return in twenty minutes, and by noon we would be broken. Unless — unless the miracle of miracles happened, and they never returned.

Archie reported that his skipper would do his damndest and that our machines were now going up. 'We've a chance, sir,' he said, 'a good sportin' chance.' It was a new Archie, with a hard voice, a lean face, and very old eyes.

Behind the jagged walls of the farm buildings was a knoll which had once formed part of the high-road. I went up there alone, for I didn't want anybody near me. I wanted a viewpoint, and I wanted quiet, for I had a grim time before me. From that knoll I had a big prospect of country. I looked east to our lines on which an occasional shell was falling, and where I could hear the chatter of machine-guns. West there was peace for the woods closed down on the landscape. Up to the north, I remember, there was a big glare as from a burning dump, and heavy guns seemed to be at work in the Ancre valley. Down in the south there was the dull murmur of a great battle. But just around me, in the gap, the deadliest place of all, there was an odd quiet. I could pick out clearly the different sounds. Somebody down at the farm had made a joke and there was a short burst of laughter. I envied the humorist his composure. There was a clatter and jingle from a battery

changing position. On the road a tractor was jolting along — I could hear its driver shout and the screech of its uncoiled axle.

My eyes were glued to my glasses, but they shook in my hands so that I could scarcely see. I bit my lip to steady myself, but they still wavered. From time to time I glanced at my watch. Eight minutes gone — ten — seventeen. If only the planes would come into sight! Even the certainty of failure would be better than this harrowing doubt. They should be back by now unless they had swung north across the salient, or unless the miracle of miracles —

Then came the distant yapping of an anti-aircraft gun, caught up the next second by others, while smoke patches studded the distant blue sky. The clouds were banking in mid-heaven, but to the west there was a big clear space now woolly with shrapnel bursts. I counted them mechanically — one — three — five — nine — with despair beginning to take the place of my anxiety. My hands were steady now, and through the glasses I saw the enemy.

Five attenuated shapes rode high above the bombardment, now sharp against the blue, now lost in a film of vapour. They were coming back, serenely, contemptuously, having seen all they wanted.

The quiet was gone now and the din was monstrous. Anti-aircraft guns, singly and in groups, were firing from every side. As I watched it seemed a futile waste of ammunition. The enemy didn't give a tinker's curse for it . . . But surely there was one down. I could only count four now. No, there was the fifth coming out of a cloud. In ten minutes they would be all over the line. I fairly stamped in my vexation. Those guns were no more use than a sick headache. Oh, where in God's name were our own planes?

At that moment they came, streaking down into sight, four fighting-scouts with the sun glinting on their wings and burnishing their metal cowls. I saw clearly the rings of red, white, and blue. Before their downward drive the enemy instantly spread out.

I was watching with bare eyes now, and I wanted companionship, for the time of waiting was over. Automatically I must have run down the knoll, for the next I knew I was staring at the heavens with Archie by my side. The combatants seemed to couple instinctively. Diving, wheeling, climbing, a pair would drop out of the melee or disappear behind a cloud. Even at that height I could hear the methodical rat-tat-tat of the machine-guns. Then there was a sudden flare and wisp of smoke. A plane sank, turning and twisting, to earth.

'Hun!' said Archie, who had his glasses on it.

Almost immediately another followed. This time the pilot recovered himself, while still a thousand feet from the ground, and started gliding for the enemy lines. Then he wavered, plunged sickeningly, and fell headlong into the wood behind La Bruyere.

Farther east, almost over the front trenches, a two-seater Albatross and a British pilot were having a desperate tussle. The bombardment had stopped, and from where we stood every movement could be followed. First one, then another, climbed uppermost and dived back, swooped out and wheeled in again, so that the two planes seemed to clear each other only by inches. Then it looked as if they closed and interlocked. I expected to see both go crashing, when suddenly the wings of one seemed to shrivel up, and the machine dropped like a stone.

'Hun,' said Archie. 'That makes three. Oh, good lads! Good lads!'

Then I saw something which took away my breath. Sloping down in wide circles came a German machine, and, following, a little behind and a little above, a British. It was the first surrender in mid-air I had seen. In my amazement I watched the couple right down to the ground, till the enemy landed in a big meadow across the high-road and our own man in a field nearer the river.

When I looked back into the sky, it was bare. North, south, east, and west, there was not a sign of aircraft, British or German.

A violent trembling took me. Archie was sweeping the heavens with his glasses and muttering to himself. Where was the fifth man? He must have fought his way through, and it was too late.

But was it? From the toe of a great rolling cloud-bank a flame shot earthwards, followed by a V-shaped trail of smoke. British or Boche? British or Boche? I didn't wait long for an answer. For, riding over the far end of the cloud, came two of our fighting scouts.

I tried to be cool, and snapped my glasses into their case, though the reaction made me want to shout. Archie turned to me with a nervous smile and a quivering mouth. 'I think we have won on the post,' he said.

He reached out a hand for mine, his eyes still on the sky, and I was grasping it when it was torn away. He was staring upwards with a white face.

We were looking at the sixth enemy plane.

It had been behind the others and much lower, and was making straight at a great speed for the east. The glasses showed me a different type of machine — a big machine with short wings, which looked menacing as a hawk in a covey of grouse. It was under the cloud-bank, and above, satisfied, easing down after their fight, and unwitting of this enemy, rode the two British craft.

A neighbouring anti-aircraft gun broke out into a sudden burst, and I thanked Heaven for its inspiration. Curious as to this new development, the two British turned, caught sight of the Boche, and dived for him.

What happened in the next minutes I cannot tell. The three seemed to be mixed up in a dog fight, so that I could not distinguish friend from foe. My hands no longer trembled; I was too desperate. The patter of machine-guns came down to us, and then one of the three broke clear and began to climb. The others strained to follow, but in a second he had risen beyond their fire, for he had easily the pace of them. Was it the Hun?

Archie's dry lips were talking.

'It's Lensch,' he said.

'How d'you know?' I gasped angrily.

'Can't mistake him. Look at the way he slipped out as he banked. That's his patent trick.'

In that agonizing moment hope died in me. I was perfectly calm now, for the time for anxiety had gone. Farther and farther drifted the British pilots behind, while Lensch in the completeness of his triumph looped more than once as if to cry an insulting farewell. In less than three minutes he would be safe inside his own lines, and he carried the knowledge which for us was death.

Someone was bawling in my ear, and pointing upward. It was Archie and his face was wild. I looked and gasped — seized my glasses and looked again.

A second before Lensch had been alone; now there were two machines.

I heard Archie's voice. 'My God, it's the Gladas — the little Gladas.' His fingers were digging into my arm and his face was against my shoulder. And then his excitement sobered into an awe which choked his speech, as he stammered — 'It's old —'

But I did not need him to tell me the name, for I had divined it when I first saw the new plane drop from the clouds. I had that queer sense that comes sometimes to a man that a friend is present when he cannot see him. Somewhere up in the void two heroes were fighting their last battle — and one of them had a crippled leg.

I had never any doubt about the result, though Archie told me later that he went crazy with suspense. Lensch was not aware of his opponent till he was almost upon him, and I wonder if by any freak of instinct he recognized his greatest antagonist. He never fired a shot, nor did Peter . . . I saw the German twist and side-slip as if to baffle the fate descending upon him. I saw Peter veer over vertically and I knew that the end had come. He was there to make certain of victory and he took the only way. The machines closed, there was a crash which I felt though I could not hear it, and next second both were hurtling down, over and over, to the earth.

They fell in the river just short of the enemy lines, but I did not see them, for my eyes were blinded and I was on my knees.

After that it was all a dream. I found myself being embraced by a French General of Division, and saw the first companies of the cheerful bluecoats whom I had longed for. With them came the rain, and it was under a weeping April sky that early in the night I marched what was left of my division away from the battle-field. The enemy guns were starting to speak behind us, but I did not heed them. I knew that now there were warders at the gate, and I believed that by the grace of God that gate was barred for ever.

They took Peter from the wreckage with scarcely a scar except his twisted leg. Death had smoothed out some of the age in him, and left his face much as I remembered it long ago in the Mashonaland hills. In his pocket was his old battered *Pilgrim's Progress*. It lies before me as I write, and beside it — for I was his only legatee — the little case which came to him weeks later, containing the highest honour that can be bestowed upon a soldier of Britain.

It was from the *Pilgrim's Progress* that I read next morning, when in the lee of an apple-orchard Mary and Blenkiron and I stood in the soft spring rain beside his grave. And what I read was the tale in the end not of Mr Standfast, whom he had singled out for his counterpart, but of Mr Valiant-for-Truth whom he had not hoped to emulate. I set down the words as a salute and a farewell:

Then said he, 'I am going to my Father's; and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought His battles who now will be my rewarder.'

So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.



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Huntingtower

PROLOGUE

The girl came into the room with a darting movement like a swallow, looked round her with the same birdlike quickness, and then ran across the polished floor to where a young man sat on a sofa with one leg laid along it.

"I have saved you this dance, Quentin," she said, pronouncing the name with a pretty staccato. "You must be so lonely not dancing, so I will sit with you. What shall we talk about?"

The young man did not answer at once, for his gaze was held by her face. He had never dreamed that the gawky and rather plain little girl whom he had romped with long ago in Paris would grow into such a being. The clean delicate lines of her figure, the exquisite pure colouring of hair and skin, the charming young arrogance of the eyes—this was beauty, he reflected, a miracle, a revelation. Her virginal fineness and her dress, which was the tint of pale fire, gave her the air of a creature of ice and flame.

"About yourself, please, Saskia," he said. "Are you happy now that you are a grown-up lady?"

"Happy!" Her voice had a thrill in it like music, frosty music. "The days are far too short. I grudge the hours when I must sleep. They say it is sad for me to make my début in a time of war. But the world is very kind to me, and after all it is a victorious war for our Russia. And listen to this, Quentin. To-morrow I am to be allowed to begin nursing at the Alexander Hospital. What do you think of that?"

The time was January, 1916, and the place a room in the great Nirski Palace. No hint of war, no breath from the snowy streets, entered that curious chamber where Prince Peter Nirski kept some of the chief of his famous treasures. It was notable for its lack of drapery and upholstery—only a sofa or two and a few fine rugs on the cedar floor. The walls were of a green marble veined like malachite, the ceiling was of darker marble inlaid with white intaglios. Scattered everywhere were tables and cabinets laden with celadon china, and carved jade, and ivories, and shimmering Persian and Rhodian vessels. In all the room there was scarcely anything of metal and no touch of gilding or bright colour. The light came from green alabaster censers, and the place swam in a cold green radiance like some cavern below the sea. The air was warm and scented, and though it was very quiet there, a hum of voices and the strains of dance music drifted to it from the pillared corridor in which could be seen the glare of lights from the great ballroom beyond.

The young man had a thin face with lines of suffering round the mouth and eyes. The warm room had given him a high colour, which increased his air of fragility. He felt a little choked by the place, which seemed to him for both body and mind a hot-house, though he knew very well that the Nirski Palace on this gala evening was in no way typical of the land or its masters. Only a week ago he had been eating black bread with its owner in a hut on the Volhynian front.

"You have become amazing, Saskia," he said. "I won't pay my old playfellow compliments; besides, you must be tired of them. I wish you happiness all the day long like a fairy-tale Princess. But a crock like me can't do much to help you to it. The service seems to be the wrong way round, for here you are wasting your time talking to me."

She put her hand on his. "Poor Quentin! Is the leg very bad?"

He laughed. "Oh, no. It's mending famously. I'll be able to get about without a stick in another month, and then you've got to teach me all the new dances."

The jiggling music of a two-step floated down the corridor. It made the young man's brow contract, for it brought to him a vision of dead faces in the gloom of a November dusk. He had once had a friend who used to whistle that air, and he had seen him die in the Hollebeke mud. There was something *macabre* in the tune. . . . He was surely morbid this evening, for there seemed something *macabre* about the house, the room, the dancing, all Russia. . . . These last days he had suffered from a sense of calamity impending, of a dark curtain drawing down upon a splendid world. They didn't agree with him at the Embassy, but he could not get rid of the notion.

The girl saw his sudden abstraction.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked. It had been her favourite question as a child.

"I was thinking that I rather wished you were still in Paris."

"But why?"

"Because I think you would be safer."

"Oh, what nonsense, Quentin dear! Where should I be safe if not in my own Russia, where I have friends—oh, so many, and tribes and tribes of relations? It is France and England that are unsafe with the German guns grumbling at their doors. . . . My complaint is that my life is too cosseted and padded. I am too secure, and I do not want to be secure."

The young man lifted a heavy casket from a table at his elbow. It was of dark green imperial jade, with a wonderfully carved lid. He took off the lid and picked up three small oddments of ivory—a priest with a beard, a tiny soldier and a draught-ox. Putting the three in a triangle, he balanced the jade box on them.

"Look, Saskia! If you were living inside that box you would think it very secure. You would note the thickness of the walls and the hardness of the stone, and you would dream away in a peaceful green dusk. But all the time it would be held up by trifles—brittle trifles."

She shook her head. "You do not understand. You cannot understand. We are a very old and strong people with roots deep, deep in the earth."

"Please God you are right," he said. "But, Saskia, you know that if I can ever serve you, you have only to command me. Now I can do no more for you than the mouse for the lion—at the beginning of the story. But the story had an end, you remember, and some day it may be in my power to help you. Promise to send for me."

The girl laughed merrily. "The King of Spain's daughter," she quoted,

"Came to visit me,
And all for the love
Of my little nut-tree."

The other laughed also, as a young man in the uniform of the Preobrajenski Guard approached to claim the girl. "Even a nut-tree may be a shelter in a storm," he said.

"Of course I promise, Quentin," she said. "*Au revoir*. Soon I will come and take you to supper, and we will talk of nothing but nut-trees."

He watched the two leave the room, her gown glowing like a tongue of fire in the shadowy archway. Then he slowly rose to his feet, for he thought that for a little he would watch the dancing. Something moved beside him, and he turned in time to prevent the jade casket from crashing to the floor. Two of the supports had slipped. He replaced the thing on its proper table and stood silent for a moment. "The priest and the soldier gone, and only the beast of burden left. . . . If I were inclined to be superstitious, I should call that a dashed bad omen."

CHAPTER 1

HOW A RETIRED PROVISION MERCHANT FELT THE IMPULSE OF SPRING

Mr. Dickson McCunn completed the polishing of his smooth cheeks with the towel, glanced appreciatively at their reflection in the looking-glass, and then permitted his eyes to stray out of the window. In the little garden lilacs were budding, and there was a gold line of daffodils beside the tiny greenhouse. Beyond the sooty wall a birch flaunted its new tassels, and the jackdaws were circling about the steeple of the Guthrie Memorial Kirk. A blackbird whistled from a thorn-bush, and Mr. McCunn was inspired to follow its example. He began a tolerable version of "Roy's Wife of Aldivalloch."

He felt singularly light-hearted, and the immediate cause was his safety razor. A week ago he had bought the thing in a sudden fit of enterprise, and now he shaved in five minutes, where before he had taken twenty, and no longer confronted his fellows, at least one day in three, with a countenance ludicrously mottled by sticking-plaster. Calculation revealed to him the fact that in his fifty-five years, having begun to shave at eighteen, he had wasted three thousand three hundred and seventy hours—or one hundred and forty days—or between four and five months—by his neglect of this admirable invention. Now he felt that he had stolen a march on Time. He had fallen heir, thus late, to a fortune in unpurchasable leisure.

He began to dress himself in the sombre clothes in which he had been accustomed for thirty-five years and more to go down to the shop in Mearns Street. And then a thought came to him which made him discard the grey-striped trousers, sit down on the edge of his bed, and muse.

Since Saturday the shop was a thing of the past. On Saturday at half-past eleven, to the accompaniment of a glass of dubious sherry, he had completed the arrangements by which the provision shop in Mearns Street, which had borne so long the legend of D. McCunn, together with the branches in Crossmyloof and the Shaws, became the property of a company, yclept the United Supply Stores, Limited. He had received in payment cash, debentures and preference shares, and his lawyers and his own acumen had acclaimed the bargain. But all the week-end he had been a little sad. It was the end of so old a song, and he knew no other tune to sing. He was comfortably off, healthy, free from any particular cares in life, but free too from any particular duties. "Will I be going to turn into a useless old man?" he asked himself.

But he had woke up this Monday to the sound of the blackbird, and the world, which had seemed rather empty twelve hours before, was now brisk and alluring. His prowess in quick shaving assured him of his youth. "I'm no' that dead old," he observed, as he sat on the edge of the bed, to his reflection in the big looking-glass.

It was not an old face. The sandy hair was a little thin on the top and a little grey at the temples, the figure was perhaps a little too full for youthful elegance, and an athlete would have censured the neck as too fleshy for perfect health. But the cheeks were rosy, the skin clear, and the pale eyes singularly childlike. They were a little weak, those eyes, and had some difficulty in looking for long at the same object, so that Mr. McCunn did not stare people in the face, and had, in consequence, at one time in his career acquired a perfectly undeserved reputation for cunning. He shaved clean, and looked uncommonly like a wise, plump schoolboy. As he gazed at his simulacrum he stopped whistling "Roy's Wife" and let his countenance harden into a noble sternness. Then he laughed, and observed in the language of his youth that "There was life in the auld dowg yet." In that moment the soul of Mr. McCunn conceived the Great Plan.

The first sign of it was that he swept all his business garments unceremoniously on to the floor. The next that he rootled at the bottom of a deep drawer and extracted a most disreputable tweed suit. It had once been what I believe is called a Lovat mixture, but was now a nondescript sub-fusc, with bright patches of colour like moss on whinstone. He regarded it lovingly, for it had been for twenty years his holiday wear, emerging annually for a hallowed month to be stained with salt and bleached with sun. He put it on, and stood shrouded in an odour of camphor. A pair of thick nailed boots and a flannel shirt and collar completed the equipment of the sportsman. He had another long look at himself in the glass, and then descended whistling to breakfast. This time the tune was "Macgregor's Gathering," and the sound of it stirred the grimy lips of a man outside who was delivering coals—himself a Macgregor—to follow suit. Mr. McCunn was a very fountain of music that morning.

Tibby, the aged maid, had his newspaper and letters waiting by his plate, and a dish of ham and eggs frizzling near the fire. He fell to ravenously but still musingly, and he had reached the stage of scones and jam before he glanced at his correspondence. There was a letter from his wife now holidaying at the Neuk Hydropathic. She reported that her health was improving, and that she had met various people who had known somebody who had known somebody else whom she had once known herself. Mr. McCunn read the dutiful pages and smiled. "Mamma's enjoying herself fine," he observed to the teapot. He knew that for his wife the earthly paradise was a hydropathic, where she put on her afternoon dress and every jewel she possessed when she rose in the morning, ate large meals of which the novelty atoned for the nastiness, and collected an immense casual acquaintance with whom she discussed ailments, ministers, sudden deaths, and the intricate genealogies of her class. For his part he rancorously hated hydropathics, having once spent a black week under the roof of one in his wife's company. He detested the food, the Turkish baths (he had a passionate aversion to baring his body before strangers), the inability to find anything to do and the compulsion to endless small talk. A thought flitted over his mind which he was too loyal to formulate. Once he and his wife had had similar likings, but they had taken different roads since their child died. Janet! He saw again—he was never quite free from the sight—the solemn little white-frocked girl who had died long ago in the spring.

It may have been the thought of the Neuk Hydropathic, or more likely the thin clean scent of the daffodils with which Tibby had decked the table, but long ere breakfast was finished the Great Plan had ceased to be an airy vision and become a sober well-masoned structure. Mr. McCunn—I may confess it at the start—was an incurable romantic.

He had had a humdrum life since the day when he had first entered his uncle's shop with the hope of some day succeeding that honest grocer; and his feet had never strayed a yard from his sober rut. But his mind, like the Dying Gladiator's, had been far away. As a boy he had voyaged among books, and they had given him a world where he could shape his career according to his whimsical fancy. Not that Mr. McCunn was what is known as a great reader. He read slowly and fastidiously, and sought in literature for one thing alone. Sir Walter Scott had been his first guide, but he read the novels not for their insight into human character or for their historical pageantry, but because they gave him material wherewith to construct fantastic journeys. It was the same with Dickens. A lit tavern, a stage-coach, post-horses, the clack of hoofs on a frosty road, went to his head like wine. He was a Jacobite not because he had any views on Divine Right, but because he had always before his eyes a picture of a knot of adventurers in cloaks, new landed from France, among the western heather.

On this select basis he had built up his small library—Defoe, Hakluyt, Hazlitt and the essayists, Boswell, some indifferent romances and a shelf of spirited poetry. His tastes became known, and he acquired a reputation for a scholarly habit. He was president of the Literary Society of the Guthrie Memorial Kirk, and read to its members a variety of papers full of a gusto which rarely became critical. He had been three times chairman at Burns Anniversary dinners, and had delivered orations in eulogy of the national Bard; not because he greatly admired him—he thought him rather vulgar—but because he took Burns as an emblem of the unBurns-like literature which he loved. Mr. McCunn was no scholar and was sublimely unconscious of background. He grew his flowers in his small garden-plot oblivious of their origin so long as they gave him the colour and scent he sought. Scent, I say, for he appreciated more than the mere picturesque. He had a passion for words and cadences, and would be haunted for weeks by a cunning phrase, savouring it as a connoisseur savours a vintage. Wherefore long ago, when he could ill afford it, he had purchased the Edinburgh *Stevenson*. They were the only large books on his shelves, for he had a liking for small volumes—things he could stuff into his pocket in that sudden journey which he loved to contemplate.

Only he had never taken it. The shop had tied him up for eleven months in the year, and the twelfth had always found him settled decorously with his wife in some seaside villa. He had not fretted, for he was content with dreams. He was always a little tired, too, when the holidays came, and his wife told him he was growing old. He consoled himself with tags from the more philosophic of his authors, but he scarcely needed consolation. For he had large stores of modest contentment.

But now something had happened. A spring morning and a safety razor had convinced him that he was still young. Since yesterday he was a man of a large leisure. Providence had done for him what he would never have done for himself. The rut in which he had travelled so long had given place to open country. He repeated to himself one of the quotations with which he had been wont to stir the literary young men at the Guthrie Memorial Kirk:

“What’s a man’s age? He must hurry more, that’s all;
Cram in a day, what his youth took a year to hold:
When we mind labour, then only, we’re too old—
What age had Methusalem when he begat Saul?”

He would go journeying—who but he?—pleasantly.

It sounds a trivial resolve, but it quickened Mr. McCunn to the depths of his being. A holiday, and alone! On foot, of course, for he must travel light. He would buckle on a pack after the approved fashion. He had the very thing in a drawer upstairs, which he had bought some years ago at a sale. That and a waterproof and a stick, and his outfit was complete. A book, too, and, as he lit his first pipe, he considered what it should be. Poetry, clearly, for it was the Spring, and besides poetry could be got in pleasantly small bulk. He stood before his bookshelves trying to select a volume, rejecting one after another as inapposite. Browning—Keats, Shelley—they seemed more suited for the hearth than for the roadside. He did not want anything Scots, for he was of opinion that Spring came more richly in England and that English people had a better notion of it. He was tempted by the Oxford Anthology, but was deterred by its thickness, for he did not possess the thin-paper edition. Finally he selected Izaak Walton. He had never fished in his life, but *The Compleat Angler* seemed to fit his mood. It was old and curious and learned and fragrant with the youth of things. He remembered its falling cadences, its country songs and wise meditations. Decidedly it was the right scrip for his pilgrimage. Characteristically he thought last of where he was to go. Every bit of the world beyond his front door had its charms to the seeing eye. There seemed nothing common or unclean that fresh morning. Even a walk among coal-pits had its attractions. . . . But since he had the right to choose, he lingered over it like an epicure. Not the Highlands, for Spring came late among their sour mosses. Some place where there were fields and woods and inns, somewhere, too, within call of the sea. It must not be too remote, for he had no time to waste on train journeys; nor too near, for he wanted a countryside untainted. Presently he thought of Carrick. A good green land, as he remembered it, with purposeful white roads and public-houses sacred to the memory of Burns; near the hills but yet lowland, and with a bright sea chafing on its shores. He decided on Carrick, found a map and planned his journey. Then he routed out his knapsack, packed it with a modest change of raiment, and sent out Tibby to buy chocolate and tobacco and to cash a cheque at the Strathclyde Bank. Till Tibby returned he occupied himself with delicious dreams. . . . He saw himself daily growing browner and leaner, swinging along broad highways or wandering in bypaths. He pictured his seasons of ease, when he unslung his pack and smoked in some clump of lilacs by a burnside—he remembered a phrase of Stevenson’s somewhat like that. He would meet and talk with all sorts of folk; an exhilarating prospect, for Mr. McCunn loved his kind. There would be the evening hour before he reached his inn, when, pleasantly tired, he would top some ridge and see the welcoming lights of a little town. There would be the lamp-lit after-supper time when he would read and reflect, and the start in the gay morning, when tobacco tastes sweetest and even fifty-five seems young. It would be holiday of the purest, for no business now tugged at his coat-tails. He was beginning a new life, he told himself, when he could cultivate the seedling interests which had withered beneath the far-reaching shade of the shop. Was ever a man more fortunate or more free?

Tibby was told that he was going off for a week or two. No letters need be forwarded, for he would be constantly moving, but Mrs. McCunn at the Neuk Hydropathic would be kept informed of his whereabouts. Presently he stood on his doorstep, a stocky figure in ancient tweeds, with a bulging pack slung on his arm, and a stout hazel stick in his hand. A passer-by would have remarked an elderly shopkeeper bent apparently on a day in the country, a common little man on a prosaic errand. But the passer-by would have been wrong, for he could not see into the heart. The plump citizen was the eternal pilgrim; he was Jason, Ulysses, Eric the Red, Albuquerque, Cortez—starting out to discover new worlds. Before he left Mr. McCunn had given Tibby a letter to post. That morning he had received an epistle from a benevolent acquaintance, one Mackintosh, regarding a group of urchins who called themselves the “Gorbals Die-Hards.” Behind the premises in Mearns Street lay a tract of slums, full of mischievous boys with whom his staff waged truceless war. But lately there had started among them a kind of unauthorised and unofficial Boy Scouts, who, without uniform or badge or any kind of paraphernalia, followed the banner of Sir Robert Baden-Powell and subjected themselves to a rude discipline. They were far too poor to join an orthodox troop, but they faithfully copied what they believed to be the practices of more fortunate boys. Mr. McCunn had witnessed their pathetic parades, and had even passed the time of day with their leader, a red-haired savage called Dougal. The philanthropic Mackintosh had taken an interest in the gang and now desired subscriptions to send them to camp in the country. Mr. McCunn, in his new exhilaration, felt that he could not deny to others what he proposed for himself. His last act before leaving was to send Mackintosh ten pounds.

CHAPTER 2

OF MR. JOHN HERITAGE AND THE DIFFERENCE IN POINTS OF VIEW

Dickson McCunn was never to forget the first stage in that pilgrimage. A little after midday he descended from a grimy third-class carriage at a little station whose name I have forgotten. In the village near-by he purchased some new-baked buns and ginger biscuits, to which he was partial, and followed by the shouts of urchins, who admired his pack—"Look at the auld man gaun to the schule"—he emerged into open country. The late April noon gleamed like a frosty morning, but the air, though tonic, was kind. The road ran over sweeps of moorland where curlews wailed, and into lowland pastures dotted with very white, very vocal lambs. The young grass had the warm fragrance of new milk. As he went he munched his buns, for he had resolved to have no plethoric midday meal, and presently he found the burnside nook of his fancy, and halted to smoke. On a patch of turf close to a grey stone bridge he had out his Walton and read the chapter on "The Chavender or Chub." The collocation of words delighted him and inspired him to verse. "Lavender or Lub"—"Pavender or Pub"—"Gravender or Grub"—but the monosyllables proved too vulgar for poetry. Regretfully he desisted.

The rest of the road was as idyllic as the start. He would tramp steadily for a mile or so and then saunter, leaning over bridges to watch the trout in the pools, admiring from a dry-stone dyke the unsteady gambols of new-born lambs, kicking up dust from strips of moor-burn on the heather. Once by a fir-wood he was privileged to surprise three lunatic hares waltzing. His cheeks glowed with the sun; he moved in an atmosphere of pastoral, serene and contented. When the shadows began to lengthen he arrived at the village of Cloncae, where he proposed to lie. The inn looked dirty, but he found a decent widow, above whose door ran the legend in home-made lettering, "Mrs. brockie tea and Coffee," and who was willing to give him quarters. There he supped handsomely off ham and eggs, and dipped into a work called *Covenanting Worthies*, which garnished a table decorated with sea-shells. At half-past nine precisely he retired to bed and unhesitating sleep.

Next morning he awoke to a changed world. The sky was grey and so low that his outlook was bounded by a cabbage garden, while a surly wind prophesied rain. It was chilly, too, and he had his breakfast beside the kitchen fire. Mrs. Brockie could not spare a capital letter for her surname on the signboard, but she exalted it in her talk. He heard of a multitude of Brockies, ascendant, descendant and collateral, who seemed to be in a fair way to inherit the earth. Dickson listened sympathetically, and lingered by the fire. He felt stiff from yesterday's exercise, and the edge was off his spirit.

The start was not quite what he had pictured. His pack seemed heavier, his boots tighter, and his pipe drew badly. The first miles were all uphill, with a wind tingling his ears, and no colours in the landscape but brown and grey. Suddenly he awoke to the fact that he was dismal, and thrust the notion behind him. He expanded his chest and drew in long draughts of air. He told himself that this sharp weather was better than sunshine. He remembered that all travellers in romances battled with mist and rain. Presently his body recovered comfort and vigour, and his mind worked itself into cheerfulness.

He overtook a party of tramps and fell into talk with them. He had always had a fancy for the class, though he had never known anything nearer it than city beggars. He pictured them as philosophic vagabonds, full of quaint turns of speech, unconscious Borrovians. With these samples his disillusionment was speedy. The party was made up of a ferret-faced man with a red nose, a draggle-tailed woman, and a child in a crazy perambulator. Their conversation was one-sided, for it immediately resolved itself into a whining chronicle of misfortunes and petitions for relief. It cost him half a crown to be rid of them.

The road was alive with tramps that day. The next one did the accosting. Hailing Mr. McCunn as "Guv'nor," he asked to be told the way to Manchester. The objective seemed so enterprising that Dickson was impelled to ask questions, and heard, in what appeared to be in the accents of the Colonies, the tale of a career of unvarying calamity. There was nothing merry or philosophic about this adventurer. Nay, there was something menacing. He eyed his companion's waterproof covetously, and declared that he had had one like it which had been stolen from him the day before. Had the place been lonely he might have contemplated highway robbery, but they were at the entrance to a village, and the sight of a public-house awoke his thirst. Dickson parted with him at the cost of sixpence for a drink.

He had no more company that morning except an aged stone-breaker whom he convoyed for half a mile. The stone-breaker also was soured with the world. He walked with a limp, which, he said, was due to an accident years before, when he had been run into by "ane o' thae damned velocipeeds." The word revived in Dickson memories of his youth, and he was prepared to be friendly. But the ancient would have none of it. He inquired morosely what he was after, and, on being told, remarked that he might have learned more sense. "It's a daft-like thing for an auld man like you to be traivellin' the roads. Ye maun be ill-off for a job." Questioned as to himself he became, as the newspapers say, "reticent," and having reached his bing of stones, turned rudely to his duties. "Awa' hame wi' ye," were his parting words. "It's idle scoondrels like you that maks wark for honest folk like me."

The morning was not a success, but the strong air had given Dickson such an appetite that he resolved to break his rule, and, on reaching the little town of Kilchrist, he sought luncheon at the chief hotel. There he found that which revived his spirits. A solitary bagman shared the meal, who revealed the fact that he was in the grocery line. There followed a well-informed and most technical conversation. He was drawn to speak of the United Supply Stores, Limited, of their prospects and of their predecessor, Mr. McCunn, whom he knew well by repute but had never met. "Yon's the clever one," he observed. "I've always said there's no longer head in the city of Glasgow than McCunn. An old-fashioned firm, but it has aye managed to keep up with the times. He's just retired, they tell me, and in my opinion it's a big loss to the provision trade. . . ." Dickson's heart glowed within him. Here was Romance; to be praised incognito; to enter a casual inn and find that fame had preceded him. He warmed to the bagman, insisted on giving him a liqueur and a cigar, and finally revealed himself. "I'm Dickson McCunn," he said, "taking a bit holiday. If there's anything I can do for you when I get back, just let me know." With mutual esteem they parted.

He had need of all his good spirits, for he emerged into an unrelenting drizzle. The environs of Kilchrist are at the best unlovely, and in the wet they were as melancholy as a graveyard. But the encounter with the bagman had worked wonders with Dickson, and he strode lustily into the weather, his waterproof collar buttoned round his chin. The road climbed to a bare moor, where lagoons had formed in the ruts, and the mist showed on each side only a yard or two of soaking heather. Soon he was wet; presently every part of him, boots, body and pack, was one vast sponge. The waterproof was not waterproof, and the rain penetrated to his most intimate garments. Little he cared. He felt lighter, younger, than on the idyllic previous day. He enjoyed the buffets of the storm, and one wet mile succeeded another to the accompaniment of Dickson's shouts and laughter. There was no one abroad that afternoon, so he could talk aloud to himself and repeat his favourite poems. About five in the evening there presented himself at the Black Bull Inn at Kirkmichael a soaked, disreputable, but most cheerful traveller.

Now the Black Bull at Kirkmichael is one of the few very good inns left in the world. It is an old place and an hospitable, for it has been for generations a haunt of anglers, who above all other men understand comfort. There are always bright fires there, and hot water, and old soft leather armchairs, and an aroma of good food and good tobacco, and giant trout in glass cases, and pictures of Captain Barclay of Urie walking to London, and Mr. Ramsay of Barnton winning a horse-race, and the three-volume edition of the Waverley Novels with many volumes missing, and indeed all those things which an inn should have. Also there used to be—there may still be—sound vintage claret in the cellars. The Black Bull expects its guests to arrive in every stage of dishevelment, and Dickson was received by a cordial landlord, who offered dry garments as a matter of course. The pack proved to have resisted the elements, and a suit of clothes and slippers were provided by the house. Dickson, after a glass of toddy, wallowed in a hot bath, which washed all the stiffness out of him. He had a fire in his bedroom, beside which he wrote the opening passages of that diary he had vowed to keep, descanting lyrically upon the joys of ill weather. At seven o'clock, warm and satisfied in soul, and with his body clad in raiment several sizes too large for it, he descended to dinner.

At one end of the long table in the dining-room sat a group of anglers. They looked jovial fellows, and Dickson would fain have joined them; but, having been fishing all day in the Loch o' the Threshes, they were talking their own talk, and he feared that his admiration for Izaak Walton did not qualify him to butt into the erudite discussions of fishermen. The landlord seemed to think likewise, for he drew back a chair for him at the other end, where sat a young man absorbed in a book. Dickson gave him good evening and got an abstracted reply. The young man supped the Black Bull's excellent broth with one hand, and with the other turned the pages of his volume. A glance convinced Dickson that the work was French, a literature which did not interest him. He knew little of the tongue and suspected it of impropriety.

Another guest entered and took the chair opposite the bookish young man. He was also young—not more than thirty-

three—and to Dickson's eye, was the kind of person he would have liked to resemble. He was tall and free from any superfluous flesh; his face was lean, fine-drawn and deeply sunburnt so that the hair above showed oddly pale; the hands were brown and beautifully shaped, but the forearm revealed by the loose cuffs of his shirt was as brawny as a blacksmith's. He had rather pale blue eyes, which seemed to have looked much at the sun, and a small moustache the colour of ripe hay. His voice was low and pleasant, and he pronounced his words precisely, like a foreigner.

He was very ready to talk, but in defiance of Dr. Johnson's warning, his talk was all questions. He wanted to know everything about the neighbourhood—who lived in what houses, what were the distances between the towns, what harbours would admit what class of vessel. Smiling agreeably, he put Dickson through a catechism to which he knew none of the answers. The landlord was called in, and proved more helpful. But on one matter he was fairly at a loss. The catechist asked about a house called Darkwater, and was met with a shake of the head. "I know no sic-like name in this countryside, sir," and the catechist looked disappointed.

The literary young man said nothing, but ate trout abstractedly, one eye on his book. The fish had been caught by the anglers in the Loch o' the Threshes, and phrases describing their capture floated from the other end of the table. The young man had a second helping, and then refused the excellent hill mutton that followed, contenting himself with cheese. Not so Dickson and the catechist. They ate everything that was set before them, topping up with a glass of port. Then the latter, who had been talking illuminatingly about Spain, rose, bowed and left the table, leaving Dickson, who liked to linger over his meals, to the society of the ichthyophagous student.

He nodded towards the book. "Interesting?" he asked.

The young man shook his head and displayed the name on the cover. "Anatole France. I used to be crazy about him, but now he seems rather a back number." Then he glanced towards the just-vacated chair. "Australian," he said.

"How d'you know?"

"Can't mistake them. There's nothing else so lean and fine produced on the globe today. I was next door to them at Pozières and saw them fight. Lord! Such men! Now and then you had a freak, but most looked like Phoebus Apollo."

Dickson gazed with a new respect at his neighbour, for he had not associated him with battle-fields. During the war he had been a fervent patriot, but, though he had never heard a shot himself, so many of his friends' sons and nephews, not to mention cousins of his own, had seen service, that he had come to regard the experience as commonplace. Lions in Africa and bandits in Mexico seemed to him novel and romantic things, but not trenches and airplanes which were the whole world's property. But he could scarcely fit his neighbour into even his haziest picture of war. The young man was tall and a little round-shouldered; he had short-sighted, rather prominent brown eyes, untidy black hair and dark eyebrows which came near to meeting. He wore a knickerbocker suit of bluish-grey tweed, a pale blue shirt, a pale blue collar and a dark blue tie—a symphony of colour which seemed too elaborately considered to be quite natural. Dickson had set him down as an artist or a newspaper correspondent, objects to him of lively interest. But now the classification must be reconsidered.

"So you were in the war," he said encouragingly.

"Four blasted years," was the savage reply. "And I never want to hear the name of the beastly thing again."

"You said he was an Australian," said Dickson, casting back. "But I thought Australians had a queer accent, like the English."

"They've all kind of accents, but you can never mistake their voice. It's got the sun in it. Canadians have got grinding ice in theirs, and Virginians have got butter. So have the Irish. In Britain there are no voices, only speaking tubes. It isn't safe to judge men by their accent only. You yourself I take to be Scotch, but for all I know you may be a senator from Chicago or a Boer General."

"I'm from Glasgow. My name's Dickson McCunn." He had a faint hope that the announcement might affect the other as it had affected the bagman at Kilchrist.

"Golly, what a name!" exclaimed the young man rudely.

Dickson was nettled. "It's very old Highland," he said. "It means the son of a dog."

"Which—Christian name or surname?" Then the young man appeared to think he had gone too far, for he smiled pleasantly. "And a very good name too. Mine is prosaic by comparison. They call me John Heritage."

"That," said Dickson, mollified, "is like a name out of a book. With that name by rights you should be a poet."

Gloom settled on the young man's countenance. "It's a dashed sight too poetic. It's like Edwin Arnold and Alfred Austin and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Great poets have vulgar monosyllables for names, like Keats. The new Shakespeare when he comes along will probably be called Grubb or Jubber, if he isn't Jones. With a name like yours I might have a chance. *You* should be the poet."

"I'm very fond of reading," said Dickson modestly.

A slow smile crumpled Mr. Heritage's face. "There's a fire in the smoking-room," he observed as he rose. "We'd better bag the armchairs before these fishing louts take them." Dickson followed obediently. This was the kind of chance acquaintance for whom he had hoped, and he was prepared to make the most of him.

The fire burned bright in the little dusky smoking-room, lighted by one oil-lamp. Mr. Heritage flung himself into a chair, stretched his long legs and lit a pipe.

"You like reading?" he asked. "What sort? Any use for poetry?"

"Plenty," said Dickson. "I've aye been fond of learning it up and repeating it to myself when I had nothing to do. In church and waiting on trains, like. It used to be Tennyson, but now it's more Browning. I can say a lot of Browning."

The other screwed his face into an expression of disgust. "I know the stuff. 'Damask cheeks and dewy sister eyelids.' Or else the Ercles vein—'God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world.' No good, Mr. McCunn. All back numbers. Poetry's not a thing of pretty round phrases or noisy invocations. It's life itself, with the tang of the raw world in it—not a sweetmeat for middle-class women in parlours."

"Are you a poet, Mr. Heritage?"

"No, Dogson, I'm a paper-maker."

This was a new view to Mr. McCunn. "I just once knew a paper-maker," he observed reflectively. "They called him Tosh. He drank a bit."

"Well, I don't drink," said the other. "I'm a paper-maker, but that's for my bread and butter. Some day for my own sake I may be a poet."

"Have you published anything?"

The eager admiration in Dickson's tone gratified Mr. Heritage. He drew from his pocket a slim book. "My firstfruits," he said, rather shyly.

Dickson received it with reverence. It was a small volume in grey paper boards with a white label on the back, and it was lettered: "*Whorls—John Heritage's Book.*" He turned the pages and read a little. "It's a nice wee book," he observed at length.

"Good God, if you call it nice, I must have failed pretty badly," was the irritated answer.

Dickson read more deeply and was puzzled. It seemed worse than the worst of Browning to understand. He found one poem about a garden entitled "Revue." "Crimson and resonant clangs the dawn," said the poet. Then he went on to describe noonday:

"Sunflowers, tall Grenadiers, ogle the roses' short-skirted ballet.
The fumes of dark sweet wine hidden in frail petals
Madden the drunkard bees."

This seemed to him an odd way to look at things, and he boggled over a phrase about an "epicene lily." Then came evening: "The painted gauze of the stars flutters in a fold of twilight crape," sang Mr. Heritage; and again, "The moon's pale leprosy sloughs the fields."

Dickson turned to other verses which apparently enshrined the writer's memory of the trenches. They were largely compounded of oaths, and rather horrible, lingering lovingly over sights and smells which every one is aware of, but most people contrive to forget. He did not like them. Finally he skimmed a poem about a lady who turned into a bird. The evolution was described with intimate anatomical details which scared the honest reader.

He kept his eyes on the book for he did not know what to say. The trick seemed to be to describe nature in metaphors mostly drawn from music-halls and haberdashers' shops, and, when at a loss, to fall to cursing. He thought it frankly very bad, and he laboured to find words which would combine politeness and honesty.

“Well?” said the poet.

“There’s a lot of fine things here, but—but the lines don’t just seem to scan very well.”

Mr. Heritage laughed. “Now I can place you exactly. You like the meek rhyme and the conventional epithet. Well, I don’t. The world has passed beyond that prettiness. You want the moon described as a Huntress or a gold disc or a flower—I say it’s oftener like a beer barrel or a cheese. You want a wealth of jolly words and real things ruled out as unfit for poetry. I say there’s nothing unfit for poetry. Nothing, Dogson! Poetry’s everywhere, and the real thing is commoner among drabs and pot-houses and rubbish heaps than in your Sunday parlours. The poet’s business is to distil it out of rottenness, and show that it is all one spirit, the thing that keeps the stars in their place. . . . I wanted to call my book ‘*Drains*,’ for drains are sheer poetry, carrying off the excess and discards of human life to make the fields green and the corn ripen. But the publishers kicked. So I called it ‘*Whorls*,’ to express my view of the exquisite involution of all things. Poetry is the fourth dimension of the soul. . . . Well, let’s hear about your taste in prose.”

Mr. McCunn was much bewildered, and a little inclined to be cross. He disliked being called Dogson, which seemed to him an abuse of his etymological confidences. But his habit of politeness held.

He explained rather haltingly his preferences in prose.

Mr. Heritage listened with wrinkled brows.

“You’re even deeper in the mud than I thought,” he remarked. “You live in a world of painted laths and shadows. All this passion for the picturesque! Trash, my dear man, like a schoolgirl’s novelette heroes. You make up romances about gipsies and sailors and the blackguards they call pioneers, but you know nothing about them. If you did, you would find they had none of the gilt and gloss you imagine. But the great things they have got in common with all humanity you ignore. It’s like—it’s like sentimentalising about a pancake because it looked like a buttercup, and all the while not knowing that it was good to eat.”

At that moment the Australian entered the room to get a light for his pipe. He wore a motor-cyclist’s overalls and appeared to be about to take the road. He bade them good night and it seemed to Dickson that his face, seen in the glow of the fire, was drawn and anxious, unlike that of the agreeable companion at dinner.

“There,” said Mr. Heritage, nodding after the departing figure. “I dare say you have been telling yourself stories about that chap—life in the bush, stock-riding and the rest of it. But probably he’s a bank-clerk from Melbourne. . . . Your romanticism is one vast self-delusion and it blinds your eye to the real thing. We have got to clear it out and with it all the damnable humbug of the Kelt.”

Mr. McCunn, who spelt the word with a soft “C,” was puzzled. “I thought a kelt was a kind of a no-weel fish,” he interposed.

But the other, in the flood-tide of his argument, ignored the interruption. “That’s the value of the war,” he went on. “It has burst up all the old conventions, and we’ve got to finish the destruction before we can build. It is the same with literature and religion and society and politics. At them with the axe, say I. I have no use for priests and pedants. I’ve no use for upper classes and middle classes. There’s only one class that matters, the plain man, the workers, who live close to life.”

“The place for you,” said Dickson dryly, “is in Russia among the Bolsheviks.”

Mr. Heritage approved. “They are doing a great work in their own fashion. We needn’t imitate all their methods—they’re a trifle crude and have too many Jews among them—but they’ve got hold of the right end of the stick. They seek truth and reality.”

Mr. McCunn was slowly being roused.

“What brings you wandering hereaways?” he asked.

“Exercise,” was the answer. “I’ve been kept pretty closely tied up all winter. And I want leisure and quiet to think over things.”

“Well, there’s one subject you might turn your attention to. You’ll have been educated like a gentleman?”

“Nine wasted years—five at Harrow, four at Cambridge.”

“See here, then. You’re daft about the working-class and have no use for any other. But what in the name of goodness do you know about working-men? . . . I come out of them myself, and have lived next door to them all my days. Take them

one way and another, they're a decent sort, good and bad like the rest of us. But there's a wheen daft folk that would set them up as models—close to truth and reality, says you. It's sheer ignorance, for you're about as well acquaint with the working-man as with King Solomon. You say I make up fine stories about tinklers and sailor-men because I know nothing about them. That's maybe true. But you're at the same job yourself. You ideelise the working-man, you and your kind, because you're ignorant. You say that he's seeking for truth, when he's only looking for a drink and a rise in wages. You tell me he's near reality, but I tell you that his notion of reality is often just a short working day and looking on at a footba'-match on Saturday. . . . And when you run down what you call the middle-classes that do three-quarters of the world's work and keep the machine going and the working man in a job, then I tell you you're talking havers. Havers!"

Mr. McCunn, having delivered his defence of the bourgeoisie, rose abruptly and went to bed. He felt jarred and irritated. His innocent little private domain had been badly trampled by this stray bull of a poet. But as he lay in bed, before blowing out his candle, he had recourse to Walton, and found a passage on which, as on a pillow, he went peacefully to sleep:

"As I left this place, and entered into the next field, a second pleasure entertained me; 'twas a handsome milkmaid, that had not yet attained so much age and wisdom as to load her mind with any fears of many things that will never be, as too many men too often do; but she cast away all care, and sang like a nightingale; her voice was good, and the ditty fitted for it; it was the smooth song that was made by *Kit Marlow* now at least fifty years ago. And the milkmaid's mother sung an answer to it, which was made by *Sir Walter Raleigh* in his younger days. They were old-fashioned poetry, but choicely good; I think much better than the strong lines that are now in fashion in this critical age."



CHAPTER 3

HOW CHILDE ROLAND AND ANOTHER CAME TO THE DARK TOWER

Dickson woke with a vague sense of irritation. As his recollections took form they produced a very unpleasant picture of Mr. John Heritage. The poet had loosened all his placid idols, so that they shook and rattled in the niches where they had been erstwhile so secure. Mr. McCunn had a mind of a singular candour, and was prepared most honestly at all times to revise his views. But by this iconoclast he had been only irritated and in no way convinced. “*Sich* poetry!” he muttered to himself as he shivered in his bath (a daily cold tub instead of his customary hot one on Saturday night being part of the discipline of his holiday). “And yon blethers about the working-man!” he ingeminated as he shaved. He breakfasted alone, having outstripped even the fishermen, and as he ate he arrived at conclusions. He had a great respect for youth, but a line must be drawn somewhere. “The man’s a child,” he decided, “and not like to grow up. The way he’s besotted on everything daftlike, if it’s only *new*. And he’s no rightly young either—speaks like an auld dominie, whiles. And he’s rather impident,” he concluded, with memories of “Dogson.” . . . He was very clear that he never wanted to see him again; that was the reason of his early breakfast. Having clarified his mind by definitions, Dickson felt comforted. He paid his bill, took an affectionate farewell of the landlord, and at 7.30 precisely stepped out into the gleaming morning.

It was such a day as only a Scots April can show. The cobbled streets of Kirkmichael still shone with the night’s rain, but the storm clouds had fled before a mild south wind, and the whole circumference of the sky was a delicate translucent blue. Homely breakfast smells came from the houses and delighted Mr. McCunn’s nostrils; a squalling child was a pleasant reminder of an awakening world, the urban counterpart to the morning song of birds; even the sanitary cart seemed a picturesque vehicle. He bought his ration of buns and ginger biscuits at a baker’s shop whence various ragamuffin boys were preparing to distribute the householders’ bread, and took his way up the Gallows Hill to the Burgh Muir almost with regret at leaving so pleasant a habitation.

A chronicle of ripe vintages must pass lightly over small beer. I will not dwell on his leisurely progress in the bright weather, or on his luncheon in a coppice of young firs, or on his thoughts which had returned to the idyllic. I take up the narrative at about three o’clock in the afternoon, when he is revealed seated on a milestone examining his map. For he had come, all unwitting, to a turning of the ways, and his choice is the cause of this veracious history.

The place was high up on a bare moor, which showed a white lodge among pines, a white cottage in a green nook by a burnside, and no other marks of human dwelling. To his left, which was the east, the heather rose to a low ridge of hill, much scarred with peat-bogs, behind which appeared the blue shoulder of a considerable mountain. Before him the road was lost momentarily in the woods of a shooting-box, but reappeared at a great distance climbing a swell of upland which seemed to be the glacis of a jumble of bold summits. There was a pass there, the map told him, which led into Galloway. It was the road he had meant to follow, but as he sat on the milestone his purpose wavered. For there seemed greater attractions in the country which lay to the westward. Mr. McCunn, be it remembered, was not in search of brown heath and shaggy wood; he wanted greenery and the Spring.

Westward there ran out a peninsula in the shape of an isosceles triangle, of which his present highroad was the base. At a distance of a mile or so a railway ran parallel to the road, and he could see the smoke of a goods train waiting at a tiny station islanded in acres of bog. Thence the moor swept down to meadows and scattered copses, above which hung a thin haze of smoke which betokened a village. Beyond it were further woodlands, not firs but old shady trees, and as they narrowed to a point the gleam of two tiny estuaries appeared on either side. He could not see the final cape, but he saw the sea beyond it, flawed with catspaws, gold in the afternoon sun, and on it a small herring smack flapping listless sails.

Something in the view caught and held his fancy. He conned his map, and made out the names. The peninsula was called the Cruives—an old name apparently, for it was in antique lettering. He vaguely remembered that “cruives” had something to do with fishing, doubtless in the two streams which flanked it. One he had already crossed, the Laver, a clear tumbling water springing from green hills; the other, the Garple, descended from the rougher mountains to the south. The hidden village bore the name of Dalquharter, and the uncouth syllables awoke some vague recollection in his mind. The great house in the trees beyond—it must be a great house, for the map showed large policies—was Huntingtower.

The last name fascinated and almost decided him. He pictured an ancient keep by the sea, defended by converging rivers, which some old Comyn lord of Galloway had built to command the shore road and from which he had sallied to hunt in his wild hills. . . . He liked the way the moor dropped down to green meadows, and the mystery of the dark woods beyond. He wanted to explore the twin waters, and see how they entered that strange shimmering sea. The odd names, the odd cul-desac of a peninsula, powerfully attracted him. Why should he not spend a night there, for the map showed clearly that Dalquharter had an inn? He must decide promptly, for before him a side-road left the highway, and the signpost bore the legend, "Dalquharter and Huntingtower."

Mr. McCunn, being a cautious and pious man, took the omens. He tossed a penny—heads go on, tails turn aside. It fell tails.

He knew as soon as he had taken three steps down the side-road that he was doing something momentous, and the exhilaration of enterprise stole into his soul. It occurred to him that this was the kind of landscape that he had always especially hankered after, and had made pictures of when he had a longing for the country on him—a wooded cape between streams, with meadows inland and then a long lift of heather. He had the same feeling of expectancy, of something most interesting and curious on the eve of happening, that he had had long ago when he waited on the curtain rising at his first play. His spirits soared like the lark, and he took to singing. If only the inn at Dalquharter were snug and empty, this was going to be a day in ten thousand. Thus mirthfully he swung down the rough grass-grown road, past the railway, till he came to a point where heath began to merge in pasture, and dry-stone walls split the moor into fields. Suddenly his pace slackened and song died on his lips. For, approaching from the right by a tributary path, was the Poet.

Mr. Heritage saw him afar off and waved a friendly hand. In spite of his chagrin Dickson could not but confess that he had misjudged his critic. Striding with long steps over the heather, his jacket open to the wind, his face a-glow and his capless head like a whin-bush for disorder, he cut a more wholesome and picturesque figure than in the smoking-room the night before. He seemed to be in a companionable mood, for he brandished his stick and shouted greetings.

"Well met!" he cried; "I was hoping to fall in with you again. You must have thought me a pretty fair cub last night."

"I did that," was the dry answer.

"Well, I want to apologise. God knows what made me treat you to a university-extension lecture. I may not agree with you, but every man's entitled to his own views, and it was dashed poor form for me to start jawing you."

Mr. McCunn had no gift of nursing anger, and was very susceptible to apologies.

"That's all right," he murmured. "Don't mention it. I'm wondering what brought you down here, for it's off the road."

"Caprice. Pure caprice. I liked the look of this butt-end of nowhere."

"Same here. I've aye thought there was something terrible nice about a wee cape with a village at the neck of it and a burn each side."

"Now that's interesting," said Mr. Heritage. "You're obsessed by a particular type of landscape. Ever read Freud?"

Dickson shook his head.

"Well, you've got an odd complex somewhere. I wonder where the key lies. Cape—woods—two rivers—moor behind. Ever been in love, Dogson?"

Mr. McCunn was startled. "Love" was a word rarely mentioned in his circle except on death-beds. "I've been a married man for thirty years," he said hurriedly.

"That won't do. It should have been a hopeless affair—the last sight of the lady on a spur of coast with water on three sides—that kind of thing, you know. Or it might have happened to an ancestor. . . . But you don't look the kind of breed for hopeless attachments. More likely some scoundrelly old Dogson long ago found sanctuary in this sort of place. Do you dream about it?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, I do. The queer thing is that I've got the same prepossession as you. As soon as I spotted this Cruives place on the map this morning, I saw it was what I was after. When I came in sight of it I almost shouted. I don't very often dream, but when I do that's the place I frequent. Odd, isn't it?"

Mr. McCunn was deeply interested at this unexpected revelation of romance. "Maybe it's being in love," he daringly observed.

The Poet demurred. “No. I’m not a connoisseur of obvious sentiment. That explanation might fit your case, but not mine. I’m pretty certain there’s something hideous at the back of *my* complex—some grim old business tucked away back in the ages. For though I’m attracted by the place, I’m frightened too!”

There seemed no room for fear in the delicate landscape now opening before them. In front in groves of birch and rowans smoked the first houses of a tiny village. The road had become a green “loaning” on the ample margin of which cattle grazed. The moorland still showed itself in spits of heather, and some distance off, where a rivulet ran in a hollow, there were signs of a fire and figures near it. These last Mr. Heritage regarded with disapproval.

“Some infernal trippers!” he murmured. “Or Boy Scouts. They desecrate everything. Why can’t the *tunicatus popellus* keep away from a paradise like this!” Dickson, a democrat who felt nothing incongruous in the presence of other holiday-makers, was meditating a sharp rejoinder, when Mr. Heritage’s tone changed.

“Ye gods! What a village!” he cried, as they turned a corner. There were not more than a dozen whitewashed houses, all set in little gardens of wallflower and daffodil and early fruit blossom. A triangle of green filled the intervening space, and in it stood an ancient wooden pump. There was no schoolhouse or kirk; not even a post-office—only a red box in a cottage side. Beyond rose the high wall and the dark trees of the demesne, and to the right up a by-road which clung to the park edge stood a two-storeyed building which bore the legend “The Cruives Inn.”

The Poet became lyrical. “At last!” he cried. “The village of my dreams! Not a sign of commerce! No church or school or beastly recreation hall! Nothing but these divine little cottages and an ancient pub! Dogson, I warn you, I’m going to have the devil of a tea.” And he declaimed:

“Thou shalt hear a song
After a while which Gods may listen to;
But place the flask upon the board and wait
Until the stranger hath allayed his thirst,
For poets, grasshoppers and nightingales
Sing cheerily but when the throat is moist.”

Dickson, too, longed with sensual gusto for tea. But, as they drew nearer, the inn lost its hospitable look. The cobbles of the yard were weedy, as if rarely visited by traffic, a pane in a window was broken, and the blinds hung tattered. The garden was a wilderness, and the doorstep had not been scoured for weeks. But the place had a landlord, for he had seen them approach and was waiting at the door to meet them.

He was a big man in his shirt sleeves, wearing old riding breeches unbuttoned at the knees, and thick ploughman’s boots. He had no leggings, and his fleshy calves were imperfectly covered with woollen socks. His face was large and pale, his neck bulged, and he had a gross unshaven jowl. He was a type familiar to students of society; not the innkeeper, which is a thing consistent with good breeding and all the refinements; a type not unknown in the House of Lords, especially among recent creations, common enough in the House of Commons and the City of London, and by no means infrequent in the governing circles of Labour; the type known to the discerning as the Licensed Victualler.

His face was wrinkled in official smiles, and he gave the travellers a hearty good afternoon.

“Can we stop here for the night?” Dickson asked.

The landlord looked sharply at him, and then replied to Mr. Heritage. His expression passed from official bonhomie to official contrition.

“Impossible, gentlemen. Quite impossible. . . . Ye couldn’t have come at a worse time. I’ve only been here a fortnight myself, and we haven’t got right shaken down yet. Even then I might have made shift to do with ye, but the fact is we’ve illness in the house, and I’m fair at my wits’ end. It breaks my heart to turn gentlemen away and me that keen to get the business started. But there it is!” He spat vigorously as if to emphasise the desperation of his quandary.

The man was clearly Scots, but his native speech was overlaid with something alien, something which might have been acquired in America or in going down to the sea in ships. He hitched his breeches, too, with a nautical air.

“Is there nowhere else we can put up?” Dickson asked.

“Not in this one-horse place. Just a wheen auld wives that packed thegither they haven’t room for an extra hen. But it’s grand weather, and it’s not above seven miles to Auchenlochan. Say the word and I’ll yoke the horse and drive ye

there.”

“Thank you. We prefer to walk,” said Mr. Heritage. Dickson would have tarried to inquire after the illness in the house, but his companion hurried him off. Once he looked back, and saw the landlord still on the doorstep gazing after them.

“That fellow’s a swine,” said Mr. Heritage sourly. “I wouldn’t trust my neck in his pothouse. Now, Dogson, I’m hanged if I’m going to leave this place. We’ll find a corner in the village somehow. Besides, I’m determined on tea.”

The little street slept in the clear pure light of an early April evening. Blue shadows lay on the white road, and a delicate aroma of cooking tantalised hungry nostrils. The near meadows shone like pale gold against the dark lift of the moor. A light wind had begun to blow from the west and carried the faintest tang of salt. The village at that hour was pure Paradise, and Dickson was of the Poet’s opinion. At all costs they must spend the night there.

They selected a cottage whiter and neater than the others, which stood at a corner, where a narrow lane turned southward. Its thatched roof had been lately repaired, and starched curtains of a dazzling whiteness decorated the small, closely-shut windows. Likewise it had a green door and a polished brass knocker.

Tacitly the duty of envoy was entrusted to Mr. McCunn. Leaving the other at the gate, he advanced up the little path lined with quartz stones, and politely but firmly dropped the brass knocker. He must have been observed, for ere the noise had ceased the door opened, and an elderly woman stood before him. She had a sharply-cut face, the rudiments of a beard, big spectacles on her nose, and an old-fashioned lace cap on her smooth white hair. A little grim she looked at first sight, because of her thin lips and Roman nose, but her mild curious eyes corrected the impression and gave the envoy confidence.

“Good afternoon, mistress,” he said, broadening his voice to something more rustical than his normal Glasgow speech. “Me and my friend are paying our first visit here, and we’re terrible taken up with the place. We would like to bide the night, but the inn is no’ taking folk. Is there any chance, think you, of a bed here?”

“I’ll no tell ye a lee,” said the woman. “There’s twae guid beds in the loft. But I dinna tak’ lodgers and I dinna want to be bothered wi’ ye. I’m an auld wumman and no’ as stoot as I was. Ye’d better try doun the street. Eppie Home nicht tak’ ye.”

Dickson wore his most ingratiating smile. “But, mistress, Eppie Home’s house is no’ yours. We’ve taken a tremendous fancy to this bit. Can you no’ manage to put with us for the one night? We’re quiet auld-fashioned folk and we’ll no’ trouble you much. Just our tea and maybe an egg to it, and a bowl of porridge in the morning.”

The woman seemed to relent. “Whaur’s your freend?” she asked, peering over her spectacles towards the garden gate. The waiting Mr. Heritage, seeing her eyes moving in his direction, took off his cap with a brave gesture and advanced. “Glorious weather, Madam,” he declared.

“English,” whispered Dickson to the woman, in explanation.

She examined the Poet’s neat clothes and Mr. McCunn’s homely garments, and apparently found them reassuring. “Come in,” she said shortly. “I see ye’re wilfu’ folk and I’ll hae to dae my best for ye.”

A quarter of an hour later the two travellers, having been introduced to two spotless beds in the loft, and having washed luxuriously at the pump in the back yard, were seated in Mrs. Morran’s kitchen before a meal which fulfilled their wildest dreams. She had been baking that morning, so there were white scones and barley scones, and oaten farles, and russet pancakes. There were three boiled eggs for each of them; there was a segment of an immense currant cake (“a present from my guid brither last Hogmanay”); there was skim-milk cheese; there were several kinds of jam, and there was a pot of dark-gold heather honey. “Try hinny and aitcake,” said their hostess. “My man used to say he never fund onything as guid in a’ his days.”

Presently they heard her story. Her name was Morran, and she had been a widow these ten years. Of her family her son was in South Africa, one daughter a lady’s maid in London, and the other married to a schoolmaster in Kyle. The son had been in France fighting, and had come safely through. He had spent a month or two with her before his return, and, she feared, had found it dull. “There’s no’ a man body in the place. Naething but auld wives.”

That was what the innkeeper had told them. Mr. McCunn inquired concerning the inn.

“There’s new folk just come. What’s this they ca’ them?—Robson—Dobson—aye, Dobson. What for wad they no’ tak’ ye in? Does the man think he’s a laird to refuse folk that gait?”

“He said he had illness in the house.”

Mrs. Morran meditated. “Whae in the world can be lyin’ there? The man bides his lane. He got a lassie frae Auchenlochan to cook, but she and her box gaed off in the post-cairt yestreen. I doot he tell’t ye a lee, though it’s no for me to judge him. I’ve never spoken a word to ane o’ thae new folk.”

Dickson inquired about the “new folk.”

“They’re a’ new come in the last three weeks, and there’s no’ a man o’ the auld stock left. John Blackstocks at the Wast Lodge dee’d o’ pneumony last back-end, and auld Simon Tappie at the Gairdens flitted to Maybole a year come Mairtinmas. There’s naeboddy at the Gairdens noo, but there’s a man come to the Wast Lodge, a blackavised body wi’ a face like bend-leather. Tam Robison used to bide at the South Lodge, but Tam got killed about Mesopotamy, and his wife took the bairns to her guidshire up at the Garpleheid. I seen the man that’s in the South Lodge gaun up the street when I was finishin’ my denner—a shilpit body and a lameter, but he hirples as fast as ither folk run. He’s no’ bonny to look at. I canna think what the factor’s ettlin’ at to let sic’ ill-faured chieles come about the toun.”

Their hostess was rapidly rising in Dickson’s esteem. She sat very straight in her chair, eating with the careful gentility of a bird, and primming her thin lips after every mouthful of tea.

“Who bides in the Big House?” he asked. “Huntingtower is the name, isn’t it?”

“When I was a lassie they ca’ed it Dalquharter Hoose, and Huntingtower was the auld rickle o’ stanes at the sea-end. But naething wad serve the last laird’s faither but he maun change the name, for he was clean daft about what they ca’ antickities. Ye speir whae bides in the Hoose? Naeboddy, since the young laird dee’d. It’s standin’ cauld and lanely and steikit, and it aince the cheeriest dwallin’ in a’ Carrick.”

Mrs. Morran’s tone grew tragic. “It’s a queer warld wi’out the auld gentry. My faither and my guidshire and his faither afore him served the Kennedys, and my man Dauvit Morran was gemkeeper to them, and afore I mairried I was ane o’ the table-maids. They were kind folk, the Kennedys, and, like a’ the rale gentry, maist mindfu’ o’ them that served them. Sic’ merry nichts I’ve seen in the auld Hoose, at Hallowe’en and Hogmanay, and at the servants’ balls and the waddin’s o’ the young leddies! But the laird bode to waste his siller in stane and lime, and hadna that much to leave to his bairns. And now they’ve a’ scattered or deid.”

Her grave face wore the tenderness which comes from affectionate reminiscence.

“There was never sic a laddie as young Maister Quentin. No’ a week gaed by but he was in here, cryin’, ‘Phemie Morran, I’ve come till my tea!’ Fine he likit my treacle scones, puir man. There wasna ane in the countryside sae bauld a rider at the hunt, or sic a skeely fisher. And he was clever at his books tae, a grund scholar, they said, and ettlin’ at bein’ what they ca’ a dipplemat. But that’s a’ bye wi’.”

“Quentin Kennedy—the fellow in the Tins?” Heritage asked. “I saw him in Rome when he was with the Mission.”

“I dinna ken. He was a brave sodger, but he wasna long fechtin’ in France till he got a bullet in his breist. Syne we heard tell o’ him in far awa’ bits like Russia; and syne cam’ the end o’ the war and we lookit to see him back, fishin’ the waters and ridin’ like Jehu as in the auld days. But wae’s me! It wasna permitted. The next news we got, the puir laddie was deid o’ influenzy and buried somewhere about France. The wanchancy bullet maun have weakened his chest, nae doot. So that’s the end o’ the guid stock o’ Kennedy o’ Huntingtower, whae hae been great folk sin’ the time o’ Robert Bruce. And noo the Hoose is shut up till the lawyers can get somebody sae far left to himsel’ as to tak’ it on lease, and in thae dear days it’s no’ just onybody that wants a muckle castle.”

“Who are the lawyers?” Dickson asked.

“Glendonan and Speirs in Embro. But they never look near the place, and Maister Loudoun in Auchenlochan does the factorin’. He’s let the public an’ filled the twae lodges, and he’ll be thinkin’ nae doot that he’s done eneuch.”

Mrs. Morran had poured some hot water into the big slop-bowl, and had begun the operation known as “synding out” the cups. It was a hint that the meal was over and Dickson and Heritage rose from the table. Followed by an injunction to be back for supper “on the chap o’ nine,” they strolled out into the evening. Two hours of some sort of daylight remained, and the travellers had that impulse to activity which comes to all men who, after a day of exercise and emptiness, are stayed with a satisfying tea.

“You should be happy, Dogson,” said the Poet. “Here we have all the materials for your blessed romance—old mansion, extinct family, village deserted of men and an innkeeper whom I suspect of being a villain. I feel almost a convert

to your nonsense myself. We'll have a look at the House."

They turned down the road which ran north by the park wall, past the inn which looked more abandoned than ever, till they came to an entrance which was clearly the West Lodge. It had once been a pretty, modish cottage, with a thatched roof and dormer windows, but now it was badly in need of repair. A window-pane was broken and stuffed with a sack, the posts of the porch were giving inwards, and the thatch was crumbling under the attentions of a colony of starlings. The great iron gates were rusty, and on the coat of arms above them the gilding was patchy and tarnished.

Apparently the gates were locked, and even the side wicket failed to open to Heritage's vigorous shaking. Inside a weedy drive disappeared among ragged rhododendrons.

The noise brought a man to the lodge door. He was a sturdy fellow in a suit of black clothes which had not been made for him. He might have been a butler *en deshabille*, but for the presence of a pair of field boots into which he had tucked the ends of his trousers. The curious thing about him was his face, which was decorated with features so tiny as to give the impression of a monstrous child. Each in itself was well enough formed, but eyes, nose, mouth, chin were of a smallness curiously out of proportion to the head and body. Such an anomaly might have been redeemed by the expression; good-humour would have invested it with an air of agreeable farce. But there was no friendliness in the man's face. It was set like a judge's in a stony impassiveness.

"May we walk up to the House?" Heritage asked. "We are here for a night and should like to have a look at it."

The man advanced a step. He had either a bad cold, or a voice comparable in size to his features.

"There's no entrance here," he said huskily. "I have strict orders."

"Oh, come now," said Heritage. "It can do nobody any harm if you let us in for half an hour."

The man advanced another step.

"You shall not come in. Go away from here. Go away, I tell you. It is private." The words spoken by the small mouth in the small voice had a kind of childish ferocity.

The travellers turned their back on him and continued their way.

"Sich a curmudgeon!" Dickson commented. His face had flushed, for he was susceptible to rudeness. "Did you notice? That man's a foreigner."

"He's a brute," said Heritage. "But I'm not going to be done in by that class of lad. There can be no gates on the sea side, so we'll work round that way, for I won't sleep till I've seen the place."

Presently the trees grew thinner, and the road plunged through thickets of hazel till it came to a sudden stop in a field. There the cover ceased wholly, and below them lay the glen of the Laver. Steep green banks descended to a stream which swept in coils of gold into the eye of the sunset. A little further down the channel broadened, the slopes fell back a little, and a tongue of glittering sea ran up to meet the hill waters. The Laver is a gentle stream after it leaves its cradle heights, a stream of clear pools and long bright shallows, winding by moorland steadings and upland meadows; but in its last half-mile it goes mad, and imitates its childhood when it tumbled over granite shelves. Down in that green place the crystal water gushed and frolicked as if determined on one hour of rapturous life before joining the sedater sea.

Heritage flung himself on the turf.

"This is a good place! Ye gods, what a good place! Dogson, aren't you glad you came? I think everything's bewitched to-night. That village is bewitched, and that old woman's tea. Good white magic! And that foul innkeeper and that brigand at the gate. Black magic! And now here is the home of all enchantment—'island valley of Avilion'—'waters that listen for lovers'—all the rest of it!"

Dickson observed and marvelled.

"I can't make you out, Mr. Heritage. You were saying last night you were a great democrat, and yet you were objecting to yon laddies camping on the moor. And you very near bit the neb off me when I said I liked Tennyson. And now. . . ." Mr. McCunn's command of language was inadequate to describe the transformation.

"You're a precise, pragmatist Scot," was the answer. "Hang it, man, don't remind me that I'm inconsistent. I've a poet's licence to play the fool, and if you don't understand me, I don't in the least understand myself. All I know is that I'm feeling young and jolly and that it's the Spring."

Mr. Heritage was assuredly in a strange mood. He began to whistle with a far-away look in his eye.

"Do you know what that is?" he asked suddenly.

Dickson, who could not detect any tune, said No.

"It's an *aria* from a Russian opera that came out just before the war. I've forgotten the name of the fellow who wrote it. Jolly thing, isn't it? I always remind myself of it when I'm in this mood, for it is linked with the greatest experience of my life. You said, I think, that you had never been in love?"

Dickson replied in the native fashion. "Have you?" he asked.

"I have, and I am-been for two years. I was down with my battalion on the Italian front early in 1918, and because I could speak the language they hoicked me out and sent me to Rome on a liaison job. It was Easter time and fine weather and, being glad to get out of the trenches, I was pretty well pleased with myself and enjoying life. . . . In the place where I stayed there was a girl. She was a Russian, a princess of a great family, but a refugee and of course as poor as sin. . . . I remember how badly dressed she was among all the well-to-do Romans. But, my God, what a beauty! There was never anything in the world like her. . . . She was little more than a child, and she used to sing that air in the morning as she went down the stairs. . . . They sent me back to the front before I had a chance of getting to know her, but she used to give me little timid good mornings, and her voice and eyes were like an angel's. . . . I'm over my head in love, but it's hopeless, quite hopeless. I shall never see her again."

"I'm sure I'm honoured by your confidence," said Dickson reverently.

The Poet, who seemed to draw exhilaration from the memory of his sorrows, arose and fetched him a clout on the back. "Don't talk of confidence as if you were a reporter," he said. "What about that House? If we're to see it before the dark comes we'd better hustle."

The green slopes on their left, as they ran seaward, were clothed towards their summit with a tangle of broom and light scrub. The two forced their way through this, and found to their surprise that on this side there were no defences of the Huntingtower demesne. Along the crest ran a path which had once been gravelled and trimmed. Beyond through a thicket of laurels and rhododendrons they came on a long unkempt aisle of grass, which seemed to be one of those side avenues often found in connection with old Scots dwellings. Keeping along this they reached a grove of beech and holly through which showed a dim shape of masonry. By a common impulse they moved stealthily, crouching in cover, till at the far side of the wood they found a sunk fence and looked over an acre or two of what had once been lawn and flower-beds to the front of the mansion.

The outline of the building was clearly silhouetted against the glowing west, but since they were looking at the east face the detail was all in shadow. But, dim as it was, the sight was enough to give Dickson the surprise of his life. He had expected something old and baronial. But this was new, raw and new, not twenty years built. Some madness had prompted its creator to set up a replica of a Tudor house in a countryside where the thing was unheard of. All the tricks were there— oriel windows, lozenged panes, high twisted chimney stacks; the very stone was red, as if to imitate the mellow brick of some ancient Kentish manor. It was new, but it was also decaying. The creepers had fallen from the walls, the pilasters on the terrace were tumbling down, lichen and moss were on the doorsteps. Shuttered, silent, abandoned, it stood like a harsh *memento mori* of human hopes.

Dickson had never before been affected by an inanimate thing with so strong a sense of disquiet. He had pictured an old stone tower on a bright headland; he found instead this raw thing among trees. The decadence of the brand-new repels as something against nature, and this new thing was decadent. But there was a mysterious life in it, for though not a chimney smoked, it seemed to enshrine a personality and to wear a sinister *aura*. He felt a lively distaste, which was almost fear. He wanted to get far away from it as fast as possible. The sun, now sinking very low, sent up rays which kindled the crests of a group of firs to the left of the front door. He had the absurd fancy that they were torches flaming before a bier.

It was well that the two had moved quietly and kept in shadow. Footsteps fell on their ears, on the path which threaded the lawn just beyond the sunk-fence. It was the keeper of the West Lodge and he carried something on his back, but both that and his face were indistinct in the half-light.

Other footsteps were heard, coming from the other side of the lawn. A man's shod feet rang on the stone of a flagged path, and from their irregular fall it was plain that he was lame. The two men met near the door, and spoke together. Then they separated, and moved one down each side of the house. To the two watchers they had the air of a patrol, or of warders

pace the corridors of a prison.

“Let’s get out of this,” said Dickson, and turned to go.

The air had the curious stillness which precedes the moment of sunset, when the birds of day have stopped their noises and the sounds of night have not begun. But suddenly in the silence fell notes of music. They seemed to come from the house, a voice singing softly but with great beauty and clearness.

Dickson halted in his steps. The tune, whatever it was, was like a fresh wind to blow aside his depression. The house no longer looked sepulchral. He saw that the two men had hurried back from their patrol, had met and exchanged some message, and made off again as if alarmed by the music. Then he noticed his companion. . . .

Heritage was on one knee with his face rapt and listening. He got to his feet and appeared to be about to make for the House. Dickson caught him by the arm and dragged him into the bushes, and he followed unresistingly, like a man in a dream. They ploughed through the thicket, recrossed the grass avenue, and scrambled down the hillside to the banks of the stream.

Then for the first time Dickson observed that his companion’s face was very white, and that sweat stood on his temples. Heritage lay down and lapped up water like a dog. Then he turned a wild eye on the other.

“I am going back,” he said. “That is the voice of the girl I saw in Rome, and it is singing her song!”



CHAPTER 4

DOUGAL

“**Y**ou’ll do nothing of the kind,” said Dickson. “You’re coming home to your supper. It was to be on the chap of nine.”
“I’m going back to that place.”

The man was clearly demented and must be humoured. “Well, you must wait till the morn’s morning. It’s very near dark now, and those are two ugly customers wandering about yonder. You’d better sleep the night on it.”

Mr. Heritage seemed to be persuaded. He suffered himself to be led up the now dusky slopes to the gate where the road from the village ended. He walked listlessly like a man engaged in painful reflection. Once only he broke the silence.

“You heard the singing?” he asked.

Dickson was a very poor hand at a lie. “I heard something,” he admitted.

“You heard a girl’s voice singing?”

“It sounded like that,” was the admission. “But I’m thinking it might have been a seagull.”

“You’re a fool,” said the Poet rudely.

The return was a melancholy business, compared to the bright speed of the outward journey. Dickson’s mind was a chaos of feelings, all of them unpleasant. He had run up against something which he violently, blindly detested, and the trouble was that he could not tell why. It was all perfectly absurd, for why on earth should an ugly house, some overgrown trees and a couple of ill-favoured servants so malignly affect him? Yet this was the fact; he had strayed out of Arcady into a sphere that filled him with revolt and a nameless fear. Never in his experience had he felt like this, this foolish childish panic which took all the colour and zest out of life. He tried to laugh at himself but failed. Heritage, stumbling alone by his side, effectually crushed his effort to discover humour in the situation. Some exhalation from that infernal place had driven the Poet mad. And then that voice singing! A seagull, he had said. More like a nightingale, he reflected—a bird which in the flesh he had never met.

Mrs. Morran had the lamp lit and a fire burning in her cheerful kitchen. The sight of it somewhat restored Dickson’s equanimity, and to his surprise he found that he had an appetite for supper. There was new milk, thick with cream, and most of the dainties which had appeared at tea, supplemented by a noble dish of shimmering “potted-head.” The hostess did not share their meal, being engaged in some duties in the little cubby-hole known as the back kitchen.

Heritage drank a glass of milk but would not touch food.

“I called this place Paradise four hours ago,” he said. “So it is, but I fancy it is next door to Hell. There is something devilish going on inside that park wall and I mean to get to the bottom of it.”

“Hoots! Nonsense!” Dickson replied with affected cheerfulness. “To-morrow you and me will take the road for Auchenlochan. We needn’t trouble ourselves about an ugly old house and a wheen impident lodge-keepers.”

“To-morrow I’m going to get inside the place. Don’t come unless you like, but it’s no use arguing with me. My mind is made up.”

Heritage cleared a space on the table and spread out a section of a large-scale Ordnance map.

“I must clear my head about the topography, the same as if this were a battle-ground. Look here, Dogson. . . . The road past the inn that we went by to-night runs north and south.” He tore a page from a note-book and proceeded to make a rough sketch. . . . “One end we know abuts on the Laver glen, and the other stops at the South Lodge. Inside the wall which follows the road is a long belt of plantation—mostly beeches and ash—then to the west a kind of park, and beyond that the lawns of the house. Strips of plantation with avenues between follow the north and south sides of the park. On the sea side of the House are the stables and what looks like a walled garden, and beyond them what seems to be open ground with an old dovecot marked and the ruins of Huntingtower keep. Beyond that there is more open ground, till you come to the cliffs of the cape. Have you got that? . . . It looks possible from the contouring to get on to the sea cliffs by following the Laver, for all that side is broken up into ravines. . . . But look at the other side—the Garple glen. It’s evidently a deep-cut gully, and

at the bottom it opens out into a little harbour. There's deep water there, you observe. Now the House on the south side—the Garple side—is built fairly close to the edge of the cliffs. Is that all clear in your head? We can't reconnoitre unless we've got a working notion of the lie of the land."

Dickson was about to protest that he had no intention of reconnoitring, when a hubbub arose in the back kitchen. Mrs. Morran's voice was heard in shrill protest.

"Ye ill laddie! Eh—ye—ill—laddie! [*crescendo*] Makin' a hash o' my back door wi' your dirty feet! What are ye slinkin' roond here for, when I tell't ye this mornin' that I wad sell ye nae mair scones till ye paid for the last lot? Ye're a wheen thievin' hungry callants, and if there were a polisman in the place I'd gie ye in chairge. . . . What's that ye say? Ye're no' wantin' meat? Ye want to speak to the gentlemen that's bidin' here? Ye ken the auld ane, says you? I believe it's a muckle lee, but there's the gentlemen to answer ye theirsels."

Mrs. Morran, brandishing a dishclout dramatically, flung open the door, and with a vigorous push propelled into the kitchen a singular figure.

It was a stunted boy, who from his face might have been fifteen years old, but had the stature of a child of twelve. He had a thatch of fiery red hair above a pale freckled countenance. His nose was snub, his eyes a sulky grey-green, and his wide mouth disclosed large and damaged teeth. But remarkable as was his visage, his clothing was still stranger. On his head was the regulation Boy Scout hat, but it was several sizes too big, and was squashed down upon his immense red ears. He wore a very ancient khaki shirt, which had once belonged to a full-grown soldier, and the spacious sleeves were rolled up at the shoulders and tied with string, revealing a pair of skinny arms. Round his middle hung what was meant to be a kilt—a kilt of home manufacture, which may once have been a tablecloth, for its bold pattern suggested no known clan tartan. He had a massive belt, in which was stuck a broken gully-knife, and round his neck was knotted the remnant of what had once been a silk bandana. His legs and feet were bare, blue, scratched, and very dirty, and his toes had the prehensile look common to monkeys and small boys who summer and winter go bootless. In his hand was a long ash-pole, new cut from some coppice.

The apparition stood glum and lowering on the kitchen floor. As Dickson stared at it he recalled Mearns Street and the band of irregular Boy Scouts who paraded to the roll of tin cans. Before him stood Dougal, Chieftain of the Gorbals Die-Hards. Suddenly he remembered the philanthropic Mackintosh, and his own subscription of ten pounds to the camp fund. It pleased him to find the rascals here, for in the unpleasant affairs on the verge of which he felt himself they were a comforting reminder of the peace of home.

"I'm glad to see you, Dougal," he said pleasantly. "How are you all getting on?" And then, with a vague reminiscence of the Scouts' code—"Have you been minding to perform a good deed every day?"

The Chieftain's brow darkened.

"*Good deeds!*" he repeated bitterly. "I tell ye I'm fair wore out wi' good deeds. Yon man Mackintosh tell't me this was going to be a grand holiday. Holiday! Govey Dick! It's been like a Setterday night in Main Street—a' fechtin', fechtin'."

No collocation of letters could reproduce Dougal's accent, and I will not attempt it. There was a touch of Irish in it, a spice of music-hall patter, as well as the odd lilt of the Glasgow vernacular. He was strong in vowels, but the consonants, especially the letter "t," were only aspirations.

"Sit down and let's hear about things," said Dickson.

The boy turned his head to the still open back door, where Mrs. Morran could be heard at her labours. He stepped across and shut it. "I'm no' wantin' that auld wife to hear," he said. Then he squatted down on the patchwork rug by the hearth, and warmed his blue-black shins. Looking into the glow of the fire, he observed, "I seen you two up by the Big Hoose the night."

"The devil you did," said Heritage, roused to a sudden attention. "And where were you?"

"Seven feet from your head, up a tree. It's my chief hidy-hole, and Gosh! I need one, for Lean's after me wi' a gun. He got a shot at me two days syne."

Dickson exclaimed, and Dougal with morose pride showed a rent in his kilt. "If I had had on breeks, he'd ha' got me."

"Who's Lean?" Heritage asked.

"The man wi' the black coat. The other—the lame one—they ca' Spittal."

"How d'you know?"

"I've listened to them crackin' thegither."

"But what for did the man want to shoot at you?" asked the scandalised Dickson.

"What for? Because they're frightened to death o' onybody going near their auld Hoose. They're a pair of deevils, worse nor any Red Indian, but for a' that they're sweatin' wi' fright. What for? says you. Because they're hidin' a Secret. I knew it as soon as I seen the man Lean's face. I once seen the same kind o' scoondrel at the Picters. When he opened his mouth to swear, I kenned he was a foreigner, like the lads down at the Broomielaw. That looked black, but I hadn't got at the worst of it. Then he loosed off at me wi' his gun."

"Were you not feared?" said Dickson.

"Ay, I was feared. But ye'll no' choke off the Gorbals Die-Hards wi' a gun. We held a meetin' round the camp fire, and we resolved to get to the bottom o' the business. Me bein' their Chief, it was my duty to make what they ca' a reckonissince, for that was the dangerous job. So a' this day I've been going on my belly about thae policies. I've found out some queer things."

Heritage had risen and was staring down at the small squatting figure.

"What have you found out? Quick. Tell me at once." His voice was sharp and excited.

"Bide a wee," said the unwinking Dougal. "I'm no' going to let ye into this business till I ken that ye'll help. It's a far bigger job than I thought. There's more in it than Lean and Spittal. There's the big man that keeps the public—Dobson, they ca' him. He's a Namerican, which looks bad. And there's two-three tinklers campin' down in the Garple Dean. They're in it, for Dobson was colloquin' wi' them a' mornin'. When I seen ye, I thought ye were more o' the gang, till I mindit that one o' ye was auld McCunn that has the shop in Mearns Street. I seen that ye didn't like the look o' Lean, and I followed ye here, for I was thinkin' I needit help."

Heritage plucked Dougal by the shoulder and lifted him to his feet.

"For God's sake, boy," he cried, "tell us what you know!"

"Will ye help?"

"Of course, you little fool."

"Then swear," said the ritualist. From a grimy wallet he extracted a limp little volume which proved to be a damaged copy of a work entitled *Sacred Songs and Solos*. "Here! Take that in your right hand and put your left hand on my pole, and say after me, 'I swear no' to blab what is telled me in secret and to be swift and sure in obeyin' orders, s'help me God!' Syne kiss the bookie."

Dickson at first refused, declaring it was all havers, but Heritage's docility persuaded him to follow suit. The two were sworn.

"Now," said Heritage.

Dougal squatted again on the hearth-rug, and gathered the eyes of his audience. He was enjoying himself.

"This day," he said slowly, "I got inside the Hoose."

"Stout fellow," said Heritage; "and what did you find there?"

"I got inside that Hoose, but it wasn't once or twice I tried. I found a corner where I was out o' sight o' anybody unless they had come there seekin' me, and I sklimmed up a rone pipe, but a' the windies were lockit and I verra near broke my neck. Syne I tried the roof, and a sore sklim I had, but when I got there there were no skylights. At the end I got in by the coal-hole. That's why ye're maybe thinkin' I'm no' very clean."

Heritage's patience was nearly exhausted.

"I don't want to hear how you got in. What did you find, you little devil?"

"Inside the Hoose," said Dougal slowly (and there was a melancholy sense of anti-climax in his voice, as of one who had hoped to speak of gold and jewels and armed men)—"inside that Hoose there's nothing but two women."

Heritage sat down before him with a stern face.

"Describe them," he commanded.

"One o' them is dead auld, as auld as the wife here. She didn't look to me very right in the head."

“And the other?”

“Oh, just a lassie.”

“What was she like?”

Dougal seemed to be searching for adequate words. “She is . . .” he began. Then a popular song gave him inspiration. “She’s pure as the lully in the dell!”

In no way discomposed by Heritage’s fierce interrogatory air, he continued: “She’s either foreign or English, for she couldn’t understand what I said, and I could make nothing o’ her clippit tongue. But I could see she had been greetin’. She looked feared, yet kind o’ determined. I speired if I could do anything for her, and when she got my meaning she was terrible anxious to ken if I had seen a man—a big man, she said, wi’ a yellow beard. She didn’t seem to ken his name, or else she wouldn’t tell me. The auld wife was mortal feared, and was aye speakin’ in a foreign langwidge. I seen at once that what frightened them was Lean and his friends, and I was just starting to speir about them when there came a sound like a man walkin’ along the passage. She was for hidin’ me in behind a sofy, but I wasn’t going to be trapped like that, so I got out by the other door and down the kitchen stairs and into the coal-hole. Gosh, it was a near thing!”

The boy was on his feet. “I must be off to the camp to give out the orders for the morn. I’m going back to that Hoose, for it’s a fight atween the Gorbals Die-Hards and the scoundrels that are frightenin’ thae women. The question is, Are ye comin’ with me? Mind, ye’ve sworn. But if ye’re no’, I’m going mysel’, though I’ll no’ deny I’d be glad o’ company. *You* anyway——” he added, nodding at Heritage. “Maybe auld McCunn wouldn’t get through the coal-hole.”

“You’re an impident laddie,” said the outraged Dickson. “It’s no’ likely we’re coming with you. Breaking into other folks’ houses! It’s a job for the police!”

“Please yersel’,” said the Chieftain and looked at Heritage.

“I’m on,” said that gentleman.

“Well, just you set out the morn as if ye were for a walk up the Garple glen. I’ll be on the road and I’ll have orders for ye.”

Without more ado Dougal left by way of the back kitchen. There was a brief denunciation from Mrs. Morran, then the outer door banged and he was gone.

The Poet sat still with his head in his hands, while Dickson, acutely uneasy, prowled about the floor. He had forgotten even to light his pipe.

“You’ll not be thinking of heeding that ragamuffin boy,” he ventured.

“I’m certainly going to get into the House tomorrow,” Heritage answered, “and if he can show me a way so much the better. He’s a spirited youth. Do you breed many like him in Glasgow?”

“Plenty,” said Dickson sourly. “See here, Mr. Heritage. You can’t expect me to be going about burgling houses on the word of a blagyard laddie. I’m a respectable man—aye been. Besides, I’m here for a holiday, and I’ve no call to be mixing myself up in strangers’ affairs.”

“You haven’t. Only, you see, I think there’s a friend of mine in that place, and anyhow there are women in trouble. If you like, we’ll say good-bye after breakfast, and you can continue as if you had never turned aside to this damned peninsula. But I’ve got to stay.”

Dickson groaned. What had become of his dream of idylls, his gentle bookish romance? Vanished before a reality which smacked horribly of crude melodrama and possibly of sordid crime. His gorge rose at the picture, but a thought troubled him. Perhaps all romance in its hour of happening was rough and ugly like this, and only shone rosy in the retrospect. Was he being false to his deepest faith?

“Let’s have Mrs. Morran in,” he ventured. “She’s a wise old body and I’d like to hear her opinion of this business. We’ll get common sense from her.”

“I don’t object,” said Heritage. “But no amount of common sense will change my mind.”

Their hostess forestalled them by returning at that moment to the kitchen.

“We want your advice, mistress,” Dickson told her, and accordingly, like a barrister with a client, she seated herself carefully in the big easy chair, found and adjusted her spectacles, and waited with hands folded on her lap to hear the business. Dickson narrated their presupper doings, and gave a sketch of Dougal’s evidence. His exposition was cautious

and colourless, and without conviction. He seemed to expect a robust incredulity in his hearer.

Mrs. Morran listened with the gravity of one in church. When Dickson finished she seemed to meditate.

"There's no blagyard trick that would surprise me in thae new folk. What's that ye ca' them—Lean and Spittal? Eppie Home threepit to me they were furriners and these are no furrin names."

"What I want to hear from you, Mrs. Morran," said Dickson impressively, "is whether you think there's anything in that boy's story?"

"I think it's maist likely true. He's a terrible impident callant, but he's no' a leear."

"Then you think that a gang of ruffians have got two lone women shut up in that House for their own purposes?"

"I wadna wonder."

"But it's ridiculous! This is a Christian and law-abiding country. What would the police say?"

"They never troubled Dalquharter muckle. There's no' a polisman nearer than Knockraw—yin Johnnie Trummle, and he's as useless as a frostit tattie."

"The wiselike thing, as I think," said Dickson, "would be to turn the Procurator-Fiscal on to the job. It's his business, no' ours."

"Weel, I wadna say but ye're richt," said the lady.

"What would you do if you were us?" Dickson's tone was subtly confidential. "My friend here wants to get into the House the morn with that red-haired laddie to satisfy himself about the facts. I say no. Let sleeping dogs lie, I say, and if you think the beasts are mad report to the authorities. What would you do yourself?"

"If I were you," came the emphatic reply, "I would tak' the first train hame the morn, and when I got hame I wad bide there. Ye're a dacent body, but ye're no' the kind to be traivellin' the roads."

"And if you were me?" Heritage asked with his queer crooked smile.

"If I was a young and yauld like you I wad gang into the Hoose, and I wadna rest till I had riddled oot the truth and jyled every scoondrel about the place. If ye dinna gang, 'faith I'll kilt my coats and gang mysel'. I havena served the Kennedys for forty year no' to hae the honour o' the Hoose at my hert. . . . Ye speired my advice, sirs, and ye've gotten it. Now I maun clear awa' your supper."

Dickson asked for a candle, and, as on the previous night, went abruptly to bed. The oracle of prudence to which he had appealed had betrayed him and counselled folly. But was it folly? For him, assuredly, for Dickson McCunn, late of Mearns Street, Glasgow, wholesale and retail provision merchant, elder in the Guthrie Memorial Kirk, and fifty-five years of age. Ay, that was the rub. He was getting old. The woman had seen it and had advised him to go home. Yet the plea was curiously irksome, though it gave him the excuse he needed. If you played at being young, you had to take up the obligations of youth, and he thought derisively of his boyish exhilaration of the past days. Derisively, but also sadly. What had become of that innocent joviality he had dreamed of, that happy morning pilgrimage of Spring enlivened by tags from the poets? His goddess had played him false. Romance had put upon him too hard a trial.

He lay long awake, torn between common sense and a desire to be loyal to some vague whimsical standard. Heritage a yard distant appeared also to be sleepless, for the bed creaked with his turning. Dickson found himself envying one whose troubles, whatever they might be, were not those of a divided mind.



CHAPTER 5

OF THE PRINCESS IN THE TOWER

Very early next morning, while Mrs. Morran was still cooking breakfast, Dickson and Heritage might have been observed taking the air in the village street. It was the Poet who had insisted upon this walk, and he had his own purpose. They looked at the spires of smoke piercing the windless air, and studied the daffodils in the cottage gardens. Dickson was glum, but Heritage seemed in high spirits. He varied his garrulity with spells of cheerful whistling.

They strode along the road by the park wall till they reached the inn. There Heritage's music waxed peculiarly loud. Presently from the yard, unshaven and looking as if he had slept in his clothes, came Dobson the innkeeper.

"Good morning," said the Poet. "I hope the sickness in your house is on the mend?"

"Thank ye, it's no worse," was the reply, but in the man's heavy face there was little civility. His small grey eyes searched their faces.

"We're just waiting on breakfast to get on the road again. I'm jolly glad we spent the night here. We found quarters after all, you know."

"So I see. Whereabouts, may I ask?"

"Mrs. Morran's. We could always have got in there, but we didn't want to fuss an old lady, so we thought we'd try the inn first. She's my friend's aunt."

At this amazing falsehood Dickson started, and the man observed his surprise. The eyes were turned on him like a searchlight. They roused antagonism in his peaceful soul, and with that antagonism came an impulse to back up the Poet. "Ay," he said, "she's my Auntie Phemie, my mother's half-sister."

The man turned on Heritage.

"Where are ye for the day?"

"Auchenlochan," said Dickson hastily. He was still determined to shake the dust of Dalquharter from his feet.

The innkeeper sensibly brightened. "Well, ye'll have a fine walk. I must go in and see about my own breakfast. Good day to ye, gentlemen."

"That," said Heritage as they entered the village street again, "is the first step in camouflage, to put the enemy off his guard."

"It was an abominable lie," said Dickson crossly.

"Not at all. It was a necessary and proper *ruse de guerre*. It explained why we spent the night here, and now Dobson and his friends can get about their day's work with an easy mind. Their suspicions are temporarily allayed, and that will make our job easier."

"I'm not coming with you."

"I never said you were. By 'we' I refer to myself and the red-headed boy."

"Mistress, you're my auntie," Dickson informed Mrs. Morran as she set the porridge on the table. "This gentleman has just been telling the man at the inn that you're my Auntie Phemie."

For a second their hostess looked bewildered. Then the corners of her prim mouth moved upwards in a slow smile.

"I see," she said. "Weel, maybe it was weel done. But if ye're my nevoy ye'll hae to keep up my credit, for we're a bauld and siccar lot."

Half an hour later there was a furious dissension when Dickson attempted to pay for the night's entertainment. Mrs. Morran would have none of it. "Ye're no' awa' yet," she said tartly, and the matter was complicated by Heritage's refusal to take part in the debate. He stood aside and grinned, till Dickson in despair returned his note-case to his pocket, murmuring darkly that "he would send it from Glasgow."

The road to Auchenlochan left the main village street at right angles by the side of Mrs. Morran's cottage. It was a better road than that which they had come yesterday, for by it twice daily the post-cart travelled to the post-town. It ran on the edge of the moor and on the lip of the Garple glen, till it crossed that stream and, keeping near the coast, emerged after

five miles into the cultivated flats of the Lochan valley. The morning was fine, the keen air invited to high spirits, plovers piped entrancingly over the bent and linnets sang in the whins, there was a solid breakfast behind him, and the promise of a cheerful road till luncheon. The stage was set for good humour, but Dickson's heart, which should have been ascending with the larks, stuck leadenly in his boots. He was not even relieved at putting Dalquharter behind him. The atmosphere of that unhallowed place lay still on his soul. He hated it, but he hated himself more. Here was one, who had hugged himself all his days as an adventurer waiting his chance, running away at the first challenge of adventure; a lover of Romance who fled from the earliest overture of his goddess. He was ashamed and angry, but what else was there to do? Burglary in the company of a queer poet and a queerer urchin? It was unthinkable.

Presently as they tramped silently on they came to the bridge beneath which the peaty waters of the Garple ran in porter-coloured pools and tawny cascades. From a clump of elders on the other side Dougal emerged. A barefoot boy, dressed in much the same parody of a Boy Scout's uniform, but with corduroy shorts instead of a kilt, stood before him at rigid attention. Some command was issued, the child saluted, and trotted back past the travellers with never a look at them. Discipline was strong among the Gorbals Die-Hards; no Chief of Staff ever conversed with his General under a stricter etiquette.

Dougal received the travellers with the condescension of a regular towards civilians.

"They're off their gawrd," he announced. "Thomas Yownie has been shadowin' them since skreigh o' day, and he reports that Dobson and Lean followed ye till ye were out o' sight o' the houses, and syne Lean got a spy-glass and watched ye till the road turned in among the trees. That satisfied them, and they're both away back to their jobs. Thomas Yownie's the fell yin. Ye'll no fickle Thomas Yownie."

Dougal extricated from his pouch the fag of a cigarette, lit it and puffed meditatively. "I did a reckonissince mysel' this morning. I was up at the Hoose afore it was light, and tried the door o' the coal-hole. I doot they've gotten on our tracks, for it was lockit—ay, and wedged from the inside."

Dickson brightened. Was the insane venture off?

"For a wee bit I was fair beat. But I mindit that the lassie was allowed to walk in a kind o' a glass hoose on the side farthest away from the Garple. That was where she was singin' yest'reen. So I reckonissined in that direction, and I fund a queer place." *Sacred Songs and Solos* was requisitioned, and on a page of it Dougal proceeded to make marks with the stump of a carpenter's pencil. "See here," he commanded. "There's the glass place wi' a door into the Hoose. That door must be open or the lassie must have the key, for she comes there whenever she likes. Now, at each end o' the place the doors are lockit, but the front that looks on the garden is open, wi' muckle posts and flower-pots. The trouble is that that side there's maybe twenty feet o' a wall between the pawrapet and the ground. It's an auld wall wi' cracks and holes in it, and it wouldn't be ill to sklim. That's why they let her gang there when she wants, for a lassie couldn't get away without breakin' her neck."

"Could we climb it?" Heritage asked.

The boy wrinkled his brows. "I could manage it mysel'—I think—and maybe you. I doubt if auld McCunn could get up. Ye'd have to be mighty carefu' that nobody saw ye, for your hinder end, as ye were sklimmin', wad be a grand mark for a gun."

"Lead on," said Heritage. "We'll try the verandah."

They both looked at Dickson, and Dickson, scarlet in the face, looked back at them. He had suddenly found the thought of a solitary march to Auchenlochan intolerable. Once again he was at the parting of the ways, and once more caprice determined his decision. That the coal-hole was out of the question had worked a change in his views. Somehow it seemed to him less burglarious to enter by a verandah. He felt very frightened but—for the moment—quite resolute.

"I'm coming with you," he said.

"Sportsman," said Heritage and held out his hand. "Well done, the auld yin," said the Chieftain of the Gorbals Die-Hards. Dickson's quaking heart experienced a momentary bound as he followed Heritage down the track into the Garple Dean.

The track wound through a thick covert of hazels, now close to the rushing water, now high upon the bank so that clear sky showed through the fringes of the wood. When they had gone a little way Dougal halted them.

"It's a ticklish job," he whispered. "There's the tinklers, mind, that's campin' in the Dean. If they're still in their camp

we can get by easy enough, but they're maybe wanderin' about the wud after rabbits. . . . Then we must ford the water, for ye'll no' cross it lower down where it's deep. . . . Our road is on the Hoose side o' the Dean and it's awfu' public if there's onybody on the other side, though it's hid well enough from folk up in the policies. . . . Ye must do exactly what I tell ye. When we get near danger I'll scout on ahead, and I daur ye to move a hair o' your head till I give the word."

Presently, when they were at the edge of the water, Dougal announced his intention of crossing. Three boulders in the stream made a bridge for an active man and Heritage hopped lightly over. Not so Dickson, who stuck fast on the second stone, and would certainly have fallen in had not Dougal plunged into the current and steadied him with a grimy hand. The leap was at last successfully taken, and the three scrambled up a rough scaur, all reddened with iron springs, till they struck a slender track running down the Dean on its northern side. Here the undergrowth was very thick, and they had gone the better part of half a mile before the covert thinned sufficiently to show them the stream beneath. Then Dougal halted them with a finger on his lips, and crept forward alone.

He returned in three minutes. "Coast's clear," he whispered. "The tinklers are eatin' their breakfast. They're late at their meat though they're up early seekin' it."

Progress was now very slow and secret and mainly on all fours. At one point Dougal nodded downward, and the other two saw on a patch of turf, where the Garple began to widen into its estuary, a group of figures round a small fire. There were four of them, all men, and Dickson thought he had never seen such ruffianly-looking customers. After that they moved high up the slope, in a shallow glade of a tributary burn, till they came out of the trees and found themselves looking seaward.

On one side was the House, a hundred yards or so back from the edge, the roof showing above the precipitous scarp. Half-way down the slope became easier, a jumble of boulders and boiler-plates, till it reached the waters of the small haven, which lay calm as a mill-pond in the windless forenoon. The haven broadened out at its foot and revealed a segment of blue sea. The opposite shore was flatter and showed what looked like an old wharf and the ruins of buildings, behind which rose a bank clad with scrub and surmounted by some gnarled and wind-crooked firs.

"There's dashed little cover here," said Heritage.

"There's no muckle," Dougal assented. "But they canna see us from the policies, and it's no' like there's anybody watchin' from the Hoose. The danger is somebody on the other side, but we'll have to risk it. Once among thae big stones we're safe. Are ye ready?"

Five minutes later Dickson found himself gasping in the lee of a boulder, while Dougal was making a cast forward. The scout returned with a hopeful report. "I think we're safe, till we get into the policies. There's a road that the auld folk made when ships used to come here. Down there it's deeper than Clyde at the Broomilaw. Has the auld yin got his wind yet? There's no time to waste."

Up that broken hillside they crawled, well in the cover of the tumbled stones, till they reached a low wall which was the boundary of the garden. The House was now behind them on their right rear, and as they topped the crest they had a glimpse of an ancient dovecot and the ruins of the old Huntingtower on the short thymy turf which ran seaward to the cliffs. Dougal led them along a sunk fence which divided the downs from the lawns behind the house, and, avoiding the stables, brought them by devious ways to a thicket of rhododendrons and broom. On all fours they travelled the length of the place, and came to the edge where some forgotten gardeners had once tended a herbaceous border. The border was now rank and wild, and, lying flat under the shade of an azalea, and peering through the young spears of iris, Dickson and Heritage regarded the north-western façade of the house.

The ground before them had been a sunken garden, from which a steep wall, once covered with creepers and rock plants, rose to a long verandah, which was pillared and open on that side; but at each end built up half-way and glazed for the rest. There was a glass roof, and inside untended shrubs sprawled in broken plaster vases.

"Ye must bide here," said Dougal, "and no cheep above your breath. Afore we dare to try that wall, I must ken where Lean and Spittal and Dobson are. I'm off to spy the policies." He glided out of sight behind a clump of pampas grass.

For hours, so it seemed, Dickson was left to his own unpleasant reflections. His body, prone on the moist earth, was fairly comfortable, but his mind was ill at ease. The scramble up the hillside had convinced him that he was growing old, and there was no rebound in his soul to counter the conviction. He felt listless, spiritless—an apathy with fright trembling somewhere at the back of it. He regarded the verandah wall with foreboding. How on earth could he climb that? And if he

did there would be his exposed hinder-parts inviting a shot from some malevolent gentleman among the trees. He reflected that he would give a large sum of money to be out of this preposterous adventure.

Heritage's hand was stretched towards him, containing two of Mrs. Morran's jellied scones, of which the Poet had been wise enough to bring a supply in his pocket. The food cheered him, for he was growing very hungry, and he began to take an interest in the scene before him instead of his own thoughts. He observed every detail of the verandah. There was a door at one end, he noted, giving on a path which wound down to the sunk garden. As he looked he heard a sound of steps and saw a man ascending this path.

It was the lame man whom Dougal had called Spittal, the dweller in the South Lodge. Seen at closer quarters he was an odd-looking being, lean as a heron, wry-necked, but amazingly quick on his feet. Had not Mrs. Morran said that he hobbled as fast as other folk ran? He kept his eyes on the ground and seemed to be talking to himself as he went, but he was alert enough, for the dropping of a twig from a dying magnolia transferred him in an instant into a figure of active vigilance. No risks could be run with that watcher. He took a key from his pocket, opened the garden door and entered the verandah. For a moment his shuffle sounded on its tiled floor, and then he entered the door admitting from the verandah to the House. It was clearly unlocked for there came no sound of a turning key.

Dickson had finished the last crumbs of his scones before the man emerged again. He seemed to be in a greater hurry than ever, as he locked the garden door behind him and hobbled along the west front of the House till he was lost to sight. After that the time passed slowly. A pair of yellow wagtails arrived and played at hide-and-seek among the stuccoed pillars. The little dry scratch of their claws was heard clearly in the still air. Dickson had almost fallen asleep when a smothered exclamation from Heritage woke him to attention. A girl had appeared in the verandah.

Above the parapet he saw only her body from the waist up. She seemed to be clad in bright colours, for something red was round her shoulders and her hair was bound with an orange scarf. She was tall—that he could tell, tall and slim and very young. Her face was turned seaward, and she stood for a little scanning the broad channel, shading her eyes as if to search for something on the extreme horizon. The air was very quiet and he thought that he could hear her sigh. Then she turned and reentered the House, while Heritage by his side began to curse under his breath with a shocking fervour.

One of Dickson's troubles had been that he did not really believe Dougal's story, and the sight of the girl removed one doubt. That bright exotic thing did not belong to the Cruives or to Scotland at all, and that she should be in the House removed the place from the conventional dwelling to which the laws against burglary applied.

There was a rustle among the rhododendrons and the fiery face of Dougal appeared. He lay between the other two, his chin on his hands, and grunted out his report.

"After they had their dinner Dobson and Lean yokit a horse and went off to Auchenlochan. I seen them pass the Garple brig, so that's two accounted for. Has Spittal been round here?"

"Half an hour ago," said Heritage, consulting a wrist watch.

"It was him that keepit me waitin' so long. But he's safe enough now, for five minutes syne he was splittin' firewood at the back door o' his hoose. . . . I've found a ladder, an auld yin in ahint yon lot o' bushes. It'll help wi' the wall. There! I've gotten my breath again and we can start."

The ladder was fetched by Heritage and proved to be ancient and wanting many rungs, but sufficient in length. The three stood silent for a moment, listening like stags, and then ran across the intervening lawn to the foot of the verandah wall. Dougal went up first, then Heritage, and lastly Dickson, stiff and giddy from his long lie under the bushes. Below the parapet the verandah floor was heaped with old garden litter, rotten matting, dead or derelict bulbs, fibre, withies and strawberry nets. It was Dougal's intention to pull up the ladder and hide it among the rubbish against the hour of departure. But Dickson had barely put his foot on the parapet when there was a sound of steps within the House approaching the verandah door.

The ladder was left alone. Dougal's hand brought Dickson summarily to the floor, where he was fairly well concealed by a mess of matting. Unfortunately his head was in the vicinity of some upturned pot-plants, so that a cactus ticked his brow and a spike of aloe supported painfully the back of his neck. Heritage was prone behind two old water-butts, and Dougal was in a hamper which had once contained seed potatoes. The house door had panels of opaque glass, so the new-comer could not see the doings of the three till it was opened, and by that time all were in cover.

The man—it was Spittal—walked rapidly along the verandah and out of the garden door. He was talking to himself

again, and Dickson, who had a glimpse of his face, thought he looked both evil and furious. Then came some anxious moments, for had the man glanced back when he was once outside, he must have seen the tell-tale ladder. But he seemed immersed in his own reflections, for he hobbled steadily along the house front till he was lost to sight.

"That'll be the end o' them the night," said Dougal, as he helped Heritage to pull up the ladder and stow it away. "We've got the place to ourselves, now. Forward, men, forward." He tried the handle of the house door and led the way in.

A narrow paved passage took them into what had once been the garden room, where the lady of the house had arranged her flowers, and the tennis racquets and croquet mallets had been kept. It was very dusty and on the cobwebbed walls still hung a few soiled garden overalls. A door beyond opened into a huge murky hall, murky, for the windows were shuttered, and the only light came through things like port-holes far up in the wall. Dougal, who seemed to know his way about, halted them. "Stop here till I scout a bit. The women bide in a wee room through that muckle door." Bare feet stole across the oak flooring, there was the sound of a door swinging on its hinges, and then silence and darkness. Dickson put out a hand for companionship and clutched Heritage's; to his surprise it was cold and all a-tremble. They listened for voices, and thought they could detect a far-away sob.

It was some minutes before Dougal returned. "A bonny kettle o' fish," he whispered. "They're both greetin'. We're just in time. Come on, the pair o' ye."

Through a green baize door they entered a passage which led to the kitchen regions, and turned in at the first door on their right. From its situation Dickson calculated that the room lay on the seaward side of the House next to the verandah. The light was bad, for the two windows were partially shuttered, but it had plainly been a smoking-room, for there were pipe-racks by the hearth, and on the walls a number of old school and college photographs, a couple of oars with emblazoned names, and a variety of stags' and roebucks' heads. There was no fire in the grate, but a small oil-stove burned inside the fender. In a stiff-backed chair sat an elderly woman, who seemed to feel the cold, for she was muffled to the neck in a fur coat. Beside her, so that the late afternoon light caught her face and head, stood a girl.

Dickson's first impression was of a tall child. The pose, startled and wild and yet curiously stiff and self-conscious, was that of a child striving to remember a forgotten lesson. One hand clutched a handkerchief, the other was closing and unclosing on a knob of the chair back. She was staring at Dougal, who stood like a gnome in the centre of the floor. "Here's the gentlemen I was tellin' ye about," was his introduction, but her eyes did not move.

Then Heritage stepped forward. "We have met before, Mademoiselle," he said. "Do you remember Easter in 1918—in the house in the Trinità dei Monte?"

The girl looked at him.

"I do not remember," she said slowly.

"But I was the English officer who had the apartments on the floor below you. I saw you every morning. You spoke to me sometimes."

"You are a soldier?" she asked, with a new note in her voice.

"I was then—till the war finished."

"And now? Why have you come here?"

"To offer you help if you need it. If not, to ask your pardon and go away."

The shrouded figure in the chair burst suddenly into rapid hysterical talk in some foreign tongue which Dickson suspected of being French. Heritage replied in the same language, and the girl joined in with sharp questions. Then the Poet turned to Dickson.

"This is my friend. If you will trust us we will do our best to save you."

The eyes rested on Dickson's face, and he realised that he was in the presence of something the like of which he had never met in his life before. It was a loveliness greater than he had imagined was permitted by the Almighty to His creatures. The little face was more square than oval, with a low broad brow and proud exquisite eyebrows. The eyes were of a colour which he could never decide on; afterwards he used to allege obscurely that they were the colour of everything in Spring. There was a delicate pallor in the cheeks, and the face bore signs of suffering and care, possibly even of hunger; but for all that there was youth there, eternal and triumphant! Not youth such as he had known it, but youth with all history behind it, youth with centuries of command in its blood and the world's treasures of beauty and pride in its ancestry.

Strange, he thought, that a thing so fine should be so masterful. He felt abashed in every inch of him.

As the eyes rested on him their sorrowfulness seemed to be shot with humour. A ghost of a smile lurked there, to which Dickson promptly responded. He grinned and bowed.

"Very pleased to meet you, Mem. I'm Mr. McCunn from Glasgow."

"You don't even know my name," she said.

"We don't," said Heritage.

"They call me Saskia. This," nodding to the chair, "is my cousin Eugénie. . . . We are in very great trouble. But why should I tell you? I do not know you. You cannot help me."

"We can try," said Heritage. "Part of your trouble we know already through that boy. You are imprisoned in this place by scoundrels. We are here to help you to get out. We want to ask no questions—only to do what you bid us."

"You are not strong enough," she said sadly. "A young man—an old man—and a little boy. There are many against us, and any moment there may be more."

It was Dougal's turn to break in. "There's Lean and Spittal and Dobson and four tinklers in the Dean—that's seven; but there's us three and five more Gorbals Die-Hards—that's eight."

There was something in the boy's truculent courage that cheered her.

"I wonder," she said, and her eyes fell on each in turn.

Dickson felt impelled to intervene.

"I think this is a perfectly simple business. Here's a lady shut up in this house against her will by a wheen blagyard. This is a free country and the law doesn't permit that. My advice is for one of us to inform the police at Auchenlochan and get Dobson and his friends took up and the lady set free to do what she likes. That is, if these folks are really molesting her, which is not yet quite clear to my mind."

"Alas! It is not so simple as that," she said. "I dare not invoke your English law, for perhaps in the eyes of that law I am a thief."

"Deary me, that's a bad business," said the startled Dickson.

The two women talked together in some strange tongue, and the elder appeared to be pleading and the younger objecting. Then Saskia seemed to come to a decision.

"I will tell you all," and she looked straight at Heritage. "I do not think you would be cruel or false, for you have honourable faces. . . . Listen, then. I am a Russian and for two years have been an exile. I will not speak of my house, for it is no more, or how I escaped, for it is the common tale of all of us. I have seen things more terrible than any dream and yet lived, but I have paid a price for such experience. First I went to Italy where there were friends, and I wished only to have peace among kindly people. About poverty I do not care, for, to us, who have lost all the great things, the want of bread is a little matter. But peace was forbidden me, for I learned that we Russians had to win back our fatherland again and that the weakest must work in that cause. So I was set my task and it was very hard. . . . There were jewels which once belonged to my Emperor—they had been stolen by the brigands and must be recovered. There were others still hidden in Russia which must be brought to a safe place. In that work I was ordered to share."

She spoke in almost perfect English, with a certain foreign precision. Suddenly she changed to French, and talked rapidly to Heritage.

"She has told me about her family," he said, turning to Dickson. "It is among the greatest in Russia, the very greatest after the throne." Dickson could only stare.

"Our enemies soon discovered me," she went on. "Oh, but they are very clever, these enemies, and they have all the criminals of the world to aid them. Here you do not understand what they are. You good people in England think they are well-meaning dreamers who are forced into violence by the persecution of Western Europe. But you are wrong. Some honest fools there are among them, but the power—the true power—lies with madmen and degenerates, and they have for allies the special devil that dwells in each country. That is why they cast their net as wide as mankind."

She shivered, and for a second her face wore a look which Dickson never forgot, the look of one who has looked over the edge of life into the outer dark.

"There were certain jewels of great price which were about to be turned into guns and armies for our enemies. These

our people recovered and the charge of them was laid on me. Who would suspect, they said, a foolish girl? But our enemies were very clever, and soon the hunt was cried against me. They tried to rob me of them, but they failed, for I too had become clever. Then they asked the help of the law—first in Italy and then in France. Oh, it was subtly done. Respectable bourgeois, who hated the Bolsheviks but had bought long ago the bonds of my country, desired to be repaid their debts out of the property of the Russian Crown which might be found in the West. But behind them were the Jews, and behind the Jews our unsleeping enemies. Once I was enmeshed in the law I would be safe for them, and presently they would find the hiding-place of the treasure, and while the bourgeois were clamouring in the courts, it would be safe in their pockets. So I fled. For months I have been fleeing and hiding. They have tried to kidnap me many times, and once they have tried to kill me, but I, too, have become very clever—oh, very clever. And I have learned not to fear.”

This simple recital affected Dickson’s honest soul with the liveliest indignation. “Sich doings!” he exclaimed, and he could not forbear from whispering to Heritage an extract from that gentleman’s conversation the first night at Kirkmichael. “We needn’t imitate all their methods, but they’ve got hold of the right end of the stick. They seek truth and reality.” The reply from the Poet was an angry shrug.

“Why and how did you come here?” he asked.

“I always meant to come to England, for I thought it the sanest place in a mad world. Also it is a good country to hide in, for it is apart from Europe, and your police, as I thought, do not permit evil men to be their own law. But especially I had a friend, a Scottish gentleman, whom I knew in the days when we Russians were still a nation. I saw him again in Italy, and since he was kind and brave I told him some part of my troubles. He was called Quentin Kennedy, and now he is dead. He told me that in Scotland he had a lonely château where I could hide secretly and safely, and against the day when I might be hard-pressed he gave me a letter to his steward, bidding him welcome me as a guest when I made application. At that time I did not think I would need such sanctuary, but a month ago the need became urgent, for the hunt in France was very close on me. So I sent a message to the steward as Captain Kennedy told me.”

“What is his name?” Heritage asked.

She spelt it, “Monsieur Loudon—L-O-U-D-O-N in the town of Auchenlochan.”

“The factor,” said Dickson. “And what then?”

“Some spy must have found me out. I had a letter from this Loudon bidding me come to Auchenlochan. There I found no steward to receive me, but another letter saying that that night a carriage would be in waiting to bring me here. It was midnight when we arrived, and we were brought in by strange ways to this house, with no light but a single candle. Here we were welcomed indeed, but by an enemy.”

“Which?” asked Heritage. “Dobson or Lean or Spittal?”

“Dobson I do not know. Léon was there. He is no Russian, but a Belgian who was a valet in my father’s service till he joined the Bolsheviks. Next day the Lett Spidel came, and I knew that I was in very truth entrapped. For of all our enemies he is, save one, the most subtle and unwearied.”

Her voice had trailed off into flat weariness. Again Dickson was reminded of a child, for her arms hung limp by her side; and her slim figure in its odd clothes was curiously like that of a boy in a school blazer. Another resemblance perplexed him. She had a hint of Janet—about the mouth—Janet, that solemn little girl those twenty years in her grave.

Heritage was wrinkling his brows. “I don’t think I quite understand. The jewels? You have them with you?”

She nodded.

“These men wanted to rob you. Why didn’t they do it between here and Auchenlochan? You had no chance to hide them on the journey. Why did they let you come here where you were in a better position to baffle them?”

She shook her head. “I cannot explain—except perhaps, that Spidel had not arrived that night, and Léon may have been waiting instructions.”

The other still looked dissatisfied. “They are either clumsier villains than I take them to be, or there is something deeper in the business than we understand. These jewels—are they here?”

His tone was so sharp that she looked startled—almost suspicious. Then she saw that in his face which reassured her. “I have them hidden here. I have grown very skilful in hiding things.”

“Have they searched for them?”

"The first day they demanded them of me. I denied all knowledge. Then they ransacked this house—I think they ransack it daily, but I am too clever for them. I am not allowed to go beyond the verandah, and when at first I disobeyed there was always one of them in wait to force me back with a pistol behind my head. Every morning Léon brings us food for the day—good food, but not enough, so that Cousin Eugénie is always hungry, and each day he and Spidel question and threaten me. This afternoon Spidel has told me that their patience is at an end. He has given me till tomorrow at noon to produce the jewels. If not, he says I will die."

"Mercy on us!" Dickson exclaimed.

"There will be no mercy for us," she said solemnly. "He and his kind think as little of shedding blood as of spilling water. But I do not think he will kill me. I think I will kill him first, but after that I shall surely die. As for Cousin Eugénie, I do not know."

Her level matter-of-fact tone seemed to Dickson most shocking, for he could not treat it as mere melodrama. It carried a horrid conviction. "We must get you out of this at once," he declared.

"I cannot leave. I will tell you why. When I came to this country I appointed one to meet me here. He is a kinsman who knows England well, for he fought in your army. With him by my side I have no fear. It is altogether needful that I wait for him."

"Then there is something more which you haven't told us?" Heritage asked.

Was there the faintest shadow of a blush on her cheek? "There is something more," she said.

She spoke to Heritage in French and Dickson caught the name "Alexis" and a word which sounded like "prance." The Poet listened eagerly and nodded. "I have heard of him," he said.

"But have you not seen him? A tall man with a yellow beard, who bears himself proudly. Being of my mother's race he has eyes like mine."

"That's the man she was askin' me about yesterday," said Dougal, who had squatted on the floor.

Heritage shook his head. "We only came here last night. When did you expect Prince—your friend?"

"I hoped to find him here before me. Oh, it is his not coming that terrifies me. I must wait and hope. But if he does not come in time another may come before him."

"The ones already here are not all the enemies that threaten you?"

"Indeed, no. The worst has still to come, and till I know he is here I do not greatly fear Spidel or Léon. They receive orders and do not give them."

Heritage ran a perplexed hand through his hair. The sunset which had been flaming for some time in the unshuttered panes was now passing into the dark. The girl lit a lamp after first shuttering the rest of the windows. As she turned it up the odd dusty room and its strange company were revealed more clearly and Dickson saw with a shock how haggard was the beautiful face. A great pity seized him and almost conquered his timidity.

"It is very difficult to help you," Heritage was saying. "You won't leave this place, and you won't claim the protection of the law. You are very independent, Mademoiselle, but it can't go on for ever. The man you fear may arrive at any moment. At any moment, too, your treasure may be discovered."

"It is that that weighs on me," she cried. "The jewels! They are my solemn trust, but they burden me terribly. If I were only rid of them and knew them to be safe I should face the rest with a braver mind."

"If you'll take my advice," said Dickson slowly, "you'll get them deposited in a bank and take a receipt for them. A Scotch bank is no' in a hurry to surrender a deposit without it gets the proper authority."

Heritage brought his hands together with a smack. "That's an idea. Will you trust us to take these things and deposit them safely?"

For a little she was silent and her eyes were fixed on each of the trio in turn. "I will trust you," she said at last. "I think you will not betray me."

"By God, we won't!" said the Poet fervently. "Dogson, it's up to you. You march off to Glasgow in double quick time and place the stuff in your own name in your own bank. There's not a moment to lose. D'you hear?"

"I will that." To his own surprise Dickson spoke without hesitation. Partly it was because of his merchant's sense of property, which made him hate the thought that miscreants should acquire that to which they had no title; but mainly it

was the appeal in those haggard childish eyes. "But I'm not going to be tramping the country in the night carrying a fortune and seeking for trains that aren't there. I'll go the first thing in the morning."

"Where are they?" Heritage asked.

"That I do not tell. But I will fetch them."

She left the room and presently returned with three odd little parcels wrapped in leather and tied with thongs of raw hide. She gave them to Heritage, who held them appraisingly in his hand and then passed them to Dickson.

"I do not ask about their contents. We take them from you as they are, and, please God, when the moment comes they will be returned to you as you gave them. You trust us, Mademoiselle?"

"I trust you, for you are a soldier. Oh, and I thank you from my heart, my friends." She held out a hand to each, which caused Heritage to grow suddenly very red.

"I will remain in the neighbourhood to await developments," he said. "We had better leave you now. Dougal, lead on."

Before going, he took the girl's hand again, and with a sudden movement bent and kissed it. Dickson shook it heartily. "Cheer up, Mem," he observed. "There's a better time coming." His last recollection of her eyes was of a soft mistiness not far from tears. His pouch and pipe had strange company jostling them in his pocket as he followed the others down the ladder into the night.

Dougal insisted that they must return by the road of the morning. "We daren't go by the Laver, for that would bring us by the public-house. If the worst comes to the worst, and we fall in wi' any of the deevils, they must think ye've changed your mind and come back from Auchenlochan."

The night smelt fresh and moist as if a break in the weather were imminent. As they scrambled along the Garple Dean a pinprick of light below showed where the tinklers were busy by their fire. Dickson's spirits suffered a sharp fall and he began to marvel at his temerity. What in Heaven's name had he undertaken? To carry very precious things, to which certainly he had no right, through the enemy to distant Glasgow. How could he escape the notice of the watchers? He was already suspect, and the sight of him back again in Dalquharter would double that suspicion. He must brazen it out, but he distrusted his powers with such tell-tale stuff in his pockets. They might murder him anywhere on the moor road or in an empty railway carriage. An unpleasant memory of various novels he had read in which such things happened haunted his mind. . . . There was just one consolation. This job over, he would be quit of the whole business. And honourably quit, too, for he would have played a manly part in a most unpleasant affair. He could retire to the idyllic with the knowledge that he had not been wanting when Romance called. Not a soul should ever hear of it, but he saw himself in the future tramping green roads or sitting by his winter fireside pleasantly retelling himself the tale.

Before they came to the Garple bridge Dougal insisted that they should separate, remarking that "it would never do if we were seen thegither." Heritage was despatched by a short cut over fields to the left, which eventually, after one or two plunges into ditches, landed him safely in Mrs. Morran's back yard. Dickson and Dougal crossed the bridge and tramped Dalquharter-wards by the highway. There was no sign of human life in that quiet place with owls hooting and rabbits rustling in the undergrowth. Beyond the woods they came in sight of the light in the back kitchen, and both seemed to relax their watchfulness when it was most needed. Dougal sniffed the air and looked seaward.

"It's coming on to rain," he observed. "There should be a muckle star there, and when you can't see it it means wet weather wi' this wind."

"What star?" Dickson asked.

"The one wi' the Irish-lukkin' name. What's that they call it? O'Brien?" And he pointed to where the constellation of the Hunter should have been declining on the western horizon.

There was a bend of the road behind them, and suddenly round it came a dogcart driven rapidly. Dougal slipped like a weasel into a bush, and presently Dickson stood revealed in the glare of a lamp. The horse was pulled up sharply and the driver called out to him. He saw that it was Dobson the innkeeper with Léon beside him.

"Who is it?" cried the voice. "Oh, you! I thought ye were off the day?"

Dickson rose nobly to the occasion.

"I thought myself I was. But I didn't think much of Auchenlochan, and I took a fancy to come back and spend the last night of my holiday with my Auntie. I'm off to Glasgow first thing the morn's morn."

“So!” said the voice. “Queer thing I never saw ye on the Auchenlochan road, where ye can see three mile before ye.”

“I left early and took it easy along the shore.”

“Did ye so? Well, good-night to ye.”

Five minutes later Dickson walked into Mrs. Morran’s kitchen, where Heritage was busy making up for a day of short provender.

“I’m for Glasgow tomorrow, Auntie Phemie,” he cried. “I want you to loan me a wee trunk with a key, and steek the doors and windows, for I’ve a lot to tell you.”



CHAPTER 6

HOW MR. McCUNN DEPARTED WITH RELIEF AND RETURNED WITH RESOLUTION

At seven o'clock on the following morning the post-cart, summoned by an early message from Mrs. Morran, appeared outside the cottage. In it sat the ancient postman, whose real home was Auchenlochan, but who slept alternate nights in Dalquharter, and beside him Dobson the innkeeper. Dickson and his hostess stood at the garden-gate, the former with his pack on his back and at his feet a small stout wooden box, of the kind in which cheeses are transported, garnished with an immense padlock. Heritage for obvious reasons did not appear; at the moment he was crouched on the floor of the loft watching the departure through a gap in the dimity curtains.

The traveller, after making sure that Dobson was looking, furtively slipped the key of the trunk into his knapsack.

"Well, good-bye, Auntie Phemie," he said. "I'm sure you've been awful kind to me, and I don't know how to thank you for all you're sending."

"Tuts, Dickson, my man, they're hungry folk about Glesca that'll be glad o' my scones and jeelie. Tell Mirren I'm rale pleased wi' her man and haste ye back soon."

The trunk was deposited on the floor of the cart and Dickson clambered into the back seat. He was thankful that he had not to sit next to Dobson, for he had tell-tale stuff on his person. The morning was wet, so he wore his waterproof, which concealed his odd tendency to stoutness about the middle.

Mrs. Morran played her part well, with all the becoming gravity of an affectionate aunt, but so soon as the post-cart turned the bend of the road her demeanour changed. She was torn with convulsions of silent laughter. She retreated to the kitchen, sank into a chair, wrapped her face in her apron and rocked. Heritage, descending, found her struggling to regain composure. "D'ye ken his wife's name?" she gasped. "I ca'ed her Mirren! And maybe the body's no mairried! Hech sirs! Hech sirs!"

Meantime Dickson was bumping along the moor-road on the back of the post-cart. He had worked out a plan, just as he had been used aforetime to devise a deal in foodstuffs. He had expected one of the watchers to turn up, and was rather relieved that it should be Dobson, whom he regarded as "the most natural beast" of the three. Somehow he did not think that he would be molested before he reached the station, since his enemies would still be undecided in their minds. Probably they only wanted to make sure that he had really departed to forget all about him. But if not, he had his plan ready.

"Are you travelling today?" he asked the innkeeper.

"Just as far as the station to see about some oil-cake I'm expectin'. What's in your wee kist? Ye came here wi' nothing but the bag on your back."

"Ay, the kist is no' mine. It's my auntie's. She's a kind body, and nothing would serve but she must pack a box for me to take back. Let me see. There's a baking of scones; three pots of honey and one of rhubarb jam—she was aye famous for her rhubarb jam; a mutton ham, which you can't get for love or money in Glasgow; some home-made black puddings and a wee skim-milk cheese. I doubt I'll have to take a cab from the station."

Dobson appeared satisfied, lit a short pipe and relapsed into meditation. The long uphill road, ever climbing to where far off showed the tiny whitewashed buildings which were the railway station, seemed interminable this morning. The aged postman addressed strange objurgations to his aged horse and muttered reflections to himself, the innkeeper smoked, and Dickson stared back into the misty hollow where lay Dalquharter. The south-west wind had brought up a screen of rain clouds and washed all the countryside in a soft wet grey. But the eye could still travel a fair distance, and Dickson thought he had a glimpse of a figure on a bicycle leaving the village two miles back. He wondered who it could be. Not Heritage, who had no bicycle. Perhaps some woman who was conspicuously late for the train. Women were the chief cyclists nowadays in country places.

Then he forgot about the bicycle and twisted his neck to watch the station. It was less than a mile off now, and they had no time to spare, for away to the south among the hummocks of the bog he saw the smoke of the train coming from Auchenlochan. The postman also saw it and whipped up his beast into a clumsy canter. Dickson, always nervous about

being late for trains, forced his eyes away and regarded again the road behind them. Suddenly the cyclist had become quite plain—a little more than a mile behind—a man, and pedalling furiously in spite of the stiff ascent. . . . It could only be one person—Léon. He must have discovered their visit to the House yesterday and be on the way to warn Dobson. If he reached the station before the train, there would be no journey to Glasgow that day for one respectable citizen.

Dickson was in a fever of impatience and fright. He dared not abjure the postman to hurry, lest Dobson should turn his head and descry his colleague. But that ancient man had begun to realise the shortness of time and was urging the cart along at a fair pace, since they were now on the flatter shelf of land which carried the railway. Dickson kept his eyes fixed on the bicycle and his teeth shut tight on his lower lip. Now it was hidden by the last dip of hill; now it emerged into view not a quarter of a mile behind, and its rider gave vent to a shrill call. Luckily the innkeeper did not hear, for at that moment with a jolt the cart pulled up at the station door, accompanied by the roar of the incoming train.

Dickson whipped down from the back seat and seized the solitary porter. "Label the box for Glasgow and into the van with it. Quick, man, and there'll be a shilling for you." He had been doing some rapid thinking these last minutes and had made up his mind. If Dobson and he were alone in a carriage he could not have the box there; that must be elsewhere, so that Dobson could not examine it if he were set on violence, somewhere in which it could still be a focus of suspicion and attract attention from his person. He took his ticket, and rushed on to the platform, to find the porter and the box at the door of the guard's van. Dobson was not there. With the vigour of a fussy traveller he shouted directions to the guard to take good care of his luggage, hurled a shilling at the porter and ran for a carriage. At that moment he became aware of Dobson hurrying through the entrance. He must have met Léon and heard news from him, for his face was red and his ugly brows darkening.

The train was in motion. "Here, you!" Dobson's voice shouted. "Stop! I want a word wi' ye." Dickson plunged at a third-class carriage, for he saw faces behind the misty panes, and above all things then he feared an empty compartment. He clambered on to the step, but the handle would not turn, and with a sharp pang of fear he felt the innkeeper's grip on his arm. Then some Samaritan from within let down the window, opened the door and pulled him up. He fell on a seat and a second later Dobson staggered in beside him.

Thank Heaven, the dirty little carriage was nearly full. There were two herds, each with a dog and a long hazel crook, and an elderly woman who looked like a ploughman's wife out for a day's marketing. And there was one other whom Dickson recognised with a peculiar joy—the bagman in the provision line of business whom he had met three days before at Kilchrist.

The recognition was mutual. "Mr. McCunn!" the bagman exclaimed. "My, but that was running it fine! I hope you've had a pleasant holiday, sir?"

"Very pleasant. I've been spending two nights with friends down hereaways. I've been very fortunate in the weather, for it has broke just when I'm leaving."

Dickson sank back on the hard cushions. It had been a near thing, but so far he had won. He wished his heart did not beat so fast, and he hoped he did not betray his disorder in his face. Very deliberately he hunted for his pipe and filled it slowly. Then he turned to Dobson. "I didn't know you were travelling the day. What about your oil-cake?"

"I've changed my mind," was the gruff answer.

"Was that you I heard crying on me, when we were running for the train?"

"Ay. I thought ye had forgot about your kist."

"No fear," said Dickson. "I'm no' likely to forget my auntie's scones."

He laughed pleasantly and then turned to the bagman. Thereafter the compartment hummed with the technicalities of the grocery trade. He exerted himself to draw out his companion, to have him refer to the great firm of D. McCunn, so that the innkeeper might be ashamed of his suspicions. What nonsense to imagine that a noted and wealthy Glasgow merchant—the bagman's tone was almost reverential—would concern himself with the affairs of a forgotten village and a tumbledown house!

Presently the train drew up at Kirkmichael station. The woman descended, and Dobson, after making sure that no one else meant to follow her example, also left the carriage. A porter was shouting: "Fast train to Glasgow—Glasgow next stop." Dickson watched the innkeeper shoulder his way through the crowd in the direction of the booking office. "He's off to send a telegram," he decided. "There'll be trouble waiting for me at the other end."

When the train moved on he found himself disinclined for further talk. He had suddenly become meditative, and curled up in a corner with his head hard against the window pane, watching the wet fields and glistening roads as they slipped past. He had his plans made for his conduct at Glasgow, but Lord! how he loathed the whole business! Last night he had had a kind of gusto in his desire to circumvent villainy; at Dalquharter station he had enjoyed a momentary sense of triumph; now he felt very small, lonely and forlorn. Only one thought far at the back of his mind cropped up now and then to give him comfort. He was entering on the last lap. Once get this detestable errand done and he would be a free man, free to go back to the kindly humdrum life from which he should never have strayed. Never again, he vowed, never again. Rather would he spend the rest of his days in hydropathics than come within the pale of such horrible adventures. Romance, forsooth! This was not the mild goddess he had sought, but an awful harpy who battered on the souls of men.

He had some bad minutes as the train passed through the suburbs, and along the grimy embankment by which the southern lines enter the city. But as it rumbled over the river bridge and slowed down before the terminus, his vitality suddenly revived. He was a business man, and there was now something for him to do.

After a rapid farewell to the bagman, he found a porter and hustled his box out of the van in the direction of the left-luggage office. Spies, summoned by Dobson's telegram, were, he was convinced, watching his every movement, and he meant to see that they missed nothing. He received his ticket for the box, and slowly and ostentatiously stowed it away in his pack. Swinging the said pack on his arm he sauntered through the entrance hall to the row of waiting taxi-cabs, and selected that one which seemed to him to have the oldest and most doddering driver. He deposited the pack inside on the seat, and then stood still as if struck with a sudden thought.

"I breakfasted terrible early," he told the driver. "I think I'll have a bite to eat. Will you wait?"

"Ay," said the man, who was reading a grubby sheet of newspaper. "I'll wait as long as ye like, for it's you that pays."

Dickson left his pack in the cab and, oddly enough for a careful man, he did not shut the door. He reentered the station, strolled to the bookstall and bought a *Glasgow Herald*. His steps then tended to the refreshment room, where he ordered a cup of coffee and two Bath buns, and seated himself at a small table. There he was soon immersed in the financial news, and though he sipped his coffee he left the buns untasted. He took out a penknife and cut various extracts from the *Herald*, bestowing them carefully in his pocket. An observer would have seen an elderly gentleman absorbed in market quotations.

After a quarter of an hour had been spent in this performance he happened to glance at the clock and rose with an exclamation. He bustled out to his taxi and found the driver still intent upon his reading. "Here I am at last," he said cheerily, and had a foot on the step, when he stopped suddenly with a cry. It was a cry of alarm, but also of satisfaction.

"What's become of my pack? I left it on the seat, and now it's gone! There's been a thief here."

The driver, roused from his lethargy, protested in the name of his gods that no one had been near it. "Ye took it into the station wi' ye," he urged.

"I did nothing of the kind. Just you wait here till I see the inspector. A bonny watch *you* keep on a gentleman's things."

But Dickson did not interview the railway authorities. Instead he hurried to the left-luggage office. "I deposited a small box here a short time ago. I mind the number. Is it there still?"

The attendant glanced at a shelf. "A wee deal box with iron bands. It was took out ten minutes syne. A man brought the ticket and took it away on his shoulder."

"Thank you. There's been a mistake, but the blame's mine. My man mistook my orders."

Then he returned to the now nervous taxi-driver. "I've taken it up with the station-master and he's putting the police on. You'll likely be wanted, so I gave him your number. It's a fair disgrace that there should be so many thieves about this station. It's not the first time I've lost things. Drive me to West George Street and look sharp." And he slammed the door with the violence of an angry man.

But his reflections were not violent, for he smiled to himself. "That was pretty neat. They'll take some time to get the kist open, for I dropped the key out of the train after we left Kirkmichael. That gives me a fair start. If I hadn't thought of that, they'd have found some way to grip me and ripe me long before I got to the Bank." He shuddered as he thought of the dangers he had escaped. "As it is, they're off the track for half an hour at least, while they're rummaging among Auntie Phemie's scones." At the thought he laughed heartily, and when he brought the taxi-cab to a standstill by rapping on the front window, he left it with a temper apparently restored. Obviously he had no grudge against the driver, who to his

immense surprise was rewarded with ten shillings.

Three minutes later Mr. McCunn might have been seen entering the head office of the Strathclyde Bank, and inquiring for the manager. There was no hesitation about him now, for his foot was on his native heath. The chief cashier received him with deference, in spite of his unorthodox garb, for he was not the least honoured of the bank's customers. As it chanced he had been talking about him that very morning to a gentleman from London. "The strength of this city," he had said, tapping his eyeglasses on his knuckles, "does not lie in its dozen very rich men, but in the hundred or two homely folk who make no parade of wealth. Men like Dickson McCunn, for example, who live all their life in a semi-detached villa and die worth half a million." And the Londoner had cordially assented.

So Dickson was ushered promptly into an inner room, and was warmly greeted by Mr. Mackintosh, the patron of the Gorbals Die-Hards.

"I must thank you for your generous donation, McCunn. Those boys will get a little fresh air and quiet after the smoke and din of Glasgow. A little country peace to smooth out the creases in their poor little souls."

"Maybe," said Dickson, with a vivid recollection of Dougal as he had last seen him. Somehow he did not think that peace was likely to be the portion of that devoted band. "But I've not come here to speak about that."

He took off his waterproof; then his coat and waistcoat; and showed himself a strange figure with sundry bulges about the middle. The manager's eyes grew very round. Presently these excrescences were revealed as linen bags sewn on to his shirt, and fitting into the hollow between ribs and hip. With some difficulty he slit the bags and extracted three hide-bound packages.

"See here, Mackintosh," he said solemnly. "I hand you over these parcels, and you're to put them in the innermost corner of your strong room. You needn't open them. Just put them away as they are, and write me a receipt for them. Write it now."

Mr. Mackintosh obediently took pen in hand.

"What'll I call them?" he asked.

"Just the three leather parcels handed to you by Dickson McCunn, Esq., naming the date."

Mr. Mackintosh wrote. He signed his name with his usual flourish and handed the slip to his client.

"Now," said Dickson, "you'll put that receipt in the strong box where you keep my securities, and you'll give it up to nobody but me in person, and you'll surrender the parcels only on presentation of the receipt. D'you understand?"

"Perfectly. May I ask any questions?"

"You'd better not if you don't want to hear lees."

"What's in the packages?" Mr. Mackintosh weighed them in his hand.

"That's asking," said Dickson. "But I'll tell ye this much. It's jools."

"Your own?"

"No, but I'm their trustee."

"Valuable?"

"I was hearing they were worth more than a million pounds."

"God bless my soul," said the startled manager. "I don't like this kind of business, McCunn."

"No more do I. But you'll do it to oblige an old friend and a good customer. If you don't know much about the packages you know all about me. Now, mind, I trust you."

Mr. Mackintosh forced himself to a joke. "Did you maybe steal them?"

Dickson grinned. "Just what I did. And that being so, I want you to let me out by the back door."

When he found himself in the street he felt the huge relief of a boy who had emerged with credit from the dentist's chair. Remembering that there would be no midday dinner for him at home, his first step was to feed heavily at a restaurant. He had, so far as he could see, surmounted all his troubles, his one regret being that he had lost his pack, which contained among other things his *Izaak Walton* and his safety razor. He bought another razor and a new Walton, and mounted an electric tram-car *en route* for home.

Very contented with himself he felt as the car swung across the Clyde bridge. He had done well—but of that he did not

want to think, for the whole beastly thing was over. He was going to bury that memory, to be resurrected perhaps on a later day when the unpleasantness had been forgotten. Heritage had his address, and knew where to come when it was time to claim the jewels. As for the watchers, they must have ceased to suspect him, when they discovered the innocent contents of his knapsack and Mrs. Morran's box. Home for him, and a luxurious tea by his own fireside; and then an evening with his books, for Heritage's nonsense had stimulated his literary fervour. He would dip into his old favourites again to confirm his faith. To-morrow he would go for a jaunt somewhere—perhaps down the Clyde, or to the South of England, which he had heard was a pleasant, thickly peopled country. No more lonely inns and deserted villages for him; henceforth he would make certain of comfort and peace.

The rain had stopped, and, as the car moved down the dreary vista of Eglinton Street, the sky opened into fields of blue and the April sun silvered the puddles. It was in such place and under such weather that Dickson suffered an overwhelming experience.

It is beyond my skill, being all unlearned in the game of psycho-analysis, to explain how this thing happened. I concern myself only with facts. Suddenly the pretty veil of self-satisfaction was rent from top to bottom, and Dickson saw a figure of himself within, a smug leaden little figure which simpered and preened itself and was hollow as a rotten nut. And he hated it.

The horrid truth burst on him that Heritage had been right. He only played with life. That imbecile image was a mere spectator, content to applaud, but shrinking from the contact of reality. It had been all right as a provision merchant, but when it fancied itself capable of higher things it had deceived itself. Foolish little image with its brave dreams and its swelling words from Browning! All make-believe of the feeblest. He was a coward, running away at the first threat of danger. It was as if he were watching a tall stranger with a wand pointing to the embarrassed phantom that was himself, and ruthlessly exposing its frailties! And yet the pitiless showman was himself too—himself as he wanted to be, cheerful, brave, resourceful, indomitable.

Dickson suffered a spasm of mortal agony. "Oh, I'm surely not so bad as all that," he groaned. But the hurt was not only in his pride. He saw himself being forced to new decisions, and each alternative was of the blackest. He fairly shivered with the horror of it. The car slipped past a suburban station from which passengers were emerging—comfortable black-coated men such as he had once been. He was bitterly angry with Providence for picking him out of the great crowd of sedentary folk for this sore ordeal. "Why was I tethered to such a conscience?" was his moan. But there was that stern inquisitor with his pointer exploring his soul. "You flatter yourself you have done your share," he was saying. "You will make pretty stories about it to yourself, and some day you may tell your friends, modestly disclaiming any special credit. But you will be a liar, for you know you are afraid. You are running away when the work is scarcely begun, and leaving it to a few boys and a poet whom you had the impudence the other day to despise. I think you are worse than a coward. I think you are a cad."

His fellow-passengers on the top of the car saw an absorbed middle-aged gentleman who seemed to have something the matter with his bronchial tubes. They could not guess at the tortured soul. The decision was coming nearer, the alternatives loomed up dark and inevitable. On one side was submission to ignominy, on the other a return to that place, which he detested, and yet loathed himself for detesting. "It seems I'm not likely to have much peace either way," he reflected dismally.

How the conflict would have ended had it continued on these lines I cannot say. The soul of Mr. McCunn was being assailed by moral and metaphysical adversaries with which he had not been trained to deal. But suddenly it leapt from negatives to positives. He saw the face of the girl in the shuttered House, so fair and young and yet so haggard. It seemed to be appealing to him to rescue it from a great loneliness and fear. Yes, he had been right, it had a strange look of his Janet—the wide-open eyes, the solemn mouth. What was to become of that child if he failed her in her great need?

Now Dickson was a practical man and this view of the case brought him into a world which he understood. "It's fair ridiculous," he reflected. "Nobody there to take a grip of things. Just a wheen Gorbals keelies and the lad Heritage. Not a business man among the lot."

The alternatives, which hove before him like two great banks of cloud, were altering their appearance. One was becoming faint and tenuous; the other, solid as ever, was just a shade less black. He lifted his eyes and saw in the near distance the corner of the road which led to his home. "I must decide before I reach that corner," he told himself.

Then his mind became apathetic. He began to whistle dismally through his teeth, watching the corner as it came nearer. The car stopped with a jerk. "I'll go back," he said aloud, clambering down the steps. The truth was he had decided five minutes before when he first saw Janet's face.

He walked briskly to his house, entirely refusing to waste any more energy on reflection. "This is a business proposition," he told himself, "and I'm going to handle it as sich." Tibby was surprised to see him and offered him tea in vain. "I'm just back for a few minutes. Let's see the letters."

There was one from his wife. She proposed to stay another week at the Neuk Hydropathic and suggested that he might join her and bring her home. He sat down and wrote a long affectionate reply, declining, but expressing his delight that she was soon returning. "That's very likely the last time Mamma will hear from me," he reflected, but—oddly enough—without any great fluttering of the heart.

Then he proceeded to be furiously busy. He sent out Tibby to buy another knapsack and to order a cab and to cash a considerable cheque. In the knapsack he packed a fresh change of clothing and the new safety razor, but no books, for he was past the need of them. That done, he drove to his solicitors.

"What like a firm are Glendonan and Speirs in Edinburgh?" he asked the senior partner.

"Oh, very respectable. Very respectable indeed. Regular Edinburgh W.S. lot. Do a lot of factoring."

"I want you to telephone through to them and inquire about a place in Carrick called Huntingtower, near the village of Dalquharter. I understand it's to let, and I'm thinking of taking a lease of it."

The senior partner after some delay got through to Edinburgh, and was presently engaged in the feverish dialectic which the long-distance telephone involves. "I want to speak to Mr. Glendonan himself. . . . Yes, yes, Mr. Caw of Paton and Linklater. . . . Good afternoon. . . . Huntingtower. Yes, in Carrick. Not to let? But I understand it's been in the market for some months. You say you've an idea it has just been let. But my client is positive that you're mistaken, unless the agreement was made this morning. . . . You'll inquire? Oh, I see. The actual factoring is done by your local agent. Mr. James Loudon, in Auchenlochan. You think my client had better get into touch with him at once. Just wait a minute, please."

He put his hand over the receiver. "Usual Edinburgh way of doing business," he observed caustically. "What do you want done?"

"I'll run down and see this Loudon. Tell Glendonan and Speirs to advise him to expect me, for I'll go this very day."

Mr. Caw resumed his conversation. "My client would like a telegram sent at once to Mr. Loudon introducing him. He's Mr. Dickson McCunn of Mearns Street—the great provision merchant, you know. Oh, yes! Good for any rent. Refer if you like to the Strathclyde Bank, but you can take my word for it. Thank you. Then that's settled. Good-bye."

Dickson's next visit was to a gunmaker who was a fellow-elder with him in the Guthrie Memorial Kirk.

"I want a pistol and a lot of cartridges," he announced. "I'm not caring what kind it is, so long as it is a good one and not too big."

"For yourself?" the gunmaker asked. "You must have a licence, I doubt, and there's a lot of new regulations."

"I can't wait on a licence. It's for a cousin of mine who's off to Mexico at once. You've got to find some way of obliging an old friend, Mr. McNair."

Mr. McNair scratched his head. "I don't see how I can sell you one. But I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll lend you one. It belongs to my nephew, Peter Tait, and has been lying in a drawer ever since he came back from the front. He has no use for it now that he's a placed minister."

So Dickson bestowed in the pockets of his waterproof a service revolver and fifty cartridges, and bade his cab take him to the shop in Mearns Street. For a moment the sight of the familiar place struck a pang to his breast, but he choked down unavailing regrets. He ordered a great hamper of foodstuffs—the most delicate kind of tinned goods, two perfect hams, tongues, Strassburg pies, chocolate, cakes, biscuits and, as a last thought, half a dozen bottles of old liqueur brandy. It was to be carefully packed, addressed to Mrs. Morran, Dalquharter Station, and delivered in time for him to take down by the 7.33 train. Then he drove to the terminus and dined with something like a desperate peace in his heart.

On this occasion he took a first-class ticket, for he wanted to be alone. As the lights began to be lit in the wayside stations and the clear April dusk darkened into night, his thoughts were sombre yet resigned. He opened the window and

let the sharp air of the Renfrewshire uplands fill the carriage. It was fine weather again after the rain, and a bright constellation—perhaps Dougal’s friend O’Brien—hung in the western sky. How happy he would have been a week ago had he been starting thus for a country holiday! He could sniff the faint scent of moor-burn and ploughed earth which had always been his first reminder of spring. But he had been pitchforked out of that old happy world and could never enter it again. Alas! for the roadside fire, the cosy inn, the *Compleat Angler*, the Chavender or Chub!

And yet—and yet! He had done the right thing, though the Lord alone knew how it would end. He began to pluck courage from his very melancholy and hope from his reflections upon the transitoriness of life. He was austere following Romance as he conceived it, and if that capricious lady had taken one dream from him she might yet reward him with a better. Tags of poetry came into his head which seemed to favour this philosophy—particularly some lines of Browning on which he used to discourse to his Kirk Literary Society. Uncommon silly, he considered, these homilies of his must have been, mere twitterings of the unfledged. But now he saw more in the lines, a deeper interpretation which he had earned the right to make.

“Oh, world, where all things change and nought abides,
Oh, life, the long mutation—is it so?
Is it with life as with the body’s change?—
Where, e’en tho’ better follow, good must pass.”

That was as far as he could get, though he cudgelled his memory to continue. Moralising thus, he became drowsy, and was almost asleep when the train drew up at the station of Kirkmichael.



CHAPTER 7

SUNDRY DOINGS IN THE MIRK

From Kirkmichael on the train stopped at every station, but no passenger seemed to leave or arrive at the little platforms white in the moon. At Dalquharther the case of provisions was safely transferred to the porter with instructions to take charge of it till it was sent for. During the next ten minutes Dickson's mind began to work upon his problem with a certain briskness. It was all nonsense that the law of Scotland could not be summoned to the defence. The jewels had been safely got rid of, and who was to dispute their possession? Not Dobson and his crew, who had no sort of title, and were out for naked robbery. The girl had spoken of greater dangers from new enemies—kidnapping perhaps. Well, that was felony, and the police must be brought in. Probably if all were known the three watchers had criminal records, pages long, filed at Scotland Yard. The man to deal with that side of the business was Loudon the factor, and to him he was bound in the first place. He had made a clear picture in his head of this Loudon—a derelict old country writer, formal, pedantic, lazy, anxious only to get an unprofitable business off his hands with the least possible trouble, never going near the place himself, and ably supported in his lethargy by conceited Edinburgh Writers to the Signet. "Sich notions of business!" he murmured. "I wonder that there's a single county family in Scotland no' in the bankruptcy court!" It was his mission to wake up Mr. James Loudon.

Arrived at Auchenlochan he went first to the Salutation Hotel, a pretentious place sacred to golfers. There he engaged a bedroom for the night and, having certain scruples, paid for it in advance. He also had some sandwiches prepared which he stowed in his pack, and filled his flask with whisky. "I'm going home to Glasgow by the first train tomorrow," he told the landlady, "and now I've got to see a friend. I'll not be back till late." He was assured that there would be no difficulty about his admittance at any hour, and directed how to find Mr. Loudon's dwelling.

It was an old house fronting direct on the street, with a fanlight above the door and a neat brass plate bearing the legend "Mr. James Loudon, Writer." A lane ran up one side leading apparently to a garden, for the moonlight showed the dusk of trees. In front was the main street of Auchenlochan, now deserted save for a single roysterer, and opposite stood the ancient town house, with arches where the country folk came at the spring and autumn hiring fairs. Dickson rang the antiquated bell, and was presently admitted to a dark hall floored with oil-cloth, where a single gas-jet showed that on one side was the business office and on the other the living-rooms. Mr. Loudon was at supper, he was told, and he sent in his card. Almost at once the door at the end on the left side was flung open and a large figure appeared flourishing a napkin. "Come in, sir, come in," it cried. "I've just finished a bite of meat. Very glad to see you. Here, Maggie, what d'you mean by keeping the gentleman standing in that outer darkness?"

The room into which Dickson was ushered was small and bright, with a red paper on the walls, a fire burning and a big oil lamp in the centre of a table. Clearly Mr. Loudon had no wife, for it was a bachelor's den in every line of it. A cloth was laid on a corner of the table, on which stood the remnants of a meal. Mr. Loudon seemed to have been about to make a brew of punch, for a kettle simmered by the fire, and lemons and sugar flanked a pot-bellied whisky decanter of the type that used to be known as a "mason's mell."

The sight of the lawyer was a surprise to Dickson and dissipated his notions of an aged and lethargic incompetent. Mr. Loudon was a strongly built man who could not be a year over fifty. He had a ruddy face, clean-shaven except for a grizzled moustache; his grizzled hair was thinning round the temples; but his skin was unwrinkled and his eyes had all the vigour of youth. His tweed suit was well cut, and the buff waistcoat with flaps and pockets and the plain leather watchguard hinted at the sportsman, as did the half-dozen racing prints on the wall. A pleasant high-coloured figure he made; his voice had the frank ring due to much use out of doors; and his expression had the singular candour which comes from grey eyes with large pupils and a narrow iris.

"Sit down, Mr. McCunn. Take the arm-chair by the fire. I've had a wire from Glendonan and Speirs about you. I was just going to have a glass of toddy—a grand thing for these uncertain April nights. You'll join me? No? Well, you'll smoke anyway. There's cigars at your elbow. Certainly, a pipe if you like. This is Liberty Hall."

Dickson found some difficulty in the part for which he had cast himself. He had expected to condescend upon an

elderly inept and give him sharp instructions; instead he found himself faced with a jovial, virile figure which certainly did not suggest incompetence. It has been mentioned already that he had always great difficulty in looking any one in the face, and this difficulty was intensified when he found himself confronted with bold and candid eyes. He felt abashed and a little nervous.

"I've come to see you about Huntingtower House," he began.

"I know. So Glendonan's informed me. Well, I'm very glad to hear it. The place has been standing empty far too long, and that is worse for a new house than an old house. There's not much money to spend on it either, unless we can make sure of a good tenant. How did you hear about it?"

"I was taking a bit holiday and I spent a night at Dalquharter with an old auntie of mine. You must understand I've just retired from business, and I'm thinking of finding a country place. I used to have the big provision shop in Mearns Street—now the United Supply Stores, Limited. You've maybe heard of it?"

The other bowed and smiled. "Who hasn't? The name of Dickson McCunn is known far beyond the city of Glasgow."

Dickson was not insensible of the flattery, and he continued with more freedom. "I took a walk and got a glimpse of the House and I liked the look of it. You see, I want a quiet bit a good long way from a town, and at the same time a house with all modern conveniences. I suppose Huntingtower has that?"

"When it was built fifteen years ago it was considered a model—six bathrooms, its own electric light plant, steam heating, an independent boiler for hot water, the whole bag of tricks. I won't say but what some of these contrivances will want looking to, for the place has been some time empty, but there can be nothing very far wrong, and I can guarantee that the bones of the house are good."

"Well, that's all right," said Dickson. "I don't mind spending a little money myself if the place suits me. But of that, of course, I'm not yet certain, for I've only had a glimpse of the outside. I wanted to get into the policies, but a man at the lodge wouldn't let me. They're a mighty uncivil lot down there."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," said Mr. Loudon in a tone of concern.

"Ay, and if I take the place I'll stipulate that you get rid of the lodgekeepers."

"There won't be the slightest difficulty about that, for they are only weekly tenants. But I'm vexed to hear they were uncivil. I was glad to get any tenant that offered, and they were well recommended to me."

"They're foreigners."

"One of them is—a Belgian refugee that Lady Morewood took an interest in. But the other—Spittal, they call him—I thought he was Scotch."

"He's not that. And I don't like the innkeeper either. I would want him shifted."

Mr. Loudon laughed. "I dare say Dobson is a rough diamond. There's worse folk in the world all the same, but I don't think he will want to stay. He only went there to pass the time till he heard from his brother in Vancouver. He's a roving spirit, and will be off overseas again."

"That's all right!" said Dickson, who was beginning to have horrid suspicions that he might be on a wild-goose chase after all. "Well, the next thing is for me to see over the House."

"Certainly. I'd like to go with you myself. What day would suit you? Let me see. This is Friday. What about this day week?"

"I was thinking of tomorrow. Since I'm down in these parts I may as well get the job done."

Mr. Loudon looked puzzled. "I quite see that. But I don't think it's possible. You see, I have to consult the owners and get their consent to a lease. Of course they have the general purpose of letting, but—well, they're queer folk the Kennedys," and his face wore the half-embarrassed smile of an honest man preparing to make confidences. "When poor Mr. Quentin died, the place went to his two sisters in joint ownership. A very bad arrangement, as you can imagine. It isn't entailed, and I've always been pressing them to sell, but so far they won't hear of it. They both married Englishmen, so it will take a day or two to get in touch with them. One, Mrs. Stukely, lives in Devonshire. The other—Miss Katie that was—married Sir Francis Morewood, the general, and I hear that she's expected back in London next Monday from the Riviera. I'll wire and write first thing tomorrow morning. But you must give me a day or two."

Dickson felt himself waking up. His doubts about his own sanity were dissolving, for, as his mind reasoned, the factor

was prepared to do anything he asked—but only after a week had gone. What he was concerned with was the next few days.

“All the same I would like to have a look at the place tomorrow, even if nothing comes of it.”

Mr. Loudon looked seriously perplexed. “You will think me absurdly fussy, Mr. McCunn, but I must really beg of you to give up the idea. The Kennedys, as I have said, are—well, not exactly like other people, and I have the strictest orders not to let any one visit the house without their express leave. It sounds a ridiculous rule, but I assure you it’s as much as my job is worth to disregard it.”

“D’you mean to say not a soul is allowed inside the House?”

“Not a soul.”

“Well, Mr. Loudon, I’m going to tell you a queer thing, which I think you ought to know. When I was taking a walk the other night—your Belgian wouldn’t let me into the policies, but I went down the glen—what’s that they call it? the Garple Dean—I got round the back where the old ruin stands and I had a good look at the House. I tell you there was somebody in it.”

“It would be Spittal, who acts as caretaker.”

“It was not. It was a woman. I saw her on the verandah.”

The candid grey eyes were looking straight at Dickson, who managed to bring his own shy orbs to meet them. He thought that he detected a shade of hesitation. Then Mr. Loudon got up from his chair and stood on the hearthrug looking down at his visitor. He laughed, with some embarrassment, but ever so pleasantly.

“I really don’t know what you will think of me, Mr. McCunn. Here are you, coming to do us all a kindness, and lease that infernal white elephant, and here have I been steadily hoaxing you for the last five minutes. I humbly ask your pardon. Set it down to the loyalty of an old family lawyer. Now, I am going to tell you the truth and take you into our confidence, for I know we are safe with you. The Kennedys are—always have been—just a wee bit queer. Old inbred stock, you know. They will produce somebody like poor Mr. Quentin, who was as sane as you or me, but as a rule in every generation there is one member of the family—or more—who is just a little bit—” and he tapped his forehead. “Nothing violent, you understand, but just not quite ‘wise and world-like,’ as the old folk say. Well, there’s a certain old lady, an aunt of Mr. Quentin and his sisters, who has always been about tenpence in the shilling. Usually she lives at Bournemouth, but one of her crazes is a passion for Huntingtower, and the Kennedys have always humoured her and had her to stay every spring. When the House was shut up that became impossible, but this year she took such a craving to come back, that Lady Morewood asked me to arrange it. It had to be kept very quiet, but the poor old thing is perfectly harmless, and just sits and knits with her maid and looks out of the seaward windows. Now you see why I can’t take you there tomorrow. I have to get rid of the old lady, who in any case was travelling south early next week. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” said Dickson with some fervour. He had learned exactly what he wanted. The factor was telling him lies. Now he knew where to place Mr. Loudon.

He always looked back upon what followed as a very creditable piece of play-acting for a man who had small experience in that line.

“Is the old lady a wee wizened body, with a black cap and something like a white cashmere shawl round her shoulders?”

“You describe her exactly,” Mr. Loudon replied eagerly.

“That would explain the foreigners.”

“Of course. We couldn’t have natives who would make the thing the clash of the countryside.”

“Of course not. But it must be a difficult job to keep a business like that quiet. Any wandering policeman might start inquiries. And supposing the lady became violent?”

“Oh, there’s no fear of that. Besides, I’ve a position in this county—Deputy Fiscal and so forth—and a friend of the Chief Constable. I think I may be trusted to do a little private explaining if the need arose.”

“I see,” said Dickson. He saw, indeed, a great deal which would give him food for furious thought. “Well, I must just possess my soul in patience. Here’s my Glasgow address, and I look to you to send me a telegram whenever you’re ready for me. I’m at the Salutation to-night, and go home tomorrow with the first train. Wait a minute”—and he pulled out his watch—“there’s a train stops at Auchenlochan at 10.17. I think I’ll catch that. . . . Well, Mr. Loudon, I’m very much obliged

to you, and I'm glad to think that it'll not be long till we renew our acquaintance."

The factor accompanied him to the door, diffusing geniality. "Very pleased indeed to have met you. A pleasant journey and a quick return."

The street was still empty. Into a corner of the arches opposite the moon was shining, and Dickson retired thither to consult his map of the neighbourhood. He found what he wanted and, as he lifted his eyes, caught sight of a man coming down the causeway. Promptly he retired into the shadow and watched the new-comer. There could be no mistake about the figure; the bulk, the walk, the carriage of the head marked it for Dobson. The inn-keeper went slowly past the factor's house; then halted and retraced his steps; then, making sure that the street was empty, turned into the side lane which led to the garden.

This was what sailors call a cross-bearing, and strengthened Dickson's conviction. He delayed no longer, but hurried down the side street by which the north road leaves the town.

He had crossed the bridge of Lochan and was climbing the steep ascent which led to the heathy plateau separating that stream from the Garple before he had got his mind quite clear on the case. *First*, Loudon was in the plot, whatever it was; responsible for the details of the girl's imprisonment, but not the main author. That must be the Unknown who was still to come, from whom Spidel took his orders. Dobson was probably Loudon's special henchman, working directly under him. *Secondly*, the immediate object had been the jewels, and they were happily safe in the vaults of the incorruptible Mackintosh. But, *third*—and this only on Saskia's evidence—the worst danger to her began with the arrival of the Unknown. What could that be? Probably, kidnapping. He was prepared to believe anything of people like Bolsheviks. And, *fourth*, this danger was due within the next day or two. Loudon had been quite willing to let him into the house and to sack all the watchers within a week from that date. The natural and right thing was to summon the aid of the law, but, *fifth*, that would be a slow business with Loudon able to put spokes in the wheels and befog the authorities, and the mischief would be done before a single policeman showed his face in Dalquharter. Therefore, *sixth*, he and Heritage must hold the fort in the meantime, and he would send a wire to his lawyer, Mr. Caw, to get to work with the constabulary. *Seventh*, he himself was probably free from suspicion in both Loudon's and Dobson's minds as a harmless fool. But that freedom would not survive his reappearance in Dalquharter. He could say, to be sure, that he had come back to see his auntie, but that would not satisfy the watchers, since, so far as they knew, he was the only man outside the gang who was aware that people were dwelling in the House. They would not tolerate his presence in the neighbourhood.

He formulated his conclusions as if it were an ordinary business deal, and rather to his surprise was not conscious of any fear. As he pulled together the belt of his waterproof he felt the reassuring bulges in its pockets which were his pistol and cartridges. He reflected that it must be very difficult to miss with a pistol if you fired it at, say, three yards, and if there was to be shooting that would be his range. Mr. McCunn had stumbled on the precious truth that the best way to be rid of quaking knees is to keep a busy mind.

He crossed the ridge of the plateau and looked down on the Garple glen. There were the lights of Dalquharter—or rather a single light, for the inhabitants went early to bed. His intention was to seek quarters with Mrs. Morran, when his eye caught a gleam in a hollow of the moor a little to the east. He knew it for the camp-fire around which Dougal's warriors bivouacked. The notion came to him to go there instead, and hear the news of the day before entering the cottage. So he crossed the bridge, skirted a plantation of firs, and scrambled through the broom and heather in what he took to be the right direction.

The moon had gone down, and the quest was not easy. Dickson had come to the conclusion that he was on the wrong road, when he was summoned by a voice which seemed to arise out of the ground.

"Who goes there?"

"What's that you say?"

"Who goes there?" The point of a pole was held firmly against his chest.

"I'm Mr. McCunn, a friend of Dougal's."

"Stand, friend." The shadow before him whistled and another shadow appeared. "Report to the Chief that there's a man here, name o' McCunn, seekin' for him."

Presently the messenger returned with Dougal and a cheap lantern which he flashed in Dickson's face.

"Oh, it's you," said that leader, who had his jaw bound up as if he had the toothache. "What are ye doing back here?"

"To tell the truth, Dougal," was the answer, "I couldn't stay away. I was fair miserable when I thought of Mr. Heritage and you laddies left to yourselves. My conscience simply wouldn't let me stop at home, so here I am."

Dougal grunted, but clearly he approved, for from that moment he treated Dickson with a new respect. Formerly when he had referred to him at all it had been as "auld McCunn." Now it was "Mister McCunn." He was given rank as a worthy civilian ally.

The bivouac was a cheerful place in the wet night. A great fire of pine roots and old paling posts hissed in the fine rain, and around it crouched several urchins busy making oatmeal cakes in the embers. On one side a respectable lean-to had been constructed by nailing a plank to two fir-trees, running sloping poles thence to the ground, and thatching the whole with spruce branches and heather. On the other side two small dilapidated home-made tents were pitched. Dougal motioned his companion into the lean-to, where they had some privacy from the rest of the band.

"Well, what's your news?" Dickson asked. He noticed that the Chieftain seemed to have been comprehensively in the wars, for apart from the bandage on his jaw, he had numerous small cuts on his brow, and a great rent in one of his shirt sleeves. Also he appeared to be going lame, and when he spoke a new gap was revealed in his large teeth.

"Things," said Dougal solemnly, "has come to a bonny cripus. This very night we've been in a battle."

He spat fiercely, and the light of war burned in his eyes.

"It was the tinklers from the Garple Dean. They yokit on us about seven o'clock, just at the darkenin'. First they tried to bounce us. We weren't wanted here, they said, so we'd better clear. I telled them that it was them that wasn't wanted. 'Awa' to Finnick,' says I. 'D'ye think we take our orders from dirty ne'er-do-weels like you?' 'By God,' says they, 'we'll cut your lights out,' and then the battle started."

"What happened?" Dickson asked excitedly.

"They were four muckle men against six laddies, and they thought they had an easy job! Little they kenned the Gorbals Die-Hards! I had been expectin' something of the kind, and had made my plans. They first tried to pu' down our tents and burn them. I let them get within five yards, reservin' my fire. The first volley—stones from our hands and our cattles—halted them, and before they could recover three of us had got hold o' burnin' sticks frae the fire and were lammin' into them. We kinnled their claes, and they fell back swearin' and stampin' to get the fire out. Then I gave the word and we were on them wi' our poles, usin' the points accordin' to instructions. My orders was to keep a good distance, for if they had grippit one o' us he'd ha' been done for. They were roarin' mad by now, and twae had out their knives, but they couldn't do muckle, for it was gettin' dark, and they didn't ken the ground like us, and were aye trippin' and tumblin'. But they pressed us hard, and one o' them landed me an awful clype on the jaw. They were still aiming at our tents, and I saw that if they got near the fire again it would be the end o' us. So I blew my whistle for Thomas Yownie, who was in command o' the other half of us, with instructions to fall upon their rear. That brought Thomas up, and the tinklers had to face round about and fight a battle on two fronts. We charged them and they broke, and the last seen o' them they were coolin' their burns in the Garple."

"Well done, man. Had you many casualties?"

"We're a' a wee thing battered, but nothing to hurt. I'm the worst, for one o' them had a grip o' me for about three seconds, and Gosh! he was fierce."

"They're beaten off for the night, anyway?"

"Ay, for the night. But they'll come back, never fear. That's why I said that things had come to a cripus."

"What's the news from the House?"

"A quiet day, and no word o' Lean or Dobson."

Dickson nodded. "They were hunting me."

"Mr. Heritage has gone to bide in the Hoose. They were watchin' the Garple Dean, so I took him round by the Laver foot and up the rocks. He's a grand climber, yon. We fund a road up the rocks and got in by the verandy. Did ye ken that the lassie had a pistol? Well, she has, and it seems that Mr. Heritage is a good shot wi' a pistol, so there's some hope thereaways. . . . Are the jools safe?"

"Safe in the bank. But the jools were not the main thing."

Dougal nodded. "So I was thinkin'. The lassie wasn't muckle the easier for gettin' rid o' them. I didn't just quite

understand what she said to Mr. Heritage, for they were aye wanderin' into foreign langwidges, but it seems she's terrible feared o' somebody that may turn up any moment. What's the reason I can't say. She's maybe got a secret, or maybe it's just that she's ower bonny."

"That's the trouble," said Dickson and proceeded to recount his interview with the factor, to which Dougal gave close attention. "Now the way I read the thing is this. There's a plot to kidnap that lady, for some infernal purpose, and it depends on the arrival of some person or persons, and it's due to happen in the next day or two. If we try to work it through the police alone, they'll beat us, for Loudon will manage to hang the business up till it's too late. So we must take up the job ourselves. We must stand a siege, Mr. Heritage and me and you laddies, and for that purpose we'd better all keep together. It won't be extra easy to carry her off from all of us, and if they do manage it we'll stick to their heels. . . . Man, Dougal, isn't it a queer thing that whiles law-abiding folk have to make their own laws? . . . So my plan is that the lot of us get into the House and form a garrison. If you don't, the tinklers will come back and you'll no' beat them in the daylight."

"I doubt no'," said Dougal. "But what about our meat?"

"We must lay in provisions. We'll get what we can from Mrs. Morran, and I've left a big box of fancy things at Dalquharter station. Can you laddies manage to get it down here?"

Dougal reflected. "Ay, we can hire Mrs. Sempill's powny, the same that fetched our kit."

"Well, that's your job tomorrow. See, I'll write you a line to the station-master. And will you undertake to get it some way into the House?"

"There's just the one road open—by the rocks. It'll have to be done. It *can* be done."

"And I've another job. I'm writing this telegram to a friend in Glasgow who will put a spoke in Mr. Loudon's wheel. I want one of you to go to Kirkmichael to send it from the telegraph office there."

Dougal placed the wire to Mr. Caw in his bosom. "What about yourself? We want somebody outside to keep his eyes open. It's bad strawtegy to cut off your communications."

Dickson thought for a moment. "I believe you're right. I believe the best plan for me is to go back to Mrs. Morran's as soon as the old body's like to be awake. You can always get at me there, for it's easy to slip into her back kitchen without anybody in the village seeing you. . . . Yes, I'll do that, and you'll come and report developments to me. And now I'm for a bite and a pipe. It's hungry work travelling the country in the small hours."

"I'm going to introjuice ye to the rest o' us," said Dougal. "Here, men!" he called, and four figures rose from the side of the fire. As Dickson munched a sandwich he passed in review the whole company of the Gorbals Die-Hards, for the pickets were also brought in, two others taking their places. There was Thomas Yownie, the Chief of Staff, with a wrist wound up in the handkerchief which he had borrowed from his neck. There was a burly lad who wore trousers much too large for him, and who was known as Peer Pairson, a contraction presumably for Peter Paterson. After him came a lean tall boy who answered to the name of Napoleon. There was a midget of a child, desperately sooty in the face either from battle or from fire-tending, who was presented as Wee Jaikie. Last came the picket who had held his pole at Dickson's chest, a sandy-haired warrior with a snub nose and the mouth and jaw of a pug-dog. He was Old Bill, or in Dougal's parlance "Auld Bull."

The Chieftain viewed his scarred following with a grim content. "That's a tough lot for ye, Mr. McCunn. Used a' their days wi' sleepin' in coalrees and dunnies and dodgin' the polis. Ye'll no beat the Gorbals Die-Hards."

"You're right, Dougal," said Dickson. "There's just the six of you. If there were a dozen, I think this country would be needing some new kind of a government."



CHAPTER 8

HOW A MIDDLE-AGED CRUSADER ACCEPTED A CHALLENGE

The first cocks had just begun to crow and the clocks had not yet struck five when Dickson presented himself at Mrs. Morran's back door. That active woman had already been half an hour out of bed, and was drinking her morning cup of tea in the kitchen. She received him with cordiality, nay, with relief.

"Eh, sirs, but I'm glad to see ye back. Guid kens what's gaun on at the Hoose thae days. Mr. Heritage left here yestreen, creepin' round by dyke-sides and berry-busses like a wheasel. It's a mercy to get a responsible man in the place. I aye had a notion ye wad come back, for, thinks I, nevoy Dickson is no the yin to desert folk in trouble. . . . Whaur's my wee kist? . . . Lost, ye say. That's a peety, for it's been my cheese-box thae thirty year."

Dickson ascended to the loft, having announced his need of at least three hours' sleep. As he rolled into bed his mind was curiously at ease. He felt equipped for any call that might be made on him. That Mrs. Morran should welcome him back as a resource in need gave him a new assurance of manhood.

He woke between nine and ten to the sound of rain lashing against the garret window. As he picked his way out of the mazes of sleep and recovered the skein of his immediate past, he found to his disgust that he had lost his composure. All the flock of fears that had left him when, on the top of the Glasgow tram-car, he had made the great decision had flown back again and settled like black crows on his spirit. He was running a horrible risk and all for a whim. What business had he to be mixing himself up in things he did not understand? It might be a huge mistake, and then he would be a laughing stock; for a moment he repented his telegram to Mr. Caw. Then he recanted that suspicion; there could be no mistake, except the fatal one that he had taken on a job too big for him. He sat on the edge of his bed and shivered, with his eyes on the grey drift of rain. He would have felt more stout-hearted had the sun been shining.

He shuffled to the window and looked out. There in the village street was Dobson, and Dobson saw him. That was a bad blunder, for his reason told him that he should have kept his presence in Dalquharter hid as long as possible.

There was a knock at the cottage door, and presently Mrs. Morran appeared.

"It's the man frae the inn," she announced. "He's wantin' a word wi' ye. Speakin' verra ceevil, too."

"Tell him to come up," said Dickson. He might as well get the interview over. Dobson had seen Loudon and must know of their conversation. The sight of himself back again when he had pretended to be off to Glasgow would remove him effectually from the class of the unsuspected. He wondered just what line Dobson would take.

The innkeeper obtruded his bulk through the low door. His face was wrinkled into a smile, which nevertheless left the small eyes ungenial. His voice had a loud vulgar cordiality. Suddenly Dickson was conscious of a resemblance, a resemblance to somebody whom he had recently seen. It was Loudon. There was the same thrusting of the chin forward, the same odd cheek-bones, the same unctuous heartiness of speech. The innkeeper, well washed and polished and dressed, would be no bad copy of the factor. They must be near kin, perhaps brothers.

"Good morning to you, Mr. McCunn. Man, it's pitifu' weather, and just when the farmers are wanting a dry seed-bed. What brings ye back here? Ye travel the country like a drover."

"Oh, I'm a free man now and I took a fancy to this place. An idle body has nothing to do but please himself."

"I hear ye're taking a lease of Huntingtower?"

"Now who told you that?"

"Just the clash of the place. Is it true?"

Dickson looked sly and a little annoyed.

"I maybe had half a thought of it, but I'll thank you not to repeat the story. It's a big house for a plain man like me, and I haven't properly inspected it."

"Oh, I'll keep mum, never fear. But if ye've that sort of notion, I can understand you not being able to keep away from the place."

"That's maybe the fact," Dickson admitted.

"Well! It's just on that point I want a word with you." The innkeeper seated himself unbidden on the chair which held Dickson's modest raiment. He leaned forward and with a coarse forefinger tapped Dickson's pyjama-clad knees. "I can't have ye wandering about the place. I'm very sorry, but I've got my orders from Mr. Loudon. So if you think that by bidin' here ye can see more of the House and the policies, ye're wrong, Mr. McCunn. It can't be allowed, for we're no' ready for ye yet. D'ye understand? That's Mr. Loudon's orders. . . . Now, would it not be a far better plan if ye went back to Glasgow and came back in a week's time? I'm thinking of your own comfort, Mr. McCunn."

Dickson was cogitating hard. This man was clearly instructed to get rid of him at all costs for the next few days. The neighbourhood had to be cleared for some black business. The tinklers had been deputed to drive out the Gorbals Die-Hards, and as for Heritage they seemed to have lost track of him. He, Dickson, was now the chief object of their care. But what could Dobson do if he refused? He dared not show his true hand. Yet he might, if sufficiently irritated. It became Dickson's immediate object to get the innkeeper to reveal himself by rousing his temper. He did not stop to consider the policy of this course; he imperatively wanted things cleared up and the issue made plain.

"I'm sure I'm much obliged to you for thinking so much about my comfort," he said in a voice into which he hoped he had insinuated a sneer. "But I'm bound to say you're awful suspicious folk about here. You needn't be feared for your old policies. There's plenty of nice walks about the roads, and I want to explore the sea-coast."

The last words seemed to annoy the innkeeper. "That's no' allowed either," he said. "The shore's as private as the policies. . . . Well, I wish ye joy tramping the roads in the glaur."

"It's a queer thing," said Dickson meditatively, "that you should keep an hotel and yet be set on discouraging people from visiting this neighbourhood. I tell you what, I believe that hotel of yours is all sham. You've some other business, you and these lodgekeepers, and in my opinion it's not a very creditable one."

"What d'ye mean?" asked Dobson sharply.

"Just what I say. You must expect a body to be suspicious, if you treat him as you're treating me." Loudon must have told this man the story with which he had been fobbed off about the half-witted Kennedy relative. Would Dobson refer to that?

The innkeeper had an ugly look on his face, but he controlled his temper with an effort. "There's no cause for suspicion," he said. "As far as I'm concerned it's all honest and aboveboard."

"It doesn't look like it. It looks as if you were hiding something up in the House which you don't want me to see."

Dobson jumped from his chair, his face pale with anger. A man in pyjamas on a raw morning does not feel at his bravest, and Dickson quailed under the expectation of assault. But even in his fright he realised that Loudon could not have told Dobson the tale of the half-witted lady. The last remark had cut clean through all camouflage and reached the quick.

"What the hell d'ye mean?" he cried. "Ye're a spy, are ye? Ye fat little fool, for two cents I'd wring your neck."

Now it is an odd trait of certain mild people that a suspicion of threat, a hint of bullying, will rouse some unsuspected obstinacy deep down in their souls. The insolence of the man's speech woke a quiet but efficient little devil in Dickson.

"That's a bonny tone to adopt in addressing a gentleman. If you've nothing to hide what way are you so touchy? I can't be a spy unless there's something to spy on."

The innkeeper pulled himself together. He was apparently acting on instructions, and had not yet come to the end of them. He made an attempt at a smile.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon if I spoke too hot. But it nettled me to hear ye say that. . . . I'll be quite frank with ye, Mr. McCunn, and, believe me, I'm speaking in your best interests. I give ye my word there's nothing wrong up at the House. I'm on the side of the law, and when I tell ye the whole story ye'll admit it. But I can't tell it ye yet. . . . This is a wild, lonely bit and very few folk bide in it. And these are wild times, when a lot of queer things happen that never get into the papers. I tell ye it's for your own good to leave Dalquharter for the present. More I can't say, but I ask ye to look at it as a sensible man. Ye're one that's accustomed to a quiet life and no' meant for rough work. Ye'll do no good if you stay, and, maybe, ye'll land yourself in bad trouble."

"Mercy on us!" Dickson exclaimed. "What is it you're expecting? Sinn Fein?"

The innkeeper nodded. "Something like that."

"Did you ever hear the like? I never did think much of the Irish."

"Then ye'll take my advice and go home? Tell ye what, I'll drive ye to the station."

Dickson got up from the bed, found his new safety-razor and began to strop it. "No, I think I'll bide. If you're right there'll be more to see than glaury roads."

"I'm warning ye, fair and honest. Ye . . . can't . . . be . . . allowed . . . to . . . stay . . . here!"

"Well, I never!" said Dickson. "Is there any law in Scotland, think you, that forbids a man to stop a day or two with his auntie?"

"Ye'll stay?"

"Ay, I'll stay."

"By God, we'll see about that."

For a moment Dickson thought that he would be attacked, and he measured the distance that separated him from the peg whence hung his waterproof with the pistol in its pocket. But the man restrained himself and moved to the door. There he stood and cursed him with a violence and a venom which Dickson had not believed possible. The full hand was on the table now.

"Ye wee pot-bellied, pig-heided Glasgow grocer," (I paraphrase), "would *you* set up to defy me? I tell ye, I'll make ye rue the day ye were born." His parting words were a brilliant sketch of the maltreatment in store for the body of the defiant one.

"Impident dog," said Dickson without heat. He noted with pleasure that the innkeeper hit his head violently against the low lintel, and, missing a step, fell down the loft stairs into the kitchen, where Mrs. Morran's tongue could be heard speeding him trenchantly from the premises.

Left to himself, Dickson dressed leisurely, and by and by went down to the kitchen and watched his hostess making broth. The fracas with Dobson had done him all the good in the world, for it had cleared the problem of dubieties and had put an edge on his temper. But he realised that it made his continued stay in the cottage undesirable. He was now the focus of all suspicion, and the innkeeper would be as good as his word and try to drive him out of the place by force. Kidnapping, most likely, and that would be highly unpleasant, besides putting an end to his usefulness. Clearly he must join the others. The soul of Dickson hungered at the moment for human companionship. He felt that his courage would be sufficient for any team-work, but might waver again if he were left to play a lone hand.

He lunched nobly off three plates of Mrs. Morran's kail—an early lunch, for that lady, having breakfasted at five, partook of the midday meal about eleven. Then he explored her library, and settled himself by the fire with a volume of Covenanting tales, entitled *Gleanings among the Mountains*. It was a most practical work for one in his position, for it told how various eminent saints of that era escaped the attention of Claverhouse's dragoons. Dickson stored up in his memory several of the incidents in case they should come in handy. He wondered if any of his forbears had been Covenanters; it comforted him to think that some old progenitor might have hunkered behind turf walls and been chased for his life in the heather. "Just like me," he reflected. "But the dragoons weren't foreigners, and there was a kind of decency about Claverhouse too."

About four o'clock Dougal presented himself in the back kitchen. He was an even wilder figure than usual, for his bare legs were mud to the knees, his kilt and shirt clung sopping to his body, and, having lost his hat, his wet hair was plastered over his eyes. Mrs. Morran said, not unkindly, that he looked "like a wull-cat glowerin' through a whin buss."

"How are you, Dougal?" Dickson asked genially. "Is the peace of nature smoothing out the creases in your poor little soul?"

"What's that ye say?"

"Oh, just what I heard a man say in Glasgow. How have you got on?"

"Not so bad. Your telegram was sent this mornin'. Old Bill took it in to Kirkmichael. That's the first thing. Second, Thomas Yownie has took a party to get down the box from the station. He got Mrs. Sempill's powny and he took the box ayont the Laver by the ford at the herd's hoose and got it on to the shore maybe a mile ayont Laverfoot. He managed to get the machine up as far as the water, but he could get no farther, for ye'll no' get a machine over the wee waterfa' just before the Laver ends in the sea. So he sent one o' the men back with it to Mrs. Sempill, and, since the box was ower heavy to carry, he opened it and took the stuff across in bits. It's a' safe in the hole at the foot o' the Huntingtower rocks, and he

reports that the rain has done it no harm. Thomas has made a good job of it. Ye'll no fickle Thomas Yownie."

"And what about your camp on the moor?"

"It was broke up afore daylight. Some of our things we've got with us, and most is hid near at hand. The tents are in the auld wife's henhouse," and he jerked his disreputable head in the direction of the back door.

"Have the tinklers been back?"

"Ay. They turned up about ten o'clock, no doubt intendin' murder. I left Wee Jaikie to watch developments. They fund him sittin' on a stone, greetin' sore. When he saw them, he up and started to run, and they cried on him to stop, but he wouldn't listen. Then they cried out where were the rest, and he telled them they were feared for their lives and had run away. After that they offered to catch him, but ye'll no' catch Jaikie in a hurry. When he had run round about them till they were wappit, he out wi' his catty and got one o' them on the lug. Syne he made for the Laverfoot and reported."

"Man, Dougal, you've managed fine. Now I've something to tell you," and Dickson recounted his interview with the innkeeper. "I don't think it's safe for me to bide here, and if I did, I wouldn't be any use, hiding in cellars and such like, and not daring to stir a foot. I'm coming with you to the House. Now tell me how to get there."

Dougal agreed to this view. "There's been nothing doing at the Hoose the day, but they're keepin' a close watch on the policies. The cripus may come any moment. There's no doubt, Mr. McCunn, that ye're in danger, for they'll serve you as the tinklers tried to serve us. Listen to me. Ye'll walk up the station road, and take the second turn on your left, a wee grass road that'll bring ye to the ford at the herd's hoose. Cross the Laver—there's a plank bridge—and take straight across the moor in the direction of the peakit hill they call Grey Carrick. Ye'll come to a big burn, which ye must follow till ye get to the shore. Then turn south, keepin' the water's edge till ye reach the Laver, where you'll find one o' us to show ye the rest of the road. . . . I must be off now, and I advise ye not to be slow of startin', for wi' this rain the water's risin' quick. It's a mercy it's such coarse weather, for it spoils the veesibility."

"Auntie Phemie," said Dickson a few minutes later, "will you oblige me by coming for a short walk?"

"The man's daft," was the answer.

"I'm not. I'll explain if you'll listen. . . . You see," he concluded, "the dangerous bit for me is just the mile out of the village. They'll no' be so likely to try violence if there's somebody with me that could be a witness. Besides, they'll maybe suspect less if they just see a decent body out for a breath of air with his auntie."

Mrs. Morran said nothing, but retired, and returned presently equipped for the road. She had indued her feet with goloshes and pinned up her skirts till they looked like some demented Paris mode. An ancient bonnet was tied under her chin with strings, and her equipment was completed by an exceedingly smart tortoise-shell-handled umbrella, which, she explained, had been a Christmas present from her son.

"I'll convoy ye as far as the Laverfoot herd's," she announced. "The wife's a freend o' mine and will set me a bit on the road back. Ye needna fash for me. I'm used to a' weathers."

The rain had declined to a fine drizzle, but a tearing wind from the south-west scoured the land. Beyond the shelter of the trees the moor was a battle-ground of gusts which swept the puddles into spindrift and gave to the stagnant bog-pools the appearance of running water. The wind was behind the travellers, and Mrs. Morran, like a full-rigged ship, was hustled before it, so that Dickson, who had linked arms with her, was sometimes compelled to trot.

"However will you get home, mistress?" he murmured anxiously.

"Fine. The wind will fa' at the darkenin'. This'll be a sair time for ships at sea."

Not a soul was about, as they breasted the ascent of the station road and turned down the grassy bypath to the Laverfoot herd's. The herd's wife saw them from afar and was at the door to receive them.

"Megsty! Phemie Morran!" she shrilled. "Wha wad ettle to see ye on a day like this? John's awa' at Dumfries, buyin' tups. Come in, the baith o' ye. The kettle's on the boil."

"This is my nevoy Dickson," said Mrs. Morran. "He's gaun to stretch his legs ayont the burn, and come back by the Ayr road. But I'll be blithe to tak' my tea wi' ye, Elspeth. . . . Now, Dickson, I'll expect ye back on the chap o' seeven."

He crossed the rising stream on a swaying plank and struck into the moorland, as Dougal had ordered, keeping the bald top of Grey Carrick before him. In that wild place with the tempest battling overhead he had no fear of human enemies. Steadily he covered the ground, till he reached the west-flowing burn that was to lead him to the shore. He found

it an entertaining companion, swirling into black pools, foaming over little falls, and lying in dark canal-like stretches in the flats. Presently it began to descend steeply in a narrow green gully, where the going was bad, and Dickson, weighted with pack and waterproof, had much ado to keep his feet on the sodden slopes. Then, as he rounded a crook of hill, the ground fell away from his feet, the burn swept in a water-slide to the boulders of the shore, and the storm-tossed sea lay before him.

It was now that he began to feel nervous. Being on the coast again seemed to bring him inside his enemies' territory, and had not Dobson specifically forbidden the shore? It was here that they might be looking for him. He felt himself out of condition, very wet and very warm, but he attained a creditable pace, for he struck a road which had been used by manure-carts collecting seaweed. There were faint marks on it, which he took to be the wheels of Dougal's "machine" carrying the provision-box. Yes. On a patch of gravel there was a double set of tracks, which showed how it had returned to Mrs. Sempill. He was exposed to the full force of the wind, and the strenuousness of his bodily exertions kept his fears quiescent, till the cliffs on his left sunk suddenly and the valley of the Laver lay before him.

A small figure rose from the shelter of a boulder, the warrior who bore the name of Old Bill. He saluted gravely.

"Ye're just in time. The water has rose three inches since I've been here. Ye'd better strip."

Dickson removed his boots and socks. "Breeks, too," commanded the boy; "there's deep holes ayont thae stanes."

Dickson obeyed, feeling very chilly, and rather improper. "Now, follow me," said the guide. The next moment he was stepping delicately on very sharp pebbles, holding on to the end of the scout's pole, while an icy stream ran to his knees.

The Laver as it reaches the sea broadens out to the width of fifty or sixty yards and tumbles over little shelves of rock to meet the waves. Usually it is shallow, but now it was swollen to an average depth of a foot or more, and there were deeper pockets. Dickson made the passage slowly and miserably, sometimes crying out with pain as his toes struck a sharper flint, once or twice sitting down on a boulder to blow like a whale, once slipping on his knees and wetting the strange excrescence about his middle, which was his tucked-up waterproof. But the crossing was at length achieved, and on a patch of sea-pinks he dried himself perfunctorily and hastily put on his garments. Old Bill, who seemed to be regardless of wind or water, squatted beside him and whistled through his teeth.

Above them hung the sheer cliffs of the Huntingtower cape, so sheer that a man below was completely hidden from any watcher on the top. Dickson's heart fell, for he did not profess to be a cragman and had indeed a horror of precipitous places. But as the two scrambled along the foot, they passed deep-cut gullies and fissures, most of them unclimbable, but offering something more hopeful than the face. At one of these Old Bill halted and led the way up and over a chaos of fallen rock and loose sand. The grey weather had brought on the dark prematurely, and in the half-light it seemed that this ravine was blocked by an unscalable mass of rock. Here Old Bill whistled, and there was a reply from above. Round the corner of the mass came Dougal.

"Up here," he commanded. "It was Mr. Heritage that fund this road."

Dickson and his guide squeezed themselves between the mass and the cliff up a spout of stones, and found themselves in an upper storey of the gully, very steep but practicable even for one who was no cragman. This in turn ran out against a wall up which there led only a narrow chimney. At the foot of this were two of the Die-Hards, and there were others above, for a rope hung down by the aid of which a package was even now ascending.

"That's the top," said Dougal, pointing to the rim of sky, "and that's the last o' the supplies." Dickson noticed that he spoke in a whisper, and that all the movements of the Die-Hards were judicious and stealthy. "Now, it's your turn. Take a good grip o' the rope, and ye'll find plenty holes for your feet. It's no more than ten yards and ye're well held above."

Dickson made the attempt and found it easier than he expected. The only trouble was his pack and waterproof, which had a tendency to catch on jags of rock. A hand was reached out to him, he was pulled over the edge, and then pushed down on his face.

When he lifted his head Dougal and the others had joined him and the whole company of the Die-Hards was assembled on a patch of grass which was concealed from the landward view by a thicket of hazels. Another, whom he recognised as Heritage, was coiling up the rope.

"We'd better get all the stuff into the old Tower for the present," Heritage was saying. "It's too risky to move it into the House now. We'll need the thickest darkness for that, after the moon is down. Quick, for the beastly thing will be rising soon and before that we must all be indoors."

Then he turned to Dickson, and gripped his hand. "You're a high class of sportsman, Dogson. And I think you're just in time."

"Are they due to-night?" Dickson asked in an excited whisper, faint against the wind.

"I don't know about They. But I've got a notion that some devilish queer things will happen before tomorrow morning."



CHAPTER 9

THE FIRST BATTLE OF THE CRUIVES

The old keep of Huntingtower stood some three hundred yards from the edge of the cliffs, a gnarled wood of hazels and oaks protecting it from the sea-winds. It was still in fair preservation, having till twenty years before been an adjunct of the house of Dalquharter, and used as kitchen, buttery and servants' quarters. There had been residential wings attached, dating from the mid-eighteenth century, but these had been pulled down and used for the foundations of the new mansion. Now it stood a lonely shell, its three storeys, each a single great room connected by a spiral stone staircase, being dedicated to lumber and the storage of produce. But it was dry and intact, its massive oak doors defied any weapon short of artillery, its narrow unglazed windows would scarcely have admitted a cat—a place portentously strong, gloomy, but yet habitable.

Dougal opened the main door with a massy key. "The lassie fund it," he whispered to Dickson, "somewhere about the kitchen—and I guessed it was the key o' this castle. I was thinkin' that if things got ower hot it would be a good plan to flit here. Change our base, like." The Chieftain's occasional studies in war had trained his tongue to a military jargon.

In the ground room lay a fine assortment of oddments, including old bedsteads and servants' furniture, and what looked like ancient discarded deer-skin rugs. Dust lay thick over everything, and they heard the scurry of rats. A dismal place, indeed, but Dickson felt only its strangeness. The comfort of being back again among allies had quickened his spirit to an adventurous mood. The old lords of Huntingtower had once quarrelled and revelled and plotted here, and now here he was at the same game. Present and past joined hands over the gulf of years. The saga of Huntingtower was not ended.

The Die-Hards had brought with them their scanty bedding, their lanterns and camp kettles. These and the provisions from Mearns Street were stowed away in a corner.

"Now for the Hoose, men," said Dougal. They stole over the downs to the shrubbery, and Dickson found himself almost in the same place as he had lain in three days before, watching a dusky lawn, while the wet earth soaked through his trouser knees and the drip from the azaleas trickled over his spine. Two of the boys fetched the ladder and placed it against the verandah wall. Heritage first, then Dickson darted across the lawn and made the ascent. The six scouts followed, and the ladder was pulled up and hidden among the verandah litter. For a second the whole eight stood still and listened. There was no sound except the murmur of the now falling wind and the melancholy hooting of owls. The garrison had entered the Dark Tower.

A council in whispers was held in the garden room.

"Nobody must show a light," Heritage observed. "It mustn't be known that we're here. Only the Princess will have a lamp. Yes"—this in answer to Dickson, "she knows that we're coming—you too. We'll hunt for quarters later upstairs. You scouts, you must picket every possible entrance. The windows are safe, I think, for they are locked from the inside. So is the main door. But there's the verandah door, of which they have a key, and the back door beside the kitchen, and I'm not at all sure that there's not a way in by the boiler-house. You understand. We're holding this place against all comers. We must barricade the danger points. The headquarters of the garrison will be in the hall, where a scout must be always on duty. You've all got whistles? Well, if there's an attempt on the verandah door the picket will whistle once, if at the back door twice, if anywhere else three times, and it's everybody's duty, except the picket who whistles, to get back to the hall for orders."

"That's so," assented Dougal.

"If the enemy forces an entrance we must overpower him. Any means you like. Sticks or fists, and remember that if it's a scrap in the dark make for the man's throat. I expect you little devils have eyes like cats. The scoundrels must be kept away from the ladies at all costs. If the worst comes to the worst, the Princess has a revolver."

"So have I," said Dickson. "I got it in Glasgow."

"The deuce you have! Can you use it?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you can hand it over to me, if you like. But it oughtn't to come to shooting, if it's only the three of them. The

eight of us should be able to manage three and one of them lame. If the others turn up—well, God help us all! But we've got to make sure of one thing, that no one lays hands on the Princess so long as there's one of us left alive to hit out."

"Ye needn't be feared for that," said Dougal. There was no light in the room, but Dickson was certain that the morose face of the Chieftain was lit with unholy joy.

"Then off with you. Mr. McCunn and I will explain matters to the ladies."

When they were alone, Heritage's voice took a different key. "We're in for it, Dogson, old man. There's no doubt these three scoundrels expect reinforcements at any moment, and with them will be one who is the devil incarnate. He's the only thing on earth that that brave girl fears. It seems he is in love with her and has pestered her for years. She hated the sight of him, but he wouldn't take no, and being a powerful man—rich and well-born and all the rest of it—she had a desperate time. I gather he was pretty high in favour with the old Court. Then when the Bolsheviks started he went over to them, like plenty of other grandees, and now he's one of their chief brains—none of your callow revolutionaries, but a man of the world, a kind of genius, she says, who can hold his own anywhere. She believes him to be in this country, and only waiting the right moment to turn up. Oh, it sounds ridiculous, I know, in Britain in the twentieth century, but I learned in the war that civilisation anywhere is a very thin crust. There are a hundred ways by which that kind of fellow could bamboozle all our law and police and spirit her away. That's the kind of crowd we have to face."

"Did she say what he was like in appearance?"

"A face like an angel—a lost angel, she says."

Dickson suddenly had an inspiration.

"D'you mind the man you said was an Australian—at Kirkmichael? I thought myself he was a foreigner. Well, he was asking for a place he called Darkwater, and there's no such place in the countryside. I believe he meant Dalquharter. I believe he's the man she's feared of."

A gasped "By Jove!" came from the darkness. "Dogson, you've hit it. That was five days ago, and he must have got on the right trail by this time. He'll be here to-night. That's why the three have been lying so quiet today. Well, we'll go through with it, even if we haven't a dog's chance. Only I'm sorry that you should be mixed up in such a hopeless business."

"Why me more than you?"

"Because it's all pure pride and joy for me to be here. Good God, I wouldn't be elsewhere for worlds. It's the great hour of my life. I would gladly die for her."

"Tuts, that's no' the way to talk, man. Time enough to speak about dying when there's no other way out. I'm looking at this thing in a business way. We'd better be seeing the ladies."

They groped into the pitchy hall, somewhere in which a Die-Hard was on picket, and down the passage to the smoking-room. Dickson blinked in the light of a very feeble lamp and Heritage saw that his hands were cumbered with packages. He deposited them on a sofa and made a ducking bow.

"I've come back, Mem, and glad to be back. Your jools are in safe keeping, and not all the blagyrds in creation could get at them. I've come to tell you to cheer up—a stout heart to a stey brae, as the old folk say. I'm handling this affair as a business proposition, so don't be feared, Mem. If there are enemies seeking you, there's friends on the road too. . . . Now, you'll have had your dinner, but you'd maybe like a little dessert."

He spread before them a huge box of chocolates, the best that Mearns Street could produce, a box of candied fruits, and another of salted almonds. Then from his hideously overcrowded pockets he took another box, which he offered rather shyly. "That's some powder for your complexion. They tell me that ladies find it useful whiles."

The girl's strained face watched him at first in mystification, and then broke slowly into a smile. Youth came back to it, the smile changed to a laugh, a low rippling laugh like far-away bells. She took both his hands.

"You are kind," she said, "you are kind and brave. You are a dear."

And then she kissed him.

Now, as far as Dickson could remember, no one had ever kissed him except his wife. The light touch of her lips on his forehead was like the pressing of an electric button which explodes some powerful charge and alters the face of a countryside. He blushed scarlet; then he wanted to cry; then he wanted to sing. An immense exhilaration seized him, and I am certain that if at that moment the serried ranks of Bolshevism had appeared in the doorway, Dickson would have

hurled himself upon them with a joyful shout.

Cousin Eugénie was earnestly eating chocolates, but Saskia had other business.

"You will hold the house?" she asked.

"Please God, yes," said Heritage. "I look at it this way. The time is very near when your three gaolers expect the others, their masters. They have not troubled you in the past two days as they threatened, because it was not worth while. But they won't want to let you out of their sight in the final hours, so they will almost certainly come here to be on the spot. Our object is to keep them out and confuse their plans. Somewhere in this neighbourhood, probably very near, is the man you fear most. If we nonplus the three watchers, they'll have to revise their policy, and that means a delay, and every hour's delay is a gain. Mr. McCunn has found out that the factor Loudon is in the plot, and he has purchase enough, it seems, to blanket for a time any appeal to the law. But Mr. McCunn has taken steps to circumvent him, and in twenty-four hours we should have help here."

"I do not want the help of your law," the girl interrupted. "It will entangle me."

"Not a bit of it," said Dickson cheerfully. "You see, Mem, they've clean lost track of the jools, and nobody knows where they are but me. I'm a truthful man, but I'll lie like a packman if I'm asked questions. For the rest, it's a question of kidnapping, I understand, and that's a thing that's not to be allowed. My advice is to go to our beds and get a little sleep while there's a chance of it. The Gorbals Die-Hards are grand watch-dogs."

This view sounded so reasonable that it was at once acted upon. The ladies' chamber was next door to the smoking-room—what had been the old schoolroom. Heritage arranged with Saskia that the lamp was to be kept burning low, and that on no account were they to move unless summoned by him. Then he and Dickson made their way to the hall, where there was a faint glimmer from the moon in the upper unshuttered windows—enough to reveal the figure of Wee Jaikie on duty at the foot of the staircase. They ascended to the second floor, where, in a large room above the hall, Heritage had bestowed his pack. He had managed to open a fold of the shutters, and there was sufficient light to see two big mahogany bedsteads without mattresses or bedclothes, and wardrobes and chests of drawers sheeted in holland. Outside the wind was rising again, but the rain had stopped. Angry watery clouds scurried across the heavens.

Dickson made a pillow of his waterproof, stretched himself on one of the bedsteads and, so quiet was his conscience and so weary his body from the buffetings of the past days, was almost instantly asleep. It seemed to him that he had scarcely closed his eyes when he was awakened by Dougal's hand pinching his shoulder. He gathered that the moon was setting, for the room was pitchy dark.

"The three o' them is approachin' the kitchen door," whispered the Chieftain. "I seen them from a spy-hole I made out o' a ventilator."

"Is it barricaded?" asked Heritage, who had apparently not been asleep.

"Ay, but I've thought o' a far better plan. Why should we keep them out? They'll be safer inside. Listen! We might manage to get them in one at a time. If they can't get in at the kitchen door, they'll send one o' them round to get in by another door and open to them. That gives us a chance to get them separated, and lock them up. There's walth o' closets and hidy-holes all over the place, each with good doors and good keys to them. Supposin' we get the three o' them shut up—the others, when they come, will have nobody to guide them. Of course some time or other the three will break out, but it may be ower late for them. At present we're besieged and they're roamin' the country. Would it no' be far better if they were the ones lockit up and we were goin' loose?"

"Supposing they don't come in one at a time?" Dickson objected.

"We'll make them," said Dougal firmly. "There's no time to waste. Are ye for it?"

"Yes," said Heritage. "Who's at the kitchen door?"

"Peter Paterson. I told him no' to whistle, but to wait on me. . . . Keep your boots off. Ye're better in your stockin' feet. Wait you in the hall and see ye're well hidden, for likely whoever comes in will have a lantern. Just you keep quiet unless I give ye a cry. I've planned it a' out, and we're ready for them."

Dougal disappeared, and Dickson and Heritage, with their boots tied round their necks by their laces, crept out to the upper landing. The hall was impenetrably dark, but full of voices, for the wind was talking in the ceiling beams, and murmuring through the long passages. The walls creaked and muttered and little bits of plaster fluttered down. The noise was an advantage for the game of hide-and-seek they proposed to play, but it made it hard to detect the enemy's approach.

Dickson, in order to get properly wakened, adventured as far as the smoking-room. It was black with night, but below the door of the adjacent room a faint line of light showed where the Princess's lamp was burning. He advanced to the window, and heard distinctly a foot on the gravel path that led to the verandah. This sent him back to the hall in search of Dougal, whom he encountered in the passage. That boy could certainly see in the dark, for he caught Dickson's wrist without hesitation.

"We've got Spittal in the wine-cellar," he whispered triumphantly. "The kitchen door was barricaded, and when they tried it, it wouldn't open. 'Bide here,' says Dobson to Spittal, 'and we'll go round by another door and come back and open to ye.' So off they went, and by that time Peter Paterson and me had the barricade down. As we expected, Spittal tried the key again and it opens quite easy. He comes in and locks it behind him, and, Dobson having took away the lantern, he gropes his way very carefu' towards the kitchen. There's a point where the wine-cellar door and the scullery door are aside each other. He should have taken the second, but I had it shut so he takes the first. Peter Paterson gave him a wee shove and he fell down the two-three steps into the cellar, and we turned the key on him. Yon cellar has a grand door and no windies."

"And Dobson and Léon are at the verandah door? With a light?"

"Thomas Yownie's on duty there. Ye can trust him. Ye'll no fickle Thomas Yownie."

The next minutes were for Dickson a delirium of excitement not unpleasantly shot with flashes of doubt and fear. As a child he had played hide-and-seek, and his memory had always cherished the delights of the game. But how marvellous to play it thus in a great empty house, at dark of night, with the heaven filled with tempest, and with death or wounds as the stakes!

He took refuge in a corner where a tapestry curtain and the side of a Dutch awmry gave him shelter, and from where he stood he could see the garden-room and the beginning of the tiled passage which led to the verandah door. That is to say, he could have seen these things if there had been any light, which there was not. He heard the soft flitting of bare feet, for a delicate sound is often audible in a din when a loud noise is obscured. Then a gale of wind blew towards him, as from an open door, and far away gleamed the flickering light of a lantern.

Suddenly the light disappeared and there was a clatter on the floor and a breaking of glass. Either the wind or Thomas Yownie.

The verandah door was shut, a match spluttered and the lantern was relit. Dobson and Léon came into the hall, both clad in long mackintoshes which glistened from the weather. Dobson halted and listened to the wind howling in the upper spaces. He cursed it bitterly, looked at his watch, and then made an observation which woke the liveliest interest in Dickson lurking beside the awmry and Heritage ensconced in the shadow of a window-seat.

"He's late. He should have been here five minutes syne. It would be a dirty road for his car."

So the Unknown was coming that night. The news made Dickson the more resolved to get the watchers under lock and key before reinforcements arrived, and so put grit in their wheels. Then his party must escape—flee anywhere so long as it was far from Dalquharter.

"You stop here," said Dobson, "I'll go down and let Spidel in. We want another lamp. Get the one that the women use and for God's sake get a move on."

The sound of his feet died in the kitchen passage and then rung again on the stone stairs. Dickson's ear of faith heard also the soft patter of naked feet as the Die-Hards preceded and followed him. He was delivering himself blind and bound into their hands.

For a minute or two there was no sound but the wind, which had found a loose chimney cowl on the roof and screwed out of it an odd sound like the drone of a bagpipe. Dickson, unable to remain any longer in one place, moved into the centre of the hall, believing that Léon had gone to the smoking-room. It was a dangerous thing to do, for suddenly a match was lit a yard from him. He had the sense to drop low, and so was out of the main glare of the light. The man with the match apparently had no more, judging by his execrations. Dickson stood stock still, longing for the wind to fall so that he might hear the sound of the fellow's boots on the stone floor. He gathered that they were moving towards the smoking-room.

"Heritage," he whispered as loud as he dared, but there was no answer.

Then suddenly a moving body collided with him. He jumped a step back and then stood at attention, "Is that you,

Dobson?" a voice asked.

Now behold the occasional advantage of a nickname. Dickson thought he was being addressed as "Dogson" after the Poet's fashion. Had he dreamed it was Léon he would not have replied, but fluttered off into the shadows and so missed a piece of vital news.

"Ay, it's me," he whispered.

His voice and accent were Scotch, like Dobson's, and Léon suspected nothing.

"I do not like this wind," he grumbled. "The Captain's letter said at dawn, but there is no chance of the Danish brig making your little harbour in this weather. She must lie off and land the men by boats. That I do not like. It is too public."

The news—tremendous news, for it told that the new-comers would come by sea, which had never before entered Dickson's head—so interested him that he stood dumb and ruminating. The silence made the Belgian suspect; he put out a hand and felt a waterproofed arm which might have been Dobson's. But the height of the shoulder proved that it was not the burly innkeeper. There was an oath, a quick movement, and Dickson went down with a knee on his chest and two hands at his throat.

"Heritage," he gasped. "Help!"

There was a sound of furniture scraped violently on the floor. A gurgle from Dickson served as a guide, and the Poet suddenly cascaded over the combatants. He felt for a head, found Léon's, and gripped the neck so savagely that the owner loosened his hold on Dickson. The last-named found himself being buffeted violently by heavy-shod feet which seemed to be manoeuvring before an unseen enemy. He rolled out of the road and encountered another pair of feet, this time unshod. Then came a sound of a concussion, as if metal or wood had struck some part of a human frame, and then a stumble and fall.

After that a good many things all seemed to happen at once. There was a sudden light, which showed Léon blinking with a short loaded life-preserver in his hand, and Heritage prone in front of him on the floor. It also showed Dickson the figure of Dougal, and more than one Die-Hard in the background. The light went out as suddenly as it had appeared. There was a whistle, and a hoarse "Come on, men," and then for two seconds there was a desperate silent combat. It ended with Léon's head meeting the floor so violently that its possessor became oblivious of further proceedings. He was dragged into a cubby-hole, which had once been used for coats and rugs, and the door locked on him. Then the light sprang forth again. It revealed Dougal and five Die-Hards, somewhat the worse for wear; it revealed also Dickson squatted with outspread waterproof very like a sitting hen.

"Where's Dobson?" he asked.

"In the boiler-house," and for once Dougal's gravity had laughter in it. "Govey Dick! but yon was a fecht! Me and Peter Paterson and Wee Jaikie started it, but it was the whole company afore the end. Are ye better, Jaikie?"

"Ay, I'm better," said a pallid midget.

"He kickit Jaikie in the stomach and Jaikie was seeck," Dougal explained. "That's the three accounted for. Now they're safe for five hours at the least. I think mysel' that Dobson will be the first to get out, but he'll have his work letting out the others. Now, I'm for flittin' to the old Tower. They'll no ken where we are for a long time, and anyway yon place will be far easier to defend. Without they kindle a fire and smoke us out, I don't see how they'll beat us. Our provisions are a' there, and there's a grand well o' water inside. Forbye there's the road down the rocks that'll keep our communications open. . . . But what's come to Mr. Heritage?"

Dickson to his shame had forgotten all about his friend. The Poet lay very quiet with his head on one side and his legs crooked limply. Blood trickled over his eyes from an ugly scar on his forehead. Dickson felt his heart and pulse and found them faint but regular. The man had got a swinging blow and might have a slight concussion; for the present he was unconscious.

"All the more reason why we should flit," said Dougal. "What d'ye say, Mr. McCunn?"

"Flit, of course, but further than the old Tower. What's the time?" He lifted Heritage's wrist and saw from his watch that it was half-past three. "Mercy! It's nearly morning. Afore we put these blagyirds away, they were conversing, at least Léon and Dobson were. They said that they expected somebody every moment, but that the car would be late. We've still got that Somebody to tackle. Then Léon spoke to me in the dark, thinking I was Dobson, and cursed the wind, saying it would keep the Danish brig from getting in at dawn as had been intended. D'you see what that means? The worst of the lot,

the ones the ladies are in terror of, are coming by sea. Ay, and they can return by sea. We thought that the attack would be by land, and that even if they succeeded we could hang on to their heels and follow them, till we got them stopped. But that's impossible! If they come in from the water, they can go out by the water, and there'll never be more heard tell of the ladies or of you or me."

Dougal's face was once again sunk in gloom. "What's your plan, then?"

"We must get the ladies away from here—away inland, far from the sea. The rest of us must stand a siege in the old Tower, so that the enemy will think we're all there. Please God we'll hold out long enough for help to arrive. But we mustn't hang about here. There's the man Dobson mentioned—he may come any second, and we want to be away first. Get the ladder, Dougal. . . . Four of you take Mr. Heritage, and two come with me and carry the ladies' things. It's no' raining, but the wind's enough to take the wings off a seagull."

Dickson roused Saskia and her cousin, bidding them be ready in ten minutes. Then with the help of the Die-Hards he proceeded to transport the necessary supplies—the stove, oil, dishes, clothes and wraps; more than one journey was needed of small boys, hidden under clouds of baggage. When everything had gone he collected the keys, behind which, in various quarters of the house, three gaolers fumed impotently, and gave them to Wee Jaikie to dispose of in some secret nook. Then he led the two ladies to the verandah, the elder cross and sleepy, the younger alert at the prospect of movement.

"Tell me again," she said. "You have locked all the three up, and they are now the imprisoned?"

"Well, it was the boys that, properly speaking, did the locking up."

"It is a great—how do you say?—a turning of the tables. Ah—what is that?"

At the end of the verandah there was a clattering down of pots which could not be due to the wind, since the place was sheltered. There was still only the faintest hint of light, and black night still lurked in the crannies. Followed another fall of pots, as from a clumsy intruder, and then a man appeared, clear against the glass door by which the path descended to the rock garden.

It was the fourth man, whom the three prisoners had awaited. Dickson had no doubt at all about his identity. He was that villain from whom all the others took their orders, the man whom the Princess shuddered at. Before starting he had loaded his pistol. Now he tugged it from his waterproof pocket, pointed it at the other and fired.

The man seemed to be hit, for he spun round and clapped a hand to his left arm. Then he fled through the door, which he left open.

Dickson was after him like a hound. At the door he saw him running and raised his pistol for another shot. Then he dropped it, for he saw something in the crouching, dodging figure which was familiar.

"A mistake," he explained to Jaikie when he returned. "But the shot wasn't wasted. I've just had a good try at killing the factor!"



CHAPTER 10

DEALS WITH AN ESCAPE AND A JOURNEY

Five scouts' lanterns burned smokily in the ground room of the keep when Dickson ushered his charges through its cavernous door. The lights flickered in the gusts that swept after them and whistled through the slits of window, so that the place was full of monstrous shadows, and its accustomed odour of mould and disuse was changed to a salty freshness. Upstairs on the first floor Thomas Yownie had deposited the ladies' baggage, and was busy making beds out of derelict iron bedsteads and the wraps brought from their room. On the ground floor on a heap of litter covered by an old scout's blanket lay Heritage, with Dougal in attendance.

The Chieftain had washed the blood from the Poet's brow and the touch of cold water was bringing back his senses. Saskia with a cry flew to him, and waved off Dickson who had fetched one of the bottles of liqueur brandy. She slipped a hand inside his shirt and felt the beating of his heart. Then her slim fingers ran over his forehead.

"A bad blow," she muttered, "but I do not think he is ill. There is no fracture. When I nursed in the Alexander Hospital I learnt much about head wounds. Do not give him cognac if you value his life."

Heritage was talking now and with strange tongues. Phrases like "lined digesters" and "free sulphurous acid" came from his lips. He implored some one to tell him if "the first cook" was finished, and he upbraided some one else for "cooling off" too fast.

The girl raised her head. "But I fear he has become mad," she said.

"Wheesht, Mem," said Dickson, who recognised the jargon. "He's a paper maker."

Saskia sat down on the litter and lifted his head so that it rested on her breast. Dougal at her bidding brought a certain case from her baggage, and with swift, capable hands she made a bandage and rubbed the wound with ointment before tying it up. Then her fingers seemed to play about his temples and along his cheeks and neck. She was the professional nurse now, absorbed, sexless. Heritage ceased to babble, his eyes shut and he was asleep.

She remained where she was, so that the Poet, when a few minutes later he woke, found himself lying with his head in her lap. She spoke first, in an imperative tone: "You are well now. Your head does not ache. You are strong again."

"No. Yes," he murmured. Then more clearly: "Where am I? Oh, I remember, I caught a lick on the head. What's become of the brutes?"

Dickson, who had extracted food from the Mearns Street box and was pressing it on the others, replied through a mouthful of biscuit: "We're in the old Tower. The three are lockit up in the House. Are you feeling better, Mr. Heritage?"

The Poet suddenly realised Saskia's position and the blood came to his pale face. He got to his feet with an effort and held out a hand to the girl. "I'm all right now, I think. Only a little dicky on my legs. A thousand thanks, Princess. I've given you a lot of trouble."

She smiled at him tenderly. "You say that when you have risked your life for me."

"There's no time to waste," the relentless Dougal broke in. "Comin' over here, I heard a shot. What was it?"

"It was me," said Dickson. "I was shootin' at the factor."

"Did ye hit him?"

"I think so, but I'm sorry to say not badly. When I last saw him he was running too quick for a sore hurt man. When I fired I thought it was the other man—the one they were expecting."

Dickson marvelled at himself, yet his speech was not bravado but the honest expression of his mind. He was keyed up to a mood in which he feared nothing very much, certainly not the laws of his country. If he fell in with the Unknown, he was entirely resolved, if his Maker permitted him, to do murder as being the simplest and justest solution. And if in the pursuit of this laudable intention he happened to wing lesser game it was no fault of his.

"Well, it's a pity ye didn't get him," said Dougal, "him being what we ken him to be. . . . I'm for holding a council o' war, and considerin' the whole position. So far we haven't done that badly. We've shifted our base without serious casualties. We've got a far better position to hold, for there's too many ways into yon Hoose, and here there's just one. Besides, we've

fickled the enemy. They'll take some time to find out where we've gone. But, mind you, we can't count on their staying long shut up. Dobson's no' safe in the boiler-house, for there's a skylight far up and he'll see it when the light comes and maybe before. So we'd better get our plans ready. A word with ye, Mr. McCunn," and he led Dickson aside.

"D'ye ken what these blagvirds were up to," he whispered fiercely in Dickson's ear. "They were goin' to pushion the lassie. How do I ken, says you? Because Thomas Yownie heard Dobson say to Lean at the scullery door, 'Have ye got the dope?' he says, and Lean says, 'Ay.' Thomas mindit the word for he had heard about it at the Picters."

Dickson exclaimed in horror.

"What d'ye make o' that? I'll tell ye. They wanted to make sure of her, but they wouldn't have thought o' dope unless the men they expectit were due to arrive any moment. As I see it, we've to face a siege not by the three but by a dozen or more, and it'll no' be long till it starts. Now, isn't it a mercy we're safe in here?"

Dickson returned to the others with a grave face.

"Where d'you think the new folk are coming from?" he asked.

Heritage answered, "From Auchenlochan, I suppose? Or perhaps down from the hills?"

"You're wrong." And he told of Léon's mistaken confidences to him in the darkness. "They are coming from the sea, just like the old pirates."

"The sea," Heritage repeated in a dazed voice.

"Ay, the sea. Think what that means. If they had been coming by the roads, we could have kept track of them, even if they beat us, and some of these laddies could have stuck to them and followed them up till help came. It can't be such an easy job to carry a young lady against her will along Scotch roads. But the sea's a different matter. If they've got a fast boat they could be out of the Firth and away beyond the law before we could wake up a single policeman. Ay, and even if the Government took it up and warned all the ports and ships at sea, what's to hinder them to find a hidy-hole about Ireland—or Norway? I tell you, it's a far more desperate business than I thought, and it'll no' do to wait on and trust that the Chief Constable will turn up afore the mischief's done."

"The moral," said Heritage, "is that there can be no surrender. We've got to stick it out in this old place at all costs."

"No," said Dickson emphatically. "The moral is that we must shift the ladies. We've got the chance while Dobson and his friends are locked up. Let's get them as far away as we can from the sea. They're far safer tramping the moors, and it's no' likely the new folk will dare to follow us."

"But I cannot go." Saskia, who had been listening intently, shook her head. "I promised to wait here till my friend came. If I leave I shall never find him."

"If you stay you certainly never will, for you'll be away with the ruffians. Take a sensible view, Mem. You'll be no good to your friend or your friend to you if before night you're rocking in a ship."

The girl shook her head again, gently but decisively. "It was our arrangement. I cannot break it. Besides, I am sure that he will come in time, for he has never failed——"

There was a desperate finality about the quiet tones and the weary face with the shadow of a smile on it.

Then Heritage spoke. "I don't think your plan will quite do, Dogson. Supposing we all break for the hinterland and the Danish brig finds the birds flown, that won't end the trouble. They will get on the Princess's trail, and the whole persecution will start again. I want to see things brought to a head here and now. If we can stick it out here long enough, we may trap the whole push and rid the world of a pretty gang of miscreants. Once let them show their hand, and then, if the police are here by that time, we can jug the lot for piracy or something worse."

"That's all right," said Dougal, "but we'd put up a better fight if we had the women off our mind. I've aye read that when a castle was going to be besieged the first thing was to rid get of the civilians."

"Sensible to the last, Dougal," said Dickson approvingly. "That's just what I'm saying. I'm strong for a fight, but put the ladies in a safe bit first, for they're our weak point."

"Do you think that if you were fighting my enemies, I would consent to be absent?" came Saskia's reproachful question.

"Deed no, Mem," said Dickson heartily. His martial spirit was with Heritage, but his prudence did not sleep, and he suddenly saw a way of placating both. "Just you listen to what I propose. What do we amount to? Mr. Heritage, six laddies,

and myself—and I'm no more used to fighting than an old wife. We've seven desperate villains against us, and afore night they may be seventy. We've a fine old castle here, but for defence we want more than stone walls—we want a garrison. I tell you we must get help somewhere. Ay, but how, says you? Well, coming here I noticed a gentleman's house away up ayont the railway and close to the hills. The laird's maybe not at home, but there will be men there of some kind—gamekeepers and woodmen and such like. My plan is to go there at once and ask for help. Now, it's useless me going alone, for nobody would listen to me. They'd tell me to go back to the shop or they'd think me demented. But with you, Mem, it would be a different matter. They wouldn't disbelieve you. So I want you to come with me and to come at once, for God knows how soon our need will be sore. We'll leave your cousin with Mrs. Morran in the village, for bed's the place for her, and then you and me will be off on our business."

The girl looked at Heritage, who nodded. "It's the only way," he said. "Get every man jack you can raise, and if it's humanly possible get a gun or two. I believe there's time enough, for I don't see the brig arriving in broad daylight."

"D'you not?" Dickson asked rudely. "Have you considered what day this is? It's the Sabbath, the best of days for an ill deed. There's no kirk hereaways, and everybody in the parish will be sitting indoors by the fire." He looked at his watch. "In half an hour it'll be light. Haste you, Mem, and get ready. Dougal, what's the weather?"

The Chieftain swung open the door, and sniffed the air. The wind had fallen for the time being, and the surge of the tides below the rocks rose like the clamour of a mob. With the lull, mist and a thin drizzle had cloaked the world again.

To Dickson's surprise Dougal seemed to be in good spirits. He began to sing to a hymn tune a strange ditty.

"Class-conscious we are, and class-conscious wull be
Till our fit's on the neck o' the Boorjoyzee."

"What on earth are you singing?" Dickson inquired.

Dougal grinned. "Wee Jaikie went to a Socialist Sunday school last winter because he heard they were for fechtin' battles. Ay, and they telled him he was to jine a thing called an International, and Jaikie thought it was a fitba' club. But when he fund out there was no magic lantern or swaree at Christmas he gie'd it the chuck. They learned him a heap o' queer songs. That's one."

"What does the last word mean?"

"I don't ken. Jaikie thought it was some kind of a draigon."

"It's a daft-like thing anyway. . . . When's high water?"

Dougal answered that to the best of his knowledge it fell between four and five in the afternoon.

"Then that's when we may expect the foreign gentry if they think to bring their boat in to the Garple foot. . . . Dougal, lad, I trust you to keep a most careful and prayerful watch. You had better get the Die-Hards out of the Tower and all round the place afore Dobson and Co. get loose, or you'll no' get a chance later. Don't lose your mobility, as the sodgers say. Mr. Heritage can hold the fort, but you laddies should be spread out like a screen."

"That was my notion," said Dougal. "I'll detail two Die-Hards—Thomas Yownie and Wee Jaikie—to keep in touch with ye and watch for ye comin' back. Thomas ye ken already; ye'll no fickle Thomas Yownie. But don't be mistook about Wee Jaikie. He's terrible fond of greetin', but it's no fright with him but excitement. It's just a habit he's gotten. When ye see Jaikie begin to greet, ye may be sure that Jaikie's gettin' dangerous."

The door shut behind them and Dickson found himself with his two charges in a world dim with fog and rain and the still lingering darkness. The air was raw, and had the sour smell which comes from soaked earth and wet boughs when the leaves are not yet fledged. Both the women were miserably equipped for such an expedition. Cousin Eugénie trailed heavy furs, Saskia's only wrap was a bright-coloured shawl about her shoulders, and both wore thin foreign shoes. Dickson insisted on stripping off his trusty waterproof and forcing it on the Princess, on whose slim body it hung very loose and very short. The elder woman stumbled and whimpered and needed the constant support of his arm, walking like a townswoman from the knees. But Saskia swung from the hips like a free woman, and Dickson had much ado to keep up with her. She seemed to delight in the bitter freshness of the dawn, inhaling deep breaths of it, and humming fragments of a tune.

Guided by Thomas Yownie they took the road which Dickson and Heritage had travelled the first evening, through the shrubberies on the north side of the House and the side avenue beyond which the ground fell to the Laver glen. On their

right the House rose like a dark cloud, but Dickson had lost his terror of it. There were three angry men inside it, he remembered: long let them stay there. He marvelled at his mood, and also rejoiced, for his worst fear had always been that he might prove a coward. Now he was puzzled to think how he could ever be frightened again, for his one object was to succeed, and in that absorption fear seemed to him merely a waste of time. "It all comes of treating the thing as a business proposition," he told himself.

But there was far more in his heart than this sober resolution. He was intoxicated with the resurgence of youth and felt a rapture of audacity which he never remembered in his decorous boyhood. "I haven't been doing badly for an old man," he reflected with glee. What, oh, what had become of the pillar of commerce, the man who might have been a Bailie had he sought municipal honours, the elder in the Guthrie Memorial Kirk, the instructor of literary young men? In the past three days he had levanted with jewels which had once been an Emperor's and certainly were not his; he had burglariously entered and made free of a strange house; he had played hide-and-seek at the risk of his neck and had wrestled in the dark with a foreign miscreant; he had shot at an eminent solicitor with intent to kill; and he was now engaged in tramping the world with a fairy-tale Princess. I blush to confess that of each of his doings he was unashamedly proud, and thirsted for many more in the same line. "Gosh, but I'm seeing life," was his unregenerate conclusion.

Without sight or sound of a human being, they descended to the Laver, climbed again by the cart track, and passed the deserted West Lodge and inn to the village. It was almost full dawn when the three stood in Mrs. Morran's kitchen.

"I've brought you two ladies, Auntie Phemie," said Dickson.

They made an odd group in that cheerful place, where the new-lit fire was crackling in the big grate—the wet undignified form of Dickson, unshaven of cheek and chin and disreputable in garb: the shrouded figure of Cousin Eugénie, who had sunk into the arm-chair and closed her eyes; the slim girl, into whose face the weather had whipped a glow like blossom; and the hostess, with her petticoats kilted and an ancient mutch on her head.

Mrs. Morran looked once at Saskia, and then did a thing which she had not done since her girlhood. She curtsied.

"I'm proud to see ye here, Mem. Off wi' your things, and I'll get ye dry claes. Losh, ye're fair soppin'. And your shoon! Ye maun change your feet. . . . Dickson! Awa' up to the loft, and dinna you stir till I give ye a cry. The leddies will change by the fire. And you, Mem"—this to Cousin Eugénie—"the place for you's your bed. I'll kinnle a fire ben the hoose in a jiffy. And syne ye'll have breakfast—ye'll hae a cup o' tea wi' me now, for the kettle's just on the boil. Awa' wi' ye, Dickson," and she stamped her foot.

Dickson departed, and in the loft washed his face, and smoked a pipe on the edge of the bed, watching the mist eddying up the village street. From below rose the sounds of hospitable bustle, and when after some twenty minutes' vigil he descended, he found Saskia toasting stockinged toes by the fire in the great arm-chair, and Mrs. Morran setting the table.

"Auntie Phemie, hearken to me. We've taken on too big a job for two men and six laddies, and help we've got to get, and that this very morning. D'you mind the big white house away up near the hills ayont the station and east of the Ayr road? It looked like a gentleman's shooting lodge. I was thinking of trying there. Mercy!"

The exclamation was wrung from him by his eyes settling on Saskia and noting her apparel. Gone were her thin foreign clothes, and in their place she wore a heavy tweed skirt cut very short, and thick homespun stockings, which had been made for some one with larger feet than hers. A pair of the coarse low-heeled shoes, which country folk wear in the farmyard, stood warming by the hearth. She still had her russet jumper, but round her neck hung a grey wool scarf, of the kind known as a "comforter." Amazingly pretty she looked in Dickson's eyes, but with a different kind of prettiness. The sense of fragility had fled, and he saw how nobly built she was for all her exquisiteness. She looked like a queen, he thought, but a queen to go gipsying through the world with.

"Ay, they're some o' Elspeth's things, rale guid furthy claes," said Mrs. Morran complacently. "And the shoon are what she used to gang about the byres wi' when she was in the Castlewham dairy. The leddy was tellin' me she was for trampin' the hills, and thae things will keep her dry and warm. . . . I ken the hoose ye mean. They ca' it the Mains of Garple. And I ken the man that bides in it. He's yin Sir Erchibald Roylance. English, but his mither was a Dalziel. I'm no weel acquaint wi' his forbears, but I'm weel eneuch acquaint wi' Sir Erchie, and 'better a guid coo than a coo o' a guid kind,' as my mither used to say. He used to be an awfu' wild callant, a freend o' puir Maister Quentin, and up to ony deevilry. But they tell me he's a quieter lad since the war, and sair lamed by fa'in oot o' an airyplane."

“Will he be at the Mains just now?” Dickson asked.

“I wadna wonder. He has a muckle place in England, but he aye used to come here in the back-end for the shootin’ and in Aprile for birds. He’s clean daft about birds. He’ll be out a’ day at the Craig watchin’ solans, or lyin’ a’ mornin’ i’ the moss lookin’ at bog-blitters.”

“Will he help, think you?”

“I’ll wager he’ll help. Onyway it’s your best chance, and better a wee bush than nae beild. Now, sit in to your breakfast.”

It was a merry meal. Mrs. Morran dispensed tea and gnomonic wisdom. Saskia ate heartily, speaking little, but once or twice laying her hand softly on her hostess’s gnarled fingers. Dickson was in such spirits that he gobbled shamelessly, being both hungry and hurried, and he spoke of the still unconquered enemy with ease and disrespect, so that Mrs. Morran was moved to observe that there was “naething sae bauld as a blind mear.” But when in a sudden return of modesty he belittled his usefulness and talked sombrely of his mature years he was told that he “wad never be auld wi’ sae muckle honesty.” Indeed it was very clear that Mrs. Morran approved of her nephew.

They did not linger over breakfast, for both were impatient to be on the road. Mrs. Morran assisted Saskia to put on Elspeth’s shoes. “Even a young fit finds comfort in an auld bauchle,” as my mother, honest woman, used to say.” Dickson’s waterproof was restored to him, and for Saskia an old raincoat belonging to the son in South Africa was discovered, which fitted her better. “Siccan weather,” said the hostess, as she opened the door to let in a swirl of wind. “The deil’s aye kind to his ain. Haste ye back, Mem, and be sure I’ll tak’ guid care o’ your leddy cousin.”

The proper way to the Mains of Garple was either by the station and the Ayr road, or by the Auchenlochan highway, branching off half a mile beyond the Garple bridge. But Dickson, who had been studying the map and fancied himself as a pathfinder, chose the direct route across the Long Muir as being at once shorter and more sequestered. With the dawn the wind had risen again, but it had shifted towards the north-west and was many degrees colder. The mist was furling on the hills like sails, the rain had ceased, and out at sea the eye covered a mile or two of wild water. The moor was drenching wet, and the peat bogs were brimming with inky pools, so that soon the travellers were soaked to the knees. Dickson had no fear of pursuit, for he calculated that Dobson and his friends, even if they had got out, would be busy looking for the truants in the vicinity of the House and would presently be engaged with the old Tower. But he realised, too, that speed on his errand was vital, for at any moment the Unknown might arrive from the sea.

So he kept up a good pace, half-running, half-striding, till they had passed the railway, and he found himself gasping with a stitch in his side, and compelled to rest in the lee of what had once been a sheepfold. Saskia amazed him. She moved over the rough heather like a deer, and it was her hand that helped him across the deeper hags. Before such youth and vigour he felt clumsy and old. She stood looking down at him as he recovered his breath, cool, unruffled, alert as Diana. His mind fled to Heritage, and it occurred to him suddenly that the Poet had set his affections very high. Loyalty drove him to speak a word for his friend.

“I’ve got the easy job,” he said. “Mr. Heritage will have the whole pack on him in that old Tower, and him with such a sore clout on his head. I’ve left him my pistol. He’s a terrible brave man!”

She smiled.

“Ay, and he’s a poet too.”

“So?” she said. “I did not know. He is very young.”

“He’s a man of very high ideals.”

She puzzled at the word, and then smiled. “I know him. He is like many of our young men in Russia, the students—his mind is in a ferment and he does not know what he wants. But he is brave.”

This seemed to Dickson’s loyal soul but a chilly tribute.

“I think he is in love with me,” she continued.

He looked up startled and saw in her face that which gave him a view into a strange new world. He had thought that women blushed when they talked of love, but her eyes were as grave and candid as a boy’s. Here was one who had gone through waters so deep that she had lost the foibles of sex. Love to her was only a word of ill omen, a threat on the lips of brutes, an extra battalion of peril in an army of perplexities. He felt like some homely rustic who finds himself swept

unwittingly into the moonlight hunt of Artemis and her maidens.

"He is a romantic," she said. "I have known so many like him."

"He's no' that," said Dickson shortly. "Why, he used to be aye laughing at me for being romantic. He's one that's looking for truth and reality, he says, and he's terrible down on the kind of poetry I like myself."

She smiled. "They all talk so. But you, my friend Dickson" (she pronounced the name in two staccato syllables ever so prettily), "you are different. Tell me about yourself."

"I'm just what you see—a middle-aged retired grocer."

"Grocer?" she queried. "Ah, yes, *épicier*. But you are a very remarkable *épicier*. Mr. Heritage I understand, but you and those little boys—no. I am sure of one thing—you are not a romantic. You are too humorous and—and—I think you are like Ulysses, for it would not be easy to defeat you."

Her eyes were kind, nay affectionate, and Dickson experienced a preposterous rapture in his soul, followed by a sinking, as he realised how far the job was still from being completed.

"We must be getting on, Mem," he said hastily, and the two plunged again into the heather.

The Ayr road was crossed, and the fir wood around the Mains became visible, and presently the white gates of the entrance. A wind-blown spire of smoke beyond the trees proclaimed that the house was not untenanted. As they entered the drive the Scots firs were tossing in the gale, which blew fiercely at this altitude, but, the dwelling itself being more in the hollow, the daffodil clumps on the lawn were but mildly fluttered.

The door was opened by a one-armed butler who bore all the marks of the old regular soldier. Dickson produced a card and asked to see his master on urgent business. Sir Archibald was at home, he was told, and had just finished breakfast. The two were led into a large bare chamber which had all the chill and mustiness of a bachelor's drawing-room. The butler returned, and said Sir Archibald would see him. "I'd better go myself first and prepare the way, Mem," Dickson whispered and followed the man across the hall.

He found himself ushered into a fair-sized room where a bright fire was burning. On a table lay the remains of breakfast, and the odour of food mingled pleasantly with the scent of peat. The horns and heads of big game, foxes' masks, the model of a gigantic salmon and several bookcases adorned the wall, and books and maps were mixed with decanters and cigar-boxes on the long sideboard. After the wild out of doors the place seemed the very shrine of comfort. A young man sat in an armchair by the fire with a leg on a stool; he was smoking a pipe, and reading the *Field*, and on another stool at his elbow was a pile of new novels. He was a pleasant brown-faced young man, with remarkably smooth hair and a roving humorous eye.

"Come in, Mr. McCunn. Very glad to see you. If, as I take it, you're the grocer, you're a household name in these parts. I get all my supplies from you, and I've just been makin' inroads on one of your divine hams. Now, what can I do for you?"

"I'm very proud to hear what you say, Sir Archibald. But I've not come on business. I've come with the queerest story you ever heard in your life, and I've come to ask your help."

"Go ahead. A good story is just what I want this vile mornin'."

"I'm not here alone. I've a lady with me."

"God bless my soul! A lady!"

"Ay, a princess. She's in the next room."

The young man looked wildly at him and waved the book he had been reading.

"Excuse me, Mr. McCunn, but are you quite sober? I beg your pardon. I see you are. But you know, it isn't done. Princesses don't as a rule come here after breakfast to pass the time of day. It's more absurd than this shocker I've been readin'."

"All the same it's a fact. She'll tell you the story herself, and you'll believe her quick enough. But to prepare your mind I'll just give you a sketch of the events of the last few days."

Before the sketch was concluded the young man had violently rung the bell. "Sime," he shouted to the servant, "clear away this mess and lay the table again. Order more breakfast, all the breakfast you can get. Open the windows and get the tobacco smoke out of the air. Tidy up the place for there's a lady comin'. Quick, you juggins!"

He was on his feet now, and, with his arm in Dickson's, was heading for the door.

“My sainted aunt! And you topped off with pottin’ at the factor. I’ve seen a few things in my day, but I’m blessed if I ever met a bird like you!”



<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/b/buchan/john/huntingtower/chapter10.html>

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CHAPTER 11

GRAVITY OUT OF BED

It is probable that Sir Archibald Roylance did not altogether believe Dickson's tale; it may be that he considered him an agreeable romancer, or a little mad, or no more than a relief to the tedium of a wet Sunday morning. But his incredulity did not survive one glance at Saskia as she stood in that bleak drawing-room among Victorian water-colours and faded chintzes. The young man's boyishness deserted him. He stopped short in his tracks, and made a profound and awkward bow. "I am at your service, Mademoiselle," he said, amazed at himself. The words seemed to have come out of a confused memory of plays and novels.

She inclined her head—a little on one side, and looked towards Dickson.

"Sir Archibald's going to do his best for us," said that squire of dames. "I was telling him that we had had our breakfast."

"Let's get out of this sepulchre," said their host, who was recovering himself. "There's a roaring fire in my den. Of course you'll have something to eat—hot coffee, anyhow—I've trained my cook to make coffee like a Frenchwoman. The housekeeper will take charge of you, if you want to tidy up, and you must excuse our ramshackle ways, please. I don't believe there's ever been a lady in this house before, you know."

He led her to the smoking-room and ensconced her in the great chair by the fire. Smilingly she refused a series of offers which ranged from a sheepskin mantle which he had got in the Pamirs and which he thought might fit her, to hot whisky and water as a specific against a chill. But she accepted a pair of slippers and deftly kicked off the brogues provided by Mrs. Morran. Also, while Dickson started rapaciously on a second breakfast, she allowed him to pour her out a cup of coffee.

"You are a soldier?" she asked.

"Two years infantry—5th Battalion Lennox Highlanders, and then Flying Corps. Top-hole time I had too, till the day before the Armistice when my luck gave out and I took a nasty toss. Consequently I'm not as fast on my legs now as I'd like to be."

"You were a friend of Captain Kennedy?"

"His oldest. We were at the same private school, and he was at m' tutor's, and we were never much separated till he went abroad to cram for the Diplomatic and I started east to shoot things."

"Then I will tell you what I told Captain Kennedy." Saskia, looking into the heart of the peats, began the story of which we have already heard a version, but she told it differently, for she was telling it to one who more or less belonged to her own world. She mentioned names at which the other nodded. She spoke of a certain Paul Abreskov. "I heard of him at Bokhara in 1912," said Sir Archie, and his face grew solemn. Sometimes she lapsed into French, and her hearer's brow wrinkled, but he appeared to follow. When she had finished he drew a long breath.

"My Aunt! What a time you've been through! I've seen pluck in my day, but yours! It's not thinkable. D'you mind if I ask a question, Princess? Bolshevism we know all about, and I admit Trotsky and his friends are a pretty effective push; but how on earth have they got a world-wide graft going in the time so that they can stretch their net to an out-of-the-way spot like this? It looks as if they had struck a Napoleon somewhere."

"You do not understand," she said. "I cannot make any one understand—except a Russian. My country has been broken to pieces, and there is no law in it; therefore it is a nursery of crime. So would England be, or France, if you had suffered the same misfortunes. My people are not wickeder than others, but for the moment they are sick and have no strength. As for the government of the Bolsheviki it matters little, for it will pass. Some parts of it may remain, but it is a government of the sick and fevered, and cannot endure in health. Lenin may be a good man—I do not think so, but I do not know—but if he were an archangel he could not alter things. Russia is mortally sick and therefore all evil is unchained, and the criminals have no one to check them. There is crime everywhere in the world, and the unfettered crime in Russia is so powerful that it stretches its hand to crime throughout the globe and there is a great mobilising everywhere of wicked men. Once you boasted that law was international and that the police in one land worked with the police of all others. To-day

that is true about criminals. After a war evil passions are loosed, and, since Russia is broken, in her they can make their headquarters. . . . It is not Bolshevism, the theory, you need fear, for that is a weak and dying thing. It is crime, which today finds its seat in my country, but is not only Russian. It has no fatherland. It is as old as human nature and as wide as the earth."

"I see," said Sir Archie. "Gad, here have I been vegetatin' and thinkin' that all excitement had gone out of life with the war, and sometimes even regrettin' that the beastly old thing was over, and all the while the world fairly hummin' with interest. And Loudon too!"

"I would like your candid opinion on yon factor, Sir Archibald," said Dickson.

"I can't say I ever liked him, and I've once or twice had a row with him, for he used to bring his pals to shoot over Dalquharter and he didn't quite play the game by me. But I know dashed little about him, for I've been a lot away. Bit hairy about the heels, of course. A great figure at local race-meetin's, and used to toady old Carforth and the huntin' crowd. He has a pretty big reputation as a sharp lawyer and some of the thick-headed lairds swear by him, but Quentin never could stick him. It's quite likely he's been gettin' into Queer Street, for he was always speculatin' in horse-flesh, and I fancy he plunged a bit on the Turf. But I can't think how he got mixed up in this show."

"I'm positive Dobson's his brother."

"And put this business in his way. That would explain it all right. . . . He must be runnin' for pretty big stakes, for that kind of lad don't dabble in crime for six-and-eightpence. . . . Now for the layout. You've got three men shut up in Dalquharter House, who by this time have probably escaped. One of you—what's his name?—Heritage?—is in the old Tower, and you think that *they* think the Princess is still there and will sit round the place like terriers. Sometime today the Danish brig will arrive with reinforcements, and then there will be a hefty fight. Well, the first thing to be done is to get rid of Loudon's stymie with the authorities. Princess, I'm going to carry you off in my car to the Chief Constable. The second thing is for you after that to stay on here. It's a deadly place on a wet day, but it's safe enough."

Saskia shook her head and Dickson spoke for her.

"You'll no' get her to stop here. I've done my best, but she's determined to be back at Dalquharter. You see she's expecting a friend, and besides, if there's going to be a battle she'd like to be in it. Is that so, Mem?"

Sir Archie looked helplessly around him, and the sight of the girl's face convinced him that argument would be fruitless. "Anyhow she must come with me to the Chief Constable. Lethington's a slow bird on the wing, and I don't see myself convincin' him that he must get busy unless I can produce the Princess. Even then it may be a tough job, for it's Sunday, and in these parts people go to sleep till Monday mornin'."

"That's just what I'm trying to get at," said Dickson. "By all means go to the Chief Constable, and tell him it's life or death. My lawyer in Glasgow, Mr. Caw, will have been stirring him up yesterday, and you two should complete the job. . . . But what I'm feared is that he'll not be in time. As you say, it's the Sabbath day, and the police are terrible slow. Now any moment that brig may be here, and the trouble will start. I'm wanting to save the Princess, but I'm wanting too to give these blagiyards the roughest handling they ever got in their lives. Therefore I say there's no time to lose. We're far ower few to put up a fight, and we want every man you've got about this place to hold the fort till the police come."

Sir Archibald looked upon the earnest flushed face of Dickson with admiration. "I'm blessed if you're not the most whole-hearted brigand I've ever struck."

"I'm not. I'm just a business man."

"Do you realise that you're levying a private war and breaking every law of the land?"

"Hoots!" said Dickson. "I don't care a docken about the law. I'm for seeing this job through. What force can you produce?"

"Only cripples, I'm afraid. There's Sime, my butler. He was a Fusilier Jock and, as you saw, has lost an arm. Then McGuffog the keeper is a good man, but he's still got a Turkish bullet in his thigh. The chauffeur, Carfrae, was in the Yeomanry, and lost half a foot, and there's myself, as lame as a duck. The herds on the home farm are no good, for one's seventy and the other is in bed with jaundice. The Mains can produce four men, but they're rather a job lot."

"They'll do fine," said Dickson heartily. "All sodgers, and no doubt all good shots. Have you plenty guns?"

Sir Archie burst into uproarious laughter. "Mr. McCunn, you're a man after my own heart. I'm under your orders. If I

had a boy I'd put him into the provision trade, for it's the place to see fightin'. Yes, we've no end of guns. I advise shot-guns, for they've more stoppin' power in a rush than a rifle, and I take it it's a rough-and-tumble we're lookin' for."

"Right," said Dickson. "I saw a bicycle in the hall. I want you to lend it me, for I must be getting back. You'll take the Princess and do the best you can with the Chief Constable."

"And then?"

"Then you'll load up your car with your folk, and come down the hill to Dalquharter. There'll be a laddie, or maybe more than one, waiting for you on this side the village to give you instructions. Take your orders from them. If it's a red-haired ruffian called Dougal you'll be wise to heed what he says, for he has a grand head for battles."

Five minutes later Dickson was pursuing a quavering course like a snipe down the avenue. He was a miserable performer on a bicycle. Not for twenty years had he bestridden one, and he did not understand such new devices as free-wheels and change of gears. The mounting had been the worst part and it had only been achieved by the help of a rockery. He had begun by cutting into two flower-beds, and missing a birch tree by inches. But he clung on desperately, well knowing that if he fell off it would be hard to remount, and at length he gained the avenue. When he passed the lodge gates he was riding fairly straight, and when he turned off the Ayr highway to the side road that led to Dalquharter he was more or less master of his machine.

He crossed the Garple by an ancient hunch-backed bridge, observing even in his absorption with the handle-bars that the stream was in roaring spate. He wrestled up the further hill, with aching calf-muscles, and got to the top just before his strength gave out. Then as the road turned seaward he had the slope with him, and enjoyed some respite. It was no case for putting up his feet, for the gale was blowing hard on his right cheek, but the downward grade enabled him to keep his course with little exertion. His anxiety to get back to the scene of action was for the moment appeased, since he knew he was making as good speed as the weather allowed, so he had leisure for thought.

But the mind of this preposterous being was not on the business before him. He dallied with irrelevant things—with the problems of youth and love. He was beginning to be very nervous about Heritage, not as the solitary garrison of the old Tower, but as the lover of Saskia. That everybody should be in love with her appeared to him only proper, for he had never met her like, and assumed that it did not exist. The desire of the moth for the star seemed to him a reasonable thing, since hopeless loyalty and unrequited passion were the eternal stock-in-trade of romance. He wished he were twenty-five himself to have the chance of indulging in such sentimentality for such a lady. But Heritage was not like him and would never be content with a romantic folly. . . . He had been in love with her for two years—a long time. He spoke about wanting to die for her, which was a flight beyond Dickson himself. "I doubt it will be what they call a 'grand passion,'" he reflected with reverence. But it was hopeless; he saw quite clearly that it was hopeless.

Why, he could not have explained, for Dickson's instincts were subtler than his intelligence. He recognised that the two belonged to different circles of being, which nowhere intersected. That mysterious lady, whose eyes had looked through life to the other side, was no mate for the Poet. His faithful soul was agitated, for he had developed for Heritage a sincere affection. It would break his heart, poor man. There was he holding the fort alone and cheering himself with delightful fancies about one remoter than the moon. Dickson wanted happy endings, and here there was no hope of such. He hated to admit that life could be crooked, but the optimist in him was now fairly dashed.

Sir Archie might be the fortunate man, for of course he would soon be in love with her, if he were not so already. Dickson like all his class had a profound regard for the country gentry. The business Scot does not usually revere wealth, though he may pursue it earnestly, nor does he specially admire rank in the common sense. But for ancient race he has respect in his bones, though it may happen that in public he denies it, and the laird has for him a secular association with good family. . . . Sir Archie might do. He was young, good-looking, obviously gallant. . . . But no! He was not quite right either. Just a trifle too light in weight, too boyish and callow. The Princess must have youth, but it should be mighty youth, the youth of a Napoleon or a Cæsar. He reflected that the Great Montrose, for whom he had a special veneration, might have filled the bill. Or young Harry with his beaver up? Or Claverhouse in the picture with the flush of temper on his cheek?

The meditations of the match-making Dickson came to an abrupt end. He had been riding negligently, his head bent against the wind, and his eyes vaguely fixed on the wet hill-gravel of the road. Of his immediate environs he was pretty well unconscious. Suddenly he was aware of figures on each side of him who advanced menacingly. Stung to activity he

attempted to increase his pace, which was already good, for the road at this point descended steeply. Then, before he could prevent it, a stick was thrust into his front wheel, and the next second he was describing a curve through the air. His head took the ground, he felt a spasm of blinding pain, and then a sense of horrible suffocation before his wits left him.

“Are ye sure it’s the richt man, Ecky?” said a voice which he did not hear.

“Sure. It’s the Glesca body Dobson telled us to look for yesterday. It’s a pund note atween us for this job. We’ll tie him up in the wud till we’ve time to attend to him.”

“Is he bad?”

“It doesna maitter,” said the one called Ecky. “He’ll be deid onyway long afore the morn.”

Mrs. Morran all forenoon was in a state of unSabbatical disquiet. After she had seen Saskia and Dickson start she finished her housewifely duties, took Cousin Eugénie her breakfast, and made preparation for the midday dinner. The invalid in the bed in the parlour was not a repaying subject. Cousin Eugénie belonged to that type of elderly women who, having been spoiled in youth, find the rest of life fall far short of their expectations. Her voice had acquired a perpetual wail, and the corners of what had once been a pretty mouth drooped in an eternal peevishness. She found herself in a morass of misery and shabby discomfort, but had her days continued in an even tenor she would still have lamented. “A dingy body,” was Mrs. Morran’s comment, but she laboured in kindness. Unhappily they had no common language, and it was only by signs that the hostess could discover her wants and show her goodwill. She fed her and bathed her face, saw to the fire and left her to sleep. “I’m boilin’ a hen to mak’ broth for your denner, Mem. Try and get a bit sleep now.” The purport of the advice was clear, and Cousin Eugénie turned obediently on her pillow.

It was Mrs. Morran’s custom of a Sunday to spend the morning in devout meditation. Some years before she had given up tramping the five miles to kirk, on the ground that having been a regular attendant for fifty years she had got all the good out of it that was probable. Instead she read slowly aloud to herself the sermon printed in a certain religious weekly which reached her every Saturday, and concluded with a chapter or two of the Bible. But today something had gone wrong with her mind. She could not follow the thread of the Reverend Doctor MacMichael’s discourse. She could not fix her attention on the wanderings and misdeeds of Israel as recorded in the Book of Exodus. She must always be getting up to look at the pot on the fire, or to open the back door and study the weather. For a little she fought against her unrest, and then she gave up the attempt at concentration. She took the big pot off the fire and allowed it to simmer, and presently she fetched her boots and umbrella, and kilted her petticoats. “I’ll be none the waur o’ a breath o’ caller air,” she decided.

The wind was blowing great guns but there was only the thinnest sprinkle of rain. Sitting on the hen-house roof and munching a raw turnip was a figure which she recognised as the smallest of the Die-Hards. Between bites he was singing dolefully to the tune of “Annie Laurie” one of the ditties of his quondam Sunday school:

“The Boorjoys’ brays are bonny,
Too-roo-ra-roo-raloo,
But the Worrrkers o’ the Worrrld
Wull gar them a’ look blue,
Wull gar them a’ look blue,
And droon them in the sea,
And—for bonnie Annie Laurie
I’ll lay me down and dee.”

“Losh, laddie,” she cried, “that’s cauld food for the stomach. Come indoors about midday and I’ll gie ye a plate o’ broth!” The Die-Hard saluted and continued on the turnip.

She took the Auchenlochan road across the Garple bridge, for that was the best road to the Mains and by it Dickson and the others might be returning. Her equanimity at all seasons was like a Turk’s, and she would not have admitted that anything mortal had power to upset or excite her: nevertheless it was a fast-beating heart that she now bore beneath her Sunday jacket. Great events, she felt, were on the eve of happening, and of them she was a part. Dickson’s anxiety was hers, to bring things to a business-like conclusion. The honour of Huntingtower was at stake and of the old Kennedys. She was carrying out Mr. Quentin’s commands, the dead boy who used to clamour for her treacle scones. And there was more than

duty in it, for youth was not dead in her old heart, and adventure had still power to quicken it.

Mrs. Morran walked well, with the steady long paces of the Scots countrywoman. She left the Auchenlochan road and took the side path along the tableland to the Mains. But for the surge of the gale and the far-borne boom of the furious sea there was little noise; not a bird cried in the uneasy air. With the wind behind her Mrs. Morran breasted the ascent till she had on her right the moorland running south to the Lochan valley and on her left Garple chafing in its deep forested gorges. Her eyes were quick and she noted with interest a weasel creeping from a fern-clad cairn. A little way on she passed an old ewe in difficulties and assisted it to rise. "But for me, my wumman, ye'd hae been braxy ere nicht," she told it as it departed bleating. Then she realised that she had come a certain distance. "Losh, I maun be gettin' back or the hen will be spiled," she cried, and was on the verge of turning.

But something caught her eye a hundred yards further on the road. It was something which moved with the wind like a wounded bird, fluttering from the roadside to a puddle and then back to the rushes. She advanced to it, missed it, and caught it.

It was an old dingy green felt hat, and she recognised it as Dickson's.

Mrs. Morran's brain, after a second of confusion, worked fast and clearly. She examined the road and saw that a little way on the gravel had been violently agitated. She detected several prints of hobnailed boots. There were prints too, on a patch of peat on the south side behind a tall bank of sods. "That's where they were hidin'," she concluded. Then she explored on the other side in a thicket of hazels and wild raspberries, and presently her perseverance was rewarded. The scrub was all crushed and pressed as if several persons had been forcing a passage. In a hollow was a gleam of something white. She moved towards it with a quaking heart, and was relieved to find that it was only a new and expensive bicycle with the front wheel badly buckled.

Mrs. Morran delayed no longer. If she had walked well on her out journey, she beat all records on the return. Sometimes she would run till her breath failed; then she would slow down till anxiety once more quickened her pace. To her joy on the Dalquharter side of the Garple bridge she observed the figure of a Die-Hard. Breathless, flushed, with her bonnet awry and her umbrella held like a scimitar, she seized on the boy.

"Awfu' doin's! They've grippit Maister McCunn up the Mains road just afore the second milestone and forenent the auld bucht. I fund his hat, and a bicycle's lyin' broken in the wud. Haste ye, man, and get the rest and awa' and seek him. It'll be the tinklers frae the Dean. I'd gang mysel', but my legs are ower auld. Oh, laddie, dinna stop to speir questions. They'll hae him murdered or awa' to sea. And maybe the leddy was wi' him and they've got them baith. Wae's me! Wae's me!"

The Die-Hard, who was Wee Jaikie, did not delay. His eyes had filled with tears at her news, which we know to have been his habit. When Mrs. Morran, after indulging in a moment of barbaric keening, looked back the road she had come, she saw a small figure trotting up the hill like a terrier who has been left behind. As he trotted he wept bitterly. Jaikie was getting dangerous.



CHAPTER 12

HOW MR. McCUNN COMMITTED AN ASSAULT UPON AN ALLY

Dickson always maintained that his senses did not leave him for more than a second or two, but he admitted that he did not remember very clearly the events of the next few hours. He was conscious of a bad pain above his eyes, and something wet trickling down his cheek. There was a perpetual sound of water in his ears and of men's voices. He found himself dropped roughly on the ground and forced to walk, and was aware that his legs were inclined to wobble. Somebody had a grip on each arm, so that he could not defend his face from the brambles, and that worried him, for his whole head seemed one aching bruise and he dreaded anything touching it. But all the time he did not open his mouth, for silence was the one duty that his muddled wits enforced. He felt that he was not the master of his mind, and he dreaded what he might disclose if he began to babble.

Presently there came a blank space of which he had no recollection at all. The movement had stopped, and he was allowed to sprawl on the ground. He thought that his head had got another whack from a bough, and that the pain put him into a stupor. When he awoke he was alone.

He discovered that he was strapped very tightly to a young Scotch fir. His arms were bent behind him and his wrists tied together with cords knotted at the back of the tree; his legs were shackled, and further cords fastened them to the bole. Also there was a halter round the trunk and just under his chin, so that while he breathed freely enough, he could not move his head. Before him was a tangle of bracken and scrub, and beyond that the gloom of dense pines; but as he could only see directly in front his prospect was strictly circumscribed.

Very slowly he began to take his bearings. The pain in his head was now dulled and quite bearable, and the flow of blood had stopped, for he felt the incrustation of it beginning on his cheeks. There was a tremendous noise all around him, and he traced this to the swaying of tree-tops in the gale. But there was an undercurrent of deeper sound—water surely, water churning among rocks. It was a stream—the Garple of course—and then he remembered where he was and what had happened.

I do not wish to portray Dickson as a hero, for nothing would annoy him more; but I am bound to say that his first clear thought was not of his own danger. It was intense exasperation at the miscarriage of his plans. Long ago he should have been with Dougal arranging operations, giving him news of Sir Archie, finding out how Heritage was faring, deciding how to use the coming reinforcements. Instead he was trussed up in a wood, a prisoner of the enemy, and utterly useless to his side. He tugged at his bonds, and nearly throttled himself. But they were of good tarry cord and did not give a fraction of an inch. Tears of bitter rage filled his eyes and made furrows on his encrusted cheeks. Idiot that he had been, he had wrecked everything! What would Saskia and Dougal and Sir Archie do without a business man by their side? There would be a muddle, and the little party would walk into a trap. He saw it all very clearly. The men from the sea would overpower them, there would be murder done, and an easy capture of the Princess; and the police would turn up at long last to find an empty headland.

He had also most comprehensively wrecked himself, and at the thought the most genuine panic seized him. There was no earthly chance of escape, for he was tucked away in this infernal jungle till such time as his enemies had time to deal with him. As to what that dealing would be like he had no doubts, for they knew that he had been their chief opponent. Those desperate ruffians would not scruple to put an end to him. His mind dwelt with horrible fascination upon throat-cutting, no doubt because of the presence of the cord below his chin. He had heard it was not a painful death; at any rate he remembered a clerk he had once had, a feeble, timid creature, who had twice attempted suicide that way. Surely it could not be very bad, and it would soon be over.

But another thought came to him. They would carry him off in the ship and settle with him at their leisure. No swift merciful death for him. He had read dreadful tales of the Bolsheviks' skill in torture, and now they all came back to him—stories of Chinese mercenaries, and men buried alive, and death by agonising inches. He felt suddenly very cold and sick, and hung in his bonds for he had no strength in his limbs. Then the pressure on his throat braced him, and also quickened his numb mind. The liveliest terror ran like quicksilver through his veins.

He endured some moments of this anguish, till after many despairing clutches at his wits he managed to attain a measure of self-control. He certainly wasn't going to allow himself to become mad. Death was death whatever form it took, and he had to face death as many better men had done before him. He had often thought about it and wondered how he should behave if the thing came to him. Respectably, he had hoped; heroically, he had sworn in his moments of confidence. But he had never for an instant dreamed of this cold, lonely, dreadful business. Last Sunday, he remembered, he had been basking in the afternoon sun in his little garden and reading about the end of Fergus MacIvor in *Waverley* and thrilling to the romance of it; and then Tibby had come out and summoned him in to tea. Then he had rather wanted to be a Jacobite in the '45 and in peril of his neck, and now Providence had taken him most terribly at his word.

A week ago—! He groaned at the remembrance of that sunny garden. In seven days he had found a new world and tried a new life, and had come now to the end of it. He did not want to die, less now than ever with such wide horizons opening before him. But that was the worst of it, he reflected, for to have a great life great hazards must be taken, and there was always the risk of this sudden extinguisher. . . . Had he to choose again, far better the smooth sheltered bypath than this accursed romantic highway on to which he had blundered. . . . No, by Heaven, no! Confound it, if he had to choose he would do it all again. Something stiff and indomitable in his soul was bracing him to a manlier humour. There was no one to see the figure strapped to the fir, but had there been a witness he would have noted that at this stage Dickson shut his teeth and that his troubled eyes looked very steadily before him.

His business, he felt, was to keep from thinking, for if he thought at all there would be a flow of memories, of his wife, his home, his books, his friends, to unman him. So he steeled himself to blankness, like a sleepless man imagining white sheep in a gate. . . . He noted a robin below the hazels, strutting impudently. And there was a tit on a bracken frond, which made the thing sway like one of the see-saws he used to play with as a boy. There was no wind in that undergrowth, and any movement must be due to bird or beast. The tit flew off, and the oscillations of the bracken slowly died away. Then they began again, but more violently, and Dickson could not see the bird that caused them. It must be something down at the roots of the covert, a rabbit, perhaps, or a fox, or a weasel.

He watched for the first sign of the beast, and thought he caught a glimpse of tawny fur. Yes, there it was—pale dirty yellow, a weasel clearly. Then suddenly the patch grew larger, and to his amazement he looked at a human face—the face of a pallid small boy.

A head disentangled itself, followed by thin shoulders, and then by a pair of very dirty bare legs. The figure raised itself and looked sharply round to make certain that the coast was clear. Then it stood up and saluted, revealing the well-known lineaments of Wee Jaikie.

At the sight Dickson knew that he was safe by that certainty of instinct which is independent of proof, like the man who prays for a sign and has his prayer answered. He observed that the boy was quietly sobbing. Jaikie surveyed the position for an instant with red-rimmed eyes and then unclasped a knife, feeling the edge of the blade on his thumb. He darted behind the fir, and a second later Dickson's wrists were free. Then he sawed at the legs, and cut the shackles which tied them together, and then—most circumspectly—assaulted the cord which bound Dickson's neck to the trunk. There now remained only the two bonds which fastened the legs and the body to the tree.

There was a sound in the wood different from the wind and stream. Jaikie listened like a startled hind.

"They're comin' back," he gasped. "Just you bide where ye are and let on ye're still tied up."

He disappeared in the scrub as inconspicuously as a rat, while two of the tinklers came up the slope from the waterside. Dickson in a fever of impatience cursed Wee Jaikie for not cutting his remaining bonds so that he could at least have made a dash for freedom. And then he realised that the boy had been right. Feeble and cramped as he was, he would have stood no chance in a race.

One of the tinklers was the man called Ecky. He had been running hard, and was mopping his brow.

"Hob's seen the brig," he said. "It's droppin' anchor ayont the Dookits whaur there's a beild frae the wund and deep water. They'll be landit in half an 'oor. Awa' you up to the Hoose and tell Dobson, and me and Sim and Hob will meet the boats at the Garplefit."

The other cast a glance towards Dickson.

"What about him?" he asked.

The two scrutinised their prisoner from a distance of a few paces. Dickson, well aware of his peril, held himself as stiff

as if every bond had been in place. The thought flashed on him that if he were too immobile they might think he was dying or dead, and come close to examine him. If they only kept their distance, the dusk of the wood would prevent them detecting Jaikie's handiwork.

"What'll you take to let me go?" he asked plaintively.

"Naething that you could offer, my mannie," said Ecky.

"I'll give you a five-pound note apiece."

"Produce the siller," said the other.

"It's in my pocket."

"It's no' that. We ripped your pooches lang syne."

"I'll take you to Glasgow with me and pay you there. Honour bright."

Ecky spat. "D'ye think we're gowks? Man, there's no siller ye could pay wad mak' it worth our while to lowse ye. Bide quiet there and ye'll see some queer things ere nicht. C'way, Davie."

The two set off at a good pace down the stream, while Dickson's pulsing heart returned to its normal rhythm. As the sound of their feet died away Wee Jaikie crawled out from cover, dry-eyed now and very business-like. He slit the last thongs, and Dickson fell limply on his face.

"Losh, laddie, I'm awful stiff," he groaned. "Now, listen. Away all your pith to Dougal, and tell him that the brig's in and the men will be landing inside the hour. Tell him I'm coming as fast as my legs will let me. The Princess will likely be there already and Sir Archibald and his men, but if they're no', tell Dougal they're coming. Haste you, Jaikie. And see here, I'll never forget what you've done for me the day. You're a fine wee laddie!"

The obedient Die-Hard disappeared, and Dickson painfully and laboriously set himself to climb the slope. He decided that his quickest and safest route lay by the highroad, and he had also some hopes of recovering his bicycle. On examining his body he seemed to have sustained no very great damage, except a painful cramping of legs and arms and a certain dizziness in the head. His pockets had been thoroughly rifled, and he reflected with amusement that he, the well-to-do Mr. McCunn, did not possess at the moment a single copper.

But his spirits were soaring, for somehow his escape had given him an assurance of ultimate success. Providence had directly interfered on his behalf by the hand of Wee Jaikie, and that surely meant that it would see him through. But his chief emotion was an ardour of impatience to get to the scene of action. He must be at Dalquharter before the men from the sea; he must find Dougal and discover his dispositions. Heritage would be on guard in the Tower and in a very little the enemy would be round it. It would be just like the Princess to try and enter there, but at all costs that must be hindered. She and Sir Archie must not be cornered in stone walls, but must keep their communications open and fall on the enemy's flank. Oh, if the police would only come in time, what a rounding-up of miscreants that day would see!

As the trees thinned on the brow of the slope and he saw the sky, he realised that the afternoon was far advanced. It must be well on for five o'clock. The wind still blew furiously, and the oaks on the fringes of the wood were whipped like saplings. Ruefully he admitted that the gale would not defeat the enemy. If the brig found a sheltered anchorage on the south side of the headland beyond the Garple, it would be easy enough for boats to make the Garple mouth, though it might be a difficult job to get out again. The thought quickened his steps, and he came out of cover on to the public road without a prior reconnaissance.

Just in front of him stood a motor-bicycle. Something had gone wrong with it for its owner was tinkering at it, on the side farthest from Dickson. A wild hope seized him that this might be the vanguard of the police, and he went boldly towards it. The owner, who was kneeling, raised his face at the sound of footsteps and Dickson looked into his eyes.

He recognised them only too well. They belonged to the man he had seen in the inn at Kirkmichael, the man whom Heritage had decided was an Australian, but whom they now knew to be their arch-enemy—the man called Paul who had persecuted the Princess for years and whom alone of all beings on earth she feared. He had been expected before, but had arrived now in the nick of time while the brig was casting anchor. Saskia had said that he had a devil's brain, and Dickson, as he stared at him, saw a fiendish cleverness in his straight brows and a remorseless cruelty in his stiff jaw and his pale eyes.

He achieved the bravest act of his life. Shaky and dizzy as he was, with freedom newly opened to him and the mental

torments of his captivity still an awful recollection, he did not hesitate. He saw before him the villain of the drama, the one man that stood between the Princess and peace of mind. He regarded no consequences, gave no heed to his own fate, and thought only how to put his enemy out of action. There was a big spanner lying on the ground. He seized it and with all his strength smote at the man's face.

The motor-cyclist, kneeling and working hard at his machine, had raised his head at Dickson's approach and beheld a wild apparition—a short man in ragged tweeds, with a bloody brow and long smears of blood on his cheeks. The next second he observed the threat of attack, and ducked his head so that the spanner only grazed his scalp. The motor-bicycle toppled over, its owner sprang to his feet, and found the short man, very pale and gasping, about to renew the assault. In such a crisis there was no time for inquiry, and the cyclist was well trained in self-defence. He leaped the prostrate bicycle, and before his assailant could get in a blow brought his left fist into violent contact with his chin. Dickson tottered back a step or two and then subsided among the bracken.

He did not lose his senses, but he had no more strength in him. He felt horribly ill, and struggled in vain to get up. The cyclist, a gigantic figure, towered above him. "Who the devil are you?" he was asking. "What do you mean by it?"

Dickson had no breath for words, and knew that if he tried to speak he would be very sick. He could only stare up like a dog at the angry eyes. Angry beyond question they were, but surely not malevolent. Indeed, as they looked at the shameful figure on the ground, amusement filled them. The face relaxed into a smile.

"Who on earth are you?" the voice repeated. And then into it came recognition. "I've seen you before. I believe you're the little man I saw last week at the Black Bull. Be so good as to explain why you want to murder me?"

Explanation was beyond Dickson, but his conviction was being wofully shaken. Saskia had said her enemy was as beautiful as a devil—he remembered the phrase, for he had thought it ridiculous. This man was magnificent, but there was nothing devilish in his lean grave face.

"What's your name?" the voice was asking.

"Tell me yours first," Dickson essayed to stutter between spasms of nausea.

"My name is Alexander Nicholson," was the answer.

"Then you're no' the man." It was a cry of wrath and despair.

"You're a very desperate little chap. For whom had I the honour to be mistaken?"

Dickson had now wriggled into a sitting position and had clasped his hands above his aching head.

"I thought you were a Russian, name of Paul," he groaned.

"Paul! Paul who?"

"Just Paul. A Bolshevik and an awful bad lot."

Dickson could not see the change which his words wrought in the other's face. He found himself picked up in strong arms and carried to a bog-pool where his battered face was carefully washed, his throbbing brows laved, and a wet handkerchief bound over them. Then he was given brandy in the socket of a flask, which eased his nausea. The cyclist ran his bicycle to the roadside, and found a seat for Dickson behind the turf-dyke of the old bucht.

"Now you are going to tell me everything," he said. "If the Paul who is your enemy is the Paul I think him, then we are allies."

But Dickson did not need this assurance. His mind had suddenly received a revelation. The Princess had expected an enemy, but also a friend. Might not this be the long-awaited friend, for whose sake she was rooted to Huntingtower with all its terrors?

"Are you sure you name's no' Alexis?" he asked.

"In my own country I was called Alexis Nicolaevitch, for I am a Russian. But for some years I have made my home with your folk, and I call myself Alexander Nicholson, which is the English form. Who told you about Alexis?"

"Give me your hand," said Dickson shamefacedly. "Man, she's been looking for you for weeks. You're terribly behind the fair."

"She!" he cried. "For God's sake tell me all you know."

"Ay, she—the Princess. But what are we havoring here for? I tell you at this moment she's somewhere down about the old Tower, and there's boatloads of blagyirds landing from the sea. Help me up, man, for I must be off. The story will keep.

Losh, it's very near the darkening. If you're Alexis, you're just about in time for a battle."

But Dickson on his feet was but a frail creature. He was still deplorably giddy, and his legs showed an unpleasing tendency to crumple. "I'm fair done," he moaned. "You see, I've been tied up all day to a tree and had two sore bashes on my head. Get you on that bicycle and hurry on, and I'll hirple after you the best I can. I'll direct you the road, and if you're lucky you'll find a Die-Hard about the village. Away with you, man, and never mind me."

"We go together," said the other quietly. "You can sit behind me and hang on to my waist. Before you turned up I had pretty well got the thing in order."

Dickson in a fever of impatience sat by while the Russian put the finishing touches to the machine, and as well as his anxiety allowed put him in possession of the main facts of the story. He told of how he and Heritage had come to Dalquharter, of the first meeting with Saskia, of the trip to Glasgow with the jewels, of the exposure of Loudon the factor, of last night's doings in the House, and of the journey that morning to the Mains of Garple. He sketched the figures on the scene—Heritage and Sir Archie, Dobson and his gang, the Gorbals Die-Hards. He told of the enemy's plans so far as he knew them.

"Looked at from a business point of view," he said, "the situation's like this. There's Heritage in the Tower, with Dobson, Léon and Spidel sitting round him. Somewhere about the place there's the Princess and Sir Archibald and three men with guns from the Mains. Dougal and his five laddies are running loose in the policies. And there's four tinklers and God knows how many foreign ruffians pushing up from the Garplefoot, and a brig lying waiting to carry off the ladies. Likewise there's the police, somewhere on the road, though the dear kens when they'll turn up. It's awful the incompetence of our Government, and the rates and taxes that high! . . . And there's you and me by this roadside, and I'm no more use than a tattie-bogle. . . . That's the situation, and the question is what's our plan to be? We must keep the blagyrds in play till the police come, and at the same time we must keep the Princess out of danger. That's why I'm wanting back, for they've sore need of a business head. Yon Sir Archibald's a fine fellow, but I doubt he'll be a bit rash, and the Princess is no' to hold or bind. Our first job is to find Dougal and get a grip of the facts."

"I am going to the Princess," said the Russian.

"Ay, that'll be best. You'll be maybe able to manage her, for you'll be well acquaint."

"She is my kinswoman. She is also my affianced wife."

"Keep us!" Dickson exclaimed, with a doleful thought of Heritage. "What ailed you then no' to look after her better?"

"We have been long separated, because it was her will. She had work to do and disappeared from me, though I searched all Europe for her. Then she sent me word, when the danger became extreme, and summoned me to her aid. But she gave me poor directions, for she did not know her own plans very clearly. She spoke of a place called Darkwater, and I have been hunting half Scotland for it. It was only last night that I heard of Dalquharter and guessed that that might be the name. But I was far down in Galloway, and have ridden fifty miles today."

"It's a queer thing, but I wouldn't take you for a Russian."

Alexis finished his work and put away his tools. "For the present," he said, "I am an Englishman, till my country comes again to her senses. Ten years ago I left Russia, for I was sick of the foolishness of my class and wanted a free life in a new world. I went to Australia and made good as an engineer. I am a partner in a firm which is pretty well known even in Britain. When war broke out I returned to fight for my people, and when Russia fell out of the war, I joined the Australians in France and fought with them till the Armistice. And now I have only one duty left, to save the Princess and take her with me to my new home till Russia is a nation once more."

Dickson whistled joyfully. "So Mr. Heritage was right. He aye said you were an Australian. . . . And you're a business man! That's grand hearing and puts my mind at rest. You must take charge of the party at the House, for Sir Archibald's a daft young lad and Mr. Heritage is a poet. I thought I would have to go myself, but I doubt I would just be a hindrance with my dwaibly legs. I'd be better outside, watching for the police. . . . Are you ready, sir?"

Dickson not without difficulty perched himself astride the luggage carrier, firmly grasping the rider round the middle. The machine started, but it was evidently in a bad way, for it made poor going till the descent towards the main Auchenlochan road. On the slope it warmed up and they crossed the Garple bridge at a fair pace. There was to be no pleasant April twilight, for the stormy sky had already made dusk, and in a very little the dark would fall. So sombre was the evening that Dickson did not notice a figure in the shadow of the roadside pines till it whistled shrilly on its fingers. He

cried on Alexis to stop, and, this being accomplished with some suddenness, fell off at Dougal's feet.

"What's the news?" he demanded.

Dougal glanced at Alexis and seemed to approve his looks.

"Napoleon has just reported that three boatloads, making either twenty-three or twenty-four men—they were gey ill to count—has landed at Garplefit and is makin' their way to the auld Tower. The tinklers warned Dobson and soon it'll be a' bye wi' Heritage."

"The Princess is not there?" was Dickson's anxious inquiry.

"Na, na. Heritage is there his lone. They were for joinin' him, but I wouldn't let them. She came wi' a man they call Sir Erchibald and three gemkeepers wi' guns. I stoppit their caw'r up the road and tell't them the lie o' the land. Yon Sir Erchibald has poor notions o' strawtegy. He was for bangin' into the auld Tower straight away and shootin' Dobson if he tried to stop them. 'Havers,' say I, 'let them break their teeth on the Tower, thinkin' the leddy's inside, and that'll give us time, for Heritage is no' the lad to surrender in a hurry.'"

"Where are they now?"

"In the Hoose o' Dalquharter, and a sore job I had gettin' them in. We've shifted our base again, without the enemy suspectin'."

"Any word of the police?"

"The polis!" and Dougal spat cynically. "It seems they're a dour crop to shift. Sir Erchibald was sayin' that him and the lassie had been to the Chief Constable, but the man was terrible auld and slow. They convertit him, but he threepit that it would take a long time to collect his men and that there was no danger o' the brig landin' afore night. He's wrong there onyway, for they're landit."

"Dougal," said Dickson, "you've heard the Princess speak of a friend she was expecting here called Alexis. This is him. You can address him as Mr. Nicholson. Just arrived in the nick of time. You must get him into the House, for he's the best right to be beside the lady. . . . Jaikie would tell you that I've been sore mishandled the day, and am no' very fit for a battle. But Mr. Nicholson's a business man and he'll do as well. You're keeping the Die-Hards outside, I hope?"

"Ay. Thomas Yownie's in charge, and Jaikie will be in and out with orders. They've instructions to watch for the polis, and keep an eye on the Garplefit. It's a mortal long front to hold, but there's no other way. I must be in the Hoose mysel'. Thomas Yownie's headquarters is the auld wife's hen-hoose."

At that moment in a pause of the gale came the far-borne echo of a shot.

"Pistol," said Alexis.

"Heritage," said Dougal. "Trade will be gettin' brisk with him. Start your machine and I'll hang on ahint. We'll try the road by the West Lodge."

Presently the pair disappeared in the dusk, the noise of the engine was swallowed up in the wild orchestra of the wind, and Dickson hobbled towards the village in a state of excitement which made him oblivious of his wounds. That lonely pistol shot was, he felt, the bell to ring up the curtain on the last act of the play.



CHAPTER 13

THE COMING OF THE DANISH BRIG

Mr. John Heritage, solitary in the old Tower, found much to occupy his mind. His giddiness was passing, though the dregs of a headache remained, and his spirits rose with his responsibilities. At daybreak he breakfasted out of the Mearns Street provision box, and made tea in one of the Die-Hards' camp kettles. Next he gave some attention to his toilet, necessary after the rough-and-tumble of the night. He made shift to bathe in icy water from the Tower well, shaved, tidied up his clothes and found a clean shirt from his pack. He carefully brushed his hair, reminding himself that thus had the Spartans done before Thermopylæ. The neat and somewhat pallid young man that emerged from these rites then ascended to the first floor to reconnoitre the landscape from the narrow unglazed windows.

If any one had told him a week ago that he would be in so strange a world he would have quarrelled violently with his informant. A week ago he was a cynical clear-sighted modern, a contemner of illusions, a swallower of formulas, a breaker of shams—one who had seen through the heroical and found it silly. Romance and such-like toys were playthings for fatted middle-age, not for strenuous and cold-eyed youth. But the truth was that now he was altogether spellbound by these toys. To think that he was serving his lady was rapture—ecstasy, that for her he was single-handed venturing all. He rejoiced to be alone with his private fancies. His one fear was that the part he had cast himself for should be needless, that the men from the sea should not come, or that reinforcements would arrive before he should be called upon. He hoped alone to make a stand against thousands. What the upshot might be he did not trouble to inquire. Of course the Princess would be saved, but first he must glut his appetite for the heroic.

He made a diary of events that day, just as he used to do at the front. At twenty minutes past eight he saw the first figure coming from the House. It was Spidel, who limped round the Tower, tried the door, and came to a halt below the window. Heritage stuck out his head and wished him good morning, getting in reply an amazed stare. The man was not disposed to talk, though Heritage made some interesting observations on the weather, but departed quicker than he came, in the direction of the West Lodge.

Just before nine o'clock he returned with Dobson and Léon. They made a very complete reconnaissance of the Tower, and for a moment Heritage thought that they were about to try to force an entrance. They tugged and hammered at the great oak door, which he had further strengthened by erecting behind it a pile of the heaviest lumber he could find in the place. It was imperative that they should not get in, and he got Dickson's pistol ready with the firm intention of shooting them if necessary. But they did nothing, except to hold a conference in the hazel clump a hundred yards to the north, when Dobson seemed to be laying down the law, and Léon spoke rapidly with a great fluttering of hands. They were obviously puzzled by the sight of Heritage, whom they believed to have left the neighbourhood. Then Dobson went off, leaving Léon and Spidel on guard, one at the edge of the shrubberies between the Tower and the House, the other on the side nearest the Laver glen. These were their posts, but they did sentry-go around the building, and passed so close to Heritage's window that he could have tossed a cigarette on their heads.

It occurred to him that he ought to get busy with camouflage. They must be convinced that the Princess was in the place, for he wanted their whole mind to be devoted to the siege. He rummaged among the ladies' baggage, and extracted a skirt and a coloured scarf. The latter he managed to flutter so that it could be seen at the window the next time one of the watchers came within sight. He also fixed up the skirt so that the fringe of it could be seen, and, when Léon appeared below, he was in the shadow talking rapid French in a very fair imitation of the tones of Cousin Eugénie. The ruse had its effect, for Léon promptly went off to tell Spidel, and when Dobson appeared he too was given the news. This seemed to settle their plans, for all three remained on guard, Dobson nearest to the Tower, seated on an outcrop of rock with his mackintosh collar turned up, and his eyes usually turned to the misty sea.

By this time it was eleven o'clock, and the next three hours passed slowly with Heritage. He fell to picturing the fortunes of his friends. Dickson and the Princess should by this time be far inland, out of danger and in the way of finding succour. He was confident that they would return, but he trusted not too soon, for he hoped for a run for his money as Horatius in the Gate. After that he was a little torn in his mind. He wanted the Princess to come back and to be somewhere near if there was a fight going, so that she might be a witness of his devotion. But she must not herself run any risk, and he

became anxious when he remembered her terrible sangfroid. Dickson could no more restrain her than a child could hold a greyhound. . . . But of course it would never come to that. The police would turn up long before the brig appeared—Dougal had thought that would not be till high tide, between four and five—and the only danger would be to the pirates. The three watchers would be put in the bag, and the men from the sea would walk into a neat trap. This reflection seemed to take all the colour out of Heritage's prospect. Peril and heroism were not to be his lot—only boredom.

A little after twelve two of the tinklers appeared with some news which made Dobson laugh and pat them on the shoulder. He seemed to be giving them directions, pointing seaward and southward. He nodded to the Tower, where Heritage took the opportunity of again fluttering Saskia's scarf athwart the window. The tinklers departed at a trot, and Dobson lit his pipe as if well pleased. He had some trouble with it in the wind, which had risen to an uncanny violence. Even the solid Tower rocked with it, and the sea was a waste of spindrift and low scurrying cloud. Heritage discovered a new anxiety—this time about the possibility of the brig landing at all. He wanted a complete bag, and it would be tragic if they got only the three seedy ruffians now circumambulating his fortress.

About one o'clock he was greatly cheered by the sight of Dougal. At the moment Dobson was lunching off a hunk of bread and cheese directly between the Tower and the House, just short of the crest of the ridge on the other side of which lay the stables and the shrubberies; Léon was on the north side opposite the Tower door, and Spidel was at the south end near the edge of the Garple glen. Heritage, watching the ridge behind Dobson and the upper windows of the House which appeared over it, saw on the very crest something like a tuft of rusty bracken which he had not noticed before. Presently the tuft moved, and a hand shot up from it waving a rag of some sort. Dobson at the moment was engaged with a bottle of porter, and Heritage could safely wave a hand in reply. He could now make out clearly the red head of Dougal.

The Chieftain, having located the three watchers, proceeded to give an exhibition of his prowess for the benefit of the lonely inmate of the Tower. Using as cover a drift of bracken, he wormed his way down till he was not six yards from Dobson, and Heritage had the privilege of seeing his grinning countenance a very little way above the innkeeper's head. Then he crawled back and reached the neighbourhood of Léon, who was sitting on a fallen Scotch fir. At that moment it occurred to the Belgian to visit Dobson. Heritage's breath stopped, but Dougal was ready, and froze into a motionless blur in the shadow of a hazel bush. Then he crawled very fast into the hollow where Léon had been sitting, seized something which looked like a bottle, and scrambled back to the ridge. At the top he waved the object, whatever it was, but Heritage could not reply, for Dobson happened to be looking towards the window. That was the last he saw of the Chieftain, but presently he realised what was the booty he had annexed. It must be Léon's life-preserver, which the night before had broken Heritage's head.

After that cheering episode boredom again set in. He collected some food from the Mearns Street box, and indulged himself with a glass of liqueur brandy. He was beginning to feel miserably cold, so he carried up some broken wood and made a fire on the immense hearth in the upper chamber. Anxiety was clouding his mind again, for it was now two o'clock, and there was no sign of the reinforcements which Dickson and the Princess had gone to find. The minutes passed, and soon it was three o'clock, and from the window he saw only the top of the gaunt shuttered House, now and then hidden by squalls of sleet, and Dobson squatted like an Eskimo, and trees dancing like a witch-wood in the gale. All the vigour of the morning seemed to have gone out of his blood; he felt lonely and apprehensive and puzzled. He wished he had Dickson beside him, for that little man's cheerful voice and complacent triviality would be a comfort. . . . Also, he was abominably cold. He put on his waterproof, and turned his attention to the fire. It needed rekindling, and he hunted in his pockets for paper, finding only the slim volume lettered *Whorls*.

I set it down as the most significant commentary on his state of mind. He regarded the book with intense disfavour, tore it in two, and used a handful of its fine deckle-edged leaves to get the fire going. They burned well, and presently the rest followed. Well for Dickson's peace of mind that he was not a witness of such vandalism.

A little warmer but in no way more cheerful, he resumed his watch near the window. The day was getting darker, and promised an early dusk. His watch told him that it was after four, and still nothing had happened. Where on earth were Dickson and the Princess? Where in the name of all that was holy were the police? Any minute now the brig might arrive and land its men, and he would be left there as a burnt-offering to their wrath. There must have been an infernal muddle somewhere. . . . Anyhow the Princess was out of the trouble, but where the Lord alone knew. . . . Perhaps the reinforcements were lying in wait for the boats at the Garplefoot. That struck him as a likely explanation, and comforted him. Very soon he might hear the sound of an engagement to the south, and the next thing would be Dobson and his crew

in flight. He was determined to be in the show somehow and would be very close on their heels. He felt a peculiar dislike to all three, but especially to Léon. The Belgian's small baby features had for four days set him clenching his fists when he thought of them.

The next thing he saw was one of the tinklers running hard towards the Tower. He cried something to Dobson, which Heritage could not catch, but which woke the latter to activity. The innkeeper shouted to Léon and Spidel, and the tinkler was excitedly questioned. Dobson laughed and slapped his thigh. He gave orders to the others, and himself joined the tinkler and hurried off in the direction of the Garplefoot. Something was happening there, something of ill omen, for the man's face and manner had been triumphant. Were the boats landing?

As Heritage puzzled over this event, another figure appeared on the scene. It was a big man in knickerbockers and mackintosh, who came round the end of the House from the direction of the South Lodge. At first he thought it was the advance-guard from his own side, the help which Dickson had gone to find, and he only restrained himself in time from shouting a welcome. But surely their supports would not advance so confidently in enemy country. The man strode over the slopes as if looking for somebody; then he caught sight of Léon and waved him to come. Léon must have known him, for he hastened to obey.

The two were about thirty yards from Heritage's window. Léon was telling some story volubly, pointing now to the Tower and now towards the sea. The big man nodded as if satisfied. Heritage noted that his right arm was tied up, and that the mackintosh sleeve was empty, and that brought him enlightenment. It was Loudon the factor, whom Dickson had winged the night before. The two of them passed out of view in the direction of Spidel.

The sight awoke Heritage to the supreme unpleasantness of his position. He was utterly alone on the headland, and his allies had vanished into space, while the enemy plans, moving like clock-work, were approaching their consummation. For a second he thought of leaving the Tower and hiding somewhere in the cliffs. He dismissed the notion unwillingly, for he remembered the task that had been set him. He was there to hold the fort to the last—to gain time, though he could not for the life of him see what use time was to be when all the strategy of his own side seemed to have miscarried. Anyhow, the blackguards would be sold for they would not find the Princess. But he felt a horrid void in the pit of his stomach, and a looseness about his knees.

The moments passed more quickly as he wrestled with his fears. The next he knew the empty space below his window was filling with figures. There was a great crowd of them, rough fellows with seamen's coats, still dripping as if they had had a wet landing. Dobson was with them, but for the rest they were strange figures.

Now that the expected had come at last Heritage's nerves grew calmer. He made out that the newcomers were trying the door, and he waited to hear it fall, for such a mob could soon force it. But instead a voice called from beneath.

"Will you please open to us?" it said.

He stuck his head out and saw a little group with one man at the head of it, a young man clad in oilskins whose face was dim in the murky evening. The voice was that of a gentleman.

"I have orders to open to no one," Heritage replied.

"Then I fear we must force an entrance," said the voice.

"You can go to the devil," said Heritage.

That defiance was the screw which his nerves needed. His temper had risen, he had forgotten all about the Princess, he did not even remember his isolation. His job was to make a fight for it. He ran up the staircase which led to the attics of the Tower, for he recollected that there was a window there which looked over the ground before the door. The place was ruinous, the floor filled with holes, and a part of the roof sagged down in a corner. The stones around the window were loose and crumbling and he managed to pull several out so that the slit was enlarged. He found himself looking down on a crowd of men, who had lifted the fallen tree on which Léon had perched, and were about to use it as a battering ram.

"The first fellow who comes within six yards of the door I shoot," he shouted.

There was a white wave below as every face was turned to him. He ducked back his head in time as a bullet chipped the side of the window.

But his position was a good one, for he had a hole in the broken wall through which he could see, and could shoot with his hand at the edge of the window while keeping his body in cover. The battering party resumed their task, and as the tree swung nearer, he fired at the foremost of them. He missed, but the shot for a moment suspended operations.

Again they came on, and again he fired. This time he damaged somebody, for the trunk was dropped.

A voice gave orders, a sharp authoritative voice. The battering squad dissolved, and there was a general withdrawal out of the line of fire from the window. Was it possible that he had intimidated them? He could hear the sound of voices, and then a single figure came into sight again, holding something in its hand.

He did not fire, for he recognised the futility of his efforts. The baseball swing of the figure below could not be mistaken. There was a roar beneath, and a flash of fire, as the bomb exploded on the door. Then came a rush of men, and the Tower had fallen.

Heritage clambered through a hole in the roof and gained the topmost parapet. He had still a pocketful of cartridges, and there in a coign of the old battlements he would prove an ugly customer to the pursuit. Only one at a time could reach that siege perilous. . . . They would not take long to search the lower rooms, and then would be hot on the trail of the man who had fooled them. He had not a scrap of fear left or even of anger—only triumph at the thought of how properly those ruffians had been sold. “Like schoolboys they who unaware”—instead of two women they had found a man with a gun. And the Princess was miles off and forever beyond their reach. When they had settled with him they would no doubt burn the House down, but that would serve them little. From his airy pinnacle he could see the whole sea-front of Huntingtower, a blur in the dusk but for the ghostly eyes of its white-shuttered windows.

Something was coming from it, running lightly over the lawns, lost for an instant in the trees, and then appearing clear on the crest of the ridge where some hours earlier Dougal had lain. With horror he saw that it was a girl. She stood with the wind plucking at her skirts and hair, and she cried in a high, clear voice which pierced even the confusion of the gale. What she cried he could not tell for it was in a strange tongue. . . .

But it reached the besiegers. There was a sudden silence in the din below him and then a confusion of shouting. The men seemed to be pouring out of the gap which had been the doorway, and as he peered over the parapet first one and then another entered his area of vision. The girl on the ridge, as soon as she saw that she had attracted attention, turned and ran back, and after her up the slopes went the pursuit bunched like hounds on a good scent.

Mr. John Heritage, swearing terribly, started to retrace his steps.



CHAPTER 14

THE SECOND BATTLE OF THE CRUIVES

The military historian must often make shift to write of battles with slender data, but he can pad out his deficiencies by learned parallels. If his were the talented pen describing this, the latest action fought on British soil against a foreign foe, he would no doubt be crippled by the absence of written orders and war diaries. But how eloquently he would discant on the resemblance between Dougal and Gouraud—how the plan of leaving the enemy to waste his strength upon a deserted position was that which on the 15th of July, 1918, the French general had used with decisive effect in Champagne! But Dougal had never heard of Gouraud, and I cannot claim that, like the Happy Warrior, he

“through the heat of conflict kept the law
In calmness made, and saw what he foresaw.”

I have had the benefit of discussing the affair with him and his colleagues, but I should offend against historic truth if I represented the main action as anything but a scrimmage—a “soldiers’ battle,” the historian would say, a Malplaquet, an Albuera.

Just after half-past three that afternoon the Commander-in-Chief was revealed in a very bad temper. He had intercepted Sir Archie’s car, and, since Léon was known to be fully occupied, had brought it in by the West Lodge, and hidden it behind a clump of laurels. There he had held a hoarse council of war. He had cast an appraising eye over Sime the butler, Carfrae the chauffeur, and McGuffog the gamekeeper, and his brows had lightened when he beheld Sir Archie with an armful of guns and two big cartridge-magazines. But they had darkened again at the first words of the leader of the reinforcements.

“Now for the Tower,” Sir Archie had observed cheerfully. “We should be a match for the three watchers, my lad, and it’s time that poor devil What’s-his-name was relieved.”

“A bonny-like plan that would be,” said Dougal. “Man, ye would be walkin’ into the very trap they want. In an hour, or maybe two, the rest will turn up from the sea and they’d have ye tight by the neck. Na, na! It’s time we’re wantin’, and the longer they think we’re a’ in the auld Tower the better for us. What news o’ the polis?”

He listened to Sir Archie’s report with a gloomy face.

“Not afore the darkenin’? They’ll be ower late—the polis are aye ower late. It looks as if we had the job to do oursels. What’s *your* notion?”

“God knows,” said the baronet whose eyes were on Saskia. “What’s yours?”

The deference conciliated Dougal. “There’s just the one plan that’s worth a docken. There’s five o’ us here, and there’s plenty weapons. Besides there’s five Die-Hards somewhere about, and though they’ve never tried it afore they can be trusted to loose off a gun. My advice is to hide at the Garplefoot and stop the boats landin’. We’d have the tinklers on our flank, no doubt, but I’m not muckle feared o’ them. It wouldn’t be easy for the boats to get in wi’ this tearin’ wind and us firin’ volleys from the shore.”

Sir Archie stared at him with admiration. “You’re a hearty young fire-eater. But Great Scott! we can’t go pottin’ at strangers before we find out their business. This is a law-abidin’ country, and we’re not entitled to start shootin’ except in self-defence. You can wash that plan out, for it ain’t feasible.”

Dougal spat cynically. “For all that it’s the right strawtegy. Man, we might sink the lot, and then turn and settle wi’ Dobson, and all afore the first polisman showed his neb. It would be a grand performance. But I was feared ye wouldn’t be for it. . . . Well, there’s just the one other thing to do. We must get inside the Hoose and put it in a state of defence. Heritage has McCunn’s pistol, and he’ll keep them busy for a bit. When they’ve finished wi’ him and find the place is empty, they’ll try the Hoose and we’ll give them a warm reception. That should keep us goin’ till the polis arrive, unless they’re comin’ wi’ the blind carrier.”

Sir Archie nodded. “But why put ourselves in their power at all? They’re at present barking up the wrong tree. Let them bark up another wrong ’un. Why shouldn’t the House remain empty? I take it we’re here to protect the Princess. Well,

we'll have done that if they go off empty-handed."

Dougal looked up to the heavens. "I wish McCunn was here," he sighed. "Ay, we've got to protect the Princess, and there's just the one way to do it, and that's to put an end to this crowd o' blagvirds. If they gang empty-handed, they'll come again another day, either here or somewhere else, and it won't be long afore they get the lassie. But if we finish with them now she can sit down wi' an easy mind. That's why we've got to hang on to them till the polis comes. There's no way out o' this business but a battle."

He found an ally. "Dougal is right," said Saskia. "If I am to have peace, by some way or other the fangs of my enemies must be drawn for ever."

He swung round and addressed her formally. "Mem, I'm askin' ye for the last time. Will ye keep out of this business? Will ye gang back and sit down aside Mrs. Morran's fire and have your tea and wait till we come for ye? Ye can do no good, and ye're puttin' yourself terrible in the enemy's power. If we're beat and ye're no' there, they get very little satisfaction, but if they get *you* they get what they've come seekin'. I tell ye straight—ye're an encumbrance."

She laughed mischievously. "I can shoot better than you," she said.

He ignored the taunt. "Will ye listen to sense and fall to the rear?"

"I will not," she said.

"Then gang your own gait. I'm ower wise to argy-bargy wi' women. The Hoose be it!"

It was a journey which sorely tried Dougal's temper. The only way in was by the verandah, but the door at the west end had been locked, and the ladder had disappeared. Now of his party three were lame, one lacked an arm, and one was a girl; besides, there were the guns and cartridges to transport. Moreover, at more than one point before the verandah was reached the route was commanded by a point on the ridge near the old Tower, and that had been Spidel's position when Dougal made his last reconnaissance. It behoved to pass these points swiftly and unobtrusively, and his company was neither swift nor unobtrusive. McGuffog had a genius for tripping over obstacles, and Sir Archie was for ever proffering his aid to Saskia, who was in a position to give rather than to receive, being far the most active of the party. Once Dougal had to take the gamekeeper's head and force it down, a performance which would have led to an immediate assault but for Sir Archie's presence. Nor did the latter escape. "Will ye stop heedin' the lassie, and attend to your own job," the Chieftain growled. "Ye're makin' as much noise as a road-roller."

Arrived at the foot of the verandah wall there remained the problem of the escalade. Dougal clambered up like a squirrel by the help of cracks in the stones, and he could be heard trying the handle of the door into the House. He was absent for about five minutes and then his head peeped over the edge accompanied by the hooks of an iron ladder. "From the boiler-house," he informed them as they stood clear for the thing to drop. It proved to be little more than half the height of the wall.

Saskia ascended first, and had no difficulty in pulling herself over the parapet. Then came the guns and ammunition, and then the one-armed Sime, who turned out to be an athlete. But it was no easy matter getting up the last three. Sir Archie anathematised his frailties. "Nice old crock to go tiger-shootin' with," he told the Princess. "But set me to something where my confounded leg don't get in the way, and I'm still pretty useful!" Dougal, mopping his brow with the rag he called his handkerchief, observed sourly that he objected to going scouting with a herd of elephants.

Once indoors his spirits rose. The party from the Mains had brought several electric torches and the one lamp was presently found and lit. "We can't count on the polis," Dougal announced, "and when the foreigners is finished wi' the Tower they'll come on here. If no', we must make them. What is it the sodgers call it? Forcin' a battle? Now see here! There's the two roads into this place, the back door and the verandy, leavin' out the front door which is chained and lockit. They'll try those two roads first and we must get them well barricaded in time. But mind, if there's a good few o' them, it'll be an easy job to batter in the front door or the windies, so we maun be ready for that."

He told off a fatigue party—the Princess, Sir Archie and McGuffog—to help in moving furniture to the several doors. Sime and Carfrae attended to the kitchen entrance, while he himself made a tour of the ground-floor windows. For half an hour the empty house was loud with strange sounds. McGuffog, who was a giant in strength, filled the passage at the verandah end with an assortment of furniture ranging from a grand piano to a vast mahogany sofa, while Saskia and Sir Archie pillaged the bedrooms and packed up the interstices with mattresses in lieu of sandbags. Dougal on his return saw fit to approve their work.

“That’ll fickle the blagyards. Down at the kitchen door we’ve got a mangle, five wash-tubs and the best part of a ton o’ coal. It’s the windies I’m anxious about, for they’re ower big to fill up. But I’ve gotten tubs o’ water below them and a lot o’ wire-nettin’ I fund in the cellar.”

Sir Archie morosely wiped his brow. “I can’t say I ever hated a job more,” he told Saskia. “It seems pretty cool to march into somebody else’s house and make free with his furniture. I hope to goodness our friends from the sea do turn up, or we’ll look pretty foolish. Loudon will have a score against me he won’t forget.”

“Ye’re no’ weakenin’?” asked Dougal fiercely.

“Not a bit. Only hopin’ somebody hasn’t made a mighty big mistake.”

“Ye needn’t be feared for that. Now you listen to your instructions. We’re terrible few for such a big place, but we maun make up for shortness o’ numbers by extra mobility. The gemkeeper will keep the windy that looks on the verandy, and fell any man that gets through. You’ll hold the verandy door, and the ither lame man—is’t Carfrae ye call him?—will keep the back door. I’ve telled the one-armed man, who has some kind of a head on him, that he maun keep on the move, watchin’ to see if they try the front door or any o’ the other windies. If they do, he takes his station there. D’ye follow?”

Sir Archie nodded gloomily. “What is my post?” Saskia asked.

“I’ve appointed ye my Chief of Staff,” was the answer. “Ye see we’ve no reserves. If this door’s the dangerous bit, it maun be reinforced from elsewhere; and that’ll want savage thinkin’. Ye’ll have to be ay on the move, Mem, and keep me informed. If they break in at two bits, we’re beat, and there’ll be nothin’ for it but to retire to our last position. Ye ken the room ayont the hall where they keep the coats. That’s our last trench, and at the worst we fall back there and stick it out. It has a strong door and a wee windy, so they’ll no’ be able to get in on our rear. We should be able to put up a good defence there, unless they fire the place over our heads. . . . Now, we’d better give out the guns.”

“We don’t want any shootin’ if we can avoid it,” said Sir Archie, who found his distaste for Dougal growing, though he was under the spell of the one being there who knew precisely his own mind.

“Just what I was goin’ to say. My instructions is, reserve your fire, and don’t loose off till you have a man up against the end o’ your barrel.”

“Good Lord, we’ll get into a horrible row. The whole thing may be a mistake, and we’ll be had up for wholesale homicide. No man shall fire unless I give the word.”

The Commander-in-Chief looked at him darkly. Some bitter retort was on his tongue, but he restrained himself.

“It appears,” he said, “that ye think I’m doin’ all this for fun. I’ll no ‘argy wi’ ye. There can be just the one general in a battle, but I’ll give ye permission to say the word when to fire. . . . Macgregor!” he muttered, a strange expletive only used in moments of deep emotion. “I’ll wager ye’ll be for sayin’ the word afore I’d say it mysel’.”

He turned to the Princess. “I hand over to you, till I am back, for I maun be off and see to the Die-Hards. I wish I could bring them in here, but I daren’t lose my communications. I’ll likely get in by the boiler-house skylight when I come back, but it might be as well to keep a road open here unless ye’re actually attacked.”

Dougal clambered over the mattresses and the grand piano; a flicker of waning daylight appeared for a second as he squeezed through the door, and Sir Archie was left staring at the wrathful countenance of McGuffog. He laughed ruefully.

“I’ve been in about forty battles, and here’s that little devil rather worried about my pluck, and talkin’ to me like a corps commander to a newly joined second-lieutenant. All the same he’s a remarkable child, and we’d better behave as if we were in for a real shindy. What do you think, Princess?”

“I think we are in for what you call a shindy. I am in command, remember. I order you to serve out the guns.”

This was done, a shot-gun and a hundred cartridges to each, while McGuffog, who was a marksman, was also given a sporting Mannlicher, and two other rifles, a .303 and a small-bore Holland, were kept in reserve in the hall. Sir Archie, free from Dougal’s compelling presence, gave the gamekeeper peremptory orders not to shoot till he was bidden, and Carfrae at the kitchen door was warned to the same effect. The shuttered house, where the only light apart from the garden-room was the feeble spark of the electric torches, had the most disastrous effect upon his spirits. The gale which roared in the chimney and eddied among the rafters of the hall seemed an infernal commotion in a tomb.

“Let’s go upstairs,” he told Saskia; “there must be a view from the upper windows.”

“You can see the top of the old Tower, and part of the sea,” she said. “I know it well, for it was my only amusement to

look at it. On clear days, too, one could see high mountains far in the west.” His depression seemed to have affected her, for she spoke listlessly, unlike the vivid creature who had led the way in.

In a gaunt west-looking bedroom, the one in which Heritage and Dickson had camped the night before, they opened a fold of the shutters and looked out into a world of grey wrack and driving rain. The Tower roof showed mistily beyond the ridge of down, but its environs were not in their prospect. The lower regions of the House had been gloomy enough, but this bleak place with its drab outlook struck a chill to Sir Archie’s soul. He dolefully lit a cigarette.

“This is a pretty rotten show for you,” he told her. “It strikes me as a rather unpleasant brand of nightmare.”

“I have been living with nightmares for three years,” she said wearily.

He cast his eyes round the room. “I think the Kennedys were mad to build this confounded barrack. I’ve always disliked it, and old Quentin hadn’t any use for it either. Cold, cheerless, raw monstrosity! It hasn’t been a very giddy place for you, Princess.”

“It has been my prison, when I hoped it would be a sanctuary. But it may yet be my salvation.”

“I’m sure I hope so. I say, you must be jolly hungry. I don’t suppose there’s any chance of tea for you.”

She shook her head. She was looking fixedly at the Tower, as if she expected something to appear there, and he followed her eyes.

“Rum old shell, that. Quentin used to keep all kinds of live stock there, and when we were boys it was our castle where we played at bein’ robber chiefs. It’ll be dashed queer if the real thing should turn up this time. I suppose McCunn’s Poet is roostin’ there all by his lone. Can’t say I envy him his job.”

Suddenly she caught his arm. “I see a man,” she whispered. “There! He is behind those far bushes. There is his head again!”

It was clearly a man, but he presently disappeared, for he had come round by the south end of the House, past the stables, and had now gone over the ridge.

“The cut of his jib is uncommonly like Loudon, the factor. I thought McCunn had stretched him on a bed of pain. Lord, if this thing should turn out a farce, I simply can’t face Loudon. . . . I say, Princess, you don’t suppose by any chance that McCunn’s a little bit wrong in the head?”

She turned her candid eyes on him. “You are in a very doubting mood.”

“My feet are cold and I don’t mind admittin’ it. Hanged if I know what it is, but I don’t feel this show a bit real. If it isn’t, we’re in a fair way to make howlin’ idiots of ourselves, and get pretty well embroiled with the law. It’s all right for the red-haired boy, for he can take everything seriously, even play. I could do the same thing myself when I was a kid. I don’t mind runnin’ some kinds of risk—I’ve had a few in my time—but this is so infernally outlandish and I—I don’t quite believe in it. That is to say, I believe in it right enough when I look at you or listen to McCunn, but as soon as my eyes are off you I begin to doubt again. I’m gettin’ old and I’ve a stake in the country, and I daresay I’m gettin’ a bit of a prig—anyway I don’t want to make a jackass of myself. Besides, there’s this foul weather and this beastly house to ice my feet.”

He broke off with an exclamation, for on the grey cloud-bounded stage in which the roof of the Tower was the central feature, actors had appeared. Dim hurrying shapes showed through the mist, dipping over the ridge, as if coming from the Garplefoot.

She seized his arm and he saw that her listlessness was gone. Her eyes were shining.

“It is they,” she cried. “The nightmare is real at last. Do you doubt now?”

He could only stare, for these shapes arriving and vanishing like wisps of fog still seemed to him phantasmal. The girl held his arm tightly clutched, and craned towards the window space. He tried to open the frame, and succeeded in smashing the glass. A swirl of wind drove inwards and blew a loose lock of Saskia’s hair across his brow.

“I wish Dougal were back,” he muttered, and then came the crack of a shot.

The pressure on his arm slackened, and a pale face was turned to him. “He is alone—Mr. Heritage. He has no chance. They will kill him like a dog.”

“They’ll never get in,” he assured her. “Dougal said the place could hold out for hours.”

Another shot followed and presently a third. She twined her hands and her eyes were wild.

“We can’t leave him to be killed,” she gasped.

"It's the only game. We're playin' for time, remember. Besides he won't be killed. Great Scott!"

As he spoke, a sudden explosion cleft the drone of the wind and a patch of gloom flashed into yellow light.

"Bomb!" he cried. "Lord, I might have thought of that."

The girl had sprung back from the window. "I cannot bear it. I will not see him murdered in sight of his friends. I am going to show myself, and when they see me they will leave him. . . . No, you must stay here. Presently they will be round this house. Don't be afraid for me—I am very quick of foot."

"For God's sake, don't! Here, Princess, stop," and he clutched at her skirt. "Look here, I'll go."

"You can't. You have been wounded. I am in command, you know. Keep the door open till I come back."

He hobbled after her, but she easily eluded him. She was smiling now, and blew a kiss to him. "La, la, la," she trilled, as she ran down the stairs. He heard her voice below, admonishing McGuffog. Then he pulled himself together and went back to the window. He had brought the little Holland with him, and he poked its barrel through the hole in the glass.

"Curse my game leg," he said, almost cheerfully, for the situation was now becoming one with which he could cope. "I ought to be able to hold up the pursuit a bit. My aunt! What a girl!"

With the rifle cuddled to his shoulder he watched a slim figure come into sight on the lawn, running towards the ridge. He reflected that she must have dropped from the high verandah wall. That reminded him that something must be done to make the wall climbable for her return, so he went down to McGuffog, and the two squeezed through the barricaded door to the verandah. The boiler-house ladder was still in position, but it did not reach half the height, so McGuffog was adjured to stand by to help, and in the meantime to wait on duty by the wall. Then he hurried upstairs to his watch-tower.

The girl was in sight, almost on the crest of the high ground. There she stood for a moment, one hand clutching at her errant hair, the other shielding her eyes from the sting of the rain. He heard her cry, as Heritage had heard her, but since the wind was blowing towards him the sound came louder and fuller. Again she cried, and then stood motionless with her hands above her head. It was only for an instant, for the next he saw she had turned and was racing down the slope, jumping the little scrogs of hazel like a deer. On the ridge appeared faces, and then over it swept a mob of men.

She had a start of some fifty yards, and laboured to increase it, having doubtless the verandah wall in mind. Sir Archie, sick with anxiety, nevertheless spared time to admire her prowess. "Gad! she's a miler," he ejaculated. "She'll do it. I'm hanged if she don't do it."

Against men in seaman's boots and heavy clothing she had a clear advantage. But two shook themselves loose from the pack and began to gain on her. At the main shrubbery they were not thirty yards behind, and in her passage through it her skirts must have delayed her, for when she emerged the pursuit had halved the distance. He got the sights of the rifle on the first man, but the lawns sloped up towards the house, and to his consternation he found that the girl was in the line of fire. Madly he ran to the other window of the room, tore back the shutters, shattered the glass, and flung his rifle to his shoulder. The fellow was within three yards of her, but thank God! he had now a clear field. He fired low and just ahead of him, and had the satisfaction to see him drop like a rabbit, shot in the leg. His companion stumbled over him, and for a moment the girl was safe.

But her speed was failing. She passed out of sight on the verandah side of the house, and the rest of the pack had gained ominously over the easier ground of the lawn. He thought for a moment of trying to stop them by his fire, but realised that if every shot told there would still be enough of them left to make sure of her capture. The only chance was at the verandah, and he went downstairs at a pace undreamed of since the days when he had two whole legs.

McGuffog, Mannlicher in hand, was poking his neck over the wall. The pursuit had turned the corner and were about twenty yards off; the girl was at the foot of the ladder, breathless, drooping with fatigue. She tried to climb, limply and feebly, and very slowly, as if she were too giddy to see clear. Above were two cripples, and at her back the van of the now triumphant pack.

Sir Archie, game leg or no, was on the parapet preparing to drop down and hold off the pursuit were it only for seconds. But at that moment he was aware that the situation had changed.

At the foot of the ladder a tall man seemed to have sprung out of the ground. He caught the girl in his arms, climbed the ladder, and McGuffog's great hands reached down and seized her and swung her into safety. Up the wall, by means of cracks and tufts, was shinning a small boy.

The stranger coolly faced the pursuers and at the sight of him they checked, those behind stumbling against those in front. He was speaking to them in a foreign tongue, and to Sir Archie's ear the words were like the crack of a lash. The hesitation was only for a moment, for a voice among them cried out, and the whole pack gave tongue shrilly and surged on again. But that instant of check had given the stranger his chance. He was up the ladder, and, gripping the parapet, found rest for his feet in a fissure. Then he bent down, drew up the ladder, handed it to McGuffog and with a mighty heave pulled himself over the top.

He seemed to hope to defend the verandah, but the door at the west end was being assailed by a contingent of the enemy, and he saw that its thin woodwork was yielding.

"Into the House," he cried, as he picked up the ladder and tossed it over the wall on the pack surging below. He was only just in time, for the west door yielded. In two steps he had followed McGuffog through the chink into the passage, and the concussion of the grand piano pushed hard against the verandah door from within coincided with the first battering on the said door from without.

In the garden-room the feeble lamp showed a strange grouping. Saskia had sunk into a chair to get her breath, and seemed too dazed to be aware of her surroundings. Dougal was manfully striving to appear at his ease, but his lip was quivering.

"A near thing that time," he observed. "It was the blame of that man's auld motor-bicycle."

The stranger cast sharp eyes around the place and company.

"An awkward corner, gentlemen," he said. "How many are there of you? Four men and a boy? And you have placed guards at all the entrances?"

"They have bombs," Sir Archie reminded him.

"No doubt. But I do not think they will use them here—or their guns, unless there is no other way. Their purpose is kidnapping, and they hope to do it secretly and slip off without leaving a trace. If they slaughter us, as they easily can, the cry will be out against them, and their vessel will be unpleasantly hunted. Half their purpose is already spoiled, for it is no longer secret. . . . They may break us by sheer weight, and I fancy the first shooting will be done by us. It's the windows I'm afraid of."

Some tone in his quiet voice reached the girl in the wicker chair. She looked up wildly, saw him and with a cry of "Alesha" ran to his arms. There she hung, while his hand fondled her hair, like a mother with a scared child. Sir Archie, watching the whole thing in some stupefaction, thought he had never in his days seen more nobly matched human creatures.

"It is my friend," she cried triumphantly, "the friend whom I appointed to meet me here. Oh, I did well to trust him. Now we need not fear anything."

As if in ironical answer came a great crashing at the verandah door, and the twanging of chords cruelly mishandled. The grand piano was suffering internally from the assaults of the boiler-house ladder.

"Wull I gie them a shot?" was McGuffog's hoarse inquiry.

"Action stations," Alexis ordered, for the command seemed to have shifted to him from Dougal. "The windows are the danger. The boy will patrol the ground floor, and give us warning, and I and this man," pointing to Sime, "will be ready at the threatened point. And for God's sake no shooting, unless I give the word. If we take them on at that game we haven't a chance."

He said something to Saskia in Russian and she smiled assent and went to Sir Archie's side. "You and I must keep this door," she said.

Sir Archie was never very clear afterwards about the events of the next hour. The Princess was in the maddest spirits, as if the burden of three years had slipped from her and she was back in her first girlhood. She sang as she carried more lumber to the pile—perhaps the song which had once entranced Heritage, but Sir Archie had no ear for music. She mocked at the furious blows which rained at the other end, for the door had gone now, and in the windy gap could be seen a blur of dark faces. Oddly enough, he found his own spirits mounting to meet hers. It was real business at last, the qualms of the civilian had been forgotten, and there was rising in him that joy in a scrap which had once made him one of the most daring airmen on the Western Front. The only thing that worried him now was the coyness about shooting. What on earth were his rifles and shot-guns for unless to be used? He had seen the enemy from the verandah wall, and a more ruffianly

crew he had never dreamed of. They meant the uttermost business, and against such it was surely the duty of good citizens to wage whole-hearted war.

The Princess was humming to herself a nursery rhyme. "The King of Spain's daughter," she crooned, "came to visit me, and all for the sake—Oh, that poor piano!" In her clear voice she cried something in Russian, and the wind carried a laugh from the verandah. At the sound of it she stopped. "I had forgotten," she said. "Paul is there. I had forgotten." After that she was very quiet, but she redoubled her labours at the barricade.

To the man it seemed that the pressure from without was slackening. He called to McGuffog to ask about the garden-room window, and the reply was reassuring. The gamekeeper was gloomily contemplating Dougal's tubs of water and wire-netting, as he might have contemplated a vermin trap.

Sir Archie was growing acutely anxious—the anxiety of the defender of a straggling fortress which is vulnerable at a dozen points. It seemed to him that strange noises were coming from the rooms beyond the hall. Did the back door lie that way? And was not there a smell of smoke in the air? If they tried fire in such a gale the place would burn like matchwood.

He left his post and in the hall found Dougal.

"All quiet," the Chieftain reported. "Far ower quiet. I don't like it. The enemy's no' puttin' out his strength yet. The Russian says a' the west windies are terrible dangerous. Him and the chauffeur's doin' their best, but ye can't block thae muckle glass panes."

He returned to the Princess, and found that the attack had indeed languished on that particular barricade. The withers of the grand piano were left unwrung, and only a faint scuffling informed him that the verandah was not empty. "They're gathering for an attack elsewhere," he told himself. But what if that attack were a feint? He and McGuffog must stick to their post, for in his belief the verandah door and the garden-room window were the easiest places where an entry in mass could be forced.

Suddenly Dougal's whistle blew, and with it came a most almighty crash somewhere towards the west side. With a shout of "Hold tight, McGuffog," Sir Archie bolted into the hall, and, led by the sound, reached what had once been the ladies' bedroom. A strange sight met his eyes, for the whole framework of one window seemed to have been thrust inward, and in the gap Alexis was swinging a fender. Three of the enemy were in the room—one senseless on the floor, one in the grip of Sime, whose single hand was tightly clenched on his throat, and one engaged with Dougal in a corner. The Die-Hard leader was sore pressed, and to his help Sir Archie went. The fresh assault made the seaman duck his head, and Dougal seized the occasion to smite him hard with something which caused him to roll over. It was Spidel's life-preserver which he had annexed that afternoon.

Alexis at the window seemed to have for a moment daunted the attack. "Bring that table," he cried, and the thing was jammed into the gap. "Now you"—this to Sime—"get the man from the back door to hold this place with his gun. There's no attack there. It's about time for shooting now, or we'll have them in our rear. What in heaven is that?"

It was McGuffog whose great bellow resounded down the corridor. Sir Archie turned and shuffled back, to be met by a distressing spectacle. The lamp, burning as peacefully as it might have burned on an old lady's tea-table, revealed the window of the garden-room driven bodily inward, shutters and all, and now forming an inclined bridge over Dougal's ineffectual tubs. In front of it stood McGuffog, swinging his gun by the barrel and yelling curses, which, being mainly couched in the vernacular, were happily meaningless to Saskia. She herself stood at the hall door, plucking at something hidden in her breast. He saw that it was a little ivory-handled pistol.

The enemy's feint had succeeded, for even as Sir Archie looked three men leaped into the room. On the neck of one the butt of McGuffog's gun crashed, but two scrambled to their feet and made for the girl. Sir Archie met the first with his fist, a clean drive on the jaw, followed by a damaging hook with his left that put him out of action. The other hesitated for an instant and was lost, for McGuffog caught him by the waist from behind and sent him through the broken frame to join his comrades without.

"Up the stairs," Dougal was shouting, for the little room beyond the hall was clearly impossible. "Our flank's turned. They're pourin' through the other windy." Out of a corner of his eye Sir Archie caught sight of Alexis, with Sime and Carfrae in support, being slowly forced towards them along the corridor. "Upstairs," he shouted. "Come on, McGuffog. Lead on, Princess." He dashed out the lamp, and the place was in darkness.

With this retreat from the forward trench line ended the opening phase of the battle. It was achieved in good order,

and position was taken up on the first-floor landing, dominating the main staircase and the passage that led to the back stairs. At their back was a short corridor ending in a window which gave on the north side of the House above the verandah, and from which an active man might descend to the verandah roof. It had been carefully reconnoitred beforehand by Dougal, and his were the dispositions.

The odd thing was that the retreating force were in good heart. The three men from the Mains were warming to their work, and McGuffog wore an air of genial ferocity. "Dashed fine position I call this," said Sir Archie. Only Alexis was silent and preoccupied. "We are still at their mercy," he said. "Pray God your police come soon." He forbade shooting yet awhile. "The lady is our strong card," he said. "They won't use their guns while she is with us, but if it ever comes to shooting they can wipe us out in a couple of minutes. One of you watch that window, for Paul Abreskov is no fool."

Their exhilaration was short-lived. Below in the hall it was black darkness save for a greyness at the entrance of the verandah passage; but the defence was soon aware that the place was thick with men. Presently there came a scuffling from Carfrae's post towards the back stairs, and a cry as of some one choking. And at the same moment a flare was lit below which brought the whole hall from floor to rafters into blinding light.

It revealed a crowd of figures, some still in the hall and some half-way up the stairs, and it revealed, too, more figures at the end of the upper landing where Carfrae had been stationed. The shapes were motionless like mannequins in a shop window.

"They've got us treed all right," Sir Archie groaned. "What the devil are they waiting for?"

"They wait for their leader," said Alexis.

No one of the party will ever forget the ensuing minutes. After the hubbub of the barricades the ominous silence was like icy water, chilling and petrifying with an indefinable fear. There was no sound but the wind, but presently mingled with it came odd wild voices.

"Hear to the whaups," McGuffog whispered.

Sir Archie, who found the tension unbearable, sought relief in contradiction. "You're an unscientific brute, McGuffog," he told his henchman. "It's a disgrace that a gamekeeper should be such a rotten naturalist. What would whaups be doin' here at this time of year?"

"A' the same, I could swear it's whaups, Sir Erchibald."

Then Dougal broke in and his voice was excited. "It's no whaups. That's our patrol signal. Man, there's hope for us yet. I believe it's the polis."

His words were unheeded, for the figures below drew apart and a young man came through them. His beautifully-shaped dark head was bare, and as he moved he unbuttoned his oilskins and showed the trim dark-blue garb of the yachtsman. He walked confidently up the stairs, an odd elegant figure among his heavy companions.

"Good afternoon, Alexis," he said in English. "I think we may now regard this interesting episode as closed. I take it that you surrender. Saskia, dear, you are coming with me on a little journey. Will you tell my men where to find your baggage?"

The reply was in Russian. Alexis' voice was as cool as the other's, and it seemed to wake him to anger. He replied in a rapid torrent of words, and appealed to the men below, who shouted back. The flare was dying down, and shadows again hid most of the hall.

Dougal crept up behind Sir Archie. "Here, I think it's the polis. They're whistlin' outbye, and I hear folk cryin' to each other—no' the foreigners."

Again Alexis spoke, and then Saskia joined in. What she said rang sharp with contempt, and her fingers played with her little pistol.

Suddenly before the young man could answer Dobson bustled towards him. The innkeeper was labouring under some strong emotion, for he seemed to be pleading and pointing urgently towards the door.

"I tell ye it's the polis," whispered Dougal. "They're nickit."

There was a swaying in the crowd and anxious faces. Men surged in, whispered and went out, and a clamour arose which the leader stilled with a fierce gesture.

"You there," he cried, looking up, "you English. We mean you no ill, but I require you to hand over to me the lady and

the Russian who is with her. I give you a minute by my watch to decide. If you refuse my men are behind you and around you, and you go with me to be punished at my leisure."

"I warn you," cried Sir Archie. "We are armed, and will shoot down any one who dares to lay a hand on us."

"You fool," came the answer. "I can send you all to eternity before you touch a trigger."

Léon was by his side now—Léon and Spidel, imploring him to do something which he angrily refused. Outside there was a new clamour, faces showing at the door and then vanishing, and an anxious hum filled the hall. . . . Dobson appeared again and this time he was a figure of fury.

"Are ye daft, man?" he cried. "I tell ye the polis are closin' round us, and there's no' a moment to lose if we would get back to the boats. If ye'll no' think o' your own neck, I'm thinkin' o' mine. The whole thing's a bloody misfire. Come on, lads, if ye're no' besotted on destruction."

Léon laid a hand on the leader's arm and was roughly shaken off. Spidel fared no better, and the little group on the upper landing saw the two shrug their shoulders and make for the door. The hall was emptying fast, and the watchers had gone from the back stairs. The young man's voice rose to a scream; he commanded, threatened, cursed; but panic was in the air and he had lost his mastery.

"Quick," croaked Dougal, "now's the time for the counter-attack."

But the figure on the stairs held them motionless. They could not see his face, but by instinct they knew that it was distraught with fury and defeat. The flare blazed up again as the flame caught a knot of fresh powder, and once more the place was bright with the uncanny light. . . . The hall was empty save for the pale man who was in the act of turning.

He looked back. "If I go now, I will return. The world is not wide enough to hide you from me, Saskia."

"You will never get her," said Alexis.

A sudden devil flamed into his eyes, the devil of some ancestral savagery, which would destroy what is desired but unattainable. He swung round, his hand went to his pocket, something clicked, and his arm shot out like a baseball pitcher's.

So intent was the gaze of the others on him, that they did not see a second figure ascending the stairs. Just as Alexis flung himself before the Princess, the new-comer caught the young man's outstretched arm and wrenched something from his hand. The next second he had hurled it into a far corner where stood the great fireplace. There was a blinding sheet of flame, a dull roar, and then billow upon billow of acrid smoke. As it cleared they saw that the fine Italian chimneypiece, the pride of the builder of the House, was a mass of splinters, and that a great hole had been blown through the wall into what had been the dining-room. . . . A figure was sitting on the bottom step feeling its bruises. The last enemy had gone.

When Mr. John Heritage raised his eyes he saw the Princess with a very pale face in the arms of a tall man whom he had never seen before. If he was surprised at the sight, he did not show it. "Nasty little bomb that. Time fuse. I remember we struck the brand first in July '18."

"Are they rounded up?" Sir Archie asked.

"They've bolted. Whether they'll get away is another matter. I left half the mounted police a minute ago at the top of the West Lodge avenue. The other lot went to the Garplefoot to cut off the boats."

"Good Lord, man," Sir Archie cried, "the police have been here for the last ten minutes."

"You're wrong. They came with me."

"Then what on earth—?" began the astonished baronet. He stopped short, for he suddenly got his answer. Into the hall from the verandah limped a boy. Never was there seen so ruinous a child. He was dripping wet, his shirt was all but torn off his back, his bleeding nose was poorly staunching by a wisp of handkerchief, his breeches were in ribbons, and his poor bare legs looked as if they had been comprehensively kicked and scratched. Limping he entered, yet with a kind of pride, like some small cock-sparrow who has lost most of his plumage but has vanquished his adversary.

With a yell Dougal went down the stairs. The boy saluted him, and they gravely shook hands. It was the meeting of Wellington and Blücher.

The Chieftain's voice shrilled in triumph, but there was a break in it. The glory was almost too great to be borne.

"I kenned it," he cried. "It was the Gorbals Die-Hards. There stands the man that done it. . . . Ye'll no' fickle Thomas Yownie."

CHAPTER 15

THE GORBALS DIE-HARDS GO INTO ACTION

We left Mr. McCunn, full of aches but desperately resolute in spirit, hobbling by the Auchenlochan road into the village of Dalquharter. His goal was Mrs. Morran's hen-house, which was Thomas Yownie's *poste de commandement*. The rain had come on again, and, though in other weather there would have been a slow twilight, already the shadow of night had the world in its grip. The sea even from the high ground was invisible, and all to westward and windward was a ragged screen of dark cloud. It was foul weather for foul deeds.

Thomas Yownie was not in the hen-house, but in Mrs. Morran's kitchen, and with him were the pug-faced boy known as Old Bill, and the sturdy figure of Peter Paterson. But the floor was held by the hostess. She still wore her big boots, her petticoats were still kilted, and round her venerable head in lieu of a bonnet was drawn a tartan shawl.

"Eh, Dickson, but I'm blithe to see ye. And, puir man, ye've been sair mishandled. This is the awfu'est Sabbath day that ever you and me pit in. I hope it'll be forgiven us. . . . Whaur's the young leddy?"

"Dougal was saying she was in the House with Sir Archibald and the men from the Mains."

"Wae's me!" Mrs. Morran keened. "And what kind o' place is yon for her? Thae laddies tell me there's boatfu's o' scoondrels landit at the Garplefit. They'll try the auld Tower, but they'll no' wait there when they find it toom, and they'll be inside the Hoose in a jiffy and awa' wi' the puir lassie. Sirs, it maunna be. Ye're lippenin' to the polis, but in a' my days I never kenned the polis in time. We maun be up and daein' oorsels. Oh, if I could get a haud o' that red-heided Dougal. . . ."

As she spoke, there came on the wind the dull reverberation of an explosion.

"Keep us, what's that?" she cried.

"It's dinnymite," said Peter Paterson.

"That's the end o' the auld Tower," observed Thomas Yownie in his quiet even voice. "And it's likely the end o' the man Heritage."

"Lord peety us!" the old woman wailed. "And us standin' here like stookies and no' liftin' a hand. Awa' wi' ye, laddies, and dae something. Awa' you too, Dickson, or I'll tak' the road mysel'."

"I've got orders," said the Chief of Staff, "no' to move till the sityation's clear. Napoleon's up at the Tower and Jaikie in the policies. I maun wait on their reports."

For a moment Mrs. Morran's attention was distracted by Dickson, who suddenly felt very faint and sat down heavily on a kitchen chair. "Man, ye're as white as a dish-clout," she exclaimed with compunction. "Ye're fair wore out, and ye'll have had nae meat sin' your breakfast. See, and I'll get ye a cup o' tea."

She proved to be in the right, for as soon as Dickson had swallowed some mouthfuls of her strong scalding brew the colour came back to his cheeks, and he announced that he felt better. "Ye'll fortify it wi' a dram," she told him, and produced a black bottle from her cupboard. "My father aye said that guid whiskey and het tea keepit the doctor's gig oot o' the close."

The back door opened and Napoleon entered, his thin shanks blue with cold. He saluted and made his report in a voice shrill with excitement.

"The Tower has fallen. They've blown in the big door, and the feck o' them's inside."

"And Mr. Heritage?" was Dickson's anxious inquiry.

"When I last saw him he was up at a windy, shootin'. I think he's gotten on to the roof. I wouldna wonder but the place is on fire."

"Here, this is awful," Dickson groaned. "We can't let Mr. Heritage be killed that way. What strength is the enemy?"

"I counted twenty-seven, and there's stragglers comin' up from the boats."

"And there's me and you five laddies here, and Dougal and the others shut up in the House." He stopped in sheer despair. It was a fix from which the most enlightened business mind showed no escape. Prudence, inventiveness were no longer in question; only some desperate course of violence.

"We must create a diversion," he said. "I'm for the Tower, and you laddies must come with me. We'll maybe see a chance. Oh, but I wish I had my wee pistol."

"If ye're gaun there, Dickson, I'm comin' wi' ye," Mrs. Morran announced.

Her words revealed to Dickson the preposterousness of the whole situation, and for all his anxiety he laughed. "Five laddies, a middle-aged man and an auld wife," he cried. "Dod, it's pretty hopeless. It's like the thing in the Bible about the weak things of the world trying to confound the strong."

"The Bible's whiles richt," Mrs. Morran answered drily. "Come on, for there's no time to lose."

The door opened again to admit the figure of Wee Jaikie. There were no tears in his eyes, and his face was very white.

"They're a' round the Hoose," he croaked. "I was up a tree forenent the verandy and seen them. The lassie ran oot and cried on them from the top o' the brae, and they a' turned and hunted her back. Gosh, but it was a near thing. I seen the Captain sklimmin' the wall, and a muckle man took the lassie and flung her up the ladder. They got inside just in time and steekit the door, and now the whole pack is roarin' round the Hoose seekin' a road in. They'll no' be long over the job, neither."

"What about Mr. Heritage?"

"They're no' heedin' about him any more. The auld Tower's bleezin'."

"Worse and worse," said Dickson. "If the police don't come in the next ten minutes, they'll be away with the Princess. They've beaten all Dougal's plans, and it's a straight fight with odds of six to one. It's not possible."

Mrs. Morran for the first time seemed to lose hope. "Eh, the puir lassie!" she wailed, and sinking on a chair covered her face with her shawl.

"Laddies, can you no' think of a plan?" asked Dickson, his voice flat with despair.

Then Thomas Yownie spoke. So far he had been silent, but under his tangled thatch of hair, his mind had been busy. Jaikie's report seemed to bring him to a decision.

"It's gey dark," he said, "and it's gettin' darker."

There was that in his voice which promised something, and Dickson listened.

"The enemy's mostly foreigners, but Dobson's there and I think he's a kind of guide to them. Dobson's feared of the polis, and if we can terrify Dobson he'll terrify the rest."

"Ay, but where are the police?"

"They're no' here yet, but they're comin'. The fear o' them is aye in Dobson's mind. If he thinks the polis has arrived, he'll put the wind up the lot. . . . We maun be the polis."

Dickson could only stare while the Chief of Staff unfolded his scheme. I do not know to whom the Muse of History will give the credit of the tactics of "infiltration"—whether to Ludendorff or von Hutier or some other proud captain of Germany, or to Foch, who revised and perfected them. But I know that the same notion was at this moment of crisis conceived by Thomas Yownie, whom no parents acknowledged, who slept usually in a coal cellar, and who had picked up his education among Gorbals closes and along the wharves of Clyde.

"It's gettin' dark," he said, "and the enemy are that busy tryin' to break into the Hoose that they'll no' be thinkin' o' their rear. The five o' us Die-Hards is grand at dodgin' and keepin' out of sight, and what hinders us to get in among them, so that they'll hear us but never see us? We're used to the ways o' the polis, and can imitate them fine. Forbye we've all got our whistles, which are the same as a bobbie's birl, and Old Bill and Peter are grand at copyin' a man's voice. Since the Captain is shut up in the Hoose, the command falls to me, and that's my plan."

With a piece of chalk he drew on the kitchen floor a rough sketch of the environs of Huntingtower. Peter Paterson was to move from the shrubberies beyond the verandah, Napoleon from the stables, Old Bill from the Tower, while Wee Jaikie and Thomas himself were to advance as if from the Garplefoot, so that the enemy might fear for his communications. "As soon as one o' ye gets into position he's to gie the patrol cry, and when each o' ye has heard five cries, he's to advance. Begin birlin' and roarin' afore ye get among them, and keep it up till ye're at the Hoose wall. If they've gotten inside, in ye go after them. I trust each Die-Hard to use his judgment, and above all to keep out o' sight and no let himsel' be grippit."

The plan, like all great tactics, was simple, and no sooner was it expounded than it was put into action. The Die-Hards faded out of the kitchen like fog-wreaths, and Dickson and Mrs. Morran were left looking at each other. They did not look

long. The bare feet of Wee Jaikie had not crossed the threshold fifty seconds, before they were followed by Mrs. Morran's out-of-doors boots and Dickson's tacketts. Arm in arm the two hobbled down the back path behind the village which led to the South Lodge. The gate was unlocked, for the warder was busy elsewhere, and they hastened up the avenue. Far off Dickson thought he saw shapes fleeing across the park, which he took to be the shock-troops of his own side, and he seemed to hear snatches of song. Jaikie was giving tongue, and this was what he sang:

“Proley Tarians, arise!
Wave the Red Flag to the skies,
Heed nae mair the Fat Man's lees,
 Stap them doun his throat!
Nocht to loss except our chains,
We maun drain oor dearest veins—
A' the worrld shall be our gains—”

But he tripped over a rabbit wire and thereafter conserved his breath.

The wind was so loud that no sound reached them from the House, which blank and immense now loomed before them. Dickson's ears were alert for the noise of shots or the dull crash of bombs; hearing nothing, he feared the worst, and hurried Mrs. Morran at a pace which endangered her life. He had no fear for himself, arguing that his foes were seeking higher game, and judging, too, that the main battle must be round the verandah at the other end. The two passed the shrubbery where the road forked, one path running to the back door and one to the stables. They took the latter and presently came out on the downs, with the ravine of the Garple on their left, the stables in front, and on the right the hollow of a formal garden running along the west side of the House.

The gale was so fierce, now that they had no wind-break between them and the ocean, that Mrs. Morran could wrestle with it no longer, and found shelter in the lee of a clump of rhododendrons. Darkness had all but fallen, and the house was a black shadow against the dusky sky, while a confused greyness marked the sea. The old Tower showed a tooth of masonry; there was no glow from it, so the fire, which Jaikie had reported, must have died down. A whaup cried loudly, and very eerily: then another.

The birds stirred up Mrs. Morran. “That's the laddies' patrol,” she gasped. “Count the cries, Dickson.”

Another bird wailed, this time very near. Then there was perhaps three minutes' silence, till a fainter wheeple came from the direction of the Tower. “Four,” said Dickson, but he waited in vain on the fifth. He had not the acute hearing of the boys, and could not catch the faint echo of Peter Paterson's signal beyond the verandah. The next he heard was a shrill whistle cutting into the wind, and then others in rapid succession from different quarters, and something which might have been the hoarse shouting of angry men.

The Gorbals Die-Hards had gone into action.

Dull prose is no medium to tell of that wild adventure. The sober sequence of the military historian is out of place in recording deeds that knew not sequence or sobriety. Were I a bard, I would cast this tale in excited verse, with a lilt which would catch the speed of the reality. I would sing of Napoleon, not unworthy of his great namesake, who penetrated to the very window of the ladies' bedroom, where the framework had been driven in and men were pouring through; of how there he made such pandemonium with his whistle that men tumbled back and ran about blindly seeking for guidance; of how in the long run his pugnacity mastered him, so that he engaged in combat with an unknown figure and the two rolled into what had once been a fountain. I would hymn Peter Paterson, who across tracts of darkness engaged Old Bill in a conversation which would have done no discredit to a Gallogate policeman. He pretended to be making reports and seeking orders. “We've gotten three o' the deevils, sir. What'll we dae wi' them?” he shouted; and back would come the reply in a slightly more genteel voice: “Fall them to the rear. Tamson has charge of the prisoners.” Or it would be: “They've gotten pistols, sir. What's the orders?” and the answer would be: “Stick to your batons. The guns are posted on the knowe, so we needn't hurry.” And over all the din there would be a perpetual whistling and a yelling of “Hands up!”

I would sing, too, of Wee Jaikie, who was having the red-letter hour of his life. His fragile form moved like a lizard in places where no mortal could be expected, and he varied his duties with impish assaults upon the persons of such as came in his way. His whistle blew in a man's ear one second and the next yards away. Sometimes he was moved to song, and

unearthly fragments of "Class-conscious we are" or "Proletarians, arise!" mingled with the din, like the cry of seagulls in a storm. He saw a bright light flare up within the house which warned him not to enter, but he got as far as the garden-room, in whose dark corners he made havoc. Indeed he was almost too successful, for he created panic where he went, and one or two fired blindly at the quarter where he had last been heard. These shots were followed by frenzied prohibitions from Spidel and were not repeated. Presently he felt that aimless surge of men that is the prelude to flight, and heard Dobson's great voice roaring in the hall. Convinced that the crisis had come, he made his way outside, prepared to harass the rear of any retirement. Tears now flowed down his face, and he could not have spoken for sobs, but he had never been so happy.

But chiefly would I celebrate Thomas Yownie, for it was he who brought fear into the heart of Dobson. He had a voice of singular compass, and from the verandah he made it echo round the House. The efforts of Old Bill and Peter Paterson had been skilful indeed, but those of Thomas Yownie were deadly. To some leader beyond he shouted news: "Robison's just about finished wi' his lot, and then he'll get the boats." A furious charge upset him, and for a moment he thought he had been discovered. But it was only Dobson rushing to Léon, who was leading the men in the doorway. Thomas fled to the far end of the verandah, and again lifted up his voice. "All foreigners," he shouted, "except the man Dobson. Ay. Ay. Ye've got Loudon? Well done!"

It must have been this last performance which broke Dobson's nerve and convinced him that the one hope lay in a rapid retreat to the Garplefoot. There was a tumbling of men in the doorway, a muttering of strange tongues, and the vision of the innkeeper shouting to Léon and Spidel. For a second he was seen in the faint reflection that the light in the hall cast as far as the verandah, a wild figure urging the retreat with a pistol clapped to the head of those who were too confused by the hurricane of events to grasp the situation. Some of them dropped over the wall, but most huddled like sheep through the door on the west side, a jumble of struggling, panic-stricken mortality. Thomas Yownie, staggered at the success of his tactics, yet kept his head and did his utmost to confuse the retreat, and the triumphant shouts and whistles of the other Die-Hards showed that they were not unmindful of this final duty. . . .

The verandah was empty, and he was just about to enter the House, when through the west door came a figure, breathing hard and bent apparently on the same errand. Thomas prepared for battle, determined that no straggler of the enemy should now wrest from him victory, but, as the figure came into the faint glow at the doorway, he recognised it as Heritage. And at the same moment he heard something which made his tense nerves relax. Away on the right came sounds, a thud of galloping horses on grass and the jingle of bridle reins and the voices of men. It was the real thing at last. It is a sad commentary on his career, but now for the first time in his brief existence Thomas Yownie felt charitably disposed towards the police.

The Poet, since we left him blaspheming on the roof of the Tower, had been having a crowded hour of most inglorious life. He had started to descend at a furious pace, and his first misadventure was that he stumbled and dropped Dickson's pistol over the parapet. He tried to mark where it might have fallen in the gloom below, and this lost him precious minutes. When he slithered through the trap into the attic room, where he had tried to hold up the attack, he discovered that it was full of smoke which sought in vain to escape by the narrow window. Volumes of it were pouring up the stairs, and when he attempted to descend he found himself choked and blinded. He rushed gasping to the window, filled his lungs with fresh air, and tried again, but he got no further than the first turn, from which he could see through the cloud red tongues of flame in the ground room. This was solemn indeed, so he sought another way out. He got on the roof, for he remembered a chimney-stack, cloaked with ivy, which was built straight from the ground, and he thought he might climb down it.

He found the chimney and began the descent, confidently, for he had once borne a good reputation at the Montanvert and Cortina. At first all went well, for stones stuck out at decent intervals like the rungs of a ladder, and roots of ivy supplemented their deficiencies. But presently he came to a place where the masonry had crumbled into a cave, and left a gap some twenty feet high. Below it he could dimly see a thick mass of ivy which would enable him to cover the further forty feet to the ground, but at that cave he stuck most finally. All round the lime and stone had lapsed into debris, and he could find no safe foothold. Worse still, the block on which he relied proved loose, and only by a dangerous traverse did he avert disaster.

There he hung for a minute or two, with a cold void in his stomach. He had always distrusted the handiwork of man as a place to scramble on, and now he was planted in the dark on a decomposing wall, with an excellent chance of breaking

his neck, and with the most urgent need for haste. He could see the windows of the House and, since he was sheltered from the gale, he could hear the faint sound of blows on woodwork. There was clearly the devil to pay there, and yet here he was helplessly stuck. . . . Setting his teeth, he started to ascend again. Better the fire than this cold breakneck emptiness.

It took him the better part of half an hour to get back, and he passed through many moments of acute fear. Footholds which had seemed secure enough in the descent now proved impossible, and more than once he had his heart in his mouth when a rotten ivy stump or a wedge of stone gave in his hands, and dropped dully into the pit of night, leaving him crazily spread-eagled. When at last he reached the top he rolled on his back and felt very sick. Then, as he realised his safety, his impatience revived. At all costs he would force his way out though he should be grilled like a herring.

The smoke was less thick in the attic, and with his handkerchief wet with the rain and bound across his mouth he made a dash for the ground room. It was as hot as a furnace, for everything inflammable in it seemed to have caught fire, and the lumber glowed in piles of hot ashes. But the floor and walls were stone, and only the blazing jambs of the door stood between him and the outer air. He had burned himself considerably as he stumbled downwards, and the pain drove him to a wild leap through the broken arch, where he miscalculated the distance, charred his shins, and brought down a red-hot fragment of the lintel on his head. But the thing was done, and a minute later he was rolling like a dog in the wet bracken to cool his burns and put out various smouldering patches on his raiment.

Then he started running for the House, but, confused by the darkness, he bore too much to the north, and came out in the side avenue from which he and Dickson had reconnoitred on the first evening. He saw on the right a glow in the verandah which, as we know, was the reflection of the flare in the hall, and he heard a babble of voices. But he heard something more, for away on his left was the sound which Thomas Yownie was soon to hear—the trampling of horses. It was the police at last, and his task was to guide them at once to the critical point of action. . . . Three minutes later a figure like a scarecrow was admonishing a bewildered sergeant, while his hands plucked feverishly at a horse's bridle.

It is time to return to Dickson in his clump of rhododendrons. Tragically aware of his impotence he listened to the tumult of the Die-Hards, hopeful when it was loud, despairing when there came a moment's lull, while Mrs. Morran like a Greek chorus drew loudly upon her store of proverbial philosophy and her memory of Scripture texts. Twice he tried to reconnoitre towards the scene of battle, but only blundered into sunken plots and pits in the Dutch garden. Finally he squatted beside Mrs. Morran, lit his pipe, and took a firm hold on his patience.

It was not tested for long. Presently he was aware that a change had come over the scene—that the Die-Hards' whistles and shouts were being drowned in another sound, the cries of panicky men. Dobson's bellow was wafted to him. "Auntie Phemie," he shouted, "the innkeeper's getting rattled. Dod, I believe they're running." For at that moment twenty paces on his left the van of the retreat crashed through the creepers on the garden's edge and leaped the wall that separated it from the cliffs of the Garplefoot.

The old woman was on her feet.

"God be thankit, is't the polis?"

"Maybe. Maybe no'. But they're running."

Another bunch of men raced past, and he heard Dobson's voice.

"I tell you, they're broke. Listen, it's horses. Ay, it's the police, but it was the Die-Hards that did the job. . . . Here! They mustn't escape. Have the police had the sense to send men to the Garplefoot?"

Mrs. Morran, a figure like an ancient prophetess, with her tartan shawl lashing in the gale, clutched him by the shoulder.

"Doun to the waterside and stop them. Ye'll no' be beat by wee laddies! On wi' ye and I'll follow! There's gaun to be a juidgment on evil-doers this nicht."

Dickson needed no urging. His heart was hot within him, and the weariness and stiffness had gone from his limbs. He, too, tumbled over the wall, and made for what he thought was the route by which he had originally ascended from the stream. As he ran he made ridiculous efforts to cry like a whaup in the hope of summoning the Die-Hards. One, indeed, he found—Napoleon, who had suffered a grievous pounding in the fountain and had only escaped by an eel-like agility which had aforetime served him in good stead with the law of his native city. Lucky for Dickson was the meeting, for he had forgotten the road and would certainly have broken his neck. Led by the Die-Hard he slid forty feet over screes and boiler-

plates, with the gale plucking at him, found a path, lost it, and then tumbled down a raw bank of earth to the flat ground beside the harbour. During all this performance, he has told me, he had no thought of fear, nor any clear notion what he meant to do. He just wanted to be in at the finish of the job.

Through the narrow entrance the gale blew as through a funnel, and the usually placid waters of the harbour were a mass of angry waves. Two boats had been launched and were plunging furiously, and on one of them a lantern dipped and fell. By its light he could see men holding a further boat by the shore. There was no sign of the police; he reflected that probably they had become tangled in the Garple Dean. The third boat was waiting for some one.

Dickson—a new Ajax by the ships—divined who this some one must be and realised his duty. It was the leader, the arch-enemy, the man whose escape must at all costs be stopped. Perhaps he had the Princess with him, thus snatching victory from apparent defeat. In any case he must be tackled, and a fierce anxiety gripped his heart. “Aye finish a job,” he told himself, and peered up into the darkness of the cliffs, wondering just how he should set about it, for except in the last few days he had never engaged in combat with a fellow-creature.

“When he comes, you grip his legs,” he told Napoleon, “and get him down. He’ll have a pistol, and we’re done if he’s on his feet.”

There was a cry from the boats, a shout of guidance, and the light on the water was waved madly. “They must have good eyesight,” thought Dickson, for he could see nothing. And then suddenly he was aware of steps in front of him, and a shape like a man rising out of the void at his left hand.

In the darkness Napoleon missed his tackle, and the full shock came on Dickson. He aimed at what he thought was the enemy’s throat, found only an arm and was shaken off as a mastiff might shake off a toy terrier. He made another clutch, fell, and in falling caught his opponent’s leg so that he brought him down. The man was immensely agile, for he was up in a second and something hot and bright blew into Dickson’s face. The pistol bullet had passed through the collar of his faithful waterproof, slightly singeing his neck. But it served its purpose, for Dickson paused, gasping, to consider where he had been hit, and before he could resume the chase the last boat had pushed off into deep water.

To be shot at from close quarters is always irritating, and the novelty of the experience increased Dickson’s natural wrath. He fumed on the shore like a deerhound when the stag has taken to the sea. So hot was his blood that he would have cheerfully assaulted the whole crew had they been within his reach. Napoleon, who had been incapacitated for speed by having his stomach and bare shanks savagely trampled upon, joined him, and together they watched the bobbing black specks as they crawled out of the estuary into the grey spindrift which marked the harbour mouth.

But as he looked the wrath died out of Dickson’s soul. For he saw that the boats had indeed sailed on a desperate venture, and that a pursuer was on their track more potent than his breathless middle-age. The tide was on the ebb, and the gale was driving the Atlantic breakers shoreward, and in the jaws of the entrance the two waters met in an unearthly turmoil. Above the noise of the wind came the roar of the flooded Garple and the fret of the harbour, and far beyond all the crashing thunder of the conflict at the harbour mouth. Even in the darkness, against the still faintly grey western sky, the spume could be seen rising like waterspouts. But it was the ear rather than the eye which made certain presage of disaster. No boat could face the challenge of that loud portal.

As Dickson struggled against the wind and stared, his heart melted and a great awe fell upon him. He may have wept; it is certain that he prayed. “Poor souls, poor souls!” he repeated. “I doubt the last hour or two has been a poor preparation for eternity.”

The tide next day brought the dead ashore. Among them was a young man, different in dress and appearance from the rest—a young man with a noble head and a finely-cut classic face, which was not marred like the others from pounding among the Garple rocks. His dark hair was washed back from his brow, and the mouth, which had been hard in life, was now relaxed in the strange innocence of death.

Dickson gazed at the body and observed that there was a slight deformation between the shoulders.

“Poor fellow,” he said. “That explains a lot. . . . As my father used to say, cripples have a right to be cankered.”



CHAPTER 16

IN WHICH A PRINCESS LEAVES A DARK TOWER AND A PROVISION MERCHANT RETURNS TO HIS FAMILY

The three days of storm ended in the night, and with the wild weather there departed from the Cruives something which had weighed on Dickson's spirits since he first saw the place. Monday—only a week from the morning when he had conceived his plan of holiday—saw the return of the sun and the bland airs of spring. Beyond the blue of the yet restless waters rose dim mountains tipped with snow, like some Mediterranean seascape. Nesting birds were busy on the Laver banks and in the Huntingtower thickets; the village smoked peacefully to the clear skies; even the House looked cheerful if dishevelled. The Garple Dean was a garden of swaying larches, linnets, and wild anemones. Assuredly, thought Dickson, there had come a mighty change in the countryside, and he meditated a future discourse to the Literary Society of the Guthrie Memorial Kirk on "Natural Beauty in Relation to the Mind of Man."

It remains for the chronicler to gather up the loose ends of his tale. There was no newspaper story with bold headlines of this the most recent assault on the shores of Britain. Alexis Nicolaevitch, once a Prince of Muscovy and now Mr. Alexander Nicholson of the rising firm of Sprot and Nicholson of Melbourne, had interest enough to prevent it. For it was clear that if Saskia was to be saved from persecution, her enemies must disappear without trace from the world, and no story be told of the wild venture which was their undoing. The constabulary of Carrick and Scotland Yard were indisposed to ask questions, under a hint from their superiors, the more so as no serious damage had been done to the persons of His Majesty's lieges, and no lives had been lost except by the violence of Nature. The Procurator-Fiscal investigated the case of the drowned men, and reported that so many foreign sailors, names and origins unknown, had perished in attempting to return to their ship at the Garplefoot. The Danish brig had vanished into the mist of the northern seas. But one signal calamity the Procurator-Fiscal had to record. The body of Loudon the factor was found on the Monday morning below the cliffs, his neck broken by a fall. In the darkness and confusion he must have tried to escape in that direction, and he had chosen an impracticable road or had slipped on the edge. It was returned as "death by misadventure" and the *Carrick Herald* and the *Auchenlochan Advertiser* excelled themselves in eulogy. Mr. Loudon, they said, had been widely known in the south-west of Scotland as an able and trusted lawyer, an assiduous public servant, and not least as a good sportsman. It was the last trait which had led to his death, for, in his enthusiasm for wild nature, he had been studying bird life on the cliffs of the Cruives during the storm, and had made that fatal slip which had deprived the shire of a wise counsellor and the best of good fellows.

The tinklers of the Garplefoot took themselves off, and where they may now be pursuing their devious courses is unknown to the chronicler. Dobson, too, disappeared, for he was not among the dead from the boats. He knew the neighbourhood and probably made his way to some port from which he took passage to one or other of those foreign lands which had formerly been honoured by his patronage. Nor did all the Russians perish. Three were found skulking next morning in the woods, starving and ignorant of any tongue but their own, and five more came ashore much battered but alive. Alexis took charge of the eight survivors, and arranged to pay their passage to one of the British Dominions and to give them a start in a new life. They were broken creatures, with the dazed look of lost animals, and four of them had been peasants on Saskia's estates. Alexis spoke to them in their own language. "In my grandfather's time," he said, "you were serfs. Then there came a change, and for some time you were free men. Now you have slipped back into being slaves again—the worst of slaveries, for you have been the serfs of fools and scoundrels and the black passion of your own hearts. I give you a chance of becoming free men once more. You have the task before you of working out your own salvation. Go, and God be with you."

Before we take leave of these companions of a single week I would present them to you again as they appeared on a certain sunny afternoon when the episode of Huntingtower was on the eve of closing. First we see Saskia and Alexis walking on the thymy sward of the cliff-top, looking out to the fretted blue of the sea. It is a fitting place for lovers, above all for lovers who have turned the page on a dark preface, and have before them still the long bright volume of life. The girl has her arm linked with the man's, but as they walk she breaks often away from him, to dart into copses, to gather flowers,

or to peer over the brink where the gulls wheel and oyster-catchers pipe among the shingle. She is no more the tragic muse of the past week, but a laughing child again, full of snatches of song, her eyes bright with expectation. They talk of the new world which lies before them, and her voice is happy. Then her brows contract, and, as she flings herself down on a patch of young heather, her air is thoughtful.

"I have been back among fairy tales," she says. "I do not quite understand, Alesha. Those gallant little boys! They are youth, and youth is always full of strangeness. Mr. Heritage! He is youth, too, and poetry, perhaps, and a soldier's tradition. I think I know him. . . . But what about Dickson? He is the *petit bourgeois*, the *épicier*, the class which the world ridicules. He is unbelievable. The others with good fortune I might find elsewhere—in Russia perhaps. But not Dickson."

"No," is the answer. "You will not find him in Russia. He is what we call the middle-class, which we who were foolish used to laugh at. But he is the stuff which above all others makes a great people. He will endure when aristocracies crack and proletariats crumble. In our own land we have never known him, but till we create him our land will not be a nation."

Half a mile away on the edge of the Laver glen Dickson and Heritage are together, Dickson placidly smoking on a tree-stump and Heritage walking excitedly about and cutting with his stick at the bracken. Sundry bandages and strips of sticking plaster still adorn the Poet, but his clothes have been tidied up by Mrs. Morran, and he has recovered something of his old precision of garb. The eyes of both are fixed on the two figures on the cliff-top. Dickson feels acutely uneasy. It is the first time that he has been alone with Heritage since the arrival of Alexis shivered the Poet's dream. He looks to see a tragic grief; to his amazement he beholds something very like exultation.

"The trouble about you, Dogson," says Heritage, "is that you're a bit of an anarchist. All you false romantics are. You don't see the extraordinary beauty of the conventions which time has consecrated. You always want novelty, you know, and the novel is usually the ugly and rarely the true. I am for romance, but upon the old, noble classic lines."

Dickson is scarcely listening. His eyes are on the distant lovers and he longs to say something which will gently and graciously express his sympathy with his friend.

"I'm afraid," he begins hesitatingly, "I'm afraid you've had a bad blow, Mr. Heritage. You're taking it awful well, and I honour you for it."

The Poet flings back his head. "I am reconciled," he says. "After all 'tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all.' It has been a great experience and has shown me my own heart. I love her, I shall always love her, but I realise that she was never meant for me. Thank God I've been able to serve her—that is all a moth can ask of a star. I'm a better man for it, Dogson. She will be a glorious memory, and Lord! what poetry I shall write! I give her up joyfully, for she has found her true mate. 'Let us not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments!' The thing's too perfect to grieve about. . . . Look! There is romance incarnate."

He points to the figures now silhouetted against the further sea. "How does it go, Dogson?" he cries. "'And on her lover's arm she leant'—what next? You know the thing."

Dickson assists and Heritage declaims:

"And on her lover's arm she leant,
And round her waist she felt it fold,
And far across the hills they went
In that new world which is the old:
Across the hills, and far away
Beyond their utmost purple rim,
And deep into the dying day
The happy princess followed him."

He repeats the last two lines twice and draws a deep breath. "How right!" he cries. "How absolutely right! Lord! It's astonishing how that old bird Tennyson got the goods!"

After that Dickson leaves him and wanders among the thickets on the edge of the Huntingtower policies above the Laver glen. He feels childishly happy, wonderfully young, and at the same time supernaturally wise. Sometimes he thinks

the past week has been a dream, till he touches the sticking-plaster on his brow, and finds that his left thigh is still a mass of bruises and that his right leg is wofully stiff. With that the past becomes very real again, and he sees the Garple Dean in that stormy afternoon, he wrestles again at midnight in the dark House, he stands with quaking heart by the boats to cut off the retreat. He sees it all, but without terror in the recollection, rather with gusto and a modest pride. "I've surely had a remarkable time," he tells himself, and then Romance, the goddess whom he has worshipped so long, marries that furious week with the idyllic. He is supremely content, for he knows that in his humble way he has not been found wanting. Once more for him the Chavender or Chub, and long dreams among summer hills. His mind flies to the days ahead of him, when he will go wandering with his pack in many green places. Happy days they will be, the prospect with which he has always charmed his mind. Yes, but they will be different from what he had fancied, for he is another man than the complacent little fellow who set out a week ago on his travels. He has now assurance of himself, assurance of his faith. Romance, he sees, is one and indivisible. . . .

Below him by the edge of the stream he sees the encampment of the Gorbals Die-Hards. He calls and waves a hand, and his signal is answered. It seems to be washing day, for some scanty and tattered raiment is drying on the sward. The band is evidently in session, for it is sitting in a circle, deep in talk.

As he looks at the ancient tents, the humble equipment, the ring of small shockheads, a great tenderness comes over him. The Die-Hards are so tiny, so poor, so pitifully handicapped, and yet so bold in their meagreness. Not one of them has had anything that might be called a chance. Their few years have been spent in kennels and closes, always hungry and hunted, with none to care for them; their childish ears have been habituated to every coarseness, their small minds filled with the desperate shifts of living. . . . And yet, what a heavenly spark was in them! He had always thought nobly of the soul; now he wants to get on his knees before the queer greatness of humanity.

A figure disengages itself from the group, and Dougal makes his way up the hill towards him. The Chieftain is not more reputable in garb than when we first saw him, nor is he more cheerful of countenance. He has one arm in a sling made out of his neckerchief, and his scraggy little throat rises bare from his voluminous shirt. All that can be said for him is that he is appreciably cleaner. He comes to a standstill and salutes with a special formality.

"Dougal," says Dickson, "I've been thinking. You're the grandest lot of wee laddies I ever heard tell of, and, forbye, you've saved my life. Now, I'm getting on in years, though you'll admit that I'm not that dead old, and I'm not a poor man, and I haven't chick or child to look after. None of you has ever had a proper chance or been right fed or educated or taken care of. I've just the one thing to say to you. From now on you're *my* bairns, every one of you. You're fine laddies, and I'm going to see that you turn into fine men. There's the stuff in you to make Generals and Provosts—ay, and Prime Ministers, and Dod! it'll not be my blame if it doesn't get out."

Dougal listens gravely and again salutes.

"I've brought ye a message," he says. "We've just had a meetin' and I've to report that ye've been unanimously electit Chief Die-Hard. We're a' hopin' ye'll accept."

"I accept," Dickson replies. "Proudly and gratefully I accept."

The last scene is some days later, in a certain southern suburb of Glasgow. Ulysses has come back to Ithaca, and is sitting by his fireside, waiting on the return of Penelope from the Neuk Hydropathic. There is a chill in the air, so a fire is burning in the grate, but the laden tea-table is bright with the first blooms of lilac. Dickson, in a new suit with a flower in his buttonhole, looks none the worse for his travels, save that there is still sticking-plaster on his deeply sunburnt brow. He waits impatiently with his eye on the black marble timepiece, and he fingers something in his pocket.

Presently the sound of wheels is heard, and the peahen voice of Tibby announces the arrival of Penelope. Dickson rushes to the door and at the threshold welcomes his wife with a resounding kiss. He leads her into the parlour and settles her in her own chair.

"My! but it's nice to be home again!" she says. "And everything that comfortable. I've had a fine time, but there's no place like your own fireside. You're looking awful well, Dickson. But losh! What have you been doing to your head?"

"Just a small tumble. It's very near mended already. Ay, I've had a grand walking tour, but the weather was a wee bit thrawn. It's nice to see you back again, Mamma. Now that I'm an idle man you and me must take a lot of jaunts together."

She beams on him as she stays herself with Tibby's scones, and when the meal is ended, Dickson draws from his

pocket a slim case. The jewels have been restored to Saskia, but this is one of her own which she has bestowed upon Dickson as a parting memento. He opens the case and reveals a necklet of emeralds, any one of which is worth half the street.

"This is a present for you," he says bashfully.

Mrs. McCunn's eyes open wide. "You're far too kind," she gasps. "It must have cost an awful lot of money."

"It didn't cost me that much," is the truthful answer.

She fingers the trinket and then clasps it round her neck, where the green depths of the stones glow against the black satin of her bodice. Her eyes are moist as she looks at him. "You've been a kind man to me," she says, and she kisses him as she has not done since Janet's death.

She stands up and admires the necklet in the mirror. Romance once more, thinks Dickson. That which has graced the slim throats of princesses in far-away Courts now adorns an elderly matron in a semi-detached villa; the jewels of the wild Nausicaa have fallen to the housewife Penelope.

Mrs. McCunn preens herself before the glass. "I call it very genteel," she says. "Real stylish. It might be worn by a queen."

"I wouldn't say but it has," says Dickson.



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The Three Hostages

John Buchan



THE UNIVERSITY
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CHAPTER I

DOCTOR GREENSLADE THEORISES

That evening, I remember, as I came up through the Mill Meadow, I was feeling peculiarly happy and contented. It was still mid-March, one of those spring days when noon is like May, and only the cold pearly haze at sunset warns a man that he is not done with winter. The season was absurdly early, for the blackthorn was in flower and the hedge roots were full of primroses. The partridges were paired, the rooks were well on with their nests, and the meadows were full of shimmering grey flocks of fieldfares on their way north. I put up half a dozen snipe on the boggy edge of the stream, and in the bracken in Sturn Wood I thought I saw a woodcock, and hoped that the birds might nest with us this year, as they used to do long ago. It was jolly to see the world coming to life again, and to remember that this patch of England was my own, and all these wild things, so to speak, members of my little household.

As I say, I was in a very contented mood, for I had found something I had longed for all my days. I had bought Fosse Manor just after the War as a wedding present for Mary, and for two and a half years we had been settled there. My son, Peter John, was rising fifteen months, a thoughtful infant, as healthy as a young colt and as comic as a terrier puppy. Even Mary's anxious eye could scarcely detect in him any symptoms of decline. But the place wanted a lot of looking to, for it had run wild during the War, and the woods had to be thinned, gates and fences repaired, new drains laid, a ram put in to supplement the wells, a heap of thatching to be done, and the garden borders to be brought back to cultivation. I had got through the worst of it, and as I came out of the Home Wood on to the lower lawns and saw the old stone gables that the monks had built, I felt that I was anchored at last in the pleasantest kind of harbour.

There was a pile of letters on the table in the hall, but I let them be, for I was not in the mood for any communication with the outer world. As I was having a hot bath Mary kept giving me the news through her bedroom door. Peter John had been raising Cain over a first tooth; the new shorthorn cow was drying off; old George Whaddon had got his granddaughter back from service; there was a new brood of runner-ducks; there was a missel-thrush building in the box hedge by the lake. A chronicle of small beer, you will say, but I was by a long chalk more interested in it than in what might be happening in Parliament or Russia or the Hindu Kush. The fact is I was becoming such a mossback that I had almost stopped reading the papers. Many a day *The Times* would remain unopened, for Mary never looked at anything but the first page to see who was dead or married. Not that I didn't read a lot, for I used to spend my evenings digging into county history, and learning all I could about the old fellows who had been my predecessors. I liked to think that I lived in a place that had been continuously inhabited for a thousand years. Cavalier and Roundhead had fought over the countryside, and I was becoming a considerable authority on their tiny battles. That was about the only interest I had left in soldiering.

As we went downstairs, I remember we stopped to look out of the long staircase window which showed a segment of lawn, a corner of the lake, and through a gap in the woods a vista of green downland. Mary squeezed my arm. "What a blessed country," she said. "Dick, did you ever dream of such peace? We're lucky, lucky people."

Then suddenly her face changed in that way she has and grew very grave. I felt a little shiver run along her arm.

"It's too good and beloved to last," she whispered. "Sometimes I am afraid."

"Nonsense," I laughed. "What's going to upset it? I don't believe in being afraid of happiness." I knew very well, of course, that Mary couldn't be afraid of anything.

She laughed too. "All the same I've got what the Greek called *aidos*. You don't know what that means, you old savage. It means that you feel you must walk humbly and delicately to propitiate the Fates. I wish I knew how."

She walked too delicately, for she missed the last step and our descent ended in an undignified shuffle right into the arms of Dr. Greenslade.

Paddock — I had got Paddock back after the War and he was now my butler — was helping the doctor out of his ulster, and I saw by the satisfied look on the latter's face that he was through with his day's work and meant to stay to dinner. Here I had better introduce Tom Greenslade, for of all my recent acquaintances he was the one I had most taken to. He was a long lean fellow with a stoop in his back from bending over the handles of motor-bicycles, with reddish hair, and the greeny-blue eyes and freckled skin that often accompany that kind of hair. From his high cheek bones and his colouring

you would have set him down as a Scotsman, but as a matter of fact he came from Devonshire — Exmoor, I think, though he had been so much about the world that he had almost forgotten where he was raised. I have travelled a bit, but nothing to Greenslade. He had started as a doctor in a whaling ship. Then he had been in the South African War and afterwards a temporary magistrate up Lydenburg way. He soon tired of that, and was for a long spell in Uganda and German East, where he became rather a swell on tropical diseases, and nearly perished through experimenting on himself with fancy inoculations. Then he was in South America, where he had a good practice in Valparaiso, and then in the Malay States, where he made a bit of money in the rubber boom. There was a gap of three years after that when he was wandering about Central Asia, partly with a fellow called Duckett exploring Northern Mongolia, and partly in Chinese Tibet hunting for new flowers, for he was mad about botany. He came home in the summer of 1914, meaning to do some laboratory research work, but the War swept him up and he went to France as M.O. of a territorial battalion. He got wounded of course, and after a spell in hospital went out to Mesopotamia, where he stayed till the Christmas of 1918, sweating hard at his job but managing to tumble into a lot of varied adventures, for he was at Baku with Dunsterville and got as far as Tashkend, where the Bolsheviks shut him up for a fortnight in a bath-house. During the War he had every kind of sickness, for he missed no experience, but nothing seemed to damage permanently his whipcord physique. He told me that his heart and lungs and blood pressure were as good as a lad's of twenty-one, though by this time he was on the wrong side of forty.

But when the War was over he hankered for a quiet life, so he bought a practice in the deepest and greenest corner of England. He said his motive was the same as that which in the rackety Middle Ages made men retire into monasteries; he wanted quiet and leisure to consider his soul. Quiet he may have found, but uncommon little leisure, for I never heard of a country doctor that toiled at his job as he did. He would pay three visits a day to a panel patient, which shows the kind of fellow he was; and he would be out in the small hours at the birth of a gipsy child under a hedge. He was a first-class man in his profession, and kept abreast of it, but doctoring was only one of a thousand interests. I never met a chap with such an insatiable curiosity about everything in heaven and earth. He lived in two rooms in a farmhouse some four miles from us, and I dare say he had several thousand books about him. All day, and often half the night, he would scour the country in his little run-about car, and yet, when he would drop in to see me and have a drink after maybe twenty visits, he was as full of beans as if he had just got out of bed. Nothing came amiss to him in talk — birds, beasts, flowers, books, politics, religion — everything in the world except himself. He was the best sort of company, for behind all his quickness and cleverness, you felt that he was solid bar-gold. But for him I should have taken root in the soil and put out shoots, for I have a fine natural talent for vegetating. Mary strongly approved of him and Peter John adored him.

He was in tremendous spirits that evening, and for once in a way gave us reminiscences of his past. He told us about the people he badly wanted to see again; an Irish Spaniard up in the north of the Argentine who had for cattle-men a most murderous brand of native from the mountains, whom he used to keep in good humour by arranging fights every Sunday, he himself taking on the survivor with his fists and always knocking him out; a Scots trader from Hankow who had turned Buddhist priest and intoned his prayers with a strong Glasgow accent; and most of all a Malay pirate, who, he said, was a sort of St. Francis with beasts, though a perfect Nero with his fellow-men. That took him to Central Asia, and he observed that if ever he left England again he would make for those parts, since they were the refuge of all the superior rascality of creation. He had a notion that something very odd might happen there in the long run. "Think of it!" he cried. "All the places with names like spells — Bokhara, Samarkand — run by seedy little gangs of communist Jews. It won't go on for ever. Some day a new Genghis Khan or a Timour will be thrown up out of the maelstrom. Europe is confused enough, but Asia is ancient Chaos."

After dinner we sat round the fire in the library, which I had modelled on Sir Walter Bullivant's room in his place on the Kennet, as I had promised myself seven years ago. I had meant it for my own room where I could write and read and smoke, but Mary would not allow it. She had a jolly panelled sitting-room of her own upstairs, which she rarely entered; but though I chased her away, she was like a hen in a garden and always came back, so that presently she had staked out a claim on the other side of my writing-table. I have the old hunter's notion of order, but it was useless to strive with Mary, so now my desk was littered with her letters and needlework, and Peter John's toys and picture-books were stacked in the cabinet where I kept my fly-books, and Peter John himself used to make a kraal every morning inside an up-turned stool on the hearth-rug.

It was a cold night and very pleasant by the fireside, where some scented logs from an old pear-tree were burning. The doctor picked up a detective novel I had been reading, and glanced at the title-page.

"I can read most things," he said, "but it beats me how you waste time over such stuff. These shockers are too easy, Dick. You could invent better ones for yourself."

"Not I. I call that a dashed ingenious yarn. I can't think how the fellow does it."

"Quite simple. The author writes the story inductively, and the reader follows it deductively. Do you see what I mean?"

"Not a bit," I replied.

"Look here. I want to write a shocker, so I begin by fixing on one or two facts which have no sort of obvious connection."

"For example?"

"Well, imagine anything you like. Let us take three things a long way apart —" He paused for a second to consider — "say, an old blind woman spinning in the Western Highlands, a barn in a Norwegian saeter, and a little curiosity shop in North London kept by a Jew with a dyed beard. Not much connection between the three? You invent a connection — simple enough if you have any imagination, and you weave all three into the yarn. The reader, who knows nothing about the three at the start, is puzzled and intrigued and, if the story is well arranged, finally satisfied. He is pleased with the ingenuity of the solution, for he doesn't realise that the author fixed upon the solution first, and then invented a problem to suit it."

"I see," I said. "You've gone and taken the gilt off my favourite light reading. I won't be able any more to marvel at the writer's cleverness."

"I've another objection to the stuff — it's not ingenious enough, or rather it doesn't take account of the infernal complexity of life. It might have been all right twenty years ago, when most people argued and behaved fairly logically. But they don't nowadays. Have you ever realised, Dick, the amount of stark craziness that the War has left in the world?"

Mary, who was sitting sewing under a lamp, raised her head and laughed.

Greenslade's face had become serious. "I can speak about it frankly here, for you two are almost the only completely sane people I know. Well, as a pathologist, I'm fairly staggered. I hardly meet a soul who hasn't got some slight kink in his brain as a consequence of the last seven years. With most people it's rather a pleasant kink — they're less settled in their grooves, and they see the comic side of things quicker, and are readier for adventure. But with some it's pukka madness, and that means crime. Now, how are you going to write detective stories about that kind of world on the old lines? You can take nothing for granted, as you once could, and your argus-eyed, lightning-brained expert has nothing solid with which to build his foundations."

I observed that the poor old War seemed to be getting blamed for a good deal that I was taught in my childhood was due to original sin.

"Oh, I'm not questioning your Calvinism. Original sin is always there, but the meaning of civilisation was that we had got it battened down under hatches, whereas now it's getting its head up. But it isn't only sin. It's a dislocation of the mechanism of human reasoning, a general loosening of screws. Oddly enough, in spite of parrot-talk about shell-shock, the men who fought suffer less from it on the whole than other people. The classes that shirked the War are the worst — you see it in Ireland. Every doctor nowadays has got to be a bit of a mental pathologist. As I say, you can hardly take anything for granted, and if you want detective stories that are not childish fantasy you'll have to invent a new kind. Better try your hand, Dick."

"Not I. I'm a lover of sober facts."

"But, hang it, man, the facts are no longer sober. I could tell you —" He paused and I was expecting a yarn, but he changed his mind.

"Take all this chatter about psycho-analysis. There's nothing very new in the doctrine, but people are beginning to work it out into details, and making considerable asses of themselves in the process. It's an awful thing when a scientific truth becomes the quarry of the half-baked. But as I say, the fact of the subconscious self is as certain as the existence of lungs and arteries."

"I don't believe that Dick has any subconscious self," said Mary.

"Oh yes, he has. Only, people who have led his kind of life have their ordinary self so well managed and disciplined — their wits so much about them, as the phrase goes — that the subconscious rarely gets a show. But I bet if Dick took to

thinking about his soul, which he never does, he would find some queer corners. Take my own case." He turned towards me so that I had a full view of his candid eyes and hungry cheek-bones which looked prodigious in the firelight. "I belong more or less to the same totem as you, but I've long been aware that I possessed a most curious kind of subconsciousness. I've a good memory and fair powers of observation, but they're nothing to those of my subconscious self. Take any daily incident. I see and hear, say, about a twentieth part of the details and remember about a hundredth part — that is, assuming that there is nothing special to stimulate my interest. But my subconscious self sees and hears practically everything, and remembers most of it. Only I can't use the memory, for I don't know that I've got it, and can't call it into being when I wish. But every now and then something happens to turn on the tap of the subconscious, and a thin trickle comes through. I find myself sometimes remembering names I was never aware of having heard, and little incidents and details I had never consciously noticed. Imagination, you will say; but it isn't, for everything that that inner memory provides is exactly true. I've tested it. If I could only find some way of tapping it at will, I should be an uncommonly efficient fellow. Incidentally I should become the first scientist of the age, for the trouble with investigation and experiment is that the ordinary brain does not observe sufficiently keenly or remember the data sufficiently accurately."

"That's interesting," I said. "I'm not at all certain I haven't noticed the same thing in myself. But what has that to do with the madness that you say is infecting the world?"

"Simply this. The barriers between the conscious and the subconscious have always been pretty stiff in the average man. But now with the general loosening of screws they are growing shaky and the two worlds are getting mixed. It is like two separate tanks of fluid, where the containing wall has worn into holes, and one is percolating into the other. The result is confusion, and, if the fluids are of a certain character, explosions. That is why I say that you can't any longer take the clear psychology of most civilised human beings for granted. Something is welling up from primeval depths to muddy it."

"I don't object to that," I said. "We've overdone civilisation, and personally I'm all for a little barbarism. I want a simpler world."

"Then you won't get it," said Greenslade. He had become very serious now, and was looking towards Mary as he talked. "The civilised is far simpler than the primeval. All history has been an effort to make definitions, clear rules of thought, clear rules of conduct, solid sanctions, by which we can conduct our life. These are the work of the conscious self. The subconscious is an elementary and lawless thing. If it intrudes on life two results must follow. There will be a weakening of the power of reasoning, which after all is the thing that brings men nearest to the Almighty. And there will be a failure of nerve."

I got up to get a light, for I was beginning to feel depressed by the doctor's diagnosis of our times. I don't know whether he was altogether serious, for he presently started on fishing, which was one of his many hobbies. There was very fair dry-fly fishing to be had in our little river, but I had taken a deer-forest with Archie Roylance for the season, and Greenslade was coming up with me to try his hand at salmon. There had been no sea-trout the year before in the West Highlands, and we fell to discussing the cause. He was ready with a dozen theories, and we forgot about the psychology of mankind in investigating the uncanny psychology of fish. After that Mary sang to us, for I considered any evening a failure without that, and at half-past ten the doctor got into his old ulster and departed.

As I smoked my last pipe I found my thoughts going over Greenslade's talk. I had found a snug harbour, but how yeasty the waters seemed to be outside the bar and how erratic the tides! I wondered if it wasn't shirking to be so comfortable in a comfortless world. Then I reflected that I was owed a little peace, for I had had a roughish life. But Mary's words kept coming back to me about "walking delicately." I considered that my present conduct filled that bill, for I was mighty thankful for my mercies and in no way inclined to tempt Providence by complacency.

Going up to bed, I noticed my neglected letters on the hall table. I turned them over and saw that they were mostly bills and receipts or tradesmen's circulars. But there was one addressed in a handwriting that I knew, and as I looked at it I experienced a sudden sinking of the heart. It was from Lord Artinswell — Sir Walter Bullivant, as was — who had now retired from the Foreign Office, and was living at his place on the Kennet. He and I occasionally corresponded about farming and fishing, but I had a premonition that this was something different. I waited for a second or two before I opened it.

"MY DEAR DICK,

"This note is in the nature of a warning. In the next day or two you will be asked, nay pressed, to undertake a

troublesome piece of business. I am not responsible for the request, but I know of it. If you consent, it will mean the end for a time of your happy vegetable life. I don't want to influence you one way or another; I only give you notice of what is coming in order that you may adjust your mind and not be taken by surprise. My love to Mary and the son.

"Yours ever,

"A."

That was all. I had lost my trepidation and felt very angry. Why couldn't the fools let me alone? As I went upstairs I vowed that not all the cajolery in the world would make me budge an inch from the path I had set myself. I had done enough for the public service and other people's interests, and it was jolly well time that I should be allowed to attend to my own.



CHAPTER II

I HEAR OF THE THREE HOSTAGES

There is an odour about a country-house which I love better than any scent in the world. Mary used to say it was a mixture of lamp and dog and wood-smoke, but at Fosse, where there was electric light and no dogs indoors, I fancy it was wood-smoke, tobacco, the old walls, and wafts of the country coming in at the windows. I liked it best in the morning, when there was a touch in it of breakfast cooking, and I used to stand at the top of the staircase and sniff it as I went to my bath. But on the morning I write of I could take no pleasure in it; indeed it seemed to tantalise me with a vision of country peace which had somehow got broken. I couldn't get that confounded letter out of my head. When I read it I had torn it up in disgust, but I found myself going down in my dressing-gown, to the surprise of a housemaid, piecing together the fragments from the waste-paper basket, and reading it again. This time I flung the bits into the new-kindled fire.

I was perfectly resolved that I would have nothing to do with Bullivant or any of his designs, but all the same I could not recapture the serenity which yesterday had clothed me like a garment. I was down to breakfast before Mary, and had finished before she appeared. Then I lit my pipe and started on my usual tour of my domain, but nothing seemed quite the same. It was a soft fresh morning with no frost, and the scillas along the edge of the lake were like bits of summer sky. The moor-hens were building, and the first daffodils were out in the rough grass below the clump of Scots firs, and old George Whaddon was nailing up rabbit wire and whistling through his two remaining teeth, and generally the world was as clear and jolly as spring could make it. But I didn't feel any more that it was really mine, only that I was looking on at a pretty picture. Something had happened to jar the harmony between it and my mind, and I cursed Bullivant and his intrusions.

I returned by the front of the house, and there at the door to my surprise stood a big touring Rolls-Royce. Paddock met me in the hall and handed me a card, on which I read the name of Mr. Julius Victor.

I knew it, of course, for the name of one of the richest men in the world, the American banker who had done a lot of Britain's financial business in the War, and was in Europe now at some international conference. I remembered that Blenkiron, who didn't like his race, had once described him to me as "the whitest Jew since the Apostle Paul."

In the library I found a tall man standing by the window looking out at our view. He turned as I entered, and I saw a thin face with a neatly trimmed grey beard, and the most worried eyes I have ever seen in a human countenance. Everything about him was spruce and dapper — his beautifully-cut grey suit, his black tie and pink pearl pin, his blue-and-white linen, his exquisitely polished shoes. But the eyes were so wild and anxious that he looked dishevelled.

"General," he said, and took a step towards me.

We shook hands and I made him sit down.

"I have dropped the 'General,' if you don't mind," I said. "What I want to know is, have you had breakfast?"

He shook his head. "I had a cup of coffee on the road. I do not eat in the morning."

"Where have you come from, sir?" I asked.

"From London."

Well, London is seventy-six miles from us, so he must have started early. I looked curiously at him, and he got out of his chair and began to stride about.

"Sir Richard," he said, in a low pleasant voice which I could imagine convincing any man he tried it on, "you are a soldier and a man of the world and will pardon my unconventionality. My business is too urgent to waste time on apologies. I have heard of you from common friends as a man of exceptional resource and courage. I have been told in confidence something of your record. I have come to implore your help in a desperate emergency."

I passed him a box of cigars, and he took one and lit it carefully. I could see his long slim fingers trembling as he held the match.

"You may have heard of me," he went on. "I am a very rich man, and my wealth has given me power, so that Governments honour me with their confidence. I am concerned in various important affairs, and it would be false modesty to deny that my word is weightier than that of many Prime Ministers. I am labouring, Sir Richard, to secure peace in the

world, and consequently I have enemies, all those who would perpetuate anarchy and war. My life has been more than once attempted, but that is nothing. I am well guarded. I am not, I think, more of a coward than other men, and I am prepared to take my chance. But now I have been attacked by a subtler weapon, and I confess I have no defence. I had a son, who died ten years ago at college. My only other child is my daughter, Adela, a girl of nineteen. She came to Europe just before Christmas, for she was to be married in Paris in April. A fortnight ago she was hunting with friends in Northamptonshire — the place is called Rushford Court. On the morning of the 8th of March she went for a walk to Rushford village to send a telegram, and was last seen passing through the lodge gates at twenty-minutes past eleven. She has not been seen since.”

“Good God!” I exclaimed, and rose from my chair. Mr. Victor was looking out of the window, so I walked to the other end of the room and fiddled with the books on a shelf. There was silence for a second or two, till I broke it.

“Do you suppose it is loss of memory?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “It is not loss of memory. I know — we have proof — that she has been kidnapped by those whom I call my enemies. She is being held as a hostage.”

“You know she is alive?”

He nodded, for his voice was choking again. “There is evidence which points to a very deep and devilish plot. It may be revenge, but I think it more likely to be policy. Her captors hold her as security for their own fate.”

“Has Scotland Yard done nothing?”

“Everything that man could do, but the darkness only grows thicker.”

“Surely it has not been in the papers. I don’t read them carefully but I could scarcely miss a thing like that.”

“It has been kept out of the papers — for a reason which you will be told.”

“Mr. Victor,” I said, “I’m most deeply sorry for you. Like you, I’ve just the one child, and if anything of that kind happened to him I should go mad. But I shouldn’t take too gloomy a view. Miss Adela will turn up all right, and none the worse, though you may have to pay through the nose for it. I expect it’s ordinary blackmail and ransom.”

“No,” he said very quietly. “It is not blackmail, and if it were, I would not pay the ransom demanded. Believe me, Sir Richard, it is a very desperate affair. More, far more is involved than the fate of one young girl. I am not going to touch on that side, for the full story will be told you later by one better equipped to tell it. But the hostage is my daughter, my only child. I have come to beg your assistance in the search for her.”

“But I’m no good at looking for things,” I stammered. “I’m most awfully sorry for you, but I don’t see how I can help. If Scotland Yard is at a loss, it’s not likely that an utter novice like me would succeed.”

“But you have a different kind of imagination and a rarer kind of courage. I know what you have done before, Sir Richard. I tell you you are my last hope.”

I sat down heavily and groaned. “I can’t begin to explain to you the bottomless futility of your idea. It is quite true that in the War I had some queer jobs and was lucky enough to bring some of them off. But, don’t you see, I was a soldier then, under orders, and it didn’t greatly signify whether I lost my life from a crump in the trenches or from a private bullet on the backstairs. I was in the mood for any risk, and my wits were strung up and unnaturally keen. But that’s all done with. I’m in a different mood now and my mind is weedy and grass-grown. I’ve settled so deep into the country that I’m just an ordinary hayseed farmer. If I took a hand — which I certainly won’t — I’d only spoil the game.”

Mr. Victor stood looking at me intently. I thought for a moment he was going to offer me money, and rather hoped he would, for that would have stiffened me like a ramrod, though it would have spoiled the good notion I had of him. The thought may have crossed his mind, but he was clever enough to reject it.

“I don’t agree with a word you say about yourself, and I’m accustomed to size up men. I appeal to you as a Christian gentleman to help me to recover my child. I am not going to press that appeal, for I have already taken up enough of your time. My London address is on my card. Good-bye, Sir Richard, and believe me, I am very grateful to you for receiving me so kindly.”

In five minutes he and his Rolls-Royce had gone, and I was left in a miserable mood of shame-faced exasperation. I realised how Mr. Julius Victor had made his fame. He knew how to handle men, for if he had gone on pleading he would only have riled me, whereas he had somehow managed to leave it all to my honour, and thoroughly unsettle my mind.

I went for a short walk, cursing the world at large, sometimes feeling horribly sorry for that unfortunate father, sometimes getting angry because he had tried to mix me up in his affairs. Of course I would not touch the thing; I couldn't; it was manifestly impossible; I had neither the capacity nor the inclination. I was not a professional rescuer of distressed ladies whom I did not know from Eve.

A man, I told myself, must confine his duties to his own circle of friends, except when his country has need of him. I was over forty, and had a wife and a young son to think of; besides, I had chosen a retired life, and had the right to have my choice respected. But I can't pretend that I was comfortable. A hideous muddy wave from the outer world had come to disturb my little sheltered pool. I found Mary and Peter John feeding the swans, and couldn't bear to stop and play with them. The gardeners were digging in sulphates about the fig trees on the south wall, and wanted directions about the young chestnuts in the nursery; the keeper was lying in wait for me in the stable-yard for instructions about a new batch of pheasants' eggs, and the groom wanted me to look at the hocks of Mary's cob. But I simply couldn't talk to any of them. These were the things I loved, but for a moment the guilt was off them, and I would let them wait till I felt better. In a very bad temper I returned to the library.

I hadn't been there two minutes when I heard the sound of a car on the gravel. "Let 'em all come," I groaned, and I wasn't surprised when Paddock entered, followed by the spare figure and smooth keen face of Macgillivray.

I don't think I offered to shake hands. We were pretty good friends, but at that moment there was no one in the world I wanted less to see.

"Well, you old nuisance," I cried, "you're the second visitor from town I've had this morning. There'll be a shortage of petrol soon."

"Have you had a letter from Lord Artinswell?" he asked.

"I have, worse luck," I said.

"Then you know what I've come about. But that can keep till after luncheon. Hurry it up, Dick, like a good fellow, for I'm as hungry as a famished kestrel."

He looked rather like one, with his sharp nose and lean head. It was impossible to be cross for long with Macgillivray, so we went out to look for Mary. "I may as well tell you," I told him, "that you've come on a fool's errand. I'm not going to be jockeyed by you or anyone into making an ass of myself. Anyhow, don't mention the thing to Mary. I don't want her to be worried by your nonsense."

So at luncheon we talked about Fosse and the Cotswolds, and about the deer-forest I had taken — Machray they called it — and about Sir Archibald Roylance, my cotenant, who had just had another try at breaking his neck in a steeplechase. Macgillivray was by way of being a great stalker and could tell me a lot about Machray. The crab of the place was its neighbours, it seemed; for Haripol on the south was too steep for the lessee, a middle-aged manufacturer, to do justice to it, and the huge forest of Glenaicill on the east was too big for any single tenant to shoot, and the Machray end of it was nearly thirty miles by road from the lodge. The result was, said Macgillivray, that Machray was surrounded by unauthorised sanctuaries, which made the deer easy to shift. He said the best time was early in the season when the stags were on the upper ground, for it seemed that Machray had uncommonly fine high pastures. . . . Mary was in good spirits, for somebody had been complimentary about Peter John, and she was satisfied for the moment that he wasn't going to be cut off by an early consumption. She was full of housekeeping questions about Machray, and revealed such spacious plans that Macgillivray said that he thought he would pay us a visit, for it looked as if he wouldn't be poisoned, as he usually was in Scotch shooting-lodges. It was a talk I should have enjoyed if there had not been that uneasy morning behind me and that interview I had still to get over.

There was a shower after luncheon, so he and I settled ourselves in the library. "I must leave at three-thirty," he said, "so I have got just a little more than an hour to tell you my business in."

"Is it worth while starting?" I asked. "I want to make it quite plain that under no circumstances am I open to any offer to take on any business of any kind. I'm having a rest and a holiday. I stay here for the summer and then I go to Machray."

"There's nothing to prevent your going to Machray in August," he said, opening his eyes. "The work I am going to suggest to you must be finished long before then."

I suppose that surprised me, for I did not stop him as I had meant to. I let him go on, and before I knew I found myself getting interested. I have a boy's weakness for a yarn, and Macgillivray knew this and played on it.

He began by saying very much what Dr. Greenslade had said the night before. A large part of the world had gone mad, and that involved the growth of inexplicable and unpredictable crime. All the old sanctities had become weakened, and men had grown too well accustomed to death and pain. This meant that the criminal had far greater resources at his command, and, if he were an able man, could mobilise a vast amount of utter recklessness and depraved ingenuity. The moral imbecile, he said, had been more or less a sport before the War; now he was a terribly common product, and thrived in batches and battalions. Cruel, humourless, hard, utterly wanting in sense of proportion, but often full of a perverted poetry and drunk with rhetoric — a hideous, untamable breed had been engendered. You found it among the young Bolshevik Jews, among the young gentry of the wilder Communist sects, and very notably among the sullen murderous hobbledehoys in Ireland.

“Poor devils,” Macgillivray repeated. “It is for their Maker to judge them, but we who are trying to patch up civilisation have to see that they are cleared out of the world. Don’t imagine that they are devotees of any movement, good or bad. They are what I have called them, moral imbeciles, who can be swept into any movement by those who understand them. They are the neophytes and hierophants of crime, and it is as criminals that I have to do with them. Well, all this desperate degenerate stuff is being used by a few clever men who are not degenerates or anything of the sort, but only evil. There has never been such a chance for a rogue since the world began.”

Then he told me certain facts, which must remain unpublished, at any rate during our life-times. The main point was that there were sinister brains at work to organise for their own purposes the perilous stuff lying about. All the contemporary anarchisms, he said, were interconnected, and out of the misery of decent folks and the agony of the wretched tools certain smug entrepreneurs were profiting. He and his men, and indeed the whole police force of civilisation — he mentioned especially the Americans — had been on the trail of one of the worst of these combines and by a series of fortunate chances had got their hand on it. Now at any moment they could stretch out that hand and gather it in.

But there was one difficulty. I learned from him that this particular combine was not aware of the danger in which it stood, but that it realised that it must stand in some danger, so it had taken precautions. Since Christmas it had acquired hostages.

Here I interrupted, for I felt rather incredulous about the whole business. “I think since the War we’re all too ready to jump at grandiose explanations of simple things. I’ll want a good deal of convincing before I believe in your international clearing-house for crime.”

“I guarantee the convincing,” he said gravely. “You shall see all our evidence, and, unless you have changed since I first knew you, your conclusion won’t differ from mine. But let us come to the hostages.”

“One I know about,” I put in. “I had Mr. Julius Victor here after breakfast.”

Macgillivray exclaimed. “Poor soul! What did you say to him?”

“Deepest sympathy, but nothing doing.”

“And he took that answer?”

“I won’t say he took it. But he went away. What about the others?”

“There are two more. One is a young man, the heir to a considerable estate, who was last seen by his friends in Oxford on the 17th day of February, just before dinner. He was an undergraduate of Christ Church, and was living out of college in rooms in the High. He had tea at the Gridiron and went to his rooms to dress, for he was dining that night with the Halcyon Club. A servant passed him on the stairs of his lodgings, going up to his bedroom. He apparently did not come down, and since that day has not been seen. You may have heard his name — Lord Mercot.”

I started. I had indeed heard the name, and knew the boy a little, having met him occasionally at our local steeplechases. He was the grandson and heir of the old Duke of Alcester, the most respected of the older statesmen of England.

“They have picked their bag carefully,” I said. “What is the third case?”

“The cruellest of all. You know Sir Arthur Warcliff. He is a widower — lost his wife just before the War, and he has an only child, a little boy about ten years old. The child — David is his name — was the apple of his eye, and was at a preparatory school near Rye. The father took a house in the neighbourhood to be near him, and the boy used to be allowed to come home for luncheon every Sunday. One Sunday he came to luncheon as usual, and started back in the pony-trap. The boy was very keen about birds, and used to leave the trap and walk the last half-mile by a short cut across the marshes.

Well, he left the groom at the usual gate, and, like Miss Victor and Lord Mercot, walked into black mystery.”

This story really did horrify me. I remembered Sir Arthur Warcliff — the kind, worn face of the great soldier and administrator, and I could imagine his grief and anxiety. I knew what I should have felt if it had been Peter John. A much-travelled young woman and an athletic young man were defenceful creatures compared to a poor little round-headed boy of ten. But I still felt the whole affair too fantastic for real tragedy.

“But what right have you to connect the three cases?” I asked. “Three people disappear within a few weeks of each other in widely separated parts of England. Miss Victor may have been kidnapped for ransom, Lord Mercot may have lost his memory, and David Warcliff may have been stolen by tramps. Why should they be all part of one scheme? Why, for that matter, should any one of them have been the work of your criminal combine? Have you any evidence for the hostage theory?”

“Yes.” Macgillivray took a moment or two to answer. “There is first the general probability. If a band of rascals wanted three hostages they could hardly find three better — the daughter of the richest man in the world, the heir of our greatest dukedom, the only child of a national hero. There is also direct evidence.” Again he hesitated.

“Do you mean to say that Scotland Yard has not a single clue to any one of these cases?”

“We have followed up a hundred clues, but they have all ended in dead walls. Every detail, I assure you, has been gone through with a fine comb. No, my dear Dick, the trouble is not that we’re specially stupid on this side, but that there is some superlative cunning on the other. That is why I want YOU. You have a kind of knack of stumbling on truths which no amount of ordinary reasoning can get at. I have fifty men working day and night, and we have mercifully kept all the cases out of the papers, so that we are not hampered by the amateur. But so far it’s a blank. Are you going to help?”

“No, I’m not. But, supposing I were, I don’t see that you’ve a scrap of proof that the three cases are connected, or that any one of them is due to the criminal gang that you say you’ve got your hand on. You’ve only given me presumptions, and precious thin at that. Where’s your direct evidence?”

Macgillivray looked a little embarrassed. “I’ve started you at the wrong end,” he said. “I should have made you understand how big and desperate the thing is that we’re out against, and then you’d have been in a more receptive mood for the rest of the story. You know as well as I do that cold blood is not always the most useful accompaniment in assessing evidence. I said I had direct evidence of connection, and so I have, and the proof to my mind is certain.”

“Well, let’s see it.”

“It’s a poem. On Wednesday of last week, two days after David Warcliff disappeared, Mr. Julius Victor, the Duke of Alcester, and Sir Arthur Warcliff received copies of it by the first post. They were typed on bits of flimsy paper, the envelopes had the addresses typed, and they had been posted in the West Central district of London the afternoon before.”

He handed me a copy, and this was what I read:

“Seek where under midnight’s sun
Laggard crops are hardly won; —
Where the sower casts his seed in
Furrows of the fields of Eden; —
Where beside the sacred tree
Spins the seer who cannot see.”

I burst out laughing, for I could not help it — the whole thing was too preposterous. These six lines of indifferent doggerel seemed to me to put the coping-stone of nonsense on the business. But I checked myself when I saw Macgillivray’s face. There was a slight flush of annoyance on his cheek, but for the rest it was grave, composed, and in deadly earnest. Now Macgillivray was not a fool, and I was bound to respect his beliefs. So I pulled myself together and tried to take things seriously.

“That’s proof that the three cases are linked together,” I said. “So much I grant you. But where’s the proof that they are the work of the great criminal combine that you say you have got your hand on?”

Macgillivray rose and walked restlessly about the room. “The evidence is mainly presumptive, but to my mind it is certain presumption. You know as well as I do, Dick, that a case may be final and yet very difficult to set out as a series of facts. My view on the matter is made up of a large number of tiny indications and cross-bearings, and I am prepared to bet that if you put your mind honestly to the business you will take the same view. But I’ll give you this much by way of direct proof — in hunting the big show we had several communications of the same nature as this doggerel, and utterly unlike

anything else I ever struck in criminology. There's one of the miscreants who amuses himself with sending useless clues to his adversaries. It shows how secure the gang thinks itself."

"Well, you've got that gang anyhow. I don't quite see why the hostages should trouble you. You'll gather them in when you gather in the malefactors."

"I wonder. Remember we are dealing with moral imbeciles. When they find themselves cornered they won't play for safety. They'll use their hostages, and when we refuse to bargain they'll take their last revenge on them."

I suppose I stared unbelievably, for he went on: "Yes. They'll murder them in cold blood — three innocent people — and then swing themselves with a lighter mind. I know the type. They've done it before." He mentioned one or two recent instances.

"Good God!" I cried. "It's a horrible thought! The only thing for you is to go canny, and not strike till you have got the victims out of their clutches."

"We can't," he said solemnly. "That is precisely the tragedy of the business. We must strike early in June. I won't trouble you with the reasons, but believe me, they are final. There is just a chance of a settlement in Ireland, and there are certain events of the first importance impending in Italy and America, and all depend upon the activities of the gang being at an end by midsummer. Do you grasp that? By midsummer we must stretch out our hand. By midsummer, unless they are released, the three hostages will be doomed. It is a ghastly dilemma, but in the public interest there is only one way out. I ought to say that Victor and the Duke and Warcliff are aware of this fact, and accept the situation. They are big men, and will do their duty even if it breaks their hearts."

There was silence for a minute or two, for I did not know what to say. The whole story seemed to me incredible, and yet I could not doubt a syllable of it when I looked at Macgillivray's earnest face. I felt the horror of the business none the less because it seemed also partly unreal; it had the fantastic grimness of a nightmare. But most of all I realised that I was utterly incompetent to help, and as I understood that I could honestly base my refusal on incapacity and not on disinclination I began to feel more comfortable.

"Well," said Macgillivray, after a pause, "are you going to help us?"

"There's nothing doing with that Sunday-paper anagram you showed me. That's the sort of riddle that's not meant to be guessed. I suppose you are going to try to work up from the information you have about the combine towards a clue to the hostages."

He nodded.

"Now, look here," I said; "you've got fifty of the quickest brains in Britain working at the job. They've found out enough to put a lasso round the enemy which you can draw tight whenever you like. They're trained to the work and I'm not. What on earth would be the use of an amateur like me butting in? I wouldn't be half as good as any one of the fifty. I'm not an expert, I'm not quick-witted, I'm a slow patient fellow, and this job, as you admit, is one that has to be done against time. If you think it over, you'll see that it's sheer nonsense, my dear chap."

"You've succeeded before with worse material."

"That was pure luck, and it was in the War when, as I tell you, my mind was morbidly active. Besides, anything I did then I did in the field, and what you want me to do now is office-work. You know I'm no good at office-work — Blenkiron always said so, and Bullivant never used me on it. It isn't because I don't want to help, but because I can't."

"I believe you can. And the thing is so grave that I daren't leave any chance unexplored. Won't you come?"

"No. Because I could do nothing."

"Because you haven't a mind for it."

"Because I haven't the right kind of mind for it."

He looked at his watch and got up, smiling rather ruefully.

"I've had my say, and now you know what I want of you. I'm not going to take your answer as final. Think over what I've said, and let me hear from you within the next day or two."

But I had lost all my doubts, for it was very clear to me that on every ground I was doing the right thing.

"Don't delude yourself with thinking that I'll change my mind," I said, as I saw him into his car. "Honestly, old fellow, if I could be an atom of use I'd join you, but for your own sake you've got to count me out this time."

Then I went for a walk, feeling pretty cheerful. I settled the question of the pheasants' eggs with the keeper, and went down to the stream to see if there was any hatch of fly. It had cleared up to a fine evening, and I thanked my stars that I was out of a troublesome business with an easy conscience, and could enjoy my peaceful life again. I say "with an easy conscience," for though there were little dregs of disquiet still lurking about the bottom of my mind, I had only to review the facts squarely to approve my decision. I put the whole thing out of my thoughts and came back with a fine appetite for tea.

There was a stranger in the drawing-room with Mary, a slim oldish man, very straight and erect, with one of those faces on which life has written so much that to look at them is like reading a good book. At first I didn't recognise him when he rose to greet me, but the smile that wrinkled the corners of his eyes and the slow deep voice brought back the two occasions in the past when I had run across Sir Arthur Wardcliff. . . . My heart sank as I shook hands, the more as I saw how solemn was Mary's face. She had been hearing the story which I hoped she would never hear.

I thought it best to be very frank with him. "I can guess your errand, Sir Arthur," I said, "and I'm extremely sorry that you should have come this long journey to no purpose." Then I told him of the visits of Mr. Julius Victor and Macgillivray, and what they had said, and what had been my answer. I think I made it as clear as day that I could do nothing, and he seemed to assent. Mary, I remember, never lifted her eyes.

Sir Arthur had also looked at the ground while I was speaking, and now he turned his wise old face to me, and I saw what ravages his new anxiety had made in it. He could not have been much over sixty and he looked a hundred.

"I do not dispute your decision, Sir Richard," he said. "I know that you would have helped me if it had been possible. But I confess I am sorely disappointed, for you were my last hope. You see — you see — I had nothing left in the world but Davie. If he had died I think I could have borne it, but to know nothing about him and to imagine terrible things is almost too much for my fortitude."

I have never been through a more painful experience. To hear a voice falter that had been used to command, to see tears in the steadfastest eyes that ever looked on the world, made me want to howl like a dog. I would have given a thousand pounds to be able to bolt into the library and lock the door.

Mary appeared to me to be behaving very oddly. She seemed to have the deliberate purpose of probing the wound, for she encouraged Sir Arthur to speak of his boy. He showed us a miniature he carried with him — an extraordinarily handsome child with wide grey eyes and his head most nobly set upon his shoulders. A grave little boy, with the look of utter trust which belongs to children who have never in their lives been unfairly treated. Mary said something about the gentleness of the face.

"Yes, Davie was very gentle," his father said. "I think he was the gentlest thing I have ever known. That little boy was the very flower of courtesy. But he was curiously stoical, too. When he was distressed, he only shut his lips tight, and never cried. I used often to feel rebuked by him."

And then he told us about Davie's performances at school, where he was not distinguished, except as showing a certain talent for cricket. "I am very much afraid of precocity," Sir Arthur said with the ghost of a smile. "But he was always educating himself in the right way, learning to observe and think." It seemed that the boy was a desperately keen naturalist and would be out at all hours watching wild things. He was a great fisherman, too, and had killed a lot of trout with the fly on hill burns in Galloway. And as the father spoke I suddenly began to realise the little chap, and to think that he was just the kind of boy I wanted Peter John to be. I liked the stories of his love of nature and trout streams. It came on me like a thunderclap that if I were in his father's place I should certainly go mad, and I was amazed at the old man's courage.

"I think he had a kind of genius for animals," Sir Arthur said. "He knew the habits of birds by instinct, and used to talk of them as other people talk of their friends. He and I were great cronies, and he would tell me long stories in his little quiet voice of birds and beasts he had seen on his walks. He had odd names for them too. . . ."

The thing was almost too pitiful to endure. I felt as if I had known the child all my life. I could see him playing, I could hear his voice, and as for Mary she was unashamedly weeping.

Sir Arthur's eyes were dry now, and there was no catch in his voice as he spoke. But suddenly a sharper flash of realisation came on him and his words became a strained cry: "Where is he now? What are they doing to him? Oh, God! My beloved little man — my gentle little Davie!"

That fairly finished me. Mary's arm was round the old man's neck, and I saw that he was trying to pull himself

together, but I didn't see anything clearly. I only know that I was marching about the room, scarcely noticing that our guest was leaving. I remember shaking hands with him, and hearing him say that it had done him good to talk to us. It was Mary who escorted him to the car, and when she returned it was to find me blaspheming like a Turk at the window. I had flung the thing open, for I felt suffocated, though the evening was cool. The mixture of anger and disgust and pity in my heart nearly choked me.

"Why the devil can't I be left alone?" I cried. "I don't ask for much — only a little peace. Why in Heaven's name should I be dragged into other people's business? Why on earth —"

Mary was standing at my elbow, her face rather white and tear-stained.

"Of course you are going to help," she said.

Her words made clear to me the decision which I must have taken a quarter of an hour before, and all the passion went out of me like wind out of a pricked bladder.

"Of course," I answered. "By the way, I had better telegraph to Macgillivray. And Warcliff too. What's his address?"

"You needn't bother about Sir Arthur," said Mary. "Before you came in-when he told me the story — I said he could count on you. Oh, Dick, think if it had been Peter John!"



CHAPTER III

RESEARCHES IN THE SUBCONSCIOUS

I went to bed in the perfect certainty that I wouldn't sleep. That happened to me about once a year, when my mind was excited or angry, and I knew no way of dodging it. There was a fine moon, and the windows were sheets of opal cut by the dark jade limbs of trees; light winds were stirring the creepers; owls hooted like sentries exchanging passwords, and sometimes a rook would talk in its dreams; the little odd squeaks and rumbles of wild life came faintly from the woods; while I lay staring at the ceiling with my thoughts running round about in a futile circus. Mary's even breathing tantalised me, for I never knew anyone with her perfect gift for slumber. I used to say that if her pedigree could be properly traced it would be found that she descended direct from one of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus who married one of the Foolish Virgins.

What kept me wakeful was principally the thought of that poor little boy, David Warcliff. I was sorry for Miss Victor and Lord Mercot, and desperately sorry for the parents of all three, but what I could not stand was the notion of the innocent little chap, who loved birds and fishing and the open air, hidden away in some stuffy den by the worst kind of blackguards. The thing preyed on me till I got to think it had happened to us and that Peter John was missing. I rose and prowled about the windows, looking out at the quiet night, and wondering how the same world could contain so much trouble and so much peace.

I laved my face with cold water and lay down again. It was no good letting my thoughts race, so I tried to fix them on one point in the hope that I would get drowsy. I endeavoured to recapitulate the evidence which Macgillivray had recited, but only made foolishness of it, for I simply could not concentrate. I saw always the face of a small boy, who bit his lips to keep himself from tears, and another perfectly hideous face that kept turning into one of the lead figures in the rose garden. A ridiculous rhyme too ran in my head — something thing about the "midnight sun" and the "fields of Eden." By and by I got it straightened out into the anagram business Macgillivray had mentioned. I have a fly-paper memory for verse when there is no reason why I should remember it, and I found I could repeat the six lines of the doggerel.

After that I found the lines mixing themselves up, and suggesting all kinds of odd pictures to my brain. I took to paraphrasing them — "Under the midnight sun, where harvests are poor" — that was Scandinavia anyhow, or maybe Iceland or Greenland or Labrador. Who on earth was the sower who sowed in the fields of Eden? Adam, perhaps, or Abel, who was the first farmer? Or an angel in heaven? More like an angel, I thought, for the line sounded like a hymn. Anyhow it was infernal nonsense.

The last two lines took to escaping me, and that made me force my mind out of the irritable confusion in which it was bogged. Ah! I had them again:

"Where beside the sacred tree
Spins the seer who cannot see."

The sacred tree was probably Yggdrasil and the spinner one of the Norns. I had once taken an interest in Norse mythology, but I couldn't remember whether one of the Norns was blind. A blind woman spinning. Now where had I heard something like that? Heard it quite recently, too?

The discomfort of wakefulness is that you are not fully awake. But now I was suddenly in full possession of my senses, and worrying at that balderdash like a dog at a bone. I had been quite convinced that there was a clue in it, but that it would be impossible to hit on the clue. But now I had a ray of hope, for I seemed to feel a very faint and vague flavour of reminiscence.

Scandinavian harvests, the fields of Eden, the blind spinner — oh, it was maddening, for every time I repeated them the sense of having recently met with something similar grew stronger. The North — Norway — surely I had it there! Norway — what was there about Norway? — Salmon, elk, reindeer, midnight sun, saeters — the last cried out to me. And the blind old woman that spun!

I had it. These were two of the three facts which Dr. Greenslade had suggested the night before as a foundation for his imaginary "shocker." What was the third? A curiosity shop in North London kept by a Jew with a dyed beard. That had no

obvious connection with a sower in the fields of Eden. But at any rate he had got two of them identical with the doggerel... It was a clue. It must be a clue. Greenslade had somewhere and somehow heard the jingle or the substance of it, and it had sunk into the subconscious memory he had spoken of, without his being aware of it. Well, I had got to dig it out. If I could discover where and how he had heard the thing, I had struck a trail.

When I had reached this conclusion, I felt curiously easier in my mind, and almost at once fell asleep. I awoke to a gorgeous spring morning, and ran down to the lake for my bath. I felt that I wanted all the freshening and screwing up I could get, and when I dressed after an icy plunge I was ready for all comers.

Mary was down in time for breakfast, and busy with her letters. She spoke little, and seemed to be waiting for me to begin; but I didn't want to raise the matter which was uppermost in our minds till I saw my way clearer, so I said I was going to take two days to think things over. It was Wednesday, so I wired to Macgillivray to expect me in London on Friday morning, and I scribbled a line to Mr. Julius Victor. By half-past nine I was on the road making for Greenslade's lodgings.

I caught him in the act of starting on his rounds, and made him sit down and listen to me. I had to give him the gist of Macgillivray's story, with extracts from those of Victor and Sir Arthur. Before I was half-way through he had flung off his overcoat, and before I had finished he had lit a pipe, which was a breach of his ritual not to smoke before the evening. When I stopped he had that wildish look in his light eyes which you see in a cairn terrier's when he is digging out a badger.

"You've taken on this job?" he asked brusquely.

I nodded.

"Well, I shouldn't have had much respect for you if you had refused. How can I help? Count on me, if I'm any use. Good God! I never heard a more damnable story."

"Have you got hold of the rhyme?" I repeated it, and he said it after me.

"Now, you remember the talk we had after dinner the night before last. You showed me how a 'shocker' was written, and you took at random three facts as the foundation. They were, you remember, a blind old woman spinning in the Western Highlands, a saeter in Norway, and a curiosity shop in North London, kept by a Jew with a dyed beard. Well, two of your facts are in that six-line jingle I have quoted to you."

"That is an odd coincidence. But is it anything more?"

"I believe that it is. I don't hold with coincidences. There's generally some explanations which we're not clever enough to get at. Your inventions were so odd that I can't think they were mere inventions. You must have heard them somehow and somewhere. You know what you said about your subconscious memory. They're somewhere in it, and, if you can remember just how they got there, you'll give me the clue I want. That six-line rhyme was sent in by people who were so confident that they didn't mind giving their enemies a clue — only it was a clue which they knew could never be discovered. Macgillivray and his fellows can make nothing of it — never will. But if I can start from the other end I'll get in on their rear. Do you see what I mean? I'm going to make you somehow or other dig it out."

He shook his head. "It can't be done, Dick. Admitting your premise — that I heard the nonsense and didn't invent it — the subconscious can't be handled like a business proposition. I remember unconsciously and I can't recall consciously. . . . But I don't admit your premise. I think the whole thing is common coincidence."

"I don't," I said stubbornly, "and even if I did I'm bound to assume the contrary, for it's the only card I possess. You've got to sit down, old chap, and do your damndest to remember. You've been in every kind of odd show, and my belief is that you HEARD that nonsense. Dig it out of your memory and we've a chance to win. Otherwise, I see nothing but tragedy."

He got up and put on his overcoat. "I've got a long round of visits which will take me all day. Of course I'll try, but I warn you that I haven't the ghost of a hope. These things don't come by care and searching. I'd better sleep at the Manor to-night. How long can you give me?"

"Two days — I go up to town on Friday morning. Yes, you must take up your quarters with us. Mary insists on it."

There was a crying of young lambs from the meadow, and through the open window came the sound of the farm-carts jolting from the stackyard into the lane. Greenslade screwed up his face and laughed.

"A nasty breach in your country peace, Dick. You know I'm with you if there's any trouble going. Let's get the thing clear, for there's a lot of researching ahead of me. My three were an old blind woman spinning in the Western Highlands —

Western Highlands, was it? — a saeter barn, and a Jew curiosity shop. The other three were a blind spinner under a sacred tree, a saeter of sorts, and a sower in the fields of Eden — Lord, such rot! Two pairs seem to coincide, the other pair looks hopeless. Well, here goes for fortune! I'm going to break my rule and take my pipe with me, for this business demands tobacco."

I spent a busy day writing letters and making arrangements about the Manor, for it looked as if I might be little at home for the next month. Oddly enough, I felt no restlessness or any particular anxiety. That would come later; for the moment I seemed to be waiting on Providence in the person of Tom Greenslade. I was trusting my instinct which told me that in those random words of his there was more than coincidence, and that with luck I might get from them a line on our problem.

Greenslade turned up about seven in the evening, rather glum and preoccupied. At dinner he ate nothing, and when we sat afterwards in the library he seemed to be chiefly interested in reading the advertisements in *The Times*. When I asked "What luck?" he turned on me a disconsolate face.

"It is the most futile job I ever took on," he groaned. "So far it's an absolute blank, and anyhow I've been taking the wrong line. I've been trying to THINK myself into recollection, and, as I said, this thing comes not by searching, nor yet by prayer and fasting. It occurred to me that I might get at something by following up the differences between the three pairs. It's a familiar method in inductive logic, for differences are often more suggestive than resemblances. So I worried away at the 'sacred tree' as contrasted with the 'Western Highlands' and the 'fields of Eden' as set against the curiosity shop. No earthly good. I gave myself a headache and I dare say I've poisoned half my patients. It's no use, Dick, but I'll peg away for the rest of the prescribed two days. I'm letting my mind lie fallow now and trusting to inspiration. I've got two faint glimmerings of notions. First, I don't believe I said 'Western Highlands.'"

"I'm positive those were your words. What did you say, then?"

"Hanged if I know, but I'm pretty certain it wasn't that. I can't explain properly, but you get an atmosphere about certain things in your mind and that phrase somehow jars with the atmosphere. Different key. Wrong tone. Second, I've got a hazy intuition that the thing, if it is really in my memory, is somehow mixed up with a hymn tune. I don't know what tune, and the whole impression is as vague as smoke, but I tell it you for what it is worth. If I could get the right tune, I might remember something."

"You've stopped thinking?"

"Utterly. I'm an Aeolian harp to be played on by any wandering wind. You see, if I did hear these three things there is no conscious rational clue to it. They were never part of my workaday mind. The only chance is that some material phenomenon may come along and link itself with them and so rebuild the scene where I heard them. A scent would be best, but a tune might do. Our one hope — and it's about as strong as a single thread of gossamer on the grass — is that that tune may drift into my head. You see the point, Dick? Thought won't do, for the problem doesn't concern the mind, but some tiny physical sensation of nose, ear, or eye might press the button. Now, it may be hallucination, but I've a feeling that the three facts I thought I invented were in some infinitely recondite way connected with a hymn tune."

He went to bed early, while I sat up till nearly midnight writing letters. As I went upstairs, I had a strong sense of futility and discouragement. It seemed the merest trifling to be groping among these spectral unrealities, while tragedy, as big and indisputable as a mountain, was overhanging us. I had to remind myself how often the trivial was the vital before I got rid of the prick in my conscience. I was tired and sleepy, and as I forced myself to think of the immediate problem, the six lines of the jingle were all blurred. While I undressed I tried to repeat them, but could not get the fourth to scan. It came out as "fields of Erin," and after that "the green fields of Erin." Then it became "the green fields of Eden."

I found myself humming a tune.

It was an old hymn which the Salvation Army used to play in the Cape Town streets when I was a schoolboy. I hadn't heard it or thought of it for thirty years. But I remembered the tune very clearly, a pretty, catchy thing like an early Victorian drawing-room ballad, and I remembered the words of the chorus —

"On the other side of Jordan
In the green fields of Eden,
Where the Tree of Life is blooming,
There is rest for you."

I marched off to Greenslade's room and found him lying wide awake staring at the ceiling, with the lamp by his bedside lit.

I must have broken in on some train of thought, for he looked at me crossly.

"I've got your tune," I said, and I whistled it, and then quoted what words I remembered.

"Tune be blowed," he said. "I never heard it before." But he hummed it after me, and made me repeat the words several times.

"No good, I'm afraid. It doesn't seem to hank on to anything. Lord, this is a fool's game. I'm off to sleep."

But three minutes later came a knock at my dressing-room door, and Greenslade entered. I saw by his eyes that he was excited.

"It's the tune all right. I can't explain why, but those three blessed facts of mine fit into it like prawns in an aspic. I'm feeling my way towards the light now. I thought I'd just tell you, for you may sleep better for hearing it."

I slept like a log, and went down to breakfast feeling more cheerful than I had felt for several days. But the doctor seemed to have had a poor night. His eyes looked gummy and heavy, and he had ruffled his hair out of all hope of order. I knew that trick of his; when his hair began to stick up at the back he was out of sorts either in mind or body. I noticed that he had got himself up in knickerbockers and thick shoes.

After breakfast he showed no inclination to smoke. "I feel as if I were going to be beaten on the post," he groaned. "I'm a complete convert to your view, Dick. I HEARD my three facts and didn't invent them. What's more, my three are definitely linked with the three in those miscreants' doggerel. That tune proves it, for it talks about the 'fields of Eden' and yet is identified in my memory with my three which didn't mention Eden. That's a tremendous point and proves we're on the right road. But I'm hanged if I can get a step farther. Wherever I heard the facts I heard the tune, but I'm no nearer finding out that place. I've got one bearing, and I need a second to give me the point of intersection I want, and how the deuce I'm to get it I don't know."

Greenslade was now keener even than I was on the chase, and indeed his lean anxious face was uncommonly like an old hound's. I asked him what he was going to do.

"At ten o'clock precisely I start on a walk — right round the head of the Windrush and home by the Forest. It's going to be a thirty-mile stride at a steady four and a half miles an hour, which, with half an hour for lunch, will get me back here before six. I'm going to drug my body and mind into apathy by hard exercise. Then I shall have a hot bath and a good dinner, and after that, when I'm properly fallow, I may get the revelation. The mistake I made yesterday was in trying to THINK."

It was a gleamy blustering March morning, the very weather for a walk, and I would have liked to accompany him. As it was I watched his long legs striding up the field we call Big Pasture, and then gave up the day to the job of putting Loch Leven fry into one of the ponds — a task so supremely muddy and wet that I had very little leisure to think of other things. In the afternoon I rode over to the market-town to see my builder, and got back only just before dinner to learn that Greenslade had returned. He was now wallowing in a hot bath, according to his programme.

At dinner he seemed to be in better spirits. The wind had heightened his colour, and given him a ferocious appetite, and the 1906 Clicquot, which I regard as the proper drink after a hard day, gave him the stimulus he needed. He talked as he had talked three nights ago, before this business got us in its clutches. Mary disappeared after dinner, and we sat ourselves in big chairs before the library fire, like two drowsy men who have had a busy day in the open air. I thought I had better say nothing till he chose to speak.

He was silent for a long time, and then he laughed not very mirthfully.

"I'm as far off it as ever. All day I've been letting my mind wander and measuring off miles with my two legs like a pair of compasses. But nothing has come to me. No word yet of that confounded cross-bearing I need. I might have heard that tune in any one of a thousand parts of the globe. You see, my rackety life is a disadvantage — I've had too many different sorts of experience. If I'd been a curate all my days in one village it would have been easier."

I waited, and he went on, speaking not to me but to the fire: "I've got an impression so strong that it amounts to certainty that I never heard the words 'Western Highlands.' It was something like it, but not that."

"Western Islands," I suggested.

"What could they be?"

"I think I've heard the phrase used about the islands off the west coast of Ireland. Does that help you?"

He shook his head. "No good. I've never been in Ireland."

After that he was silent again, staring at the fire, while I smoked opposite him, feeling pretty blank and dispirited. I realised that I had banked more than I knew on this line of inquiry which seemed to be coming to nothing. . . .

Then suddenly there happened one of those trivial things which look like accidents but I believe are part of the reasoned government of the universe.

I leaned forward to knock out the ashes of my pipe against the stone edge of the hearth. I hammered harder than I intended, and the pipe, which was an old one, broke off at the bowl. I exclaimed irritably, for I hate to lose an old pipe, and then pulled up sharp at the sight of Greenslade.

He was staring open-mouthed at the fragments in my hand, and his eyes were those of a man whose thoughts are far away. He held up one hand, while I froze into silence. Then the tension relaxed, and he dropped back into his chair with a sigh.

"The cross-bearing!" he said. "I've got it. . . . Medina."

Then he laughed at my puzzled face.

"I'm not mad, Dick. I once talked to a man, and as we talked he broke the bowl of his pipe as you have just done. He was the man who hummed the hymn tune, and though I haven't the remotest recollection of what he said, I am as certain as that I am alive that he gave me the three facts which sunk into the abyss of my subconscious memory. Wait a minute. Yes. I see it as plain as I see you. He broke his pipe just as you have done, and some time or other he hummed that tune."

"Who was he?" I asked, but Greenslade disregarded the question. He was telling his story in his own way, with his eyes still abstracted as if he were looking down a long corridor of memory.

"I was staying at the Bull at Hanham — shooting wild-fowl on the sea marshes. I had the place to myself, for it wasn't weather for a country pub, but late one night a car broke down outside, and the owner and his chauffeur had to put up at the Bull. Oddly enough I knew the man. He had been at one of the big shoots at Rousham Thorpe and was on his way back to London. We had a lot to say to each other and sat up into the small hours. We talked about sport, and the upper glens of the Yarkand river, where I first met him. I remember quite a lot of our talk, but not the three facts or the tune, which made no appeal to my conscious memory. Only of course they must have been there."

"When did this happen?"

"Early last December, the time we had the black frost. You remember, Dick, how I took a week's holiday and went down to Norfolk after duck."

"You haven't told me the man's name."

"I have. Medina."

"Who on earth is Medina?"

"Oh Lord! Dick. You're overdoing the rustic. You've heard of Dominick Medina."

I had, of course, when he mentioned the Christian name. You couldn't open a paper without seeing something about Dominick Medina, but whether he was a poet or a politician or an actor-manager I hadn't troubled to inquire. There was a pile of picture-papers on a side-table, and I fetched them and began to turn them over. Very soon I found what I wanted. It was a photograph of a group at a country-house party for some steeplechase, the usual "reading-from-left-to-right" business, and there between a Duchess and a foreign Princess was Mr. Dominick Medina. The poverty of the photograph could not conceal the extraordinary good looks of the man. He had the kind of head I fancy Byron had, and I seemed to discern, too, a fine, clean, athletic figure.

"If you had happened to look at that rag you might have short-circuited your inquiry."

He shook his head. "No. It doesn't happen that way. I had to get your broken pipe and the tune or I would have been stuck."

"Then I suppose I have to get in touch with this chap and find where he picked up the three facts and the tune. But how if he turns out to be like you, another babbler from the subconscious?"

"That is the risk you run, of course. He may be able to help you, or more likely he may prove only another dead wall."

I felt suddenly an acute sense of the difficulty of the job I had taken on, and something very near hopelessness.

"Tell me about this Medina. Is he a decent fellow?"

"I suppose so. Yes, I should think so. But he moves in higher circles than I'm accustomed to, so I can't judge. But I'll tell you what he is beyond doubt — he's rather a great man. Hang it, Dick, you must have heard of him. He's one of the finest shots living, and he's done some tall things in the exploration way, and he was the devil of a fellow as a partisan leader in South Russia. Also — though it may not interest you — he's an uncommon fine poet."

"I suppose he's some sort of a Dago."

"Not a bit of it. Old Spanish family settled here for three centuries. One of them rode with Rupert. Hold on! I rather believe I've heard that his people live in Ireland, or did live, till life there became impossible."

"What age?"

"Youngish. Not more than thirty-five. Oh, and the handsomest thing in mankind since the Greeks."

"I'm not a flapper," I said impatiently. "Good looks in a man are no sort of recommendation to me. I shall probably take a dislike to his face."

"You won't. From what I know of him and you you'll fall under his charm at first sight. I never heard of a man that didn't. He has a curious musical voice and eyes that warm you — glow like sunlight. Not that I know him well, but I own I found him extraordinarily attractive. And you see from the papers what the world thinks of him."

"All the same I'm not much nearer my goal. I've got to find out where he heard those three blessed facts and that idiotic tune. He'll probably send me to blazes, and, even if he's civil, he'll very likely be helpless."

"Your chance is that he's a really clever man, not an old blunderer like me. You'll get the help of a first-class mind, and that means a lot. Shall I write you a line of introduction?"

He sat down at my desk and wrote. "I'm saying nothing about your errand — simply that I'd like you to know each other — common interest in sport and travel — that sort of thing. You're going to be in London, so I had better give your address as your club."

Next morning Greenslade went back to his duties and I caught the early train to town. I was not very happy about Mr. Dominick Medina, for I didn't seem able to get hold of him. Who's Who only gave his age, his residence — Hill Street, his club, and the fact that he was M.P. for a South London division. Mary had never met him, for he had appeared in London after she had stopped going about, but she remembered that her Wymondham aunts raved about him, and she had read somewhere an article on his poetry. As I sat in the express, I tried to reconstruct what kind of fellow he must be — a mixture of Byron and Sir Richard Burton and the young political highbrow. The picture wouldn't compose, for I saw only a figure like a waxwork, with a cooing voice and a shop-walker's suavity. Also his name kept confusing me, for I mixed him up with an old ruffian of a Portugee I once knew at Beira.

I was walking down St. James's Street on my way to Whitehall, pretty much occupied with my own thoughts, when I was brought up by a hand placed flat on my chest, and lo! and behold! it was Sandy Arbuthnot.



CHAPTER IV

I MAKE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF A POPULAR MAN

You may imagine how glad I was to see old Sandy again, for I had not set eyes on him since 1916. He had been an Intelligence Officer with Maude, and then something at Simla, and after the War had had an administrative job in Mesopotamia, or, as they call it nowadays, Iraq. He had written to me from all kinds of queer places, but he never appeared to be coming home, and, what with my marriage and my settling in the country, we seemed to be fixed in ruts that were not likely to intersect. I had seen his elder brother's death in the papers, so he was now Master of Clanroyden and heir to the family estates, but I didn't imagine that that would make a Scotch laird of him. I never saw a fellow less changed by five years of toil and travel. He was desperately slight and tanned — he had always been that, but the contours of his face were still soft like a girl's, and his brown eyes were merry as ever.

We stood and stared at each other.

"Dick, old man," he cried, "I'm home for good. Yes — honour bright. For months and months, if not years and years. I've got so much to say to you I don't know where to begin. But I can't wait now. I'm off to Scotland to see my father. He's my chief concern now, for he's getting very frail. But I'll be back in three days. Let's dine together on Tuesday."

We were standing at the door of a club — his and mine — and a porter was stowing his baggage into a taxi. Before I could properly realise that it was Sandy, he was waving his hand from the taxi window and disappearing up the street.

The sight of him cheered me immensely and I went on along Pall Mall in a good temper. To have Sandy back in England and at call made me feel somehow more substantial, like a commander who knows his reserves are near. When I entered Macgillivray's room I was smiling, and the sight of me woke an answering smile on his anxious face. "Good man!" he said. "You look like business. You're to put yourself at my disposal while I give you your bearings."

He got out his papers and expounded the whole affair. It was a very queer story, yet the more I looked into it the thinner my scepticism grew. I am not going to write it all down, for it is not yet time; it would give away certain methods which have not yet exhausted their usefulness; but before I had gone very far, I took off my hat to these same methods, for they showed amazing patience and ingenuity. It was an odd set of links that made up the chain. There was an importer of Barcelona nuts with a modest office near Tower Hill. There was a copper company, purporting to operate in Spain, whose shares were not quoted on the Stock Exchange, but which had a fine office in London Wall, where you could get the best luncheon in the City. There was a respectable accountant in Glasgow, and a French count, who was also some kind of Highland laird and a great supporter of the White Rose League. There was a country gentleman living in Shropshire, who had bought his place after the War and was a keen rider to hounds and a very popular figure in the county. There was a little office not far from Fleet Street, which professed to be the English agency of an American religious magazine; and there was a certain publicist, who was always appealing in the newspapers for help for the distressed populations of Central Europe. I remembered his appeals well, for I had myself twice sent him small subscriptions. The way Macgillivray had worked out the connection between these gentry filled me with awe.

Then he showed me specimens of their work. It was sheer unmitigated crime, a sort of selling a bear on a huge scale in a sinking world. The aim of the gang was money, and already they had made scandalous profits. Partly their business was mere conscienceless profiteering well inside the bounds of the law, such as gambling in falling exchanges and using every kind of brazen and subtle trick to make their gamble a certainty. Partly it was common fraud of the largest size. But there were darker sides — murder when the victim ran athwart their schemes, strikes engineered when a wrecked industry somewhere or other in the world showed symptoms of reviving, shoddy little outbursts in shoddy little countries which increased the tangle. These fellows were wreckers on the grand scale, merchants of pessimism, giving society another kick downhill whenever it had a chance of finding its balance, and then pocketing their profits.

Their motive, as I have said, was gain but that was not the motive of the people they worked through. Their cleverness lay in the fact that they used the fanatics, the moral imbeciles as Macgillivray called them, whose key was a wild hatred of something or other, or a reasoned belief in anarchy. Behind the smug exploiters lay the whole dreary wastes of half-baked craziness. Macgillivray gave me examples of how they used these tools, the fellows who had no thought of profit, and were

ready to sacrifice everything, including their lives, for a mad ideal. It was a masterpiece of cold-blooded, devilish ingenuity. Hideous, and yet comic too; for the spectacle of these feverish cranks toiling to create a new heaven and a new earth and thinking themselves the leaders of mankind, when they were dancing like puppets at the will of a few scoundrels engaged in the most ancient of pursuits, was an irony to make the gods laugh.

I asked who was their leader.

Macgillivray said he wasn't certain. No one of the gang seemed to have more authority than the others, and their activities were beautifully specialised. But he agreed that there was probably one master mind, and said grimly that he would know more about that when they were rounded up. "The dock will settle that question."

"How much do they suspect?" I asked.

"Not much. A little, or they would not have taken hostages. But not much, for we have been very careful to make no sign. Only, since we became cognisant of the affair, we have managed very quietly to put a spoke in the wheels of some of their worst enterprises, though I am positive they have no suspicion of it. Also we have put the brake on their propaganda side. They are masters of propaganda, you know. Dick, have you ever considered what a diabolical weapon that can be using all the channels of modern publicity to poison and warp men's minds? It is the most dangerous thing on earth. You can use it cleanly — as I think on the whole we did in the War — but you can also use it to establish the most damnable lies. Happily in the long run it defeats itself, but only after it has sown the world with mischief. Look at the Irish! They are the cleverest propagandists extant, and managed to persuade most people that they were a brave, generous, humorous, talented, warm-hearted race, cruelly yoked to a dull mercantile England, when God knows they were exactly the opposite."

Macgillivray, I may remark, is an Ulsterman, and has his prejudices.

"About the gang — I suppose they're all pretty respectable to outward view?"

"Highly respectable," he said. "I met one of them at dinner the other night at —'s"— he mentioned the name of a member of the Government. "Before Christmas I was at a cover shoot in Suffolk, and one of the worst had the stand next me — an uncommonly agreeable fellow."

Then we sat down to business. Macgillivray's idea was that I should study the details of the thing and then get alongside some of the people. He thought I might begin with the Shropshire squire. He fancied that I might stumble on something which would give me a line on the hostages, for he stuck to his absurd notion that I had a special flair which the amateur sometimes possessed and the professional lacked. I agreed that that was the best plan, and arranged to spend Sunday in his room going over the secret dossiers. I was beginning to get keen about the thing, for Macgillivray had a knack of making whatever he handled as interesting as a game.

I had meant to tell him about my experiments with Greenslade; but after what he had shown me I felt that that story was absurdly thin and unpromising. But as I was leaving, I asked him casually if he knew Mr. Dominick Medina.

He smiled. "Why do you ask? He's scarcely your line of country."

"I don't know. I've heard a lot about him and I thought I would rather like to meet him."

"I barely know him, but I must confess that the few times I've met him I was enormously attracted. He's the handsomest being alive."

"So I'm told, and it's the only thing that puts me off."

"It wouldn't if you saw him. He's not in the least the ordinary *matinée* idol. He is the only fellow I ever heard of who was adored by women and also liked by men. He's a first-class sportsman and said to be the best shot in England after His Majesty. He's a coming man in politics, too, and a most finished speaker. I once heard him, and, though I take very little stock in oratory, he almost had me on my feet. He has knocked a bit about the world, and he is also a very pretty poet, though that wouldn't interest you."

"I don't know why you say that," I protested. "I'm getting rather good at poetry."

"Oh, I know. Scott and Macaulay and Tennyson. But that is not Medina's line. He is a deity of *les jeunes* and a hardy innovator. Jolly good, too. The man's a fine classical scholar."

"Well, I hope to meet him soon, and I'll let you know my impression."

I had posted my letter to Medina, enclosing Greenslade's introduction, on my way from the station, and next morning I found a very civil reply from him at my club. Greenslade had talked of our common interest in big-game shooting, and he

professed to know all about me, and to be anxious to make my acquaintance. He was out of town unfortunately for the week-end, he said, but he suggested that I should lunch with him on the Monday. He named a club, a small, select, old-fashioned one of which most of the members were hunting squires.

I looked forward to meeting him with a quite inexplicable interest and on Sunday, when I was worrying through papers in Macgillivray's room, I had him at the back of my mind. I had made a picture of something between a Ouida guardsman and the Apollo Belvedere and rigged it out in the smartest clothes. But when I gave my name to the porter at the club door, and a young man who was warming his hands at the hall fire came forward to meet me, I had to wipe that picture clean off my mind.

He was about my own height, just under six feet, and at first sight rather slightly built, but a hefty enough fellow to eyes which knew where to look for the points of a man's strength. Still he appeared slim, and therefore young, and you could see from the way he stood and walked that he was as light on his feet as a rope-dancer. There is a horrible word in the newspapers, "well-groomed," applied to men by lady journalists, which always makes me think of a glossy horse on which a stable-boy has been busy with the brush and currycomb. I had thought of him as "well-groomed," but there was nothing glossy about his appearance. He wore a rather old well-cut brown tweed suit, with a soft shirt and collar, and a russet tie that matched his complexion. His get-up was exactly that of a country squire who has come up to town for a day at Tattersalls'.

I find it difficult to describe my first impression of his face, for my memory is all overlaid with other impressions acquired when I looked at it in very different circumstances. But my chief feeling, I remember, was that it was singularly pleasant. It was very English, and yet not quite English; the colouring was a little warmer than sun or weather would give, and there was a kind of silken graciousness about it not commonly found in our countrymen. It was beautifully cut, every feature regular, and yet there was a touch of ruggedness that saved it from conventionality. I was puzzled about this, till I saw that it came from two things, the hair and the eyes. The hair was a dark brown, brushed in a wave above the forehead, so that the face with its strong fine chin made an almost perfect square. But the eyes were the thing. They were of a startling blue, not the pale blue which is common enough and belongs to our Norse ancestry, but a deep dark blue, like the colour of a sapphire. Indeed if you think of a sapphire with the brilliance of a diamond, you get a pretty fair notion of those eyes. They would have made a plain-headed woman lovely, and in a man's face, which had not a touch of the feminine, they were startling. Startling — I stick to that word — but also entrancing.

He greeted me as if he had been living for this hour, and also with a touch of the deference due to a stranger.

"This is delightful, Sir Richard. It was very good of you to come. We've got a table to ourselves by the fire. I hope you're hungry. I've had a devilish cold journey this morning and I want my luncheon."

I was hungry enough and I never ate a better meal. He gave me Burgundy on account of the bite in the weather, and afterwards I had a glass of the Bristol Cream for which the club was famous; but he drank water himself. There were four other people in the room, all of whom he appeared to call by their Christian names, and these lantern-jawed hunting fellows seemed to cheer up at the sight of him. But they didn't come and stand beside him and talk, which is apt to happen to your popular man. There was that about Medina which was at once friendly and aloof, the air of a simple but tremendous distinction.

I remember we began by talking about rifles. I had done a good deal of shikar in my time, and I could see that this man had had a wide experience and had the love of the thing in his bones. He never bragged, but by little dropped remarks showed what a swell he was. We talked of a new .240 bore which had remarkable stopping power, and I said I had never used it on anything more formidable than a Scotch stag. "It would have been a godsend to me in the old days on the Pungwe where I had to lug about a .500 express that broke my back."

He grinned ruefully. "The old days!" he said. "We've all had 'em, and we're all sick to get 'em back. Sometimes I'm tempted to kick over the traces and be off to the wilds again. I'm too young to settle down. And you, Sir Richard — you must feel the same. Do you never regret that that beastly old War is over?"

"I can't say I do. I'm a middle-aged man now and soon I'll be stiff in the joints. I've settled down in the Cotswolds, and though I hope to get a lot of sport before I die I'm not looking for any more wars. I'm positive the Almighty meant me for a farmer."

He laughed. "I wish I knew what He meant me for. It looks like some sort of politician."

“Oh, you!” I said. “You’re the fellow with twenty talents. I’ve only got the one, and I’m jolly well going to bury it in the soil.”

I kept wondering how much help I would get out of him. I liked him enormously, but somehow I didn’t yet see his cleverness. He was just an ordinary good fellow of my own totem — just such another as Tom Greenslade. It was a dark day, and the firelight silhouetted his profile, and as I stole glances at it I was struck by the shape of his head. The way he brushed his hair front and back made it look square, but I saw that it was really round, the roundest head I have ever seen except in a Kaffir. He was evidently conscious of it and didn’t like it, so took some pains to conceal it.

All through luncheon I was watching him covertly, and I could see that he was also taking stock of me. Very friendly these blue eyes were, but very shrewd. He suddenly looked me straight in the face.

“You won’t vegetate,” he said. “You needn’t deceive yourself. You haven’t got the kind of mouth for a rustic. What is it to be? Politics? Business? Travel? You’re well off?”

“Yes. For my simple tastes I’m rather rich. But I haven’t the ambition of a maggot.”

“No. You haven’t.” He looked at me steadily. “If you don’t mind my saying it, you have too little vanity. Oh, I’m quick at detecting vanity, and anyhow it’s a thing that defies concealment. But I imagine — indeed I know — that you can work like a beaver, and that your loyalty is not the kind that cracks. You won’t be able to help yourself, Sir Richard. You’ll be caught up in some machine. Look at me. I swore two years ago never to have a groove, and I’m in a deep one already. England is made up of grooves, and the only plan is to select a good one.”

“I suppose yours is politics,” I said.

“I suppose it is. A dingy game as it’s played at present, but there are possibilities. There is a mighty Tory revival in sight, and it will want leading. The newly enfranchised classes, especially the women, will bring it about. The suffragists didn’t know what a tremendous force of conservatism they were releasing when they won the vote for their sex. I should like to talk to you about these things some day.”

In the smoking-room we got back to sport and he told me the story of how he met Greenslade in Central Asia. I was beginning to realise that the man’s reputation was justified, for there was a curious mastery about his talk, a careless power as if everything came easily to him and was just taken in his stride. I had meant to open up the business which had made me seek his acquaintance, but I did not feel the atmosphere quite right for it. I did not know him well enough yet, and I felt that if I once started on those ridiculous three facts, which were all I had, I must make a clean breast of the whole thing and take him fully into my confidence. I thought the time was scarcely ripe for that, especially as we would meet again.

“Are you by any chance free on Thursday?” he asked as we parted. “I would like to take you to dine at the Thursday Club. You’re sure to know some of the fellows, and it’s a pleasant way of spending an evening. That’s capital! Eight o’clock on Thursday. Short coat and black tie.”

As I walked away, I made up my mind that I had found the right kind of man to help me. I liked him, and the more I thought of him the more the impression deepened of a big reservoir of power behind his easy grace. I was completely fascinated, and the proof of it was that I went off to the nearest bookseller’s and bought his two slim volumes of poems. I cared far more about poetry than Macgillivray imagined — Mary had done a lot to educate me — but I hadn’t been very fortunate in my experiments with the new people. But I understood Medina’s verses well enough. They were very simple, with a delicious subtle tune in them, and they were desperately sad. Again and again came the note of regret and transience and disillusioned fortitude. As I read them that evening I wondered how a man, who had apparently such zest for life and got so much out of the world, should be so lonely at heart. It might be a pose, but there was nothing of the conventional despair of the callow poet. This was the work of one as wise as Ulysses and as far-wandering. I didn’t see how he could want to write anything but the truth. A pose is a consequence of vanity, and I was pretty clear that Medina was not vain.

Next morning I found his cadences still running in my head and I could not keep my thoughts off him. He fascinated me as a man is fascinated by a pretty woman. I was glad to think that he had taken a liking for me, for he had done far more than Greenslade’s casual introduction demanded. He had made a plan for us to meet again, and he had spoken not as an acquaintance but as a friend. Very soon I decided that I would get Macgillivray’s permission and take him wholly into our confidence. It was no good keeping a man like that at arm’s length and asking him to solve puzzles presented as meaninglessly as an acrostic in a newspaper. He must be told all or nothing, and I was certain that if he were told all he

would be a very tower of strength to me. The more I thought of him the more I was convinced of his exceptional brains.

I lunched with Mr. Julius Victor in Carlton House Terrace. He was carrying on his ordinary life, and when he greeted me he never referred to the business which had linked us together. Or rather he only said one word. "I knew I could count on you," he said. "I think I told you that my daughter was engaged to be married this spring. Well, her fiancé has come over from France and will be staying for an indefinite time with me. He can probably do nothing to assist you, but he is here at your call if you want him. He is the Marquis de la Tour du Pin."

I didn't quite catch the name, and, as it was a biggish party, we had sat down to luncheon before I realised who the desolated lover was. It was my ancient friend Turpin, who had been liaison officer with my old division. I had known that he was some kind of grandee, but as everybody went by nicknames I had become used to think of him as Turpin, a version of his title invented, I think, by Archie Roylance. There he was, sitting opposite me, a very handsome pallid young man, dressed with that excessive correctness found only among Frenchmen who get their clothes in England. He had been a tremendous swashbuckler when he was with the division, unbridled in speech, volcanic in action, but always with a sad gentleness in his air. He raised his heavy-lidded eyes and looked at me, and then, with a word of apology to his host, marched round the table and embraced me.

I felt every kind of a fool, but I was mighty glad all the same to see Turpin. He had been a good pal of mine, and the fact that he had been going to marry Miss Victor seemed to bring my new job in line with other parts of my life. But I had no further speech with him, for I had conversational women on both sides of me, and in the few minutes while the men were left alone at table I fell into talk with an elderly man on my right, who proved to be a member of the Cabinet. I found that out by a lucky accident, for I was lamentably ill-informed about the government of our country.

I asked him about Medina and he brightened up at once.

"Can you place him?" he asked. "I can't. I like to classify my fellow-men, but he is a new specimen. He is as exotic as the young Disraeli and as English as the late Duke of Devonshire. The point is, has he a policy, something he wants to achieve, and has he the power of attaching a party to him? If he has these two things, there is no doubt about his future. Honestly, I'm not quite certain. He has very great talents, and I believe if he wanted he would be in the front rank as a public speaker. He has the ear of the House, too, though he doesn't often address it. But I am never sure how much he cares about the whole business, and England, you know, demands wholeheartedness in her public men. She will follow blindly the second-rate, if he is in earnest, and reject the first-rate if he is not."

I said something about Medina's view of a great Tory revival, based upon the women. My neighbour grinned.

"I dare say he's right, and I dare say he could whistle women any way he pleased. It's extraordinary the charm he has for them. That handsome face of his and that melodious voice would enslave anything female from a charwoman to a Cambridge intellectual. Half his power of course comes from the fact that they have no charm for HIM. He's as aloof as Sir Galahad from any interest in the sex. Did you ever hear his name coupled with a young woman's? He goes everywhere and they would give their heads for him, and all the while he is as insensitive as a nice Eton boy whose only thought is of getting into the Eleven. You know him?"

I told him, very slightly.

"Same with me. I've only a nodding acquaintance, but one can't help feeling the man everywhere and being acutely interested. It's lucky he's a sound fellow. If he were a rogue he could play the devil with our easy-going society."

That night Sandy and I dined together. He had come back from Scotland in good spirits, for his father's health was improving, and when Sandy was in good spirits it was like being on the Downs in a south-west wind. We had so much to tell each other that we let our food grow cold. He had to hear all about Mary and Peter John, and what I knew of Blenkiron and a dozen other old comrades, and I had to get a sketch — the merest sketch — of his doings since the Armistice in the East. Sandy for some reason was at the moment disinclined to speak of his past, but he was as ready as an undergraduate to talk of his future. He meant to stay at home now, for a long spell at any rate; and the question was how he should fill up his time. "Country life's no good," he said. "I must find a profession or I'll get into trouble."

I suggested politics, and he rather liked the notion.

"I might be bored in Parliament," he reflected, "but I should love the rough-and-tumble of an election. I only once took part in one, and I discovered surprising gifts as a demagogue and made a speech in our little town which is still talked about. The chief row was about Irish Home Rule, and I thought I'd better have a whack at the Pope. Has it ever struck you,

Dick, that ecclesiastical language has a most sinister sound? I knew some of the words, though not their meaning, but I knew that my audience would be just as ignorant. So I had a magnificent peroration. 'Will you men of Kilclavers,' I asked, 'endure to see a chasuble set up in your market-place? Will you have your daughters sold into simony? Will you have celibacy practised in the public streets?' Gad, I had them all on their feet bellowing 'Never!'"

He also rather fancied business. He had a notion of taking up civil aviation, and running a special service for transporting pilgrims from all over the Moslem world to Mecca. He reckoned the present average cost to the pilgrim at not less than £30, and believed that he could do it for an average of £15 and show a handsome profit. Blenkiron, he thought, might be interested in the scheme and put up some of the capital.

But later, in a corner of the upstairs smoking-room, Sandy was serious enough when I began to tell him the job I was on, for I didn't need Macgillivray's permission to make a confidant of him. He listened in silence while I gave him the main lines of the business that I had gathered from Macgillivray's papers, and he made no comment when I came to the story of the three hostages. But, when I explained my disinclination to stir out of my country rut, he began to laugh.

"It's a queer thing how people like us get a sudden passion for cosiness. I feel it myself coming over me. What stirred you up in the end? The little boy?"

Then very lamely and shyly I began on the rhymes and Greenslade's memory. That interested him acutely. "Just the sort of sensible-nonsensical notion you'd have, Dick. Go on. I'm thrilled."

But when I came to Medina he exclaimed sharply.

"You've met him?"

"Yesterday at luncheon."

"You haven't told him anything?"

"No. But I'm going to."

Sandy had been deep in an arm-chair with his legs over the side, but now he got up and stood with his arms on the mantelpiece looking into the fire.

"I'm going to take him into my full confidence," I said, "when I've spoken to Macgillivray."

"Macgillivray will no doubt agree?"

"And you? Have you ever met him?"

"Never. But of course I've heard of him. Indeed I don't mind telling you that one of my chief reasons for coming home was a wish to see Medina."

"You'll like him tremendously. I never met such a man."

"So everyone says." He turned his face and I could see that it had fallen into that portentous gravity which was one of Sandy's moods, the complement to his ordinary insouciance. "When are you going to see him again?"

"I'm dining with him the day after tomorrow at a thing called the Thursday Club."

"Oh, he belongs to that, does he? So do I. I think I'll give myself the pleasure of dining also."

I asked about the Club, and he told me that it had been started after the War by some of the people who had had queer jobs and wanted to keep together. It was very small, only twenty members. There were Collatt, one of the Q-boat V.C.'s, and Pugh of the Indian Secret Service, and the Duke of Burminster, and Sir Arthur Warcliff, and several soldiers all more or less well-known. "They elected me in 1919," said Sandy, "but of course I've never been to a dinner. I say, Dick, Medina must have a pretty strong pull here to be a member of the Thursday. Though I say it as shouldn't, it's a show most people would give their right hand to be in."

He sat down again and appeared to reflect, with his chin on his hand.

"You're under the spell, I suppose," he said.

"Utterly. I'll tell you how he strikes me. Your ordinary very clever man is apt to be a bit bloodless and priggish, while your ordinary sportsman and good fellow is inclined to be a bit narrow. Medina seems to me to combine all the virtues and none of the faults of both kinds. Anybody can see he's a sportsman, and you've only to ask the swells to discover how high they put his brains."

"He sounds rather too good to be true." I seemed to detect a touch of acidity in his voice. "Dick," he said, looking very serious, "I want you to promise to go slow in this business — I mean about telling Medina."

“Why?” I asked. “Have you anything against him?”

“No — o — o,” he said. “I haven’t anything against him. But he’s just a little incredible, and I would like to know more about him. I had a friend who knew him. I’ve no right to say this, and I haven’t any evidence, but I’ve a sort of feeling that Medina didn’t do him any good.”

“What was his name?” I asked, and was told “Lavater”; and when I inquired what had become of him Sandy didn’t know. He had lost sight of him for two years.

At that I laughed heartily, for I could see what was the matter. Sandy was jealous of this man who was putting a spell on everybody. He wanted his old friends to himself. When I taxed him with it he grinned and didn’t deny it.



CHAPTER V

THE THURSDAY CLUB

We met in a room on the second floor of a little restaurant in Mervyn Street, a pleasant room, panelled in white, with big fires burning at each end. The Club had its own cook and butler, and I swear a better dinner was never produced in London, starting with preposterously early plovers' eggs and finishing with fruit from Burminster's houses. There were a dozen present including myself, and of these, besides my host, I knew only Burminster and Sandy. Collatt was there, and Pugh, and a wizened little man who had just returned from bird-hunting at the mouth of the Mackenzie. There was Pallister-Yeates, the banker, who didn't look thirty, and Fulleylove, the Arabian traveller, who was really thirty and looked fifty. I was specially interested in Nightingale, a slim peering fellow with double glasses, who had gone back to Greek manuscripts and his Cambridge fellowship after captaining a Bedouin tribe. Leithen was there, too, the Attorney-General, who had been a private in the Guards at the start of the War, and had finished up a G.S.O.I., a toughly built man, with a pale face and very keen quizzical eyes. I should think there must have been more varied and solid brains in that dozen than you would find in an average Parliament.

Sandy was the last to arrive, and was greeted with a roar of joy. Everybody seemed to want to wring his hand and beat him on the back. He knew them all except Medina, and I was curious to see their meeting. Burminster did the introducing, and Sandy for a moment looked shy. "I've been looking forward to this for years," Medina said, and Sandy, after one glance at him, grinned sheepishly and stammered something polite.

Burminster was chairman for the evening, a plump, jolly little man, who had been a pal of Archie Roylance in the Air Force. The talk to begin with was nothing out of the common. It started with horses and the spring handicaps, and then got on to spring salmon-fishing, for one man had been on the Helmsdale, another on the Naver, and two on the Tay. The fashion of the Club was to have the conversation general, and there was very little talking in groups. I was next to Medina, between him and the Duke, and Sandy was at the other end of the oval table. He had not much to say, and more than once I caught his eyes watching Medina.

Then by and by, as was bound to happen, reminiscences began. Collatt made me laugh with a story of how the Admiralty had a notion that sea-lions might be useful to detect submarines. A number were collected, and trained to swim after submarines to which fish were attached as bait, the idea being that they would come to associate the smell of submarines with food, and go after a stranger. The thing shipwrecked on the artistic temperament. The beasts all came from the music-halls and had names like Flossie and Cissie, so they couldn't be got to realise that there was a war on, and were always going ashore without leave.

That story started the ball rolling, and by the time we had reached the port the talk was like what you used to find in the smoking-room of an East African coastal steamer, only a million times better. Everybody present had done and seen amazing things, and, moreover, they had the brains and knowledge to orientate their experiences. It was no question of a string of yarns, but rather of the best kind of give-and-take conversation, when a man would buttress an argument by an apt recollection. I especially admired Medina. He talked little, but he made others talk, and his keen interest seemed to wake the best in everybody. I noticed that, as at our luncheon three days before, he drank only water.

We talked, I remember, about the people who had gone missing, and whether any were likely still to turn up. Sandy told us about three British officers who had been in prison in Turkestan since the summer of '18 and had only just started home. He had met one of them at Marseilles, and thought there might be others tucked away in those parts. Then someone spoke of how it was possible to drop off the globe for a bit and miss all that was happening. I said I had met an old prospector in Barberton in 1920 who had come down from Portuguese territory and when I asked him what he had been doing in the War, he said "What war?" Pugh said a fellow had just turned up in Hong Kong, who had been a captive of Chinese pirates for eight years and had never heard a word of our four years' struggle, till he said something about the Kaiser to the skipper of the boat that picked him up.

Then Sandy, as the new-comer, wanted news about Europe. I remember that Leithen gave him his views on the malaise that France was suffering from, and that Palliser-Yeates, who looked exactly like a Rugby three-quarter back,

enlightened him — and incidentally myself — on the matter of German reparations. Sandy was furious about the muddle in the Near East and the mishandling of Turkey. His view was that we were doing our best to hammer a much-divided Orient into a hostile unanimity.

“Lord!” he cried, “how I loathe our new manners in foreign policy. The old English way was to regard all foreigners as slightly childish and rather idiotic and ourselves as the only grown-ups in a kindergarten world. That meant that we had a cool detached view and did even-handed unsympathetic justice. But now we have got into the nursery ourselves and are bear-fighting on the floor. We take violent sides, and make pets, and of course if you are — phil something or other you have got to be — phobe something else. It is all wrong. We are becoming Balkanised.”

We would have drifted into politics, if Pugh had not asked him his opinion of Gandhi. That led him into an exposition of the meaning of the fanatic, a subject on which he was well qualified to speak, for he had consorted with most varieties.

“He is always in the technical sense mad — that is, his mind is tilted from its balance, and since we live by balance he is a wrecker, a crowbar in the machinery. His power comes from the appeal he makes to the imperfectly balanced, and as these are never the majority his appeal is limited. But there is one kind of fanatic whose strength comes from balance, from a lunatic balance. You cannot say that there is any one thing abnormal about him, for he is all abnormal. He is as balanced as you or me, but, so to speak, in a fourth-dimensional world. That kind of man has no logical gaps in his creed. Within his insane postulates he is brilliantly sane. Take Lenin for instance. That’s the kind of fanatic I’m afraid of.”

Leithen asked how such a man got his influence. “You say that there is no crazy spot in him which appeals to a crazy spot in other people.”

“He appeals to the normal,” said Sandy solemnly, “to the perfectly sane. He offers reason, not visions — in any case his visions are reasonable. In ordinary times he will not be heard, because, as I say, his world is not our world. But let there come a time of great suffering or discontent, when the mind of the ordinary man is in desperation, and the rational fanatic will come by his own. When he appeals to the sane and the sane respond, revolutions begin.”

Pugh nodded his head, as if he agreed. “Your fanatic of course must be a man of genius.”

“Of course. And genius of that kind is happily rare. When it exists, its possessor is the modern wizard. The old necromancer fiddled away with cabalistic signs and crude chemicals and got nowhere; the true wizard is the man who works by spirit on spirit. We are only beginning to realise the strange crannies of the human soul. The real magician, if he turned up today, wouldn’t bother about drugs and dopes. He would dabble in far more deadly methods, the compulsion of a fiery nature over the limp things that men call their minds.”

He turned to Pugh. “You remember the man we used to call Ram Dass in the War — I never knew his right name?”

“Rather,” said Pugh. “The fellow who worked for us in San Francisco. He used to get big sums from the agitators and pay them in to the British Exchequer, less his commission of ten per cent.”

“Stout fellow!” Burminster exclaimed approvingly. “Well, Ram Dass used to discourse to me on this subject. He was as wise as a serpent and as loyal as a dog, and he saw a lot of things coming that we are just beginning to realise. He said that the great offensives of the future would be psychological, and he thought the Governments should get busy about it and prepare their defence. What a jolly sight it would be—all the high officials sitting down to little primers! But there was sense in what he said. He considered that the most deadly weapon in the world was the power of mass-persuasion, and he wanted to meet it at the source, by getting at the mass-persuader. His view was that every spell-binder had got something like Samson’s hair which was the key of his strength, and that if this were tampered with he could be made innocuous. He would have had us make pets of the prophets and invite them to Government House. You remember the winter of 1917 when the Bolsheviks were making trouble in Afghanistan and their stuff was filtering through into India. Well, Ram Dass claimed the credit of stopping that game by his psychological dodges.”

He looked across suddenly at Medina. “You know the Frontier. Did you ever come across the guru that lived at the foot of the Shansi pass as you go over to Kaikand?”

Medina shook his head. “I never travelled that way. Why?”

Sandy seemed disappointed. “Ram Dass used to speak of him. I hoped you might have met him.”

The club madeira was being passed round, and there was a little silence while we sipped it. It was certainly a marvellous wine, and I noticed with pain Medina’s abstinence.

“You really are missing a lot, you know,” Burminster boomed in his jolly voice, and for a second all the company

looked Medina's way.

He smiled and lifted his glass of water.

"Sit vini abstemius qui hermeneuma tentat aut hominum petit dominatum," he said.

Nightingale translated. "Meaning that you must be pussyfoot if you would be a big man."

There was a chorus of protests, and Medina again lifted his glass.

"I'm only joking. I haven't a scrap of policy or principle in the matter. I don't happen to like the stuff — that's all."

I fancy that the only two scholars among us were Nightingale and Sandy. I looked at the latter and was surprised by the change in his face. It had awakened to the most eager interest. His eyes, which had been staring at Medina, suddenly met mine, and I read in them not only interest but disquiet.

Burminster was delivering a spirited defence of Bacchus, and the rest joined in, but Sandy took the other side.

"There's a good deal in that Latin tag," he said. "There are places in the world where total abstinence is reckoned a privilege. Did you ever come across the Ulai tribe up the Karakoram way?" He was addressing Medina. "No? Well, the next time you meet a man in the Guides ask him about them, for they're a curiosity. They're Mahommedan and so should by rights be abstainers, but they're a drunken set of sweeps, and the most priest-ridden community on earth. Drinking is not only a habit among them, it's an obligation, and their weekly tamasha would make Falstaff take the pledge. But their priests — they're a kind of theocracy — are strict teetotal. It is their privilege and the secret of their power. When one of them has to be degraded he is filled compulsorily full of wine. That's your — how does the thing go? — your 'hominum dominatus.'"

From that moment I found the evening go less pleasantly. Medina was as genial as ever, but something seemed to have affected Sandy's temper and he became positively grumpy. Now and then he contradicted a man too sharply for good manners, but for the most part he was silent, smoking his pipe and answering his neighbours in monosyllables. About eleven I began to feel it was time to leave, and Medina was of the same opinion. He asked me to walk with him, and I gladly accepted, for I did not feel inclined to go to bed.

As I was putting on my coat, Sandy came up. "Come to the Club, Dick," he said. "I want to talk to you." His manner was so peremptory that I opened my eyes.

"Sorry," I said. "I've promised to walk home with Medina."

"Oh, damn Medina!" he said. "Do as I ask or you'll be sorry for it."

I wasn't feeling very pleased with Sandy, especially as Medina was near enough to hear what he said. So I told him rather coldly that I didn't intend to go back on my arrangement. He turned and marched out, cannoning at the doorway into Burminster, to whom he did not apologise. That nobleman rubbed his shoulder ruefully. "Old Sandy hasn't got used to his corn yet," he laughed. "Looks as if the madeira had touched up his liver."

It was a fine still March night with a good moon, and as we walked along Piccadilly I was feeling cheerful. The good dinner I had eaten and the good wine I had drunk played their part in this mood, and there was also the satisfaction of having dined with good fellows and having been admitted into pretty select company. I felt my liking for Medina enormously increase, and I had the unworthy sense of superiority which a man gets from seeing an old friend whom he greatly admires behave rather badly. I was considering what had ailed Sandy when Medina raised the subject.

"A wonderful fellow Arbuthnot," he said. "I have wanted to meet him for years, and he is certainly up to my expectations. But he has been quite long enough abroad. A mind as keen as his, if it doesn't have the company of its equals, is in danger of getting viewy. What he said to-night was amazingly interesting, but I thought it a little fantastic."

I agreed, but the hint of criticism was enough to revive my loyalty. "All the same there's usually something in his most extravagant theories. I've seen him right when all the sober knowledgeable people were wrong."

"That I can well believe," he said. "You know him well?"

"Pretty well. We've been in some queer places together."

The memory of those queer places came back to me as we walked across Berkeley Square. The West End of London at night always affected me with a sense of the immense solidity of our civilisation. These great houses, lit and shuttered and secure, seemed the extreme opposite of the world of half-lights and perils in which I had sometimes journeyed. I thought of them as I thought of Fosse Manor, as sanctuaries of peace. But to-night I felt differently towards them. I wondered what

was going on at the back of those heavy doors. Might not terror and mystery lurk behind that barricade as well as in tent and slum? I suddenly had a picture of a plump face all screwed up with fright muffled beneath the bed-clothes.

I had imagined that Medina lived in chambers or a flat, but we stopped before a substantial house in Hill Street.

"You're coming in? The night's young and there's time for a pipe."

I had no wish to go to bed, so I followed him as he opened the front door with a latch-key. He switched on a light, which lit the first landing of the staircase but left the hall in dusk. It seemed to be a fine place full of cabinets, the gilding of which flickered dimly. We ascended thickly-carpeted stairs, and on the landing he switched off the first light and switched on another which lit a further flight. I had the sensation of mounting to a great height in a queer shadowy world.

"This is a big house for a bachelor," I observed.

"I've a lot of stuff, books and pictures and things, and I like it round me."

He opened a door and ushered me into an enormous room, which must have occupied the whole space on that floor. It was oblong, with deep bays at each end, and it was lined from floor to ceiling with books. Books, too, were piled on the tables, and sprawled on a big flat couch which was drawn up before the fire. It wasn't an ordinary gentleman's library, provided by the bookseller at so much a yard. It was the working collection of a scholar, and the books had that used look which makes them the finest tapestry for a room. The place was lit with lights on small tables, and on a big desk under a reading lamp were masses of papers and various volumes with paper slips in them. It was workshop as well as library.

A servant entered, unsummoned, and put a tray of drinks on a side table. He was dressed like an ordinary butler, but I guessed that he had not spent much of his life in service. The heavy jowl, the small eyes, the hair cut straight round the nape of the neck, the swollen muscles about the shoulder and upper arm told me the profession he had once followed. The man had been in the ring, and not so very long ago. I wondered at Medina's choice, for a pug is not the kind of servant I would choose myself.

"Nothing more, Odell," said Medina. "You can go to bed. I will let Sir Richard out."

He placed me in a long arm-chair, and held the syphon while I mixed myself a very weak whisky-and-soda. Then he sat opposite me across the hearth-rug in a tall old-fashioned chair which he pulled forward from his writing-table. The servant in leaving had turned out all the lights except one at his right hand, which vividly lit up his face, and which, since the fire had burned low, made the only bright patch in the room. I stretched my legs comfortably and puffed at my pipe, wondering how I would have the energy to get up and go home. The long dim shelves, where creamy vellum and morocco ran out of the dusk into darkness, had an odd effect on me. I was visited again by the fancies which had occupied me coming through Berkeley Square. I was inside one of those massive sheltered houses, and lo and behold! it was as mysterious as the aisles of a forest. Books — books — old books full of forgotten knowledge! I was certain that if I had the scholarship to search the grave rows I would find out wonderful things.

I was thirsty, so I drank off my whisky-and-soda, and was just adding a little more soda-water from the syphon at my elbow, when I looked towards Medina. There was that in his appearance which made me move my glass so that a thin stream of liquid fell on my sleeve. The patch was still damp next morning.

His face, brilliantly lit up by the lamp, seemed to be also lit from within. It was not his eyes or any one feature that enthralled me, for I did not notice any details. Only the odd lighting seemed to detach his head from its environment so that it hung in the air like a planet in the sky, full of intense brilliance and power.

It is not very easy to write down what happened. For twelve hours afterwards I remembered nothing — only that I had been very sleepy, and must have been poor company and had soon got up to go. . . . But that was not the real story: it was what the man had willed that I should remember, and because my own will was not really mastered I remembered other things in spite of him; remembered them hazily, like a drunkard's dream.

The head seemed to swim in the centre of pale converging lines. These must have been the book-shelves, which in that part of the room were full of works bound in old vellum. My eyes were held by two violet pin-points of light which were so bright that they hurt me. I tried to shift my gaze, but I could only do that by screwing round my head towards the dying fire. The movement demanded a great effort, for every muscle in my body seemed drugged with lethargy.

As soon as I looked away from the light I regained some possession of my wits. I felt that I must be in for some sickness, and had a moment of bad fright. It seemed to be my business to keep my eyes on the shadows in the hearth, for where darkness was there I found some comfort. I was as afraid of the light before me as a child of a boggy. I thought that if

I said something I should feel better, but I didn't seem to have the energy to get a word out. Curiously enough I felt no fear of Medina; he didn't seem to be in the business; it was that disembodied light that scared me.

Then I heard a voice speaking, but still I didn't think of Medina.

"Hannay," it said. "You are Richard Hannay?"

Against my will I slewed my eyes round, and there hung that intolerable light burning into my eyeballs and my soul. I found my voice now, for it seemed to be screwed out of me, and I said "Yes" like an automaton.

I felt my wits and my sense slipping away under that glare. But my main discomfort was physical, the flaming control of the floating brightness — not face, or eyes, but a dreadful overmastering aura. I thought — if at that moment you could call any process of my mind thought — that if I could only link it on to some material thing I should find relief. With a desperate effort I seemed to make out the line of a man's shoulder and the back of a chair. Let me repeat that I never thought of Medina, for he had been wiped clean out of my world.

"You are Richard Hannay," said the voice. "Repeat, 'I am Richard Hannay.'"

The words came out of my mouth involuntarily. I was concentrating all my wits on the comforting outline of the chair-back, which was beginning to be less hazy.

The voice spoke again.

"But till this moment you have been nothing. There was no Richard Hannay before. Now, when I bid you, you begin your life. You remember nothing. You have no past."

"I remember nothing," said my voice, but as I spoke I knew I lied, and that knowledge was my salvation.

I have been told more than once by doctors who dabbled in the business that I was the most hopeless subject for hypnotism that they ever struck. One of them once said that I was about as unsympathetic as Table Mountain. I must suppose that the intractable bedrock of commonplaceness in me now met the something which was striving to master me and repelled it. I felt abominably helpless, my voice was not my own, my eyes were tortured and aching, but I had recovered my mind.

I seemed to be repeating a lesson at someone's dictation. I said I was Richard Hannay, who had just come from South Africa on his first visit to England. I knew no one in London and had no friends. Had I heard of a Colonel Arbuthnot? I had not. Or the Thursday Club? I had not. Or the War? Yes, but I had been in Angola most of the time and had never fought. I had money? Yes, a fair amount, which was in such-and-such a bank and such-and-such investments. . . . I went on repeating the stuff as glibly as a parrot, but all the while I knew I lied. Something deep down in me was insisting that I was Sir Richard Hannay, K.C.B., who had commanded a division in France, and was the squire of Fosse Manor, the husband of Mary, and the father of Peter John.

Then the voice seemed to give orders. I was to do this and that, and I repeated them docilely. I was no longer in the least scared. Someone or something was trying to play monkey-tricks with my mind, but I was master of that, though my voice seemed to belong to an alien gramophone, and my limbs were stupidly weak. I wanted above all things to be allowed to sleep. . . .

I think I must have slept for a little, for my last recollection of that queer sederunt is that the unbearable light had gone, and the ordinary lamps of the room were switched on. Medina was standing by the dead fire, and another man beside him — a slim man with a bent back and a lean grey face. The second man was only there for a moment, but he looked at me closely and I thought Medina spoke to him and laughed. . . . Then I was being helped by Medina into my coat, and conducted downstairs. There were two bright lights in the street which made me want to lie down on the kerb and sleep. . . .

I woke about ten o'clock next morning in my bedroom at the Club, feeling like nothing on earth. I had a bad headache, my eyes seemed to be backed with white fire, and my legs were full of weak pains as if I had influenza. It took me several minutes to realise where I was, and when I wondered what had brought me to such a state I could remember nothing. Only a preposterous litany ran in my brain — the name "Dr. Newhover," and an address in Wimpole Street. I concluded glumly that that for a man in my condition was a useful recollection, but where I had got it I hadn't an idea.

The events of the night before were perfectly clear. I recalled every detail of the Thursday Club dinner, Sandy's brusqueness, my walk back with Medina, my admiration of his great library. I remembered that I had been drowsy there and thought that I had probably bored him. But I was utterly at a loss to account for my wretched condition. It could not

have been the dinner; or the wine, for I had not drunk much, and in any case I have a head like cast iron; or the weak whisky-and-soda in Medina's house. I staggered to my feet and looked at my tongue in the glass. It was all right, so there could be nothing the matter with my digestion.

You are to understand that the account I have just written was pieced together as events came back to me, and that at 10 a.m. the next morning I remembered nothing of it — nothing but the incidents up to my sitting down in Medina's library, and the name and address of a doctor I had never heard of. I concluded that I must have got some infernal germ, probably botulism, and was in for a bad illness. I wondered dismally what kind of fool I had made of myself before Medina, and still more dismally what was going to happen to me. I decided to wire for Mary when I had seen a doctor, and to get as soon as possible into a nursing home. I had never had an illness in my life, except malaria, and I was as nervous as a cat.

But after I had had a cup of tea I felt a little better, and inclined to get up. A cold bath relieved my headache, and I was able to shave and dress. It was while I was shaving that I observed the first thing which made me puzzle about the events of the previous evening. The valet who attended to me had put out the contents of my pockets on the dressing-table — my keys, watch, loose silver, notecase, and my pipe and pouch. Now I carry my pipe in a little leather case, and, being very punctilious in my habits, I invariably put it back in the case when it is empty. But the case was not there, though I remembered laying it on the table beside me in Medina's room, and, moreover, the pipe was still half full of unsmoked tobacco. I rang for the man, and learned that he had found the pipe in the pocket of my dinner jacket, but no case. He was positive, for he knew my ways and had been surprised to find my pipe so untidily pocketed.

I had a light breakfast in the coffee-room, and as I ate it I kept wondering as to what exactly I had been doing the night before. Odd little details were coming back to me; in particular, a recollection of some great effort which had taken all the strength out of me. Could I have been drugged? Not the Thursday Club madeira. Medina's whisky-and-soda?

The idea was nonsense; in any case a drugged man does not have a clean tongue the next morning.

I interviewed the night porter, for I thought he might have something to tell me.

"Did you notice what hour I came home last night?" I asked.

"It was this morning, Sir Richard," the man replied, with the suspicion of a grin. "About half-past three, it would be, or twenty minutes to four."

"God bless my soul!" I exclaimed. "I had no notion it was so late. I sat up talking with a friend."

"You must have been asleep in the car, Sir Richard, for the chauffeur had to wake you, and you were that drowsy I thought I'd better take you upstairs myself. The bedrooms on the top floor is not that easy found."

"I didn't drop a pipe case?" I asked.

"No, sir." The man's discreet face revealed that he thought I had been dining too well but was not inclined to blame me for it.

By luncheon-time I had decided that I was not going to be ill, for there was no longer anything the matter with my body except a certain stiffness in the joints and the ghost of a headache behind my eyes. But my mind was in a precious confusion. I had stayed in Medina's room till after three, and had not been conscious of anything that happened there after, say, half-past eleven. I had left finally in such a state that I had forgotten my pipe-case, and had arrived at the Club in somebody's car — probably Medina's — so sleepy that I had to be escorted upstairs, and had awoke so ill that I thought I had botulism. What in Heaven's name had happened?

I fancy that the fact that I had resisted the influence brought to bear on me with my MIND, though tongue and limbs had been helpless, enabled me to remember what the wielder of the influence had meant to be forgotten. At any rate bits of that strange scene began to come back. I remembered the uncanny brightness — remembered it not with fear but with acute indignation. I vaguely recalled that I had repeated nonsense to somebody's dictation, but what it was I could not yet remember. The more I thought of it the angrier I grew. Medina must have been responsible, though to connect him with it seemed ridiculous when I thought of what I had seen of him. Had he been making me the subject of some scientific experiment? If so, it was infernal impertinence. Anyhow it had failed — that was a salve to my pride — for I had kept my head through it. The doctor had been right who had compared me with Table Mountain.

I had got thus far in my reflections, when I recollected that which put a different complexion on the business. Suddenly I remembered the circumstances in which I had made Medina's acquaintance. From him Tom Greenslade had heard the three facts which fitted in with the jingle which was the key to the mystery that I was sworn to unravel. Hitherto I

had never thought of this dazzling figure except as an ally. Was it possible that he might be an enemy? The turn-about was too violent for my mind to achieve it in one movement. I swore to myself that Medina was straight, that it was sheer mania to believe that a gentleman and a sportsman could ever come within hailing distance of the hideous underworld which Macgillivray had revealed to me. . . . But Sandy had not quite taken to him. . . . I thanked my stars that anyhow I had said nothing to him about my job. I did not really believe that there was any doubt about him, but I realised that I must walk very carefully.

And then another idea came to me. Hypnotism had been tried on me, and it had failed. But those who tried it must believe from my behaviour that it had succeeded. If so, somehow and somewhere they would act on that belief. It was my business to encourage it. I was sure enough of myself to think that, now I was forewarned, no further hypnotic experiments could seriously affect me. But let them show their game, let me pretend to be helpless wax in their hands. Who “they” were I had still to find out.

I had a great desire to get hold of Sandy and talk it over, but though I rung up several of his lairs I could not find him. Then I decided to see Dr. Newhover, for I was certain that that name had come to me out of the medley of last night. So I telephoned and made an appointment with him for that afternoon, and four o’clock saw me starting out to walk to Wimpole Street.



CHAPTER VI

THE HOUSE IN GOSPEL OAK

It was a dry March afternoon, with one of those fantastic winds which seem to change their direction hourly, and contrive to be in a man's face at every street corner. The dust was swirling in the gutters, and the scent of hyacinth and narcissus from the flower-shops was mingled with that bleak sandy smell which is London's foretaste of spring. As I crossed Oxford Street I remember thinking what an odd pointless business I had drifted into. I saw nothing for it but to continue drifting and see what happened. I was on my way to visit a doctor of whom I knew nothing, about some ailment which I was not conscious of possessing. I didn't even trouble to make a plan, being content to let chance have the guiding of me.

The house was one of those solid dreary erections which have usually the names of half a dozen doctors on their front doors. But in this case there was only one — Dr. M. Newhover. The parlourmaid took me into the usual drab waiting-room furnished with Royal Academy engravings, fumed oak, and an assortment of belated picture-papers, and almost at once she returned and ushered me into the consulting-room. This again was of the most ordinary kind — glazed bookcases, wash-hand basin in a corner, roll-top desk, a table with a medical journal or two and some leather cases. And Dr. Newhover at first sight seemed nothing out of the common. He was a youngish man, with high cheek-bones, a high forehead, and a quantity of blond hair brushed straight back from it. He wore a pince-nez, and when he removed it showed pale prominent blue eyes. From his look I should have said that his father had called himself Neuhofer.

He greeted me with a manner which seemed to me to be at once patronising and dictatorial. I wondered if he was some tremendous swell in his profession, of whom I ought to have heard. "Well, Mr. Hannay, what can I do for you?" he said. I noticed that he called me "Mr.," though I had given "Sir Richard" both on the telephone and to the parlourmaid. It occurred to me that someone had already been speaking of me to him, and that he had got the name wrong in his memory.

I thought I had better expound the alarming symptoms with which I had awakened that morning.

"I don't know what's gone wrong with me," I said. "I've a pain behind my eyeballs, and my whole head seems muddled up. I feel drowsy and slack, and I've got a weakness in my legs and back like a man who has just had 'flu.'"

He made me sit down and proceeded to catechise me about my health. I said it had been good enough, but I mentioned my old malaria and several concussions, and I pretended to be pretty nervous about my condition. Then he went through the whole bag of tricks — sounding me with a stethoscope, testing my blood pressure, and hitting me hard below the knee to see if I reacted. I had to play up to my part, but upon my soul I came near reacting too vigorously to some of his questions and boxing his ears. Always he kept up that odd, intimate, domineering, rather offensive manner.

He made me lie down on a couch while he fingered the muscles of my neck and shoulder and seemed to be shampooing my head with his long chilly hands. I was by this time feeling rather extra well, but I managed to invent little tendernesses here and there and a lot of alarming mental aberrations. I wondered if he were not getting suspicious, for he asked abruptly: "Have you had these symptoms long?" so I thought it better to return to the truth, and told him "only since this morning."

At last he bade me get up, took off the tortoise-shell spectacles he had been wearing and resumed his pince-nez, and while I was buttoning my collar seemed to be sunk in reflection. He made me sit in the patient's chair, and stood up and looked down on me with a magisterial air that made me want to laugh.

"You are suffering," he said, "from a somewhat abnormal form of a common enough complaint. Just as the effects of a concussion are often manifest only some days after the blow, so the results of nervous strain may take a long time to develop. I have no doubt that in spite of your good health you have during recent years been working your mind and body at an undue pressure, and now this morning quite suddenly you reap the fruits. I don't want to frighten you, Mr. Hannay, but neurosis is so mysterious a disease in its working that we must take it seriously, especially at its first manifestations. There are one or two points in your case which I am not happy about. There is, for example, a certain congestion — or what seems to me a congestion — in the nerve centres of the neck and head. That may be induced by the accidents — concussion and the like — which you have told me of, or it may not. The true cure must, of course, take time, and rest and change of scene are obligatory. You are fond of sport? A fisherman?"

I told him I was.

“Well, a little later I may prescribe a salmon river in Norway. The remoteness of the life from ordinary existence and the contemplation of swift running water have had wonderful results with some of my patients. But Norway is not possible till May, and in the meantime I am going to order you specific treatment. Yes. I mean massage, but by no means ordinary massage. That science is still in its infancy, and its practitioners are only fumbling at the doorway. But now and then we find a person, man or woman, with a kind of extra sense for disentangling and smoothing out muscular and nervous abnormalities. I am going to send you to such an one. The address may surprise you, but you are man of the world enough to know that medical skill is not confined to the area between Oxford Street and the Marylebone Road.” He took off his glasses, and smiled.

Then he wrote something on a slip of paper and handed it to me. I read “Madame Breda, 4 Palmyra Square, N.W.”

“Right!” I said. “Much obliged to you. I hope Madame Breda will cure this infernal headache. When can I see her?”

“I can promise you she will cure the headache. She is a Swedish lady who has lived in London since the War, and is so much an enthusiast in her art that she will only now and then take a private patient. For the most part she gives her skill free to the children’s hospitals. But she will not refuse me. As for beginning, I should lose no time for the sake of your own comfort. What about tomorrow morning?”

“Why not to-night? I have nothing to do, and I want to be quit of my headache before bedtime. Why shouldn’t I go on there now?”

“No reason in the world. But I must make an appointment. Madame is on the telephone. Excuse me a moment.”

He left the room and returned in a few minutes to say that he had made an appointment for seven o’clock. “It is an outlandish place to get to, but most taxi-drivers know it. If your man doesn’t, tell him to drive to Gospel Oak, and then any policeman will direct you.”

I had my cheque-book with me, but he didn’t want his fee, saying that he was not done with me. I was to come back in a week and report progress. As I left I had a strong impression of a hand as cold as a snake, pale bulging eyes, and cheekbones like a caricature of a Scotchman. An odd but rather impressive figure was Dr. Newhover. He didn’t look a fool, and if I hadn’t known the uncommon toughness of my constitution I might have been unsettled by his forebodings.

I walked down to Oxford Street and had tea in a tea-shop. As I sat among the chattering typists and shopboys I kept wondering whether I was not wasting my time and behaving like a jackass. Here was I, as fit as a hunter, consulting specialists and visiting unknown masseuses in North London, and all with no clear purpose. In less than twenty-four hours I had tumbled into a perfectly crazy world, and for a second I had a horrid doubt whether the craziness was not inside my mind. Had something given in my brain last night in Medina’s room, so that now I was what people call “wanting”? I went over the sequence of events again, and was reassured by remembering that in it all I had kept my head. I had not got to the stage of making theories; I was still only waiting on developments, and I couldn’t see any other way before me. I must, of course, get hold of Sandy, but first let me see what this massage business meant. It might all be perfectly square; I might have remembered Dr. Newhover’s name by a queer trick of memory — heard it, perhaps, from some friend — and that remarkable practitioner might be quite honest. But then I remembered the man’s manner — I was quite clear that he knew something of me, that someone had told him to expect me. Then it occurred to me that I might be doing a rash thing in going off to an unknown house in a seedy suburb. So I went into a public telephone-booth, rang up the Club, and told the porter that if Colonel Arbuthnot called, I was at 4 Palmyra Square, N.W. — I made him write down the address — and would be back before ten o’clock.

I was rather short of exercise, so I decided to walk, since I had plenty of time. Strangely enough, the road was pretty much that which I had taken on that June day of 1914 when I had been waiting on Bulivant and the Black Stone gentry, and had walked clean out of London to pass the time. Then, I remembered, I had been thrilling with wild anticipation, but now I was an older and much wiser man, and though I was sufficiently puzzled I could curb my restlessness with philosophy. I went up Portland Place, past the Regent’s Park, till I left the houses of the well-to-do behind me, and got into that belt of mean streets which is the glacis of the northern heights. Various policemen directed me, and I enjoyed the walk as if I had been exploring, for London is always to me an undiscovered country. I passed yards which not so long ago had been patches of market-garden, and terraces, sometime pretentious, and now sinking into slums; for London is like the tropical bush — if you don’t exercise constant care the jungle, in the shape of the slums, will break in. The streets were full

of clerks and shop-girls waiting for buses, and workmen from the St. Pancras and Clerkenwell factories going home. The wind was rising, and in the untidy alleys was stirring up a noisome dust; but as the ground rose it blew cleaner and seemed to bring from Kentish fields and the Channel the tonic freshness of spring. I stopped for a little and watched behind me the plain of lights, which was London, quivering in the dark-blue windy dusk.

It was almost dark when at last, after several false casts, I came into Palmyra Square. It was a square only in name, for one side was filled with a warehouse of sorts, and another straggled away in nests of small brick houses. One side was a terrace of artisans' dwellings, quite new, each with a tiny bow-window and names like "Chatsworth" and "Kitchener Villa." The fourth side, facing south, had once had a certain dignity, and the builder who had designed the place seventy years ago had thought, no doubt, that he was creating a desirable residential quarter. There the houses stood apart, each in a patch of garden, which may at one time have had lawns and flowers. Now these gardens were mere dusty yards, the refuge of tin cans and bits of paper, and only a blackened elm, an ill-grown privet hedge, and some stunted lilacs told of the more cheerful past. On one house was the brass plate of a doctor, on another that of a teacher of music; several advertised lodgings to let; the steps were untidy, the gates askew on their hinges, and over everything was written the dreary legend of a shabby gentility on the very brink of squalor.

Number 4 was smarter than the others, and its front door had been newly painted a vivid green. I rang the bell, which was an electric one, and the door was opened by a maid who looked sufficiently respectable. When I entered I saw that the house was on a more generous scale than I had thought, and had once, no doubt, been the home of some comfortable citizen. The hall was not the tank-like thing of the small London dwelling, and the room into which I was ushered, though small, was well furnished and had an electric fire in the grate. It seemed to be a kind of business room, for there was a telephone, a big safe, and on the shelves a line of lettered boxes for papers. I began to think that Madame Breda, whoever she might be, must be running a pretty prosperous show on ordinary business lines.

I was presently led by the maid to a room on the other side of the hall, where I was greeted by a smiling lady. Madame was a plump person in the early forties, with dark hair and a high colour, who spoke English almost without an accent. "Dr. Newhover has sent you. So? He has told me. Will you please go in there and take off your coat and waistcoat? Your collar, too, please."

I did as I was bid, and in a little curtained cubicle divested myself of these garments and returned in my shirt-sleeves. The room was a very pleasant one, with folding doors at one end, furnished like an ordinary drawing-room, with flowers in pots and books, and what looked like good eighteenth-century prints. Any suspicion I may have had of the bona fides of the concern received a rude shock. Madame had slipped over her black dress a white linen overall, such as surgeons wear, and she had as her attendant a small thin odd-looking girl, who also wore an overall, and whose short hair was crowned with a small white cap.

"This is Gerda," Madame said. "Gerda helps me. She is very clever." She smiled on Gerda, and Gerda smiled back, a limp little contortion of a perfectly expressionless face.

Madame made me lie down on a couch. "You have a headache?"

I mendaciously said that I had.

"That I can soon cure. But there are other troubles? So? These I must explore. But first I will take away the pain."

"I felt her light firm fingers playing about my temples and the base of my skull and my neck muscles. A very pleasant sensation it was, and I am certain that if I had been suffering from the worst headache in the world it would have been spirited away. As it was, being in excellent health, I felt soothed and freshened.

"So," she said, beaming down on me. "You are better? You are so beeg that it is not easy to be well all over at once. Now, I must look into more difficult things. You are not happy in your nerves — not altogether. Ah! these nerves! We do not quite know what they are, except that they are what you call the devil. You are very wakeful now. Is it not so? Well I must put you to sleep. That is necessary, if you are willing."

"Right-o," I answered; but inwardly I said to myself, "No, my woman, I bet you don't." I was curious to see if, now that I was forewarned, I could resist any hypnotic business, as I believed I could.

I imagined that she would try to master me with her eyes, which were certainly remarkable orbs. But her procedure was the very opposite, for the small girl brought some things on a tray, and I saw that they were bandages. First of all, with a fine cambric handkerchief, she swathed my eyes, and then tied above it another of some heavy opaque material. They

were loosely bound, so that I scarcely felt them, but I was left in the thickest darkness. I noticed that she took special pains so to adjust them that they should not cover my ears.

"You are not wakeful," I heard her voice say, "I think you are sleepy. You will sleep now."

I felt her fingers stray over my face, and the sensation was different, for whereas, when she had treated my headache, they had set up a delicious cool tingling of the skin, now they seemed to induce wave upon wave of an equally pleasant languor. She pressed my forehead, and my senses seemed to be focused there and to be lulled by that pressure. All the while she was cooing to me in a voice which was like the drowsy swell of the sea. If I had wanted to go to sleep I could have dropped off easily, but, as I didn't want to, I had no difficulty in resisting the gentle coercion. That, I fancy, is my position about hypnotism. I am no kind of use under compulsion, and for the thing to affect me it has to have the backing of my own will. Anyhow, I could appreciate the pleasantness of it and yet disregard it. But it was my business to be a good subject, so I pretended to drift away into slumber. I made my breath come slowly and softly, and let my body relax into impassivity.

Presently she appeared to be satisfied. She said a word to the child, whose feet I could hear cross the room. There was a sound of opening doors — my ears, remember, were free of the bandages and my hearing is acute — and then it seemed to me that the couch on which I lay began slowly to move. I had a moment of alarm and nearly gave away the show by jerking up my head. The couch seemed to travel very smoothly on rails, and I was conscious that I had passed through the folding doors and was now in another room. Then the movement stopped, and I realised that I was in an entirely different atmosphere. I realised, too, that a new figure had come on the scene.

There was no word spoken, but I had the queer inexplicable consciousness of human presences which is independent of sight and hearing. I have said that the atmosphere of the place had changed. There was a scent in the air which anywhere else I would have sworn was due to peat smoke, and mixed with it another intangible savour which I could not put a name to, but which did not seem to belong to London at all, or to any dwelling, but to some wild out-of-doors. . . . And then I was aware of noiseless fingers pressing my temples.

They were not the plump capable hands of Madame Breda. Nay, they were as fine and tenuous as a wandering wind, but behind their airy lightness was a hint of steel, as if they could choke as well as caress. I lay supine, trying to keep my breathing regular, since I was supposed to be asleep, but I felt an odd excitement rising in my heart. And then it quieted for the fingers seemed to be smoothing it away. . . . A voice was speaking in a tongue of which I knew not a word, not speaking to me, but repeating, as it were, a private incantation. And the touch and voice combined to bring me nearer to losing my wits than even on the night before, nearer than I have ever been in all my days.

The experience was so novel and overpowering that I find it hard to give even a rough impression of it. Let me put it this way. A man at my time of life sees old age not so very far distant, and the nearer he draws to the end of his journey the more ardently he longs for his receding youth. I do not mean that, if some fairy granted him the gift, he would go back to boyhood; few of us would choose such a return; but he clothes all his youth in a happy radiance and aches to recapture the freshness and wonder with which he then looked on life. He treasures, like a mooning girl, stray sounds and scents and corners of landscape, which for a moment push the door ajar. . . . As I lay blindfolded on that couch I felt mysterious hands and voices plucking on my behalf at the barrier of the years and breaking it down. I was escaping into a delectable country, the Country of the Young, and I welcomed the escape. Had I been hypnotised, I should beyond doubt have moved like a sheep whithersoever this shepherd willed.

But I was awake, and, though on the very edge of surrender, I managed to struggle above the tides. Perhaps to my waking self the compulsion was too obvious and aroused a faint antagonism. Anyhow I had already begun a conscious resistance when the crooning voice spoke in English.

"You are Richard Hannay," it said. "You have been asleep, but I have wakened you. You are happy in the world in which you have wakened?"

My freedom was now complete, for I had begun to laugh, silently, far down at the bottom of my heart. I remembered last night, and the performance in Medina's house which had all day been growing clearer in my memory. I saw it as farce, and this as farce, and at the coming of humour the spell died. But it was up to me to make some kind of an answer, if I wanted to keep up the hoax, so I did my best to screw out an eerie sleep-walker's voice.

"I am happy," I said, and my pipe sounded like the twittering of sheeted ghosts.

"You wish to wake often in this world?"

I signified by a croak that I did.

"But to wake you must first sleep, and I alone can make you sleep and wake. I exact a price, Richard Hannay. Will you pay my price?"

I was puzzled about the voice. It had not the rich foreign tones of Madame Breda, but it had a very notable accent, which I could not place. At one moment it seemed to have the lilt which you find in Western Ross, but there were cadences in it which were not Highland. Also, its timbre was curious — very light and thin like a child's. Was it possible that the queer little girl I had seen was the sibyl? No, I decided; the hands had not been a child's hands.

"I will pay any price," I said, which seemed to be the answer required of me.

"Then you are my servant when I summon you. Now, sleep again."

I had never felt less like being anyone's servant. The hands fluttered again around my temples, but they had no more effect on me than the buzzing of flies. I had an insane desire to laugh, which I repressed by thinking of the idiotic pointlessness of my recent doings. . . . I felt my couch slide backwards, and heard the folding doors open again and close. Then I felt my bandages being deftly undone, and I lay with the light on my closed eyelids, trying to look like a sleeping warrior on a tomb. Someone was pressing below my left ear and I recognised the old hunter's method of bringing a man back gently from sleep to consciousness, so I set about the job of making a workmanlike awaking. I hope I succeeded. Anyhow I must have looked dazed enough, for the lamps hurt my eyes after the muffled darkness.

I was back in the first room, with only Madame beside me. She beamed on me with the friendliest eyes, and helped me on with my coat and collar. "I have had you under close observation," she said, "for sleep often reveals where the ragged ends of the nerves lie. I have made certain deductions, which I will report to Dr. Newhover. . . . No, there is no fee. Dr. Newhover will make arrangements." She bade me good-bye in the best professional manner, and I descended the steps into Palmyra Square as if I had been spending a commonplace hour having my back massaged for lumbago.

Once in the open air I felt abominably tired and very hungry. By good luck I hadn't gone far when I picked up a taxi and told it to drive to the Club. I looked at my watch and saw that it was later than I thought — close on ten o'clock. I had been several hours in the house, and small wonder I was weary.

I found Sandy wandering restlessly about the hall. "Thank God!" he said when he saw me. "Where the devil have you been, Dick? The porter gave me a crazy address in North London. You look as if you wanted a drink."

"I feel as if I wanted food," I said. "I have a lot to tell you, but I must eat first. I've had no dinner."

Sandy sat opposite me while I fed, and forbore to ask questions.

"What put you in such a bad humour last night?" I asked.

He looked very solemn. "Lord knows. No, that's not true, I know well enough. I didn't take to Medina."

"Now I wonder why?"

"I wonder too. But I'm just like a dog: I take a dislike to certain people at first sight, and the queer thing is that my instinct isn't often wrong."

"Well, you're pretty well alone in your opinion. What sets you against him? He is well-mannered, modest, a good sportsman, and you can see he's as clever as they make."

"Maybe. But I've got a notion that the man is one vast lie. However, let's put it that I reserve my opinion. I have various inquiries to make."

We found the little back smoking-room on the first floor empty, and when I had lit my pipe and got well into an armchair, Sandy drew up another at my elbow. "Now, Dick," he said.

"First," I said, "it may interest you to learn that Medina dabbles in hypnotism."

"I knew that," he said, "from his talk last night."

"How on earth —?"

"Oh, from a casual quotation he used. It's a longish story, which I'll tell you later. Go on."

I began from the break-up of the Thursday Club dinner and told him all I could remember of my hours in Medina's house. As a story it met with an immense success. Sandy was so interested that he couldn't sit in his chair, but must get up and stand on the hearth-rug before me. I told him that I had wakened up feeling uncommonly ill, with a blank mind except

for the address of a doctorman in Wimpole Street, and how during the day recollection had gradually come back to me. He questioned me like a cross-examining counsel.

“Bright light — ordinary hypnotic property. Face, which seemed detached — that’s a common enough thing in Indian magic. You say you must have been asleep, but were also in a sense awake and could hear and answer questions, and that you felt a kind of antagonism all the time which kept your will alive. You’re probably about the toughest hypnotic proposition in the world, Dick, and you can thank God for that. Now, what were the questions? A summons to forget your past and begin as a new creature, subject to the authority of a master. You assented, making private reservations of which the hypnotist knew nothing. If you had not kept your head and made those reservations, you would have remembered nothing at all of last night, but there would have been a subconscious bond over your will. As it is, you’re perfectly free: only the man who tried to monkey with you doesn’t know that. Therefore you begin by being one up on the game. You know where you are and he doesn’t know where he is.”

“What do you suppose Medina meant by it? It was infernal impertinence anyhow. But was it Medina? I seem to remember another man in the room before I left.”

“Describe him.”

“I’ve only a vague picture — a sad grey-faced fellow.”

“Well, assume for the present that the experimenter was Medina. There’s such a thing, remember, as spiriting away a man’s recollection of his past, and starting him out as a waif in a new world. I’ve heard in the East of such performances, and of course it means that the memory-less being is at the mercy of the man who has stolen his memory. That is probably not the intention in your case. They wanted only to establish a subconscious control. But it couldn’t be done at once with a fellow of your antecedents, so they organised a process. They suggested to you in your trance a doctor’s name, and the next stage was his business. You woke feeling very seedy and remembering a doctor’s address, and they argued that you would think that you had been advised about the fellow and make a bee-line for him. Remember, they would assume that you had no recollection of anything else from the night’s doings. Now go ahead and tell me about the surgeon. Did you go to see him?”

I continued my story, and at the Wimpole Street episode Sandy laughed long and loud.

“Another point up in the game. You say you think the leech had been advised of your coming and not by you? By the way, he seems to have talked fairly good sense, but I’d as soon set a hippopotamus for nerves as you.” He wrote down Dr. Newhover’s address in his pocket book. “Continuez. You then proceeded, I take it, to 4 Palmyra Square.”

At the next stage in my narrative he did not laugh. I dare say I told it better than I have written it down here, for I was fresh from the experience, and I could see that he was a good deal impressed.

“A Swedish masseuse and an odd-looking little girl. She puts you to sleep, or thinks she has, and then, when your eyes are bandaged, someone else nearly charms the soul out of you. That sounds big magic. I see the general lines of it, but it is big magic, and I didn’t know that it was practised on these shores. Dick, this is getting horribly interesting. You kept wide awake — you are an old buffalo, you know — but you gave the impression of absolute surrender. Good for you — you are now three points ahead in the game.”

“Well, but what is the game? I’m hopelessly puzzled.”

“So am I, but we must work on assumptions. Let us suppose Medina is responsible. He may only be trying to find out the extent of his powers, and selects you as the most difficult subject to be found. You may be sure he knows all about your record. He may be only a vain man experimenting.”

“In which case,” I said, “I propose to punch his head.”

“In which case, as you justly observe, you will give yourself the pleasure of punching his head. But suppose that he has got a far deeper purpose, something really dark and damnable. If by his hypnotic power he could make a tool of you, consider what an asset he would have found. A man of your ability and force. I have always said, you remember, that you had a fine natural talent for crime.”

“I tell you, Sandy, that’s nonsense. It’s impossible that there’s anything wrong — badly wrong — with Medina.”

“Improbable, but not impossible. We’re taking no chances. And if he were a scoundrel, think what a power he might be with all his talents and charm and popularity.”

Sandy flung himself into a chair and appeared to be meditating. Once or twice he broke silence.

"I wonder what Dr. Newhover meant by talking of a salmon river in Norway. Why not golf at North Berwick?"

And again:

"You say there was a scent like peat in the room? Peat! You are certain?"

Finally he got up. "To-morrow," he said, "I think I will have a look round the house in Gospel Oak. Gospel Oak, by the way, is a funny name, isn't it? You say it has electric light. I will visit it as a man from the corporation to see about the meter. Oh, that can easily be managed. Macgillivray will pass the word for me."

The mention of Macgillivray brought me to attention. "Look here," I said, "I'm simply wasting my time. I got in touch with Medina in order to ask his help, and now I've been landed in a set of preposterous experiences which have nothing to do with my job. I must see Macgillivray tomorrow about getting alongside his Shropshire squire. For the present there can be nothing doing with Medina."

"Shropshire squire be hanged! You're an old ass, Dick. For the present there's everything doing with Medina. You wanted his help. Why? Because he was the next stage in the clue to that nonsensical rhyme. Well, you've discovered that there may be odd things about him. You can't get his help, but you may get something more. You may get the secret itself. Instead of having to burrow into his memory, as you did with Greenslade, you may find it sticking out of his life."

"Do you really believe that?" I asked in some bewilderment.

"I believe nothing as yet. But it is far the most promising line. He thinks that from what happened last night PLUS what happened two hours ago you are under his influence, an acolyte, possibly a tool. It may be all quite straight, or it may be most damnably crooked. You have got to find out. You must keep close to him, and foster his illusions, and play up to him for all you're worth. He is bound to show his hand. You needn't take any steps on your own account. He'll give you the lead all right."

I can't say I liked the prospect, for I have no love for playacting, but I am bound to admit that Sandy talked sense. I asked him about himself, for I counted on his backing more than I could say.

"I propose to resume my travels," he said. "I wish to pursue my studies in the Bibliothèque Nationale of France."

"But I thought you were with me in this show."

"So I am. I go abroad on your business, as I shall explain to you some day. Also I want to see the man whom we used to call Ram Dass. I believe him to be in Munich at this moment. The day after tomorrow you will read in The Times that Colonel the Master of Clanroyden has gone abroad for an indefinite time on private business."

"How long will you be away?" I groaned.

"A week perhaps, or a fortnight — or more. And when I come back it may not be as Sandy Arbuthnot."



CHAPTER VII

SOME EXPERIENCES OF A DISCIPLE

I didn't see Sandy again, for he took the night train for Paris next evening, and I had to go down to Oxford that day to appear as a witness in a running-down case. But I found a note for me at the Club when I got back the following morning. It contained nothing except these words: "Coverts drawn blank, no third person in house." I had not really hoped for anything from Sandy's expedition to Palmyra Square, and thought no more about it.

He didn't return in a week, nor yet in a fortnight, and, realising that I had only a little more than two months to do my job in, I grew very impatient. But my time was pretty well filled with Medina, as you shall hear.

While I was reading Sandy's note Turpin turned up, and begged me to come for a drive in his new Delage and talk to him. The Marquis de la Tour du Pin was, if possible, more pallid than before, his eyelids heavier, and his gentleness more silken. He drove me miles into the country, away through Windsor Forest, and as we raced at sixty miles an hour he uncovered his soul. He was going mad, it seemed; was, indeed, already mad, and only a slender and doubtless ill-founded confidence in me prevented him shooting himself. He was convinced that Adela Victor was dead, and that no trace of her would ever be found. "These policemen of yours — bah!" he moaned. "Only in England can people vanish." He concluded, however, that he would stay alive till he had avenged her, for he believed that a good God would some day deliver her murderer into his hands. I was desperately sorry for him, for behind his light gasconading manner there were marks of acute suffering, and indeed in his case I think I should have gone crazy. He asked me for hope, and I gave him it, and told him what I did not believe — that I saw light in the business, and had every confidence that we would restore him his sweetheart safe and sound. At that he cheered up and wanted to embrace me, thereby jolly nearly sending the Delage into a ditch and us both into eternity. He was burning for something to do, and wanted me to promise that as soon as possible I would inspan him into my team. That made me feel guilty, for I knew I had no team, and nothing you could call a clue; so I talked hastily about Miss Victor, lest he should ask me more.

I had her portrait drawn for me in lyric prose. She was slight, it seemed, middling tall, could ride like Diana and dance like the nymphs. Her colouring and hair were those of a brunette, but her eyes were a deep grey, and she had the soft voice which commonly goes with such eyes. Turpin, of course, put all this more poetically, relapsing frequently into French. He told me all kinds of things about her — how she was crazy about dogs, and didn't fear anything in the world, and walked with a throw-out, and lisped delightfully when she was excited. Altogether at the end of it I felt I had a pretty good notion of Miss Victor, especially as I had studied about fifty photographs of her in Macgillivray's room.

As we were nearing home again it occurred to me to ask him if he knew Medina. He said no, but that he was dining at the Victors' that evening — a small dinner party, mostly political. "He is wonderful, that Mr. Victor. He will not change his life, and his friends think Adela is in New York for a farewell visit. He is like the Spartan boy with the fox."

"Tell Mr. Victor, with my compliments," I said, "that I would like to dine there to-night. I have a standing invitation. Eight-fifteen, isn't it?"

It turned out to be a very small and select party — the Foreign Secretary, Medina, Palliser-Yeates, the Duke of Alcester, Lord Sunningdale, the exLord Chancellor, Levasseur the French Minister, besides Turpin and myself. There were no women present. The behaviour of the Duke and Mr. Victor was a lesson in fortitude, and you would never have guessed that these two men were living with a nightmare. It was not a talkative assembly, though Sunningdale had a good deal to say to the table about a new book that a German had written on the mathematical conception of infinity, a subject which even his brilliant exposition could not make clear to my thick wits. The Foreign Secretary and Levasseur had a tête-à-tête, with Turpin as a hanger-on, and the rest of us would have been as dull as sticks if it had not been for Medina. I had a good chance of observing his quality, and I must say I was astonished at his skill. It was he who by the right kind of question turned Sunningdale's discourse on infinity, which would otherwise have been a pedantic monologue, into good conversation. We got on to politics afterwards, and Medina, who had just come from the House, was asked what was happening.

"They had just finished the usual plat du jour, the suspension of a couple of Labour mountebanks," he said.

This roused Sunningdale, who rather affected the Labour Party, and I was amused to see how Medina handled the exChancellor. He held him in good-humoured argument, never forsaking his own position, but shedding about the whole subject an atmosphere of witty and tolerant understanding. I felt that he knew more about the business than Sunningdale, that he knew so much he could afford to give his adversary rope. Moreover, he never forgot that he was at a dinner-table, the pitch and key of his talk were exactly right, and he managed to bring everyone into it.

To me he was extraordinarily kind. Indeed he treated me like a very ancient friend, bantering and affectionate and yet respectful, and he forced me to take a full share in the conversation. Under his stimulus, I became quite intelligent, and amazed Turpin, who had never credited me with any talents except for fighting. But I had not forgotten what I was there for, and if I had been inclined to, there were the figures of Victor and the Duke to remind me. I watched the two, the one thin, grey-bearded, rather like an admiral with his vigilant dark eyes, the other heavy-jowled, rubicund, crowned with fine silver hair; in both I saw shadows of pain stealing back to the corners of lip and eye, whenever the face was in repose. And Medina — the very beau ideal of a courteous, kindly, open-air Englishman. I noted how in his clothes he avoided any touch of overdressing, no fancifully-cut waistcoat or too-smartly-tied tie. In manner and presence he was the perfection of unselfconscious good breeding. It was my business to play up to him, and I let my devotion be pretty evident. The old Duke, whom I now met for the first time, patted my shoulder as we left the dining-room. "I am glad to see that you and Medina are friends, Sir Richard. Thank God that we have a man like him among the young entry. They ought to give him office at once, you know, get him inside the shafts of the coach. Otherwise he'll find something more interesting to do than politics."

By tacit consent we left the house together, and I walked the streets by his side, as I had done three nights before. What a change, I reflected, in my point of view! Then I had been blind, now I was acutely watchful. He slipped an arm into mine as we entered Pall Mall, but its pressure did not seem so much friendly as possessive.

"You are staying at your Club?" he said. "Why not take up your quarters with me while you are in town? There's ample room in Hill Street."

The suggestion put me into a fright. To stay with him at present would wreck all my schemes; but, supposing he insisted, could I refuse, if it was my role to appear to be under his domination? Happily he did not insist. I made a lot of excuses — plans unsettled, constantly running down to the country, and so on.

"All right. But some day I may make the offer again and then I'll take no refusal."

They were just the kind of words a friend might have used, but somehow, though the tone was all right, they slightly grated on me.

"How are you?" he asked. "Most people who have led your life find the English spring trying. You don't look quite as fit as when I first saw you."

"No. I've been rather seedy this past week — headachy, loss of memory, stuffed-up brain and that sort of thing. I expect it's the spring fret. I've seen a doctor and he doesn't worry about it."

"Who's your man?"

"A chap Newhover in Wimpole Street."

He nodded. "I've heard of him. They tell me he's good."

"He has ordered me massage," I said boldly. "That cures the headaches anyway."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Then he suddenly released my arm.

"I see Arbuthnot has gone abroad."

There was a coldness in his voice to which I hastened to respond.

"So I saw in the papers," I said carelessly. "He's a hopeless fellow. A pity, for he's able enough; but he won't stay put, and that makes him pretty well useless."

"Do you care much for Arbuthnot?"

"I used to," I replied shamelessly. "But till the other day I hadn't seen him for years, and I must say he has grown very queer. Didn't you think he behaved oddly at the Thursday dinner?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I wasn't much taken by him. He's too infernally unEnglish. I don't know how he got it, but

there seems to be a touch of the shrill Levantine in him. Compare him with those fellows to-night. Even the Frenchmen — even Victor, though he's an American and a Jew — are more our own way of thinking."

We were at the Club door, and as I stopped he looked me full in the face.

"If I were you I wouldn't have much to do with Arbuthnot," he said, and his tone was a command. I grinned sheepishly, but my fingers itched for his ears.

I went to bed fuming. This new possessory attitude, this hint of nigger-driving, had suddenly made me hate Medina. I had been unable to set down the hypnotist business clearly to his account, and, even if I had been certain, I was inclined to think it only the impertinent liberty of a faddist — a thing which I hotly resented but which did not arouse my serious dislike. But now — to feel that he claimed me as his man, because he thought, no doubt, that he had established some unholy power over me — that fairly broke my temper. And his abuse of Sandy put the lid on it — abuse to which I had been shamefully compelled to assent. Levantine, by gad! I swore that Sandy and I would make him swallow that word before he was very much older. I couldn't sleep for thinking about it. By this time I was perfectly willing to believe that Medina was up to any infamy, and I was resolved that in him and him alone lay the key to the riddle of the three hostages. But all the time I was miserably conscious that if I suggested such an idea to anyone except Sandy I should be set down as a lunatic. I could see that the man's repute was as solidly planted as the British Constitution.

Next morning I went to see Macgillivray. I explained that I had not been idle, that I had been pursuing lines of my own, which I thought more hopeful than his suggestion of getting alongside the Shropshire squire. I said I had nothing as yet to report, and that I didn't propose to give him the faintest notion of what I was after till I had secured some results. But I wanted his help, and I wanted his very best men.

"Glad to see you've got busy, Dick," he said. "I await your commands."

"I want a house watched. No. 4 Palmyra Square, up in North London. So far as I know it is occupied by a woman, who purports to be a Swedish masseuse and calls herself Madame Breda, one or more maids, and an odd-looking little girl. I want you to have a close record kept of the people who go there, and I want especially to know who exactly are the inmates of the house and who are the frequent visitors. It must be done very cautiously, for the people must have no suspicion that they are being spied on."

He wrote down the details.

"Also I want you to find out the antecedents of Medina's butler."

He whistled. "Medina. Dominick Medina, you mean?"

"Yes. Oh, I'm not suspecting HIM." We both laughed, as if at a good joke. "But I should like to hear something about his butler, for reasons which I'm not yet prepared to give you. He answers to the name of Odell, and has the appearance of an inferior prize-fighter. Find out all you can about his past, and it mightn't be a bad plan to have him shadowed. You know Medina's house in Hill Street. But for Heaven's sake, let it be done tactfully."

"I'll see to that for my own sake. I don't want head-lines in the evening papers — 'House of Member of Parliament Watched. Another Police Muddle.'"

"Also, could you put together all you can get about Medina? It might give me a line on Odell."

"Dick," he said solemnly, "are you growing fantastic?"

"Not a bit of it. You don't imagine I'm ass enough to think there's anything shady about Medina. He and I have become bosom friends and I like him enormously. Everybody swears by him, and so do I. But I have my doubts about Mr. Odell, and I would like to know just how and where Medina picked him up. He's not the ordinary stamp of butler." It seemed to me very important to let no one but Sandy into the Medina business at present, for our chance lay in his complete confidence that all men thought well of him.

"Right," said Macgillivray. "It shall be done. Go your own way, Dick. I won't attempt to dictate to you. But remember that the thing is desperately serious, and that the days are slipping past. We're in April now, and you have only till midsummer to save three innocent lives."

I left his office feeling very solemn, for I had suddenly a consciousness of the shortness of time and the magnitude of the job which I had not yet properly begun. I cudgelled my brains to think of my next step. In a few days I should again visit Dr. Newhover, but there was not likely to be much assistance there. He might send me back to Palmyra Square, or I

might try to make an appointment with Madame Breda myself, inventing some new ailment; but I would only find the same old business, which would get me no further forward. As I viewed it, the Newhover and Palmyra Square episodes had been used only to test my submission to Medina's influence, and it was to Medina that I must look for further light. It was a maddening job to sit and wait and tick off the precious days on the calendar, and I longed to consult with Sandy. I took to going down to Fosse for the day, for the sight of Mary and Peter John somehow quieted my mind and fixed my resolution. It was a positive relief when at the end of the week Medina rang me up and asked me to luncheon.

We lunched at his house, which, seen on a bright April day, was a wonderful treasury of beautiful things. It was not the kind of house I fancied myself, being too full of museum pieces, and all the furniture strictly correct according to period. I like rooms in which there is a pleasant jumble of things, and which look as if homely people had lived in them for generations. The dining-room was panelled in white, with a Vandyck above the mantelpiece and a set of gorgeous eighteenth-century prints on the walls. At the excellent meal Medina as usual drank water, while I obediently sampled an old hock, an older port, and a most prehistoric brandy. Odell was in attendance, and I had a good look at him — his oddly-shaped head, his flat sallow face, the bunches of black eyebrow above his beady eyes. I calculated that if I saw him again I would not fail to recognise him. We never went near the library on the upper floor, but sat after luncheon in a little smoking-room at the back of the hall, which held my host's rods and guns in glass cabinets, and one or two fine heads of deer and ibex.

I had made up my mind, as I walked to Hill Street, that I was going to convince Medina once and for all of the abjectness of my surrender. He should have proof that I was clay in his hands, for only that way would he fully reveal himself. I detested the job, and as I walked through the pleasant crisp noontide I reflected with bitterness that I might have been fishing for salmon in Scotland, or, better still, cantering with Mary over the Cotswold downs.

All through luncheon I kept my eyes fixed on him like a dog's on his master. Several times I wondered if I were not overdoing it, but he seemed to accept my homage as quite natural. I had thought when I first met him that the man had no vanity; now I saw that he had mountains of it, that he was all vanity, and that his public modesty was only a cloak to set off his immense private conceit. He unbent himself, his whole mind was in undress, and behind the veneer of good-fellowship I seemed to see a very cold arrogant soul. Nothing worse, though that was bad enough. He was too proud to boast in words, but his whole attitude was one long brag. He was cynical about everything, except, as I suspected, his private self-worship. The thing would have been monstrously indecent, if it had not been done with such consummate skill. Indeed I found my part easy to play, for I was deeply impressed and had no difficulty in showing it.

The odd thing was that he talked a good deal about myself. He seemed to take pains to rout out the codes and standards, the points of honour and points of conduct, which somebody like me was likely to revere, and to break them down with his cynicism. I felt that I was looking on at an attempt, which the devil is believed to specialise in, to make evil good and good evil. . . . Of course I assented gladly. Never had master a more ready disciple. . . . He broke down, too, my modest ambitions. A country life, a wife and family — he showed that they were too trivial for more than a passing thought. He flattered me grossly, and I drank it all in with a silly face. I was fit for bigger things, to which he would show me the way. He sketched some of the things — very flattering they were and quite respectable, but somehow they seemed out of the picture when compared to his previous talk. He was clearly initiating me step by step into something for which I was not yet fully ready. . . . I wished Sandy could have seen me sitting in Medina's arm-chair, smoking one of his cigars, and agreeing to everything he said like a schoolgirl who wants to keep on the good side of her schoolmistress. And yet I didn't find it difficult, for the man's talk was masterly and in its way convincing, and, while my mind repudiated it, it was easy for my tongue to assent. He was in a prodigious good-humour, and he was kindly, as a keeper is kind to a well-broken dog.

On the doorstep I stammered my thanks. "I wish I could tell you what knowing you means to me. It's — it's far the biggest thing in my life. What I mean to say is —" the familiar patois of the tongue-tied British soldier.

He looked at me with those amazing eyes of his, no kindness in them, only patronage and proprietorship. I think he was satisfied that he had got someone who would serve him body and soul.

I, too, was satisfied, and walked away feeling more cheerful than I had done for days. Surely things would begin to move now, I thought. At the Club, too, I got encouragement in the shape of a letter from Sandy. It bore a French postmark which I could not decipher, and it was the merest scribble, but it greatly heartened me.

"I have made progress," it ran, "but I have still a lot to do and we can't talk to each other yet awhile. But I shall have to

send you letters occasionally, which you must burn on receipt. I shall sign them with some letter of the Greek alphabet — no, you wouldn't recognise that — with the names of recent Derby winners. Keep our affair secret as the grave — don't let in a soul, not even Mac. And for God's sake stick close to M. and serve him like a slave."

There wasn't much in it, but it was hopeful, though the old ruffian didn't seem in a hurry to come home. I wondered what on earth he had found out — something solid, I judged, for he didn't talk lightly of making progress.

That evening I had nothing to do, and after dinner I felt too restless to sit down to a pipe and book. There was no one in the Club I wanted to talk to, so I sallied forth to another pot-house to which I belonged, where there was a chance of finding some of the younger and cheerier generation. Sure enough the first man I saw there was Archie Roylance, who greeted me with a whoop and announced that he was in town for a couple of days to see his doctor. He had had a bad fall steeplechasing earlier in the year, when he had all but broken his neck, but he declared that he was perfectly fit again except for some stiffness in his shoulder muscles. He was as lame as a duck from his flying smash just before the Armistice, but all the same he got about at a surprising pace. Indeed, out of cussedness he walked more than he used to do in the old days, and had taken to deer-stalking with enthusiasm. I think I have mentioned that he was my partner in the tenancy of Machray forest.

I proposed that we should go to a music-hall or cut into the second act of some play, but Archie had another idea. One of his fads was to be an amateur of dancing, though he had never been a great performer before his smash and would never dance again. He said he wanted to see the latest fashions and suggested that we should go for an hour to a small (and he added, select) club somewhere in Marylebone, of which he believed he was a member. It bore an evil reputation, he said, for there was a good deal of high play, and the licensing laws were not regarded, but it was a place to see the best dancing. I made no objection, so we strolled up Regent Street in that season of comparative peace when busy people have gone home and the idle are still shut up in theatres and restaurants.

It was a divine April night, and I observed that I wished I were in a better place to enjoy spring weather. "I've just come from a Scotch moor," said Archie. "Lord! the curlews are makin' a joyful noise. That is the bird for my money. Come back with me, Dick, on Friday and I'll teach you a lot of things. You're a wise man, but you might be a better naturalist."

I thought how much I would have given to be able to accept, as the light wind blew down Langham Place. Then I wished that this job would take me out of town into fresh air, where I could get some exercise. The result was that I was in a baddish temper when we reached our destination, which was in one of the streets near Fitzroy Square. The place proved to be about as hard to get into as the Vatican. It took a long harangue and a tip from Archie to persuade the door-keeper that we were of the right brand of disreputability to be admitted. Finally we found ourselves in a room with sham Chinese decorations, very garishly lit, with about twenty couples, dancing and about twenty more sitting drinking at little tables.

We paid five shillings apiece for a liqueur, found a table and took notice of the show. It seemed to me a wholly rotten and funereal business. A nigger band, looking like monkeys in uniform, pounded out some kind of barbarous jingle, and sad-faced marionettes moved to it. There was no gaiety or devil in that dancing, only a kind of bored perfection. Thin young men with rabbit heads and hair brushed straight back from their brows, who I suppose were professional dancing partners, held close to their breasts women of every shape and age, but all alike in having dead eyes and masks for faces, and the macabre procession moved like automata to the niggers' rhythm. I dare say it was all very wonderful, but I was not built by Providence to appreciate it.

"I can't stand much more of this," I told Archie.

"It's no great shakes. But there are one or two high-class performers. Look at that girl dancing with the young Jew — the one in green."

I looked and saw a slim girl, very young apparently, who might have been pretty but for the way her face was loaded with paint and the preposterous style in which her hair was dressed. Little though I know of dancing, I could see that she was a mistress of the art, for every motion was a delight to watch, and she made poetry out of that hideous ragtime. But her face shocked me. It was BLIND, if you understand me, as expressionless as a mummy, a kind of awful death-in-life. I wondered what kind of experience that poor soul had gone through to give her the stare of a sleep-walker.

As my eyes passed from her they fell on another figure that seemed familiar. I saw that it was Odell the butler, splendidly got up for his night out in dress clothes, white waistcoat, and diamond studs. There was no mistaking the pugilistic air of the fellow, now I saw him out of service; I had seen a dozen such behind the bars of sporting public-houses.

He could not see me, but I had a fair view of him, and I observed that he also was watching the girl in green.

“Do you know who she is?” I asked.

“Some professional. Gad, she can dance, but the poor child looks as if she found it a hard life. I’d rather like to talk to her.”

But the music had stopped, and I could see that Odell had made a sign to the dancer. She came up to him as obediently as a dog, he said something to another man with him, a man with a black beard, and the three passed out at the further door. A moment later I caught a glimpse of her with a cloak round her shoulders passing the door by which we had entered.

Archie laughed. “That big brute is probably her husband. I bet she earns the living of both by dancing at these places, and gets beaten every night. I would say my prayers before taking on that fellow in a scrap.”



CHAPTER VIII

THE BLIND SPINNER

I look back upon those days of waiting as among the beastliest of my life. I had the clearest conviction now that Medina was the key of the whole puzzle, but as yet I had found out nothing worth mentioning, and I had to wait like the sick folk by the pool of Bethesda till something troubled the waters. The only thing that comforted me was the fine old-fashioned dislike to the man which now possessed me. I couldn't pretend to understand more than a fragment of him, but what I understood I detested. I had been annexed by him as a slave, and every drop of free blood in my veins was in revolt; but I was also resolved to be the most docile slave that ever kissed the ground before a tyrant. Some day my revenge would come and I promised myself that it would be complete. Meantime I thanked Heaven that he had that blind spot of vanity, which would prevent him seeing the cracks in my camouflage.

For the better part of a week we were very little separate. I lunched with him two days out of three, and we motored more than once down to Brighton for fresh air. He took me to a dinner he gave at the House of Commons to a Canadian statesman who was over on a visit, and he made me accompany him to a very smart dance at Lady Amysfort's, and he got me invited to a week-end party at Wirlesdon because he was going there. I went through the whole programme dutifully and not unpleasurably. I must say he treated me admirably in the presence of other people — with a jolly affectionate friendliness, constantly asking for my opinion, and deferring to me and making me talk, so that the few people I met whom I had known before wondered what had come over me. Mary had a letter from a cousin of hers, who reported that I seemed to have got into society and to be making a big success of it — a letter she forwarded to me with a pencilled note of congratulation at the end. On these occasions I didn't find my task difficult, for I fell unconsciously under the man's spell and could easily play up to him. .. But when we were alone his manner changed. Iron crept into his voice, and, though he was pleasant enough, he took a devil of a lot for granted, and the note of authority grew more habitual. After such occasions I used to go home grinding my teeth. I never had a worse job than to submit voluntarily to that insolent protection.

Repeatedly in my bedroom at the Club I tried to put together the meagre handful of ascertained facts, but they were like a lot of remnants of different jig-saw puzzles and nothing fitted in to anything else. Macgillivray reported that so far he had drawn a blank in the case of Odell; and that the watchers at Palmyra Square had noted very few visitors except tradesmen and organ-grinders. Nothing resembling a gentleman had been seen to enter or leave, so it appeared that my estimate of Madame Breda's flourishing business was wrong. A woman frequently went out and returned, never walking but always in a taxi or a motor-car — probably the same woman, but so hooded and wrapped up as to make details difficult to be clear about. There were a host of little notes — coal or firewood had been delivered one day, twice the wrapped-up lady had gone out in the evening, to come back in a couple of hours, but mostly she made her visits abroad in daylight, the household woke late and retired to bed early, once or twice a sound like weeping had been heard but it might have been the cat. Altogether it was a poor report, and I concluded that I was either barking up the wrong tree, or that Macgillivray's agents were a pretty useless crowd.

For the rest, what had I? A clear and well-founded suspicion of Medina. But of what? Only that he was behaving towards me in a way that I resented, that he dabbled in an ugly brand of hypnotism, and that the more I saw of him the less I liked him. I knew that his public repute was false, but I had no worse crime to accuse him of than vanity. He had a butler who had been a prize-fighter, and who had a taste for night clubs. I remember I wrote all this down, and sat staring blankly at it, feeling how trivial it was. Then I wrote down the six-line jingle and stared at that too, and I thought of the girl, and the young man, and the small boy who liked birds and fishing. I hadn't a scrap of evidence to link up Medina with that business, except that Tom Greenslade believed that he had got from him the three facts which ran more or less in the rhyme; but Tom might be mistaken, or Medina might have learned them in some perfectly innocent way. I hadn't enough evidence to swing a cat on. But yet — the more I thought of Medina the more dark and subtle his figure loomed in my mind. I had a conviction, on which I would have staked my life, that if I stuck to him I would worry out some vital and damning truth; so, with no very lively or cheerful hope, but with complete certainty, I resolved for the hundredth time to let logic go and back my fancy.

As in duty bound I paid another visit to Dr. Newhover. He received me casually, and appeared to have forgotten about my case till he looked up his diary.

"Ah yes, you saw Madame Breda," he said. "I have her report. Your headaches are cured but you are still a little shaky? Yes, please. Take off your coat and waistcoat."

He vetted me very thoroughly, and then sat down in his desk-chair and tapped his eye-glasses on his knee.

"You are better, much better, but you are not cured. That will take time and care, and lies, of course, in your own hands. You are leading a quiet life? Half town, half country — it is probably the best plan. Well, I don't think you can improve on that."

"You said something about fishing in Norway when I was here last."

"No, on the whole I don't recommend it. Your case is slightly different from what I at first supposed."

"You are a fisherman yourself?" I said.

He admitted that he was, and for a minute or two spoke more like a human being. He always used a two-piece Castle—Connell rod, though he granted it was a cumbrous thing to travel with. For flies he swore by Harlows — certainly the best people for Norwegian flies. He thought that there was a great difference between Norwegian rivers than most people imagined, and Harlows understood that.

He concluded by giving me some simple instructions about diet and exercise.

"If my headaches return, shall I go back to Madame Breda?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Your headaches won't return."

I paid him his fee, and, as I was leaving, I asked if he wanted to see me again.

"I don't think it necessary. At any rate not till the autumn. I may have to be out of London myself a good deal this summer. Of course if you should find the malaise recurring, which I do not anticipate, you must come and see me. If I am out of town, you can see my colleague." He scribbled a name and address on a sheet of paper.

I left the house feeling considerably puzzled. Dr. Newhover, who on my first visit had made a great to-do about my health, seemed now to want to be quit of me. His manner was exactly that of a busy doctor dealing with a malade imaginaire. The odd thing was that I was really beginning to feel rather seedy, a punishment for my former pretence. It may have been the reaction of my mental worry, but I had the sort of indefinite out-of-sorts feeling which I believe precedes an attack of influenza. Only I had hitherto been immune from influenza.

That night I had another of Sandy's communications, a typed half-sheet with a Paris postmark.

"Keep close to M.," it ran. "Do everything he wants. Make it clear that you have broken for ever with me. This is desperately important."

It was signed "Buchan," a horse which Sandy seemed to think had been a Derby winner. He knew no more about racing than I knew of Chinese.

Next morning I woke with a bad taste in my mouth and a feeling that I had probably a bout of malaria due me. Now I had had no malaria since the autumn of '17, and I didn't like the prospect of the revisitation. However, as the day wore on, I felt better, and by midday I concluded I was not going to be ill. But all the same I was as jumpy as a cat in a thunderstorm. I had the odd sense of anticipation, which I used to have before a battle, a lurking excitement by no means pleasant — not exactly apprehension, but first cousin to it. It made me want to see Medina, as if there was something between him and me that I ought to get over.

All afternoon this dentist-anteroom atmosphere hung about me, and I was almost relieved when about five o'clock I got a telephone message from Hill Street asking me to come there at six. I went round to the Bath Club and had a swim and a shampoo, and then started for the house. On the way there I had those tremors in my legs and coldness in the pit of the stomach which brought back my childish toothaches. Yes, that was it. I felt exactly like a small boy setting off with dreadful anticipations to have a tooth drawn, and not all my self-contempt could cure me of my funk. The house when I reached it seemed larger and lonelier than ever, and the April evening had darkened down to a scurry of chill dusty winds under a sky full of cloud.

Odell opened the door to me, and took me to the back of the hall, where I found a lift which I had not known existed. We went up to the top of the house, and I realised that I was about to enter again the library where before I had so

strangely spent the midnight hours.

The curtains were drawn, shutting out the bleak spring twilight, and the room was warmed by, and had for its only light, a great fire of logs. I smelt more than wood smoke; there was peat burning among the oak billets. The scent recalled, not the hundred times when I had sniffed peat-reek in happy places, but the flavour of the room in Palmyra Square when I had lain with bandaged eyes and felt light fingers touch my face. I had suddenly a sense that I had taken a long stride forward, that something fateful was about to happen, and my nervousness dropped from me like a cloak.

Medina was standing before the hearth, but his was not the figure that took my eyes. There was another person in the room, a woman. She sat in the high-backed chair which he had used on the former night, and she sat in it as if it were a throne. The firelight lit her face, and I saw that it was very old, waxen with age, though the glow made the wax rosy. Her dress was straight and black like a gaberdine, and she had thick folds of lace at her wrists and neck. Wonderful hair, masses of it, was piled on her head, and it was snow-white and fine as silk. Her hands were laid on the arms of the chair, and hands more delicate and shapely I have never seen, though they had also the suggestion of a furious power, like the talons of a bird of prey.

But it was the face that took away my breath. I have always been a great admirer of the beauty of old age, especially in women, but this was a beauty of which I had never dreamed. It was a long face, and the features were large, though exquisitely cut and perfectly proportioned. Usually in an old face there is a certain loosening of muscles or blurring of contours, which detracts from sheer beauty but gives another kind of charm. But in this face there was no blurring or loosening; the mouth was as firm, the curve of the chin as rounded, the arch of the eyes as triumphant as in some proud young girl.

And then I saw that the eyes which were looking at the fire were the most remarkable things of all. Even in that half-light I could see that they were brightly, vividly blue. There was no film or blurring to mar their glory. But I saw also that they were sightless. How I knew it I do not know, for there was no physical sign of it, but my conviction was instantaneous and complete. These starlike things were turned inward. In most blind people the eyes are like marbles, dead windows in an empty house; but — how shall I describe it? — these were blinds drawn in a room which was full of light and movement, stage curtains behind which some great drama was always set. Blind though they were, they seemed to radiate an ardent vitality, to glow and flash like the soul within.

I realised that it was the most wonderful face of a woman I had ever looked on. And I realised in the same moment that I hated it, that the beauty of it was devilish, and the soul within was on fire with all the hatred of Hell.

"Hannay," I heard Medina's voice, "I have brought you here because I wish to present you to my mother."

I behaved just like somebody in a play. I advanced to her chair, lifted one of the hands, and put it to my lips. That seemed to me the right thing to do. The face turned towards me, and broke into a smile, the kind of smile you may see on the marble of a Greek goddess.

The woman spoke to Medina in a tongue which was strange to me, and he replied. There seemed to be many questions and answers, but I did not trouble to try to catch a word I knew. I was occupied with the voice. I recognised in it those soft tones which had crooned over me as I lay in the room in Palmyra Square. I had discovered who had been the third person in that scene.

Then it spoke to me in English, with that odd lilting accent I had tried in vain to trace.

"You are a friend of Dominick, and I am glad to meet you, Sir Richard Hannay. My son has told me about you. Will you bring a chair and sit close to me?"

I pulled up a long low arm-chair, so long and low that the sitter was compelled almost to recline. My head was on a level with the hand which lay on the arm of her chair. Suddenly I felt that hand laid on my head, and I recognised her now by touch as well as voice.

"I am blind, Sir Richard," she said, "so I cannot see my son's friends. But I long to know how they look, and I have but one sense which can instruct me. Will you permit me to pass my hands over your face?"

"You may do what you please, Madame," I said. "I would to God I could give you eyes."

"That is a pretty speech," she said. "You might be one of my own people." And I felt the light fingers straying over my brow.

I was so placed that I was looking into the red heart of the fire, the one patch of bright light in the curtained room. I

knew what I was in for, and, remembering past experience, I averted my eyes to the dark folios on the lowest shelves beyond the hearth. The fingers seemed to play a gentle tattoo on my temples, and then drew long soft strokes across my eyebrows. I felt a pleasant languor beginning to creep down my neck and spine, but I was fully prepared, and without much trouble resisted it. Indeed my mind was briskly busy, for I was planning how best to play my game. I let my head recline more and more upon the cushioned back of my chair, and I let my eyelids droop.

The gentle fingers were very thorough, and I had let myself sink back beyond their reach before they ceased.

“You are asleep,” the voice said. “Now wake.”

I was puzzled to know how to stage-manage that wakening, but she saved me the trouble. Her voice suddenly hissed like a snake’s. “Stand up!” it said. “Quick — on your life.”

I scrambled to my feet with extreme energy, and stood staring at the fire, wondering what to do next.

“Look at your master,” came the voice again, peremptory as a drill-sergeant’s.

That gave me my cue. I knew where Medina was standing, and, in the words of the Bible, my eyes regarded him as a handmaiden regards her master. I stood before him, dumb and dazed and obedient.

“Down,” he cried. “Down, on all-fours.”

I did as I was bid, thankful that my job was proving so easy.

“Go to the door — no, on all-fours, open it twice, shut it twice, and bring me the paper-knife from the far table in your mouth.”

I obeyed, and a queer sight I must have presented prancing across the room, a perfectly sane man behaving like a lunatic.

I brought the paper-knife, and remained dog-wise. “Get up,” he said, and I got up.

I heard the woman’s voice say triumphantly: “He is well broken,” and Medina laughed.

“There is yet the last test,” he said. “I may as well put him through it now. If it fails, it means only that he needs more schooling. He cannot remember, for his mind is now in my keeping. There is no danger.”

He walked up to me, and gave me a smart slap in the face.

I accepted it with Christian meekness. I wasn’t even angry. In fact I would have turned the other cheek in the Scriptural fashion, if it hadn’t occurred to me that it might be overacting.

Then he spat in my face.

That, I admit, tried me pretty high. It was such a filthy Kaffir trick that I had some trouble in taking it resignedly. But I managed it. I kept my eyes on the ground, and didn’t even get out my handkerchief to wipe my cheek till he had turned away.

“Well broken to heel,” I heard him say. “It is strange how easily these flat tough English natures succumb to the stronger spirit. I have got a useful weapon in him, mother mine.”

They paid no more attention to me than if I had been a piece of furniture, which, indeed, in their eyes I was. I was asleep, or rather awake in a phantasmal world, and I could not return to my normal life till they bade me. I could know nothing — so they thought — and remember nothing, except what they willed. Medina sat in my chair, and the woman had her hand on his head, and they talked as if they were alone in the desert. And all the while I was standing sheepishly on the rug, not daring to move, scarcely to breathe, lest I should give the show away.

They made a pretty picture — “The Prodigal’s Return” or “The Old Folks at Hone,” by Simpkins, R.A., Royal Academy, 1887. No, by Heaven, there was no suggestion of that. It was a marvellous and tragic scene that I regarded. The fitful light of the fire showed figures of an antique beauty and dignity. The regal profile of the woman, her superb pose, and the soft eerie music of her voice were a world removed from vulgarity, and so was the lithe vigour and the proud face of the man. They were more like a king and queen in exile, decreeing the sea of blood which was to wash them back again. I realised for the first time that Medina might be damnable, but was also great. Yes, the man who had spat on me like a stable-boy had also something of the prince. I realised another thing. The woman’s touch had flattened down the hair above his forehead, which he brushed square, and his head, outlined in the firelight against the white cushion, was as round as a football. I had suspected this when I first saw him, and now I was certain. What did a head like that portend? I had a vague remembrance that I had heard somewhere that it meant madness — at any rate degeneracy.

They talked rapidly and unceasingly, but the confounded thing was that I could hear very little of it. They spoke in low tones, and I was three yards off and daren't for my life move an inch nearer. Also they spoke for the most part in a language of which I did not know a word — it may have been Choctaw, but was probably Erse. If I had only comprehended that tongue I might there and then have learned all I wanted to know. But sometimes Medina talked English, though it seemed to me that the woman always tried to bring him back to the other speech. All I heard were broken sentences that horribly tantalised me.

My brain was cool and very busy. This woman was the Blind Spinner of the rhymes. No doubt of it. I could see her spinning beside a peat fire, nursing ancient hate and madness, and crooning forgotten poetry. "Beside the Sacred Tree." Yggdrasil be hanged! I had it, it was Gospel Oak. Lord, what a fool I had been not to guess it before! The satisfaction of having got one of the three conundrums dead right made me want to shout. These two harpies held the key to the whole riddle, and I had only to keep up my present character to solve it. They thought they were dealing with a hypnotised fool, and instead they had a peculiarly wide-awake if rather slow and elderly Englishman. I wished to Heaven I knew what they were saying. Sluicing out malice about my country, no doubt, or planning the ruin of our civilisation for the sake of a neurotic dream.

Medina said something impatiently about "danger," as if his purpose were to reassure. Then I caught nothing for several minutes, till he laughed and repeated the word "secundus." Now I was looking for three people, and if there was a "secundus" there must have been a "primus," and possibly a "tertius."

"He is the least easy to handle," he said. "And it is quite necessary that Jason should come home. I have decided that the doctor must go out. It won't be for long — only till midsummer."

The date interested me actually. So did what followed, for he went on:

"By midsummer they liquidate and disband. There is no fear that it won't succeed. We have the whip hand, remember. Trust me, all will go smoothly, and then we begin a new life. . . ."

I thought she sighed, and for the first time she spoke in English:

"I fear sometimes that you are forgetting your own land, Dominick."

He put up an arm and drew her head to his.

"Never, mother mine. It is our strength that we can seem to forget and still remember."

I was finding my stand on that hearth-rug extraordinarily trying. You see I had to keep perfectly rigid, for every now and then Medina would look towards me, and I knew that the woman had an ear like a hound. But my knees were beginning to shake with fatigue and my head to grow giddy, and I feared that, like the soldiers who stand guard round a royal bier, I might suddenly collapse. I did my best to struggle against the growing weakness, and hoped to forget it by concentrating all my attention on the fragments of talk.

"I have news for you," Medina was saying. "Kharáma is in Europe and proposes to come to England."

"You will see him?" I thought her voice had a trace of alarm in it.

"Most certainly. I would rather see him than any living man."

"Dominick, be careful. I would rather you confined yourself to your old knowledge. I fear these new things from the East."

He laughed. "They are as old as ours — older. And all knowledge is one. I have already drunk of his learning and I must have the whole cup."

That was the last I heard, for at that moment I made my exit from the scene in a way which I could not have bettered by much cogitation. My legs suddenly gave under me, the room swam round, and I collapsed on the floor in a dead faint. I must have fallen heavily, for I knocked a leg off one of the little tables.

When I came to — which I suppose was a minute or two later — Odell was bathing my face, and Medina with a grave and concerned air was standing by with a brandy decanter.

"My dear fellow, you gave me a bad fright," he said, and his manner was that of the considerate friend. "You're not feeling ill?"

"I haven't been quite fit all day, and I suppose the hot room knocked me out. I say, I'm most awfully sorry for playing the fool like this. I've damaged your furniture, I'm afraid. I hope I didn't scare the lady."

“What lady?”

“Your mother.”

He looked at me with a perfectly blank face, and I saw I had made a mistake.

“I beg your pardon — I’m still giddy. I’ve been dreaming.”

He gave me a glass of brandy and tucked me into a taxi. Long before I got to the Club I was feeling all right, but my mind was in a fine turmoil. I had stumbled at last upon not one clue but many, and though they were confused enough, I hoped with luck to follow them out. I could hardly eat any dinner that night, and my brain was too unsettled to do any serious thinking. So I took a taxi up to Gospel Oak, and, bidding it wait for me, had another look at Palmyra Square. The place seemed to have been dead and decaying for centuries, seen in that windy moonless dark, and No. 4 was a shuttered tomb. I opened the gate and, after making sure that the coast was clear, stole round to the back-door where tradesmen called. There were some dilapidated outhouses, and the back garden, with rank grasses and obscene clothes-posts, looked like nothing so much as a neglected grave-yard. In that house was the terrible blind Fate that span. As I listened I heard from somewhere inside the sound of slow heartbroken sobs. I wondered if they came from the queer-looking little girl.



CHAPTER IX

I AM INTRODUCED TO STRONG MAGIC

The first thing I did when I got up next morning was to pay a visit to Harlows, the fishing-tackle people. They knew me well enough, for I used to buy my rods there, and one of the assistants had been down to Fosse to teach Mary how to use a light split-cane. With him I embarked on a long talk about Norwegian rivers and their peculiarities, and very soon got his views on the best flies. I asked which river was considered to be the earliest, and was told in an ordinary season the Nirdal and the Skarso. Then I asked if he knew my friend Dr. Newhover. "He was in here yesterday afternoon," I was told. "He is going to the Skarso this year, and hopes to be on the water in the last week of April. Rather too soon in my opinion, though salmon have been caught in it as early as April 17th. By the end of the first week of May it should be all right." I asked a good deal more about the Skarso, and was told that it was best fished from Merdal at the head of the Meraldjord. There were only about three miles of fishable water before the big foss, but every yard of it was good. I told him I had hoped to get a beat on the Leardal for June, but had had to give up the notion this year and intended to confine myself to Scotland. I bought a new reel, a quantity of sea-trout flies, and a little book about Norwegian fishing.

Then I went on to see Macgillivray, with whom I had made an appointment by telephone.

"I've come to ask your help," I told him. "I'm beginning to get a move on, but it's a ticklish business, and I must walk very warily. First of all, I want you to find out the movements of a certain Dr. Newhover of Wimpole Street. He is going to Norway some time in the next fortnight, to the Skarso to fish, and his jumping-off place will be Stavanger. Find out by which boat he takes a passage, and book me a berth in it also. I'd better have my old name, Cornelius Brand."

"You're not thinking of leaving England just now?" he asked reproachfully.

"I don't know. I may have to go or I may not, but in any case I won't be long away. Anyhow, find out about Dr. Newhover. Now for the more serious business. Just about when have you settled to round up the gang?"

"For the reasons I gave you it must be before midsummer. It is an infernally complicated job and we must work to a time-table. I had fixed provisionally the 20th of June."

"I think you'd better choose an earlier date."

"Why?"

"Because the gang are planning themselves to liquidate by midsummer, and, if you don't hurry, you may draw the net tight and find nothing in it."

"Now how on earth did you find that out?" he asked, and his usually impassive face was vivid with excitement.

"I can't tell you. I found it out in the process of hunting for the hostages, and I give you my word it's correct."

"But you must tell me more. If you have fresh lines on what you call my 'gang,' it may be desperately important for me to know."

"I haven't. I've just the one fact, which I have given you. Honestly, old man, I can't tell you anything more till I tell you everything. Believe me, I'm working hard."

I had thought the thing out, and had resolved to keep the Medina business to myself and Sandy. Our one chance with him was that he should be utterly unsuspecting, and even so wary a fellow as Macgillivray might, if he were told, create just that faint breath of suspicion that would ruin all. He grunted, as if he were not satisfied. "I suppose you must have it your own way. Very well, we'll fix the 10th of June for Der Tag. You realise, of course, that the round-up of all must be simultaneous — that's why it takes such a lot of bandobast. By the way, you've got the same problem with the hostages. You can't release one without the others, or the show is given away — not your show only but mine. You realise that?"

"I do," I said, "and I realise that the moving forward of your date narrows my time down to less than two months. If I succeed, I must wait till the very eve of your move. Not earlier, I suppose, than June 9th? Assume I only find one of the three? I wait till June 9th before getting him out of their clutches. Then you strike, and what happens to the other two?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "The worst, I fear. You see, Dick, the gang I mean to crush and the people who hold the hostages are allied, but I take it they are different sets. I may land every member of my gang, and yet not come within

speaking distance of the other lot. I don't know, but I'm pretty certain that even if we found the second lot we'd never be able to prove complicity between the two. The first are devilish deep fellows, but the second are great artists."

"All the same," I said, "I'm in hopes of finding at least one of the hostages, and that means some knowledge of the kidnappers."

"I must not ask, but I'd give my head to know how and where you're working. More power to you! But I wonder if you'll ever get near the real prime fountain of iniquity."

"I wonder," I said, and took my leave.

I had been playing with sickness, and now it looked as if I was going to be punished by getting the real thing. For all the rest of that day I felt cheap, and in the evening I was positive I had a temperature. I thought I might have 'flu, so I went round after dinner to see a doctor whom I had known in France. He refused to admit the temperature. "What sort of life have you been leading these last weeks?" he asked, and when I told him that I had been hanging round London waiting on some tiresome business developments, he said that that was the whole trouble. "You're accustomed to an active life in fresh air and you've been stuffing in town, feeding too well and getting no exercise. Go home tomorrow and you'll be as right as a trivet."

"It rather would suit me to be sick for a spell — say a week."

He looked puzzled and then laughed.

"Oh, if you like I'll give you a chit to say you must go back to the country at once or I won't answer for the consequences."

"I'd like that, but not just yet. I'll ring you up when I want it. Meantime I can take it that there's nothing wrong with me?"

"Nothing that a game of squash and a little Eno won't cure."

"Well, when you send me that chit, say I've got to have a quiet week in bed at home — no visitors — regular rest cure."

"Right," he said. "It's a prescription that every son of Adam might follow with advantage four times a year."

When I got back to the Club I found Medina waiting for me. It was the first time he had visited me there, and I pretended to be delighted to see him — almost embarrassed with delight — and took him to the back smoking-room where I had talked with Sandy. I told him that I was out of sorts, and he was very sympathetic. Then, with a recollection of Sandy's last letter, I started out to blaspheme my gods. He commented on the snugness and seclusion of the little room, which for the moment we had to ourselves.

"It wasn't very peaceful when I was last in it," I said. "I had a row here with that lunatic Arbuthnot before he went abroad."

He looked up at the name.

"You mean you quarrelled. I thought you were old friends."

"Once we were. Now I never want to see the fellow again." I thought I might as well do the job thoroughly, though the words stuck in my throat.

I thought he seemed pleased.

"I told you," he said, "that he didn't attract me."

"Attract!" I cried. "The man has gone entirely to the devil. He has forgotten his manners, his breeding, and everything he once possessed. He has lived so long among cringing Orientals that his head is swollen like a pumpkin. He wanted to dictate to me, and I said I would see him further — and — oh well, we had the usual row. He's gone back to the East, which is the only place for him, and — no! I never want to clap eyes on him again."

There was a purr of satisfaction in his voice, for he believed, as I meant him to, that his influence over me had been strong enough to shatter an ancient friendship. "I am sure you are wise. I have lived in the East and know something of its ways. There is the road of knowledge and the road of illusion, and Arbuthnot has chosen the second. . . . We are friends, Hannay, and I have much to tell you some day — perhaps very soon. I have made a position for myself in the world, but the figure which the world sees is only a little part of me. The only power is knowledge, and I have attained to a knowledge compared with which Arbuthnot's is the merest smattering."

I noticed that he had dropped the easy, well-bred, deprecating manner which I had first noted in him. He spoke to me

now magisterially, arrogantly, almost pompously.

"There has never been a true marriage of East and West," he went on. "To-day we incline to put a false interpretation on the word Power. We think of it in material terms like money, or the control of great patches of inanimate nature. But it still means, as it has always meant, the control of human souls, and to him who acquires that everything else is added. How does such control arise? Partly by knowledge of the intricacies of men's hearts, which is a very different thing from the stock platitudes of the professional psychologists. Partly by that natural dominion of spirit which comes from the possession of certain human qualities in a higher degree than other men. The East has the secret knowledge, but, though it can lay down the practice, it cannot provide the practitioners. The West has the tools, but not the science of their use. There has never, as I have said, been a true marriage of East and West, but when there is, its seed will rule the world."

I was drinking this in with both ears, and murmuring my assent. Now at last I was to be given his confidence, and I prayed that he might be inspired to go on. But he seemed to hesitate, till a glance at my respectful face reassured him. "The day after tomorrow a man will be in London, a man from the East, who is a great master of this knowledge. I shall see him, and you will accompany me. You will understand little, for you are only at the beginning, but you will be in the presence of wisdom."

I murmured that I should feel honoured.

"You will hold yourself free for all that day. The time will probably be the evening."

After that he left with the most perfunctory good-bye. I congratulated myself on having attained to just the kind of position I wanted — that of a disciple whose subjection was so much taken for granted that he was treated like a piece of furniture. From his own point of view Medina was justified; he must have thought the subconscious control so strong, after all the tests I had been through, that my soul was like putty in his hands.

Next day I went down to Fosse and told Mary to expect me back very soon for a day or two. She had never plagued me with questions, but something in my face must have told her that I was hunting a trail, for she asked me for news and looked as if she meant to have it. I admitted that I had found out something, and said I would tell her everything when I next came back. That would only have been prudent, for Mary was a genius at keeping secrets and I wanted some repository of my knowledge in case I got knocked on the head.

When I returned to town I found another note from Sandy, also from France, signed "Alan Breck" — Sandy was terribly out with his Derby winners. It was simply two lines imploring me again to make Medina believe I had broken with him and that he had gone east of Suez for good.

There was also a line from Macgillivray, saying that Dr. Newhover had taken a passage on the Gudrun, leaving Hull at 6.30 p.m. on the 21st, and that a passage had been booked for C. Brand, Esqre, by the same boat. That decided me, so I wrote to my own doctor asking for the chit he had promised, to be dated the 19th. I was busy with a plan, for it seemed to me that it was my duty to follow up the one trail that presented itself, though it meant letting the rest of the business sleep. I longed more than I could say for a talk with Sandy, who was now playing the fool in France and sending me imbecile notes. I also rang up Archie Roylance, and found to my delight that he had not left town, for I ran him to ground at the Travellers', and fixed a meeting for next morning.

"Archie," I said, when we met, "I want to ask a great favour from you. Are you doing anything special in the next fortnight?"

He admitted that he had thought of getting back to Scotland to watch a pair of nesting greenshanks.

"Let the greenshanks alone, like a good fellow. I've probably got to go to Norway on the 21st, and I shall want to get home in the deuce of a hurry. The steamer's far too slow."

"Destroyer," he suggested.

"Hang it, this is not the War. Talk sense. I want an aeroplane, and I want you to fetch me."

Archie whistled long and loud.

"You're a surprisin' old bird, Dick. It's no joke bein' a pal of yours. . . . I dare say I could raise a bus all right. But you've got to chance the weather. And my recollection of Norway is that it's not very well provided with landin' places. What part do you favour?"

I told him the mouth of the Merdalfjord.

“Lord! I’ve been there,” he said. “It’s all as steep as the side of a house.”

“Yes, but I’ve been studying the map, and there are some eligible little islands off the mouth, which look flattish from the contouring. I’m desperately serious, old man. I’m engaged on a job where failure means the loss of innocent lives. I’ll tell you all about it soon, but meantime you must take my word for it.”

I managed to get Archie suitably impressed, and even to interest him in the adventure, for he was never the man to lag behind in anything that included risk and wanted daring. He promised to see Hansen, who had been in his squadron and was believed to have flown many times across the North Sea. As I left him I could see that he was really enormously cheered by the prospect, for if he couldn’t watch his blessed birds the next best thing was to have a chance of breaking his neck.

I had expected to be bidden by Medina to meet his necromancer in some den in the East End or some Bloomsbury lodging-house. Judge of my surprise, then, when I was summoned to Claridge’s for nine-thirty that evening. When I got to the hotel it was difficult to believe that a place so bright and commonplace could hold any mystery. There was the usual dancing going on, and squads of people who had dined well were sitting around watching. Medina was standing by a fireplace talking to a man who wore a long row of miniature medals and a star, and whom I recognised as Tom Machin, who had commanded a cavalry brigade in France. Medina nodded casually to me, and Tom, whom I had not seen for years, made a great fuss.

“Regimental dinner,” he explained. “Came out for a moment to give instructions about my car. Been telling Medina here of the dirty trick the Government have played on my old crowd. I say it’s up to the few sahibs like him in that damned monkey-house at Westminster to make a row about it. You back me up, Hannay. What I say is . . .” and so on with all the eternal iteration of “abso-lutely” and “If you follow me” and “You see what I mean” of the incoherent British regular.

Medina gently disengaged himself. “Sorry, Tom, but I must be off now. You’re dining with Burminster on Thursday aren’t you? We’ll talk about that business then. I agree it’s an infernal shame.”

He signed to me and we went together to the lift. On the first floor, where the main suites are, a turbaned Indian waited for us in the corridor. He led us into a little ante-room, and then disappeared through big folding-doors. I wondered what kind of swell this Oriental necromancer must be who could take rooms like these, for the last time I had been in them was when they were occupied by a Crown Prince who wanted to talk to me about a certain little problem in Anatolia.

“You are about to see Kharáma,” Medina whispered, and there was an odd exaltation in his voice. “You do not know his name, but there are millions in the East who reverence it like that of a god. I last saw him in a hut on the wildest pass in the Karakoram, and now he is in this gilded hotel with the dance-music of the West jiggling below. It is a parable of the unity of all Power.”

The door was opened, and the servant beckoned us to enter. It was a large room furnished with the usual indifferent copies of French furniture — very hot and scented, just the kind of place where international financiers make their deals over liqueur brandy and big cigars, or itinerant stars of the cinema world receive their friends. Bright, hard and glossy, you would have said that no vulgarer environment could be found. . . . And yet after the first glance I did not feel its commonness, for it was filled with the personality of the man who sat on a couch at the far end. I realised that here was one who carried with him his own prepotent atmosphere, and who could transform his surroundings, whether it was a Pamir hut or a London restaurant.

To my surprise he was quite young. His hair was hidden by a great turban, but the face was smooth and hairless, and the figure, so far as I could judge, had not lost the grace of youth. I had imagined someone immensely venerable and old with a beard to his girdle, or, alternately, an obese babu with a soft face like a eunuch. I had forgotten that this man was of the hills. To my amazement he wore ordinary evening dress, well-cut too, I thought, and over it a fine silk dressing-gown. He had his feet tucked up on the couch, but he did not sit cross-legged. At our entrance he slightly inclined his head, while we both bowed. Medina addressed him in some Indian tongue, and he replied, and his voice was like the purr of a big cat.

He motioned us to sit down, looking not so much at us as through us, and while Medina spoke I kept my eyes on his face. It was the thin, high-boned, high-bred face of the hillman; not the Mongolian type, but that other which is like an Arab, the kind of thing you can see in Pathan troops. And yet, though it was as hard as flint and as fierce as Satan, there was a horrid feline softness in it, like that of a man who would never need to strike a blow in anger, since he could win his way otherwise. The brow was straight and heavy, such as I had always associated with mathematical talent, and broader

than is common with Orientals. The eyes I could not see, for he kept them half shut, but there was something uncanny in the way they were chased in his head, with an odd slant the opposite from what you see in the Chinaman. His mouth had a lift at each corner as if he were perpetually sneering, and yet there was a hint of humour in the face, though it was as grave as a stone statue.

I have rarely seen a human being at once so handsome and so repulsive, but both beauty and horror were merged in the impression of ruthless power. I had been sceptical enough about this Eastern image, as I had been sceptical about Medina's arts, because they had failed with me. But as I looked on that dark countenance I had a vision of a world of terrible knowledge, a hideousness like an evil smell, but a power like a blasting wind or a pestilence. . . . Somehow Sandy's talk at the Thursday Club dinner came back to me, about the real danger to the world lying in the constraint of spirit over spirit. This swarthy brute was the priest of that obscene domination, and I had an insane desire there and then to hammer him into pulp.

He was looking at me, and seemed to be asking a question to which Medina replied. I fancy he was told that I was a chela, or whatever was the right name, a well-broken and submissive disciple.

Then to my surprise he spoke in English — good English, with the chi-chi accent of the Indian.

"You have followed far in the path of knowledge, brother. I did not think a son of the West could have travelled so far and so soon. You have won two of the three keys to Mastery, if you can make a man forget his past, and begin life anew subject to your will. But what of the third key?"

I thought Medina's voice had a tinge of disappointment. "It is the third key which I look for, master. What good is it to wipe out the past and establish my control if it is only temporary? I want the third key, to lock the door, so that I have my prisoner safe for ever. Is there such a key?"

"The key is there, but to find it is not easy. All control tends to grow weak and may be broken by an accident, except in the case of young children, and some women, and those of feeble mind."

"That I know," said Medina almost pettishly. "But I do not want to make disciples only of babes, idiots, and women."

"Only some women, I said. Among our women perhaps all, but among Western women, who are hard as men, only the softer and feebler."

"That is my trouble. I wish to control for ever, and to control without constant watching on my part. I have a busy life and time is precious. Tell me, master, is there a way?"

I listened to this conversation with feelings of genuine horror. Now I saw Medina's plans, and I realised that he and he alone was at the bottom of the kidnapping. I realised, too, how he had dealt with the three hostages, and how he proposed to deal. Compared to him a murderer was innocent, for a murderer only took life, while he took the soul. I hated him and that dark scoundrel more intensely than I think I have ever hated man; indeed it was only by a great effort that I checked myself from clutching the two by the throat. The three stories, which had been half forgotten and overlaid by my recent experiences, returned sharp and clear to my memory. I saw again Victor's haggard face, I heard Sir Arthur Warchiff's voice break; and my wrath rose and choked me. This stealing of souls was the worst infamy ever devised by devils among mankind. I must have showed my emotion, but happily the two had no eyes for me.

"There is a way, a sure way," the Indian was saying, and a wicked half-smile flitted over his face. "But it is a way which, though possible in my own country, may be difficult in yours. I am given to understand that your police are troublesome, and you have a public repute, which it is necessary to cherish. There is another way which is slower, but which is also sure, if it is boldly entered upon."

The sage seemed to open his half-shut eyes, and I thought I saw the opaque brightness which comes from drug-taking.

"Him whom you would make your slave," he said, "you first strip of memory, and then attune to your own will. To keep him attuned you must be with him often and reinforce the control. But this is burdensome, and if the slave be kept apart and seen rarely the influence will ebb — except, as I have said, in the case of a young child. There is a way to rivet the bondage and it is this. Take him or her whom you govern into the same life as they have been accustomed to live before, and there, among familiar things, assert your control. Your influence will thus acquire the sanction of familiarity — for though the conscious memory has gone, the unconscious remains — and presently will be a second nature."

"I see," said Medina abstractedly. "I had already guessed as much. Tell me, master, can the dominion, once it is established, be shaken off?"

“It cannot save by the will of him who exercises it. Only the master can release.”

After that they spoke again in the foreign tongue of I know not what devilry. It seemed to me that the sage was beginning to tire of the interview, for he rang a bell and when the servant appeared gave him some rapid instructions. Medina rose, and kissed the hand which was held out to him, and I, of course, followed suit.

“You stay here long, master?” he asked.

“Two days. Then I have business in Paris and elsewhere. But I return in May, when I will summon you again. Prosper, brother. The God of Wisdom befriend you.”

We went downstairs to the dancing and the supper parties. The regimental dinner was breaking up and Tom Machin was holding forth in the hall to a knot of bemedalled friends. I had to say something to Medina to round off the evening, and the contrast of the two scenes seemed to give me a cue. As we were putting on our coats I observed that it was like coming from light to darkness. He approved. “Like falling from a real world into shadows,” he said.

He evidently wished to follow his own thoughts, for he did not ask me to walk home with him. I, too, had a lot to think about. When I got back to the Club I found a note signed “Spion Kop,” and with an English postmark.

“Meet me,” it said, “on the 21st for breakfast at the inn called ‘The Silent Woman’ on the Fosse Way as you go over from Colne to Windrush. I have a lot to tell you.”

I thanked Heaven that Sandy was home again, though he chose fantastic spots for his assignments. I, too, had something to say to him. For that evening had given me an insight into Medina’s mind, and, what was more, the glimmerings of a plan of my own.



CHAPTER X

CONFIDENCES AT A WAYSIDE INN

My first impulse was to go to Macgillivray about this Kharáma fellow, who I was certain was up to mischief. I suspected him of some kind of political intrigue; otherwise what was he doing touring the capitals of Europe and putting up at expensive hotels? But on second thoughts I resolved to let the police alone. I could not explain about Kharáma without bringing in Medina, and I was determined to do nothing which would stir a breath of suspicion against him. But I got the chit from my doctor, recommending a week's rest, and I went round to see Medina on the morning of the 19th. I told him I had been feeling pretty cheap for some days and that my doctor ordered me to go home and go to bed. He didn't look pleased, so I showed him the doctor's letter, and made a poor mouth, as if I hated the business but was torn between my inclinations and my duty. I think he liked my producing that chit, like a second-lieutenant asking for leave, anyhow he made the best of it and was quite sympathetic. "I'm sorry you're going out of town," he said, "for I want you badly. But it's as well to get quite fit, and to lie up for a week ought to put you all right. When am I to expect you back?" I told him that without fail I would be in London on the 29th. "I'm going to disappear into a monastery," I said. "Write no letters, receive none, not at home to visitors, only sleep and eat. I can promise you that my wife will watch me like a dragon."

Then I hunted up Archie Roylance, whom I found on the very top of his form. He had seen Hansen, and discovered that on the island of Flacksholm, just off the mouth of the Merdalfjord, there was good landing. It was a big flattish island with a loch in the centre, and entirely uninhabited except for a farm at the south end. Archie had got a machine, a Sopwith, which he said he could trust, and I arranged with him to be at Flacksholm not later than the 27th, and to camp there as best he could. He was to keep watch by day for a motor-boat from the Merdalfjord, and at night if he saw a green light he was to make for it. I told him to take ample supplies, and he replied that he wasn't such a fool as to neglect the commissariat. He said he had been to Fortnum & Mason and was going to load up with liqueurs and delicatessen. "Take all the clothes you've got, Dick," he added. "It will be perishing cold in those parts at this time of year." He arranged, too, to cable through Hansen for a motor-launch to be ready at Stavanger for a Mr. Brand who was due by the Hull steamer on the morning of the 23rd. If I had to change my plans I was to wire him at once.

That evening I went down to Fosse a little easier in my mind. It was a blessed relief to get out of London and smell clean air, and to reflect that for a week at any rate I should be engaged in a more congenial job than loafing about town. I found Peter John in the best of health and the Manor garden a glory of spring flowers.

I told Mary that I was ordered by my doctor to go to bed for a week and take a rest cure.

"Dick," she asked anxiously, "you're not ill, are you?"

"Not a bit, only a trifle stale. But officially I'm to be in bed for a week and not a blessed soul is to be allowed to come near me. Tell the servants, please, and get the cook on to invalid dishes. I'll take Paddock into my confidence, and he'll keep up a show of waiting on me."

"A show?"

"Yes, for you see I'm going to put in a week in Norway — that is, unless Sandy has anything to say against it."

"But I thought Colonel Arbuthnot was still abroad?"

"So he is — officially. But I'm going to breakfast with him the day after tomorrow at The Silent Woman — you remember, the inn we used to have supper at last summer when I was fishing the Colne."

"Dick," she said solemnly, "isn't it time you told me a little more about what you're doing?"

"I think it is," I agreed, and that night after dinner I told her everything.

She asked a great many questions, searching questions, for Mary's brain was about twice as good as mine. Then she sat pondering for a long time with her chin on her hand.

"I wish I had met Mr. Medina," she said at last. "Aunt Claire and Aunt Doria know him. . . . I am afraid of him, terribly afraid, and I think I should be less afraid if I could just see him once. It is horrible, Dick, and you are fighting with such strange weapons. Your only advantage is that you're such a gnarled piece of oak. I wish I could help. It's dreadful to have to wait here and be tortured by anxiety for you, and to be thinking all the time of those poor people. I can't get the little boy

out of my head. I often wake in a terror, and have to go up to the night-nursery to hug Peter John. Nanny must think I'm mad. . . . I suppose you're right to go to Norway?"

"I see no other way. We have a clue to the whereabouts of one of the hostages — I haven't a notion which. I must act on that, and besides, if I find one it may give me a line on the others."

"There will still be two lost," she said, "and the time grows fearfully short. You are only one man. Can you not get helpers? Mr. Macgillivray?"

"No. He has his own job, and to let him into mine would wreck both."

"Well, Colonel Arbuthnot? What is he doing?"

"Oh, Sandy's busy enough, and, thank God! he's back in England. I'll know more about his game when I see him, but you may be sure it's a deep one. While I'm away Sandy will be working all the time."

"Do you know, I have never met him. Couldn't I see him some time when you're away? It would be a great comfort to me. And, Dick, can't I help somehow? We've always shared everything, even before we were married, and you know I'm dependable."

"Indeed I do, my darling," I said. "But I can't see how you can help — yet. If I could, I would inspan you straight off, for I would rather have you with me than a regiment."

"It's the poor little boy. I could endure the rest, but the thought of him makes me crazy. Have you seen Sir Arthur?"

"No, I have avoided him. I can stand the sight of Victor and the Duke, but I swear I shall never look Sir Arthur in the face unless I can hand him over his son."

Then Mary got up and stood over me like a delivering angel.

"It is going to be done," she cried. "Dick, you must never give up. I believe in my heart we shall win. We must win or I shall never be able to kiss Peter John again with a quiet mind. Oh, I wish — I wish I could do something."

I don't think Mary slept that night, and next morning she was rather pale and her eyes had that funny long-sighted look that they had had when I said good-bye to her at Amiens in March '18, before going up to the line.

I spent a blissful day with her and Peter John wandering round our little estate. It was one of those April days which seem to have been borrowed from late May, when you have the warmth of summer joined with the austerity and fresh colouring of spring. The riot of daffodils under the trees was something to thank God for, the banks of the little lake were one cascade of grape hyacinths, blue and white, and every dell in the woods was bright with primroses. We occupied the morning deepening the pools in a tiny stream which was to be one of the spawning-grounds for the new trout in the lake, and Peter John showed conspicuous talent as a hydraulic engineer. His nurse, who was a middle-aged Scotswoman from the Cheviots, finally carried him off for his morning rest, and when he had gone, Mary desisted from her watery excavations and sat down on a bank of periwinkles.

"What do you really think of Nanny?" she asked.

"About as good as they make," I replied.

"That's what I think too. You know, Dick, I feel I'm far too fussy about Peter John. I give hours of my time to him, and it's quite unnecessary. Nanny can do everything better than I can. I scarcely dare let him out of my sight, and yet I'm certain that I could safely leave him for weeks with Nanny and Paddock — and Dr. Greenslade within call."

"Of course you could," I agreed, "but you'd miss him, as I do, for he's jolly good company."

"Yes, he's jolly good company, the dear fellow," she said.

In the afternoon we went for a canter on the downs, and I came back feeling as fit as a race-horse and keyed up for anything. But that evening, as we walked in the garden before dinner, I had another fit of longing to be free of the business and to return to my quiet life. I realised that I had buried my heart in my pleasant acres, and the thought of how much I loved them made me almost timid. I think Mary understood what I was feeling, for she insisted on talking about David Wardcliff, and before I went to bed had worked me into that honest indignation which is the best stiffener of resolution. She went over my plans with me very carefully. On the 28th, if I could manage it, I was to come home, but if I was short of time I was to send her a wire and go straight to London. The pretence of my being in bed was to be religiously kept up. For safety's sake I was to sign every wire with the name of Cornelius.

Very early next morning, long before anyone was stirring, I started the big Vauxhall with Paddock's assistance, and,

accompanied by a very modest kit, crept down the avenue. Paddock, who could drive a car, was to return to the house about ten o'clock, and explain to my chauffeur that by my orders he had taken the Vauxhall over to Oxford as a loan for a week to a friend of mine. I drove fast out of the silent hill roads and on to the great Roman way which lay like a strap across the highlands. It was not much after six o'clock when I reached The Silent Woman, which sat like an observation post on a ridge of down, at a junction of four roads. Smoke was going up from its chimneys, so I judged that Sandy had ordered early breakfast. Presently, as I was garaging the car in an outhouse, Sandy appeared in flannel bags and a tweed jacket, looking as fresh as paint and uncommonly sunburnt.

"I hope you're hungry," he said. "Capital fellow the landlord! He knows what a man's appetite is. I ordered eggs, kidneys, sausages and cold ham, and he seemed to expect it. Yes. These are my headquarters for the present, though Advanced G.H.Q. is elsewhere. By the by, Dick, just for an extra precaution, my name's Thomson — Alexander Thomson — and I'm a dramatic critic taking a belated Easter holiday."

The breakfast was as good as Sandy had promised, and what with the run in the fresh air and the sight of him opposite me I began to feel light-hearted.

"I got your letters," I said, "but, I say, your knowledge of Derby winners is pretty rocky. I thought that was the kind of information no gentleman was without."

"I'm the exception. Did you act on them?"

"I told Medina I had broken with you for good and never wanted to see your face again. But why did you make such a point of it?"

"Simply because I wanted to be rid of his attentions, and I reckoned that if he thought we had quarrelled and that I had gone off for good, he might let me alone. You see he has been trying hard to murder me."

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "When?"

"Four times," said Sandy calmly, counting on his fingers. "Once before I left London. Oh, I can tell you I had an exciting departure. Three times in Paris, the last time only four days ago. I fancy he's off my trail now, for he really thinks I sailed from Marseilles the day before yesterday."

"But why on earth?"

"Well, I made some ill-advised remarks at the Thursday Club dinner. He believes that I'm the only man alive who might uncover him, and he won't sleep peacefully till he knows that I am out of Europe and is convinced that I suspect nothing. I sent you those letters because I wanted to be let alone, seeing I had a lot to do, and nothing wastes time like dodging assassins. But my chief reason was to protect YOU. You mayn't know it, Dick, but you've been walking for three weeks on the edge of a precipice with one foot nearly over. You've been in the most hideous danger, and I was never more relieved in my life than when I saw your solemn old face this morning. You were only safe when he regarded our friendship as broken and me out of the way and you his blind and devoted slave."

"I'm that all right," I said. "There's been nothing like it since Uncle Tom's Cabin."

"Good. That's the great thing, for it gives us a post in the enemy's citadel. But we're only at the beginning of a tremendous fight and there's no saying how it will go. Have you sized up Medina?"

"Only a little bit. Have you?"

"I'm on the road. He's the most complex thing I've ever struck. But now we've got to pool our knowledge. Shall I start?"

"Yes. Begin at the Thursday dinner. What started you off then? I could see that something he said intrigued you."

"I must begin before that. You see, I'd heard a good deal about Medina up and down the world and couldn't for the life of me place him. Everybody swore by him, but I had always a queer feeling about the man. I told you about Lavater. Well, I had nothing to go upon there except the notion that his influence upon my friend had been bad. So I began making inquiries, and, as you know, I've more facilities than most people for finding things out. I was curious to know what he had been doing during the War. The ordinary story was that he had been for the first two years pretty well lost in Central Asia, where he had gone on a scientific expedition, and that after that he has been with the Russians, and had finished up by doing great work with Denikin. I went into that story and discovered that he had been in Central Asia all right, but had never been near any fighting front and had never been within a thousand miles of Denikin. That's what I meant when I told

you that I believed the man was one vast lie.”

“He made everybody believe it.”

“That’s the point. He made the whole world believe what he wanted. Therefore he must be something quite out of the common — a propagandist of genius. That was my first conclusion. But how did he work? He must have a wonderful organisation, but he must have something more — the kind of personality which can diffuse itself like an atmosphere and which, like an electric current, is not weakened by distance. He must also have unique hypnotic powers. I had made a study of that in the East and had discovered how little we know here about the compulsion of spirit by spirit. That, I have always believed, is today, and ever has been, the true magic. You remember I said something about that at the Thursday dinner?”

I nodded. “I suppose you did it to try him?”

“Yes. It wasn’t very wise, for I might easily have frightened him. But I was luckier than I deserved, and I drew from him a tremendous confession.”

“The Latin quotation?”

“The Latin quotation. *Sit vini abstemius qui hermeneuma tentat aut hominum petit dominatum*. I nearly had a fit when I heard it. Listen, Dick. I’ve always had a craze for recondite subjects, and when I was at Oxford I wasted my time on them when I should have been working for my schools. I only got a third in Greats, but I acquired a lot of unusual information. One of my subjects was Michael Scott. Yes — the wizard, only he wasn’t a wizard, but a very patient and original thinker. He was a Borderer like me, and I started out to write a life of him. I kept up the study, and when I was at the Paris Embassy I spent my leisure tracking him through the libraries of Europe. Most of his works were published in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and mighty dull they are, but there are some still in manuscript, and I had always the hope of discovering more, for I was positive that the real Michael Scott was something far bigger than the translator and commentator whom we know. I believed that he taught the mad Emperor Ferdinand some queer things, and that the centre of his teaching was just how one human soul could control another. Well, as it turned out, I was right. I found some leaves of manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale, which I was certain were to be attributed to Michael. One of his best-known works, you remember, is the *Physionomia*, but that is only a version of Aristotle. This, too, was part of a *Physionomia*, and a very different thing from the other, for it purported to give the essence of the *Secreta Secretorum* — it would take too long to explain about that — and the teaching of the *Therapeutae*, with Michael’s own comments. It is a manual of the arts of spiritual control — oh, amazingly up-to-date, I assure you, and a long way ahead of our foolish psycho-analysts. Well, that quotation of Medina’s comes from that fragment — the rare word ‘hermeneuma’ caught my attention as soon as he uttered it. That proved that Medina was a student of Michael Scott, and showed me what was the bent of his mind.”

“Well, he gave himself away then, and you didn’t.”

“Oh yes, I did. You remember I asked him if he knew the guru who lived at the foot of the Shansi pass as you go over to Kaikand? That was a bad blunder, and it is on account of that question that he has been trying to remove me from the earth. For it was from that guru that he learned most of his art.”

“Was the guru’s name Kharáma?” I asked.

Sandy stared as if he had seen a ghost.

“Now how on earth do you know that?”

“Simply because I spent an hour with him and Medina a few nights ago.”

“The devil you did! Kharáma in London! Lord, Dick, this is an awesome business. Quick, tell me every single thing that passed.”

I told him as well as I remembered, and he seemed to forget his alarm and to be well satisfied. “This is tremendously important. You see the point of Medina’s talk? He wants to rivet his control over those three unfortunate devils, and to do that he is advised to assert it in some environment similar to that of their past lives. That gives us a chance to get on their track. And the control can only be released by him who first imposed it! I happened to know that, but I was not sure that Medina knew it. It is highly important to have found this out.”

“Finish your story,” I begged him. “I want to know what you have been doing abroad?”

“I continued my studies in the Bibliothèque Nationale, and I found that, as I suspected, Medina, or somebody like him,

had got on to the Michael Scott MS. and had had a transcript made of it. I pushed my researches further, for Michael wasn't the only pebble on the beach, though he was the biggest. Lord, Dick, it's a queer business in a problem like ours to have to dig for help in the debris of the Middle Ages. I found out something — not much, but something."

"And then?"

"Oh, all the time I was making inquiries about Medina's past — not very fruitful — I've told you most of the results. Then I went to see Ram Dass — you remember my speaking about him. I thought he was in Munich, but I found him in Westphalia, keeping an eye on the German industrials. Don't go to Germany for a holiday, Dick; it's a sad country and a comfortless. I had to see Ram Dass, for he happens to be the brother of Kharáma."

"What size of a fellow is Kharáma?" I asked.

Sandy's reply was: "For knowledge of the practice unequalled but only a second-class practitioner"— exactly what Medina had said.

"Ram Dass told me most of what I wanted to know. But he isn't aware that his brother is in Europe. I rather fancy he thinks he is dead. . . . That's all I need tell you now. Fire away, Dick, and give me an exact account of your own doings."

I explained as best I could the gradual change in Medina's manner from friendship to proprietorship. I told how he had begun to talk freely to me, as if I were a disciple, and I described that extraordinary evening in Hill Street when I had met his mother."

"His mother!" Sandy exclaimed, and made me go over every incident several times — the slap in the face, the spitting, my ultimate fainting. He seemed to enjoy it immensely. "Good business," he said. "You never did a better day's work, old man."

"I have found the Blind Spinner at any rate," I said.

"Yes. I had half guessed it. I didn't mention it, but when I got into the house in Gospel Oak as the electric light man, I found a spinning-wheel in the back room, and they had been burning peat on the hearth. Well, that's Number One."

"I think I am on my way to find Number Two," I said, and I told him of the talk I had overheard between the two about secundus and sending "the doctor" somewhere, and of how I had discovered that Dr. Newhover was starting this very day for the Skarso. "It's the first clear clue," I said, "and I think I ought to follow it up."

"Yes. What do you propose to do?"

"I am travelling this evening on the Gudrun and I'm going to trail the fellow till I find out his game. I'm bound to act upon what little information we've got."

"I agree. But this means a long absence from London, and secundus is only one of three."

"Just a week," I said. "I've got sick leave from Medina for a week, and I'm supposed to be having a rest cure at Fosse, with Mary warding off visitors. I've arranged with Archie Roylance to pick me up in an aeroplane about the 28th and bring me back. It doesn't allow me much time, but an active man can do the deuce of a lot in a week."

"Bravo!" he cried. "That's your old moss-trooping self!"

"Do you approve?"

"Entirely. And, whatever happens, you present yourself to Medina on the 29th? That leaves us about six weeks for the rest of the job."

"More like five," I said gloomily, and I told him how I had learnt that the gang proposed to liquidate by midsummer, and that Macgillivray had therefore moved the date when he would take action ten days forward. "You see how we are placed. He must collect all the gang at the same moment, and we must release all three hostages, if we can, at the same time. The releasing mustn't be done too soon or it will warn the gang. Therefore if Macgillivray strikes on the 10th of June, we must be ready to strike not earlier than the 9th and, of course, not later."

"I see," he said, and was silent for a little. "Have you anything more to tell me?"

I ransacked my memory and remembered about Odell. He wrote down the name of the dancing club where I had seen that unprepossessing butler. I mentioned that I had asked Macgillivray to get on to his dossier.

"You haven't told Macgillivray too much?" he inquired anxiously and seemed relieved when I replied that I had never mentioned the Medina business.

"Well, here's the position," he said at last. "You go off for a week hunting Number Two. We are pretty certain that we

have got Number One. Number Three — that nonsense about the fields of Eden and the Jew with a dyed beard in a curiosity shop in Marylebone — still eludes us. And of course we have as yet no word of any of the three hostages. There's a terrible lot still to do. How do you envisage the thing, Dick? Do you think of the three, the girl, the young man, and the boy, shut up somewhere and guarded by Medina's minions? Do you imagine that if we find their places of concealment we shall have done the job?"

"That was my idea."

He shook his head. "It is far subtler than that. Did no one ever tell you that the best way of hiding a person is to strip him of his memory? Why is it that when a man loses his memory he is so hard to find? You see it constantly in the newspapers. Even a well-known figure, if he loses his memory and wanders away, is only discovered by accident. The reason is that the human personality is identified far less by appearance than by its habits and mind. Loss of memory means the loss of all true marks of identification, and the physical look alters to correspond. Medina has stolen these three poor souls' memories and set them adrift like waifs. David Wardcliff may at this moment be playing in a London gutter along with a dozen guttersnipes and his own father could scarcely pick him out from the rest. Mercot may be a dock labourer or a deck hand, whom you wouldn't recognise if you met him, though you had sat opposite him in a college hall every night for a year. And Miss Victor may be in a gaiety chorus or a milliner's assistant or a girl in a dancing saloon. . . . Wait a minute. You saw Odell at a dance-club? There may be something in that." I could see his eyes abstracted in thought.

"There's another thing I forgot to mention," I said. "Miss Victor's fiancé is over here, staying in Carlton House Terrace. He is old Turpin, who used to be with the division — the Marquis de la Tour du Pin."

Sandy wrote the name down. "Her fiancé. He may come in useful. What sort of fellow?"

"Brave as a lion, but he'll want watching, for he's a bit of a Gascon."

We went out after breakfast and sat in an arbour looking down a shallow side-valley to the upper streams of the Windrush. The sounds of morning were beginning to rise from the little village far away in the bottom, the jolt of a wagon, the "clink-clenk" from the smithy, the babble of children at play. In a fortnight the may-fly would be here, and every laburnum and guelder rose in bloom. Sandy, who had been away from England for years, did not speak for a long time, but drank in the sweet-scented peace of it. "Poor devil," he said at last. "He has nothing like this to love. He can only hate."

I asked whom he was talking about, and he said "Medina."

"I'm trying to understand him. You can't fight a man unless you understand him, and in a way sympathise with him."

"Well, I can't say I sympathise with him, and I most certainly don't understand him."

"Do you remember once telling me that he had no vanity? You were badly out there. He has a vanity which amounts to delirium."

"This is how I read him," he went on. "To begin with, there's a far-away streak of the Latin in him, but he is mainly Irish, and that never makes a good cross. He's the *déraciné* Irish, such as you find in America. I take it that he imbibed from that terrible old woman — I've never met her, but I see her plainly and I know that she is terrible — he imbibed that venomous hatred of imaginary things — an imaginary England, an imaginary civilisation, which they call love of country. There is no love in it. They think there is, and sentimentalise about an old simplicity, and spinning wheels and turf fires and an uncouth language, but it's all hollow. There's plenty of decent plain folk in Ireland, but his kind of *déraciné* is a ghastly throw-back to something you find in the dawn of history, hollow and cruel like the fantastic gods of their own myths. Well, you start with this ingrained hate."

"I agree about the old lady. She looked like Lady Macbeth."

"But hate soon becomes conceit. If you hate, you despise, and when you despise you esteem inordinately the self which despises. This is how I look at it, but remember, I'm still in the dark and only feeling my way to an understanding. I see Medina growing up — I don't know in what environment — conscious of great talents and immense good looks, flattered by those around him till he thinks himself a god. His hatred does not die, but it is transformed into a colossal egotism and vanity, which, of course, is a form of hate. He discovers quite early that he has this remarkable hypnotic power — Oh, you may laugh at it, because you happen to be immune from it, but it is a big thing in the world for all that. He discovers another thing — that he has an extraordinary gift of attracting people and making them believe in him. Some of the worst scoundrels in history have had it. Now, remember his vanity. It makes him want to play the biggest game. He does not want to be a king among pariahs; he wants to be the ruler of what is most strange to him, what he hates and in an unwilling

bitter way admires. So he aims at conquering the very heart, the very soundest part of our society. Above all he wants to be admired by men and admitted into the innermost circle.”

“He has succeeded all right,” I said.

“He has succeeded, and that is the greatest possible tribute to his huge cleverness. Everything about him is dead right — clothes, manner, modesty, accomplishments. He has made himself an excellent sportsman. Do you know why he shoots so well, Dick? By faith — or fatalism, if you like. His vanity doesn’t allow him to believe that he could miss. . . . But he governs himself strictly. In his life he is practically an ascetic, and though he is adored by women he doesn’t care a straw for them. There are no lusts of the flesh in that kind of character. He has one absorbing passion which subdues all others — what our friend Michael Scott called ‘hominum dominatus.’”

“I see that. But how do you explain the other side?”

“It is all the ancestral hate. First of all, of course, he has got to have money, so he gets it in the way Macgillivray knows about. Second, he wants to build up a regiment of faithful slaves. That’s where you come in, Dick. There is always that inhuman hate at the back of his egotism. He wants to conquer in order to destroy, for destruction is the finest meat for his vanity. You’ll find the same thing in the lives of Eastern tyrants, for when a man aspires to be like God he becomes an incarnate devil.”

“It is a tough proposition,” I observed dismally.

“It would be an impossible proposition, but for one thing. He is always in danger of giving himself away out of sheer arrogance. Did you ever read the old Irish folk-lore? Very beautiful it is, but there is always something fantastic and silly which mars the finest stories. They lack the grave good-sense which you find in the Norse sagas and, of course, in the Greek. Well, he has this freakish element in his blood. That is why he sent out that rhyme about the three hostages, which by an amazing concatenation of chances put you on to his trail. Our hope is — and, mind you, I think it is a slender hope — that his vanity may urge him to further indiscretions.”

“I don’t know how you feel about it,” I said, “but I’ve got a pretty healthy hatred for that lad. I’m longing for a quiet life, but I swear I won’t settle down again till I’ve got even with him.”

“You never will,” said Sandy solemnly. “Don’t let’s flatter ourselves that you and I are going to down Medina. We are not. A very wise man once said to me that in this life you could often get success, if you didn’t want victory. In this case we’re out for success only. We want to release the hostages. Victory we can never hope for. Why, man, supposing we succeed fully, we’ll never be able to connect Medina with the thing. His tools are faithful, because he has stolen their souls and they work blindly under him. Supposing Macgillivray rounds up all the big gang and puts the halter round their necks. There will be none of them to turn King’s evidence and give Medina away. Why? Because none of them KNOW anything against him. They’re his unconscious agents, and very likely most have never seen him. And you may be pretty sure that his banking accounts are too skilfully arranged to show anything.”

“All the same,” I said stubbornly, “I have a notion that I’ll be able to put a spoke in his wheel.”

“Oh, I dare say we can sow suspicion, but I believe he’ll be too strong for us. He’ll advance in his glorious career, and may become Prime Minister — or Viceroy of India — what a chance the second would be for him! — and publish exquisite little poetry books, as finished and melancholy as *The Shropshire Lad*. Pessimism, you know, is often a form of vanity.”

At midday it was time for me to be off, if I was to be at Hull by six o’clock. I asked Sandy what he proposed to do next, and he said he was undecided. “My position,” he said, “badly cramps my form. It would be ruination if Medina knew I was in England — ruination for both you and me. Mr. Alexander Thomson must lie very low. I must somehow get in touch with Macgillivray to hear if he has anything about Odell. I rather fancy Odell. But there will probably be nothing doing till you come back, and I think I’ll have a little fishing.”

“Suppose I want to get hold of you?”

“Suppose nothing of the kind. You mustn’t make any move in my direction. That’s our only safety. If I want you I’ll come to you.”

As I was starting he said suddenly: “I’ve never met your wife, Dick. What about my going over to Fosse and introducing myself?”

“The very thing,” I cried. “She is longing to meet you. But remember that I’m supposed to be lying sick upstairs.” As I looked back he was waving his hand, and his face wore its familiar elfish smile.

CHAPTER XI

HOW A GERMAN ENGINEER FOUND STRANGE FISHING

I got to Hull about six o'clock, having left my car at a garage in York, and finished the journey by train. I had my kit in a small suit-case and rucksack, and I waited on the quay till I saw Dr. Newhover arrive with a lot of luggage and a big rod-box. When I reckoned he would be in his cabin arranging his belongings, I went on board myself, and went straight to my own cabin, which was a comfortable two-berthed one well forward. There I had sandwiches brought me, and settled myself to doze and read for thirty-six hours.

All that night and all next day it blew fairly hard, and I remained quietly in my bunk, trying to read Boswell's Life of Johnson, and thanking my stars that I hadn't lived a thousand years earlier and been a Viking. I didn't see myself ploughing those short steep seas in an open galley. I woke on the morning of the 23rd to find the uneasy motion at an end, and, looking out of my port-hole, saw a space of green sunlit water, a rocky beach, and the white and red of a little town. The Gudrun waited about an hour at Stavanger, so I gave Dr. Newhover time to get on shore, before I had a hurried breakfast in the saloon and followed him. I saw him go off with two men, and get on board a motor-launch which was lying beside one of the jetties. The coast was now clear, so I went into the town, found the agents to whom Archie Roylance had cabled, and learned that my own motor-launch was ready and waiting in the inner harbour where the fishing-boats lie. A clerk took me down there, and introduced me to Johan, my skipper, a big, cheerful, bearded Norwegian, who had a smattering of English. I bought a quantity of provisions, and by ten o'clock we were on the move. I asked Johan about the route to Merdal, and he pointed out a moving speck a couple of miles ahead of us. "That is Kristian Egge's boat," he said. "He carries an English fisherman to Merdal and we follow." I got my glasses on the craft, and made out Newhover smoking in the stern.

It was a gorgeous day, with that funny Northern light which makes noon seem like early morning. I enjoyed every hour of it, partly because I had now a definite job before me, and partly because I was in the open air to which I properly belonged. I got no end of amusement watching the wild life — the cormorants and eider-duck on the little islands, and the seals, with heads as round as Medina's, that slipped off the skerries at our approach. The air was chilly and fresh, but when we turned the corner of the Merdalfjord out of the sea-wind and the sun climbed the sky it was as warm as June. A big flat island we passed, all short turf and rocky outcrops, was pointed out to me by Johan as Flacksholm. Soon we were shaping due east in an inlet which was surrounded by dark steep hills, with the snow lying in the gullies. I had Boswell with me in two volumes; the first I had read in the steamer, and the second I was now starting on, when it fell overboard, through my getting up in a hurry to look at a flock of duck. So I presented the odd volume to Johan, and surrendered myself to tobacco and meditation.

In the afternoon the inlet narrowed to a fjord, and the walls of hill grew steeper. They were noble mountains, cut sharp like the edge of the Drakensberg, and crowned with a line of snow, so that they looked like a sugar-coated cake that had been sliced. Streams came out of the upper snow-wreaths and hurled themselves down the steepes — above a shimmering veil of mist, and below a torrent of green water tumbling over pebbles to the sea. The landscape and the weather lulled me into a delectable peace which refused to be disturbed by any "looking before or after," as some poet says. Newhover was ahead of me — we never lost track of his launch — and it was my business to see what he was up to and to keep myself out of his sight. The ways and means of it I left to fortune to provide.

By and by the light grew dimmer, and the fjord grew narrower, so that dusk fell on us, though, looking back down the inlet, we could see a bright twilight. I assumed that Newhover would go on to Merdal and the fjord's head, where the Skarso entered the sea, and had decided to stop at Hauge, a village two miles short of it, on the south shore. We came to Hauge about half-past eight, in a wonderful purple dusk, for the place lay right under the shadow of a great cliff. I gave Johan full instructions: he was to wait for me and expect me when I turned up, and to provision himself from the village. On no account must he come up to Merdal, or go out of sight or hail of the boat. He seemed to relish the prospect of a few days' idleness, for he landed me at a wooden jetty in great good-humour, and wished me sport. What he thought I was after I cannot imagine, for I departed with a rucksack on my back and a stout stick in my hand, which scarcely suggested the chase.

I was in good spirits myself as I stretched my legs on the road which led from Hauge to Merdal. The upper fjord lay black on my left hand, the mountains rose black on my right, but though I walked in darkness I could see twilight ahead of me, where the hills fell back from the Skarso valley, that wonderful apple-green twilight which even in spring is all the northern night. I had never seen it before, and I suppose something in my blood answered to the place — for my father used to say that the Hannays came originally from Norse stock. There was a jolly crying of birds from the waters, ducks and geese and oyster-catchers and sandpipers, and now and then would come a great splash as if a salmon were jumping in the brackish tides on his way to the Skarso. I was thinking longingly of my rods left behind, when on turning a corner the lights of Merdal showed ahead, and it seemed to me that I had better be thinking of my next step.

I knew no Norwegian, but I counted on finding natives who could speak English, seeing so many of them have been in England or America. Newhover, I assumed, would go to the one hotel, and it was for me to find lodgings elsewhere. I began to think this spying business might be more difficult than I had thought, for if he saw me he would recognise me, and that must not happen. I was ready, of course, with a story of a walking tour, but he would be certain to suspect, and certain to let Medina know. . . . Well, a lodging for the night was my first business, and I must start inquiries. Presently I came to the little pier of Merdal, which was short of the village itself. There were several men sitting smoking on barrels and coils of rope, and one who stood at the end looking out to where Kristian Egge's boat, which had brought Newhover, lay moored. I turned down the road to it, for it seemed a place to gather information.

I said good evening to the men, and was just about to ask them for advice about quarters, when the man who had been looking out to sea turned round at the sound of my voice. He seemed an oldish fellow, with rather a stoop in his back, wearing an ancient shooting-jacket. The light was bad, but there was something in the cut of his jib that struck me as familiar, though I couldn't put a name to it.

I spoke to the Norwegians in English, but it was obvious that I had hit on a bunch of indifferent linguists. They shook their heads, and one pointed to the village, as if to tell me that I would be better understood there. Then the man in the shooting-jacket spoke.

"Perhaps I can help," he said. "There is a good inn in Merdal, which at this season is not full."

He spoke excellent English, but it was obvious that he wasn't an Englishman. There was an unmistakable emphasis of the gutturals.

"I doubt the inn may be too good for my purse," I said. "I am on a walking-tour and must lodge cheaply."

He laughed pleasantly. "There may be accommodation elsewhere. Peter Bojer may have a spare bed. I am going that way, sir, and can direct you."

He had turned towards me, and his figure caught the beam of the riding-light of the motor-launch. I saw a thin sunburnt face with a very pleasant expression, and an untidy grizzled beard. Then I knew him, and I could have shouted with amazement at the chance which had brought us two together again.

We walked side by side up the jetty road and on to the highway.

"I think," I said, "that we have met before, Herr Gaudian."

He stopped short. "That is my name . . . but I do not . . . I do not think . . ."

"Do you remember a certain Dutchman called Cornelius Brandt whom you entertained at your country house one night in December '15?"

He looked searchingly in my face.

"I remember," he said. "I also remember a Mr. Richard Hanau, one of Guggenheim's engineers, with whom I talked at Constantinople."

"The same," I said. For a moment I was not clear how he was going to take the revelation, but his next action reassured me, and I saw that I had not been wrong in my estimate of the one German I have ever wholeheartedly liked. He began to laugh, a friendly tolerant laugh.

"Kritzi Turken!" he cried. "It is indeed romantic. I have often wondered whether I should see or hear of you again, and behold! you step out of the darkness on a Norwegian fjord."

"You bear no malice?" I said. "I served my country as you served yours. I played fair, as you played fair."

"Malice!" he cried. "But we are gentlemen; also we are not children. I rejoice to see that you have survived the War. I

have always wished you well, for you are a very bold and brave man.”

“Not a bit of it,” I said — “only lucky.”

“By what name shall I call you now — Brandt or Hanau?”

“My name is Richard Hannay, but for the present I am calling myself Cornelius Brand — for a reason which I am going to tell you.” I had suddenly made up my mind to take Gaudian into my full confidence. He seemed to have been sent by Providence for that purpose, and I was not going to let such a chance slip.

But at my words he stopped short.

“Mr. Hannay,” he said, “I do not want your confidence. You are still engaged, I take it, in your country’s service? I do not question your motive, but remember I am a German, and I cannot be party to the pursuit of one of my countrymen, however base I may think him.”

I could only stare. “But I am not in my country’s service,” I stammered. “I left it at the Armistice, and I’m a farmer now.”

“Do English farmers travel in Norway under false names?”

“That’s a private business which I want to explain to you. I assure you there is no German in it. I want to keep an eye on the doings of a fashionable English doctor.”

“I must believe you,” he said after a pause. “But two hours ago a man arrived in the launch you see anchored out there. He is a fisherman and is now at the inn. That man is known to me — too well known. He is a German, who during the War served Germany in secret ways, in America and elsewhere. I did not love him and I think he did my country grievous ill, but that is a matter for us Germans to settle, and not for foreigners.”

“I know your man as Dr. Newhover of Wimpole Street.”

“So?” he said. “He has taken again his father’s name, which was Neuhofer. We knew him as Kristoffer. What do you want with him?”

“Nothing that any honest German wouldn’t approve,” and there and then I gave him a sketch of the Medina business. He exclaimed in horror.

“Mr. Hannay,” he said hesitatingly, “you are being honest with me?”

“I swear by all that’s holy I am telling you the plain truth, and the full truth. Newhover may have done anything you jolly well like in the War. That’s all washed out. I’m after him to get a line on a foul business which is English in origin. I want to put a spoke in the wheel of English criminals, and to save innocent lives. Besides, Newhover is only a subordinate. I don’t propose to raise a hand against him, only to find out what he is doing.”

He held out his hand. “I believe you,” he said, “and if I can I will help you.”

He conducted me through the long street of the village, past the inn, where I supposed Newhover was now going to bed, and out on to the road which ran up the Skarso valley. We came in sight of the river, a mighty current full of melted snow, sweeping in noble curves through the meadowland in that uncanny dusk. It appeared that he lodged with Peter Bojer, who had a spare bed, and when we reached the cottage, which stood a hundred yards from the highway on the very brink of the stream, Peter was willing to let me have it. His wife gave us supper — an omelette, smoked salmon, and some excellent Norwegian beer — and after it I got out my map and had a survey of the neighbourhood.

Gaudian gave me a grisly picture of the condition of his own country. It seemed that the downfall of the old régime had carried with it the decent wise men like himself, who had opposed its follies, but had lined up with it on patriotic grounds when the War began. He said that Germany was no place for a moderate man, and that the power lay with the bloated industrials, who were piling up fortunes abroad while they were wrecking their country at home. The only opposition, he said, came from the communists, who were half-witted, and the monarchists, who wanted the impossible. “Reason is not listened to, and I fear there is no salvation till my poor people have passed through the last extremity. You foreign Powers have hastened our destruction, when you had it in your hands to save us. I think you have meant well, but you have been blind, for you have not supported our moderate men and have by your harshness played the game of the wreckers among us.”

It appeared that he was very poor now, like all the professional classes. I thought it odd that this man, who had a world-wide reputation as an engineer, couldn’t earn a big income in any country he chose. Then I saw that it was because

he had lost the wish to make money. He had seen too deep into the vanity of human wishes to have any ambition left. He was unmarried, with no near relations, and he found his pleasure in living simply in remote country places and watching flowers and beasts. He was a keen fisherman, but couldn't afford a good beat, so he leased a few hundred yards from a farmer, who had not enough water to get a proper rent for it, and he did a lot of trout fishing in the tarns high up in the hills and in the Skarso above the foss. As he sat facing me beyond the stove, with his kind sad brown eyes and his rugged face, I thought how like he was to a Scottish moorland shepherd. I had liked him when I first saw him in Stumm's company, but now I liked him so much that because of him I was prepared to think better of the whole German race.

I asked him if he had heard of any other Englishman in the valley — anyone of the name of Jason, for instance. He said no; he had been there for three weeks, but the fishing did not begin for another fortnight, and foreign visitors had not yet arrived. Then I asked him about the saeter farms, and he said that few of these were open yet, since the high pastures were not ready. One or two on the lower altitudes might be already inhabited, but not many, though the winter had been a mild one and the spring had come early. "Look at the Skarso," he said. "Usually in April it is quite low, for the snowfields have not begun to melt. But today it is as brimming as if it were the middle of May."

He went over the map with me — an inch-to-a-mile one I had got in London — and showed me the lie of the land. The saeters were mostly farther up the river, reached by paths up the tributary glens. There was a good road running the length of the valley, but no side roads to connect with the parallel glens, the Uradal and the Bremendal. I found indeed one track marked on the map, which led to the Uradal by a place called Snaasen. "Yes," said Gaudian, "that is the only thing in the way of what you soldiers would call lateral communications. I've walked it, and I'm sorry for the man who tries the road in bad weather. You can see the beginning of the track from this house; it climbs up beside the torrent just across the valley. Snaasen is more or less inhabited all the year round, and I suppose you would call it a kind of saeter. It is a sort of shelter hut for travellers taking that road, and in summer it is a paradise for flowers. You would be surprised at the way the natives can cross the hills even in winter. Snaasen belongs to the big farm two miles upstream, which carries with it the best beat on the Skarso. Also there is said to be first-class ryper-shooting later in the year, and an occasional bear. By the way, I rather fancy someone told me that the whole thing was owned by, or had been leased to, an Englishman. . . . You are rich, you see, and you do not leave much in Norway for poor people."

I slept like a log on a bed quite as hard as a log, and woke to a brilliant blue morning, with the birds in the pine-woods fairly riotous, and snipe drumming in the boggy meadows, and the Skarso coming down like a sea. I could see the water almost up to the pathway of a long wooden bridge that led to the big farm Gaudian had spoken of. I got my glass on the torrent opposite, and saw the track to Snaasen winding up beside it till it was lost in a fold of the ravine. Above it I scanned the crown of the ridge, which was there much lower than on the sides of the fjord. There was no snow to be seen, and I knew by a sort of instinct that if I got up there I should find a broad tableland of squelching pastures with old snowdrifts in the hollows and tracts of scrubby dwarf birch.

While I was waiting for breakfast I heard a noise from the high-road, and saw a couple of the little conveyances they call stolkjaeres passing. My glass showed me Dr. Newhover in the first and a quantity of luggage in the second. They took the road across the wooden bridge to the big farm, and I could see the splash of their wheels at the far end of it, where the river was over the road. So Dr. Newhover, or some friend of his, was the lessee of this famous fishing, which carried with it the shooting on the uplands behind it. I rather thought I should spend the day finding out more about Snaasen, and I counted myself lucky to have got quarters in such an excellent observation-post as Peter Bojer's cottage.

I wouldn't go near the track to Snaasen till I saw what Newhover did, so Gaudian and I sat patiently at Peter Bojer's window. About ten o'clock a couple of ponies laden with kit in charge of a tow-headed boy appeared at the foot of the track and slowly climbed up the ravine. An hour later came Dr. Newhover, in a suit that looked like khaki and wearing a long mackintosh cape. He strode out well and breasted the steep path like a mountaineer. I wanted to go off myself in pursuit of him, keeping well behind, but Gaudian very sensibly pointed out how sparse the cover was, and that if he saw a man on that lonely road he would certainly want to know all about him.

We sat out-of-doors after luncheon in a pleasant glare of sun, and by and by were rewarded by the sight of the pack-ponies returning, laden with a different size and shape of kit. They did not stop at the big farm, but crossed the wooden bridge and took the high-road for Merdal. I concluded that this was the baggage of the man whom Newhover had replaced, and that he was returning to Stavanger in Kristian Egge's boat. About tea-time the man himself appeared — Jason, or whatever his name was. I saw two figures come down the ravine by the Snaasen road, and stop at the foot and exchange

farewells. One of them turned to go back, and I saw that this was Newhover, climbing with great strides like a man accustomed to hills. The other crossed the bridge, and passed within hail of us — a foppish young man, my glass told me, wearing smart riding-breeches and with an aquascutum slung over his shoulder.

I was very satisfied with what I had learned. I had seen Newhover relieve his predecessor, just as Medina had planned, and I knew where he was lodged. Whatever his secret was it was hidden in Snaasen, and to Snaasen I would presently go. Gaudian advised me to wait till after supper, when there would be light enough to find the way and not too much to betray us. So we both lay down and slept for four hours, and took the road about ten-thirty as fresh as yearlings.

It was a noble night, windless and mild, and, though darkness lurked in the thickets and folds of hill, the sky was filled with a translucent amethyst glow. I felt as if I were out on some sporting expedition and enjoyed every moment of the walk with that strung-up expectant enjoyment which one gets in any form of chase. The torrent made wild music on our left hand, grumbling in pits and shooting over ledges with a sound like a snowslip. There was every kind of bird about, but I had to guess at them by their sounds and size, for there was no colour in that shadowy world.

By and by we reached the top and had a light cold wind in our faces blowing from the snowy mountains to the north. The place seemed a huge broken tableland and every hollow glistened as if filled with snow or water. There were big dark shapes ahead of us which I took to be the hills beyond the Uradal. Here it was not so easy to follow the track, which twined about in order to avoid the boggy patches, and Gaudian and I frequently strayed from it and took tosses over snags of juniper. Once I was up against an iron pole, and to my surprise saw wires above. Gaudian nodded. "Snaasen is on the telephone," he said.

I had hoped to see some light in the house, so as to tell it from a distance. But we did not realise its presence till we were close upon it, standing a little back from the path, as dark as a tombstone. The inhabitants must have gone early to bed, for there was no sign of life within. It was a two-storeyed erection of wood, stoutly built, with broad eaves, to the roof. Adjacent there stood a big barn or hayshed, and behind it some other outbuildings which might have been byres or dairies. We walked stealthily round the place, and were amazed at its utter stillness. There was no sound of an animal moving in the steading, and when a brace of mallards flew overhead we started at the noise like burglars at the creaking of a board.

Short of burglary there was nothing further to be done, so we took the road home and scrambled at a great pace down the ravine, for it was chilly on the tableland. Before we went to bed, we had settled that next day Gaudian should go up to Snaasen like an ordinary tourist and make some excuse to get inside, while I would take a long tramp over the plateau, keeping well away from the house in case there might be something ado in that barren region.

Next morning saw the same cloudless weather, and we started off about ten o'clock. I had a glorious but perfectly futile day. I went up the Skarso to well above the foss, and then climbed the north wall of the valley by a gulley choked with brushwood, which gave out long before the top and left me to finish my ascent by way of some very loose scree and unpleasant boiler-plates. I reached the plateau much farther to the east, where it was at a greater altitude, so that I looked down upon the depression where ran the track to Uradal. I struck due north among boggy meadows and the remains of old snowdrifts, through whose fringes flowers were showing, till I was almost on the edge of Uradal, and looked away beyond it to a fine cluster of rock peaks streaked and patched with ice. The Uradal glen was so deep cut that I could not see into it, so I moved west and struck the Merdal track well to the north of Snaasen. After that I fetched a circuit behind Snaasen, and had a good view of the house from the distance of about half a mile. Two of its chimneys were smoking, and there were sounds of farm work from the yard. There was no sign of live stock, but it looked as if someone was repairing the sheds against the summer season. I waited for more than an hour, but I saw no human being, so I turned homeward, and made a careful descent by the ravine, reconnoitring every corner in case I should run into Newhover.

I found that Gaudian had returned before me. When I asked him what luck he had had he shook his head.

"I played the part of a weary traveller, and asked for milk. An ugly woman gave me beer. She said she had no milk, till the cattle came up from the valleys. She would not talk and she was deaf. She said an English Herr had the ryper shooting, but lived at Tryssil. That is the name of the big farm by the Skarso. She would tell me no more, and I saw no other person. But I observed that Snaasen is larger than I thought. There are rooms built out at the back, which we thought were barns. There is ample space there for a man to be concealed."

I asked him if he had any plan, and he said he thought of going boldly up next day and asking for Newhover, whom he could say he had seen passing Peter Bojer's cottage. He disliked the man, but had never openly quarrelled with him. I

approved of that, but in the meantime I resolved to do something on my own account that night. I was getting anxious, for I felt that my time was growing desperately short; it was now the 25th of April and I was due back in London on the 29th, and, if I failed to turn up, Medina would make inquiries at Fosse Manor and suspect. I had made up my mind to go alone that night to Snaasen and do a little pacific burgling.

I set out about eleven, and I put my pistol in my pocket, as well as my flask and sandwiches and electric torch, for it occurred to me that anything might happen. I made good going across the bridge and up the first part of the track, for I wanted to have as much time as possible for my job. My haste was nearly my undoing, for instead of reconnoitring and keeping my ears open, I strode up the hill as if I had been walking to make a record. It was by the mercy of Heaven that I was at a point where an outjutting boulder made a sharp corner when I was suddenly aware that someone was coming down the road. I flattened myself into the shadow, and saw Newhover.

He did not see or hear me, for he, too, was preoccupied. He was descending at a good pace, and he must have started in a hurry, for he had no hat. His longish blond locks were all tousled, and his face seemed sharper than usual with anxiety.

I wondered what on earth had happened, and my first notion was to follow him downhill. And then it occurred to me that his absence gave me a sovereign chance at Snaasen. But if the household was astir there might be other travellers on the road and it behoved me to go warily. Now, near the top of the ravine, just under the edge of the tableland, there was a considerable patch of wood — birches, juniper, and wind-blown pines — for there the torrent flowed in a kind of cup, after tumbling off the plateau and before hurling itself down to the valley. Here it was possible to find an alternative road to the path, so I dived in among the matted whortleberries and moss-covered boulders.

I had not gone ten yards before I realised that there was somebody or something else in the thicket. There was a sound of plunging ahead of me, then the crack of a rotten log, then the noise of a falling stone. It might be a beast, but it struck me that no wild thing would move so awkwardly. Only human boots make that kind of clumsy slipping.

If this was somebody from Snaasen, what was he doing off the track? Could he be watching me? Well, I proposed to do a little stalking on my own account. I got down on all-fours and crawled in cover in the direction of the sound. It was very dark there, but I could see a faint light where the scrub thinned round the stream.

Soon I was at the edge of the yeasty water. The sounds had stopped, but suddenly they began again a little farther up, and there was a scuffle as if part of the bank had given way. The man, whoever he was, seemed to be trying to cross. That would be a dangerous thing to do, for the torrent was wide and very strong. I crawled a yard or two up-stream, and then in an open patch saw what was happening.

A fallen pine made a crazy bridge to a great rock, from which the rest of the current might conceivably be leaped. A man was kneeling on the trunk and beginning to move along it. . . . But as I looked the rotten thing gave way and the next I saw he was struggling in the foam. It was all the matter of a fraction of a second, and before I knew I was leaning over the brink and clutching at an arm. I gripped it, braced one leg against a rock, and hauled the owner close into the edge out of the main current. He seemed to have taken no hurt, for he found a foothold, and scarcely needed my help to scramble up beside me.

Then to my surprise he went for me tooth and nail. It was like the assault of a wild beast, and its suddenness rolled me on my back. I felt hands on my throat, and grew angry, caught the wrists and wrenched them away. I flung a leg over his back and got uppermost, and after that he was at my mercy. He seemed to realise it, too, for he lay quite quiet and did not struggle.

“What the devil do you mean?” I said angrily. “You’d have been drowned but for me, and then you try to throttle me.”

I got out my torch and had a look at him. It was the figure of a slight young man, dressed in rough homespun such as Norwegian farm lads wear. His face was sallow and pinched, and decorated with the most preposterous wispish beard, and his hair was cut roughly as if with garden shears. The eyes that looked up at me were as scared and wild as a deer’s.

“What the devil do you mean?” I repeated, and then to my surprise he replied in English.

“Let me up,” he said, “I’m too tired to fight. I’ll go back with you.”

Light broke in on me.

“Don’t you worry, old chap,” I said soothingly. “You’re going back with me, but not to that infernal saeter. We’ve met before, you know. You’re Lord Mercot, and I saw you ride ‘Red Prince’ last year at the ‘House’ Grind.”

He was sitting up, staring at me like a ghost.

“Who are you? Oh, for God’s sake, who are you?”

“Hannay’s my name. I live at Fosse Manor in the Cotswolds. You once came to dine with us before the Heythrop Ball.”

“Hannay!” He repeated stumblingly — “I remember — I think — remember — remember Lady Hannay. Yes — and Fosse. It’s on the road between —”

He scrambled to his feet.

“Oh, sir, get me away. He’s after me — the new devil with the long face, the man who first brought me here. I don’t know what has happened to me, but I’ve been mad a long time, and I’ve only got sane in the last days. Then I remembered — and I ran away. But they’re after me. Oh, quick, quick! Let’s hide.”

“See here, my lad,” I said, and I took out my pistol. “The first man that lays a hand on you I shoot, and I don’t miss. You’re as safe now as if you were at home. But this is no place to talk, and I’ve the devil of a lot to tell you. I’m going to take you down with me to my lodging in the valley. But they’re hunting you, so we’ve got to go cannily. Are you fit to walk? Well, do exactly as I tell you, and in an hour you’ll be having a long drink and looking up time-tables.”

I consider that journey back a creditable piece of piloting. The poor boy was underfed and shaking with excitement, but he stepped out gallantly, and obeyed me like a lamb. We kept off the track so as to muffle our steps in grass, and took every corner like scouts in a reconnaissance. We met Newhover coming back, but we heard him a long way off and were in good cover when he passed. He was hurrying as furiously as ever and I could hear his laboured breathing. After that we had a safe road over the meadow, but we crossed the bridge most circumspectly, making sure that there was no one in the landscape. About half-past one I pushed open Gaudian’s bedroom window, woke him, and begged him to forage for food and drink.

“Did you get into Snaasen?” he asked sleepily.

“No, but I’ve found what we’ve been looking for. One of the three hostages is at this moment sitting on your cabin-box.”



CHAPTER XII

I RETURN TO SERVITUDE

We fed Mercot with tinned meats and biscuits and bottled beer, and he ate like a famished schoolboy. The odd thing was that his terror had suddenly left him. I suppose the sight of me, which had linked him up definitely with his past, had made him feel a waif no more, and, once he was quite certain who he was, his natural courage returned. He got great comfort from looking at Gaudian, and indeed I could not imagine a better sedative than a sight of that kind, wise old face. I lent him pyjamas, rubbed him down to prevent a chill from his ducking, put him in my bed, and had the satisfaction of seeing him slip off at once into deep slumber.

Next morning Gaudian and I interviewed Peter Bojer and explained that a young English friend of ours had had an accident, while on a walking tour, and might be with us for a day or two. It was not likely that Newhover would advertise his loss, and in any case Peter was no gossip, and Gaudian, who had known him for years, let him see that we wanted the fact of a guest being with us kept as quiet as possible. The boy slept till nearly midday, while I kept a watch on the road. Newhover appeared early, and went down to Merdal village, where he spent the better part of the forenoon. He was probably making inquiries, but they were bound in his own interest to be discreet ones. Then he returned to Tryssil, and later I saw a dejected figure tramping up the Snaasen track. He may have thought that the body of the fugitive was in some pool of the torrent or being swirled down by the Skarso to the sea, and I imagined that that scarcely fitted in with his instructions.

When Mercot awoke at last and had his breakfast he looked a different lad. His eyes had lost their fright, and though he stuttered badly and seemed to have some trouble in collecting his wits, he had obviously taken hold of himself. His great desire was to get clean, and that took some doing, for he could not have had a bath for weeks. Then he wanted to borrow my razor and shave his beard, but I managed to prevent him in time, for I had been thinking the thing out, and I saw that that would never do. So far as I could see, he had recovered his memory, but there were still gaps in it; that is to say, he remembered all his past perfectly well till he left Oxford on February 17th, and he remembered the events of the last few days, but between the two points he was still hazy.

On returning to his rooms that February evening he had found a note about a horse he was trying to buy, an urgent note asking him to come round at once to certain stables. He had just time for this, before dressing for dinner, so he dashed out of the house — meeting nobody, as it chanced, on the stairs, and, as the night was foggy, being seen by no one in the streets. After that his memory was a blank. He had wakened in a room in London, which he thought was a nursing home, and had seen a doctor — I could picture that doctor — and had gone to sleep again. After that his recollection was like a black night studded with little points of light which were physical sensations. He remembered being very cold and sometimes very tired, he recollected the smell of paraffin, and of mouldy hay, and of a treacly drink which made him sick. He remembered faces, too, a cross old woman who cursed him, a man who seemed to be always laughing, and whose laugh he feared more than curses. . . .

I suppose that Medina's spell must have been wearing thin during these last days, and that the keeper, Jason, or whoever he was, could not revive it. For Mercot had begun to see Jason no longer as a terror but as an offence — an underbred young bounder whom he detested. And with this clearing of the foreground came a lightening of the background. He saw pictures of his life at Alcester, at first as purely objective things, but soon as in some way connected with himself. Then longing started, passionate longing for something which he knew was his own. . . . It was a short step from that to the realisation that he was Lord Mercot, though he happened to be clad like a tramp and was as dirty as a stoker. And then he proceeded to certain halting deductions. Something bad had happened to him: he was in a foreign land — which land he didn't know: he was being ill-treated and kept prisoner; he must escape and get back to his old happy world. He thought of escape quite blindly, without any plan; if only he could get away from that accursed saeter, he would remember better, things would happen to him, things would come back to him.

Then Jason went and Newhover came, and Newhover drove him half crazy with fear, for the doctor's face was in some extraordinary way mixed up with his confused memory of the gaps between the old world and the new. He was mad to escape now, but rather to escape from Newhover than to reach anywhere. He watched for his chance, and found it about

eight o'clock the evening before, when the others in the house were at supper. Some instinct had led him towards Merdal. He had heard footsteps behind him and had taken to the thicket. . . . I appeared, an enemy as he thought, and he had despairingly flung himself on me. Then I had spoken his name, and that fixed the wavering panorama of his memory. He "came to himself" literally, and was now once more the undergraduate of Christ Church, rather shell-shocked and jumpy, but quite sane.

The question which worried me was whether the cure was complete, whether Newhover could act as Medina's deputy and resurrect the spell. I did not believe that he could, but I wasn't certain. Anyhow it had to be risked.

Mercot repeated his request for the loan of my razor. He was smoking a Turkish cigarette as if every whiff took him nearer Elysium. Badly shorn, ill-clad, and bearded as he was, he had still the ghost of the air of the well-to-do, sporting young men. He wanted to know when the steamer sailed, but there seemed no panic now in his impatience.

"Look here," I said. "I don't think you can start just yet. There's a lot I want to tell you now you're able to hear it."

I gave him a rough summary of Macgillivray's story, and the tale of the three hostages. I think he found it comforting to know that there were others in the same hole as himself. "By Jove!" he said, "what a damnable business! And I'm the only one you've got on the track of. No word of the girl and the little boy?"

"No word!"

"Poor devils," he said, but I do not think he really took in the situation.

"So you see how we are placed. Macgillivray's round-up is fixed for the 10th of June. We daren't release the hostages till the 9th, for otherwise the gang would suspect. They have everything ready, as I've told you, for their own liquidation. Also we can't release one without the others, unless by the 9th of June we have given up hope of the others. Do you see what I mean?"

He didn't. "All I want is to get home in double-quick time," he said.

"I don't wonder. But you must see that that is impossible, unless we chuck in our hand."

He stared at me, and I saw fright beginning to return to his eyes.

"Do you mean that you want me to go back to that bloody place?"

"That's what I mean. If you think it out, you'll see it's the only way. We must do nothing to spoil the chances of the other two. You're a gentleman, and are bound to play the game."

"But I can't," he cried. "Oh, my God, you can't ask me to." There were tears in his voice, and his eyes were wild.

"It's a good deal to ask, but I know you will do it. There's not a scrap of danger now, for you have got back your memory, and you know where you are. It's up to you to play a game with your gaoler. He is the dupe now. You fill the part of the half-witted farm-boy and laugh at him all the time in your sleeve. Herr Gaudian will be waiting down here to keep an eye on you, and when the time is ripe — and it won't be more than five weeks — I give you full permission to do anything you like with Dr. Newhover."

"I can't, I can't," he wailed, and his jaw dropped like a scared child's.

Then Gaudian spoke. "I think we had better leave the subject for the present. Lord Mercot will do precisely what he thinks right. You have sprung the thing on him too suddenly. I think it might be a good plan if you went for a walk, Hannay. Try the south side of the foss — there's some very pretty scrambling to be had there."

He spoke to me at the door. "The poor boy is all in pieces. You cannot ask him for a difficult decision when his nerves are still raw. Will you leave him with me? I have had some experience in dealing with such cases."

When I got back for supper, after a climb which exercised every muscle in my body, I found Gaudian teaching Mercot a new patience game. We spent a very pleasant evening, and I noticed that Gaudian led the talk to matters in which the boy could share, and made him speak of himself. We heard about his racing ambitions, his desire to ride in the Grand National, his hopes for his polo game. It appeared that he was destined for the Guards, but he was to be allowed a year's travel when he left the 'Varsity, and we planned out an itinerary for him. Gaudian, who had been almost everywhere in the world, told him of places in Asia where no tourist had ever been and where incredible sport was to be had in virgin forest, and I pitched him some yarns about those few districts of Africa which are still unspoiled. He got very keen, for he had a bit of the explorer in him, and asked modestly if we thought he could pull off certain plans we had suggested. We told him there was no doubt about it. "It's not as tough a proposition as riding in the National," I said.

When we had put him to bed, Gaudian smiled as if well pleased. "He has begun to get back his confidence," he said.

He slept for twelve hours, and when he woke I had gone out, for I thought it better to leave him in Gaudian's hands. I had to settle the business that day, for it was now the 27th. I walked down the fjord to Hauge, and told Johan to be ready to start next morning. I asked him about the weather, which was still cloudless, and he stared at the sky and sniffed, and thought it would hold for a day or two. "But rain is coming," he added, "and wind. The noise of the foss is too loud."

When I returned Gaudian met me at the door. "The boy has recovered," he said. "He will speak to you himself. He is a brave boy and will do a hard task well."

It was a rather shy and self-conscious Mercot that greeted me.

"I'm afraid I behaved rather badly yesterday, sir. I was feeling a bit rattled, and I'm ashamed of myself, for I've always rather fancied my nerve."

"My dear chap," I said, "you've been through enough to crack the nerve of a buffalo."

"I want to say that of course I'll do what you want. I must play the game by the others. That poor little boy! And I remember Miss Victor quite well — I once stayed in the same house with her. I'll go back to the saeter when you give the word. Indeed, I'm rather looking forward to it. I promise to play the half-wit so that Dr. Newhover will think me safe in the bag. All I ask is that you let me have my innings with him when the time comes. I've a biggish score to settle."

"Indeed I promise that. Look here, Mercot, if you don't mind my saying it, I think you're behaving uncommonly well. You're a gallant fellow."

"Oh, that's all right," he said, blushing. "When do you want me to start? If it's possible, I'd like another night in a decent bed."

"You shall have it. Early tomorrow morning we'll accompany you to the prison door. You've got to gibber when you see Newhover, and pretend not to be able to give any account of your doings. I leave you to put up a camouflage. The next five weeks will be infernally dull for you, but you must just shut your teeth and stick it out. Remember, Gaudian will be down here all the time and in touch with your friends, and when the day comes you will take your instructions from him. And, by the way, I'm going to leave you my pistol. I suppose you can keep it concealed, for Newhover is not likely to search your pockets. Don't use it, of course, but it may be a comfort to you to know that you have it."

He took it gladly. "Don't be afraid I'll use it. What I'm keeping for Newhover is the best hiding man ever had. He's a bit above my weight, but I don't mind that."

Very early next morning we woke Mercot, and, while the sky was turning from sapphire to turquoise, took our way through the hazy meadows and up the Snaasen track. We left it at the summit, and fetched a circuit round by the back of the saeter, but first we made Mercot roll in the thicket till he had a very grubby face and plenty of twigs and dust in his untidy hair. Then the two of us shook hands with him, found a lair in a patch of juniper, and watched him go forward.

A forlorn figure he looked in that cold half-light as he approached the saeter door. But he was acting his part splendidly, for he stumbled with fatigue, dropped heavily against the door, and beat on it feebly. It seemed a long time till it opened, and then he appeared to shrink back in terror. The old woman cried out shrilly to summon someone from within, and presently Newhover came out in a dressing-gown. He caught Mercot by the shoulder and shook him, and that valiant soul behaved exactly like a lunatic, shielding his head and squealing like a rabbit. Finally we saw him dragged indoors . . . It was horrible to leave him like that, but I comforted myself with the thought of what Newhover would be like in five weeks' time.

We raced back to Peter Bojer's and after a hasty breakfast started off for Hauge. I settled with Gaudian that he was to report any developments to me by cable, and I was to do the same to him. When the day of release was fixed, he was to go boldly up to Snaasen and deal with the doctor as he liked, making sure that he could not communicate with Medina for a day or two. A motor-launch would be waiting at Merdal to take the two to Stavanger, for I wanted him to see Mercot on board the English steamer. I arranged, too, that he should be supplied with adequate funds, for Mercot had not a penny.

We pushed off at once, for I had to be at Flacksholm in good time, and as the morning advanced I did not feel so sure of the weather. What wind we had had these last days had been mild breezes from the west, but now it seemed to be shifting more to the north, and increasing in vehemence. Down in that deep-cut fjord it was calm enough, but up on the crest of the tableland on the northern shore I could see that it was blowing hard, for my glass showed me little tourmentes of snow. Also it had suddenly got much colder. I made Johan force the pace, and early in the afternoon we were out of the

shelter of the rock walls in the inlet into which the fjord broadened. Here it was blowing fairly hard, and there was a stiff sea running. Flying squalls of rain beat down on us from the north, and for five minutes or so would shut out the view. It was a regular gusty April day, such as you find in spring salmon-fishing in Scotland, and had my job been merely to catch the boat at Stavanger I should not have minded it at all. But there was no time for the boat, for in little more than twenty-four hours I had to meet Medina. I wondered if Archie Roylance had turned up. I wondered still more how an aeroplane was to make the return journey over these stormy leagues of sea.

Presently the low green lines of Flacksholm showed through the spray, and when Johan began to shape his course to the south-west for Stavanger, I bade him go straight forward and land me on the island. I told him I had a friend who was camping there, and that we were to be picked up in a day or two by an English yacht. Johan obviously thought me mad, but he did as he was told. "There will be no one on the island yet," he said. "The farmer from Rosmaer does not come till June, when the haymaking begins. The winter pasture is poor and sour." That was all to the good, for I did not want any spectator of our madness.

As we drew nearer I could see no sign of life on the low shore, except an infinity of eider-ducks, and a fine osprey which sat on a pointed rock like a heraldic griffin. I was watching the bird, for I had only seen an osprey twice before, when Johan steered me into a creek, where there was deep water alongside a flat reef. This, he told me, was the ordinary landing-place from the mainland. I flung my suit-case and rucksack on shore, said good-bye to Johan and tipped him well, and watched the little boat ploughing south till it was hidden by a squall. Then, feeling every kind of a fool, I seized my baggage and proceeded, like Robinson Crusoe, into the interior.

It was raining steadily, a fine thin rain, and every now and then a squall would burst on me and ruffle the sea. Jolly weather for flying, I reflected, especially for flying over some hundreds of miles of ocean! . . . I found the farm, a few rough wooden buildings and a thing like a stone cattle-pen, but there was no sign of human life there. Then I got out my map, and concluded that I had better make for the centre of the island, where there seemed to be some flat ground at one end of the loch. I was feeling utterly depressed, walking like a bagman with my kit in my hand in an uninhabited Norwegian isle, and due in London the next evening. London seemed about as inaccessible in the time as the moon.

When I got to the rim of the central hollow there was a brief clearing of the weather, and I looked down on a little grey tarn set in very green meadows. In the meadows at the north end I saw to my joy what looked like an aeroplane picketed down, and a thing like a small tent near it. Also I could see smoke curling up from a group of boulders adjoining. The gallant Archie had arrived, and my spirits lightened. I made good going down the hill, and, as I shouted, a figure like an Arctic explorer crawled out of the tent.

"Hullo, Dick," it cried. "Any luck?"

"Plenty," I said. "And you?"

"Famous. Got here last night after a clinkin' journey with the bus behavin' like a lamb. Had an interestin' evenin' with the birds — Lord! such a happy huntin'-ground for 'em. I've been doin' sentry-go on the tops all mornin' lookin' for you, but the weather got dirty, so I returned to the wigwam. Lunch is nearly ready."

"What about the weather?" I asked anxiously.

"Pas si bête," he said, sniffing. "The wind is pretty sure to go down at sunset. D'you mind a night journey?"

Archie's imperturbable good humour cheered me enormously. I must say he was a born campaigner, for he had made himself very snug, and gave me as good a meal as I have ever eaten — a hot stew of tinned stuff and curry, a plum-pudding, and an assortment of what he called "delicatessen." To keep out the cold we drank benedictine in horn mugs. He could talk about nothing but his blessed birds, and announced that he meant to come back to Flacksholm and camp for a week. He had seen a special variety — some kind of phalarope — that fairly ravished his heart. When I asked questions about the journey ahead of us, he scarcely deigned to answer, so busy he was with speculation on the feathered fauna of Norway.

"Archie," I said, "are you sure you can get me across the North Sea?"

"I won't say 'sure.' There's always a lottery in this game, but with any luck we ought to manage it. The wind will die down, and besides it's a ground wind, and may be quiet enough a few hundred feet up. We'll have to shape a compass course anyhow, so that darkness won't worry us."

"What about the machine?" I asked. I don't know why, but I felt horribly nervous.

"A beauty. But of course you never know. If we were driven much out of a straight course, our petrol might run short."

“What would that mean?”

“Forced landin’.”

“But supposing we hadn’t reached land?”

“Oh, then we’d be for it,” said Archie cheerfully. He added, as if to console me: “We might be picked up by a passin’ steamer or a fishin’ smack. I’ve known fellows that had that luck.”

“What are the chances of our getting over safely?”

“Evens. Never better or worse than evens in this flyin’ business. But it will be all right. Dash it all, a woodcock makes the trip constantly in one flight.”

After that I asked no more questions, for I knew I could not get him past the woodcock. I was not feeling happy, but Archie’s calm put me to shame. We had a very good tea, and then, sure enough, the wind began to die down, and the clouds opened to show clear sky. It grew perishing cold, and I was glad of every stitch of clothing, and envied Archie his heavy skin coat. We were all ready about nine, and in a dead calm cast loose, taxied over a stretch of turf, rose above the loch so as to clear the hill, and turned our faces to the west, which was like a shell of gold closing down upon the molten gold of the sea.

Luck was with us that night, and all my qualms were belied. Apart from the cold, which was savage, I enjoyed every moment of the trip, till in the early dawn we saw a crawling black line beneath us which was the coast of Aberdeen. We filled up with petrol at a place in Kincardine, and had an enormous breakfast at the local hotel. Everything went smoothly and it was still early in the day when I found we were crossing the Cheviots. We landed at York about noon, and, while Archie caught the London train, I got my car from the garage and started for Oxford. But first I wired to Mary asking her to wire to Medina in my name that I would reach London by the seven-fifteen. I had a pleasant run south, left the car at Oxford, and duly emerged on the platform at Paddington to find Medina waiting for me.

His manner was almost tender.

“My dear fellow, I do hope you are better?”

“Perfectly fit again, thank you. Ready for anything.”

“You look more sunburnt than when you left town.”

“It’s the wonderful weather we’ve had. I’ve been lying basking on the verandah.”



CHAPTER XIII

I VISIT THE FIELDS OF EDEN

There was a change in Medina. I noticed it the following day when I lunched with him, and very particularly at the next dinner of the Thursday Club to which I went as his guest. It was a small change, which nobody else would have remarked, but to me, who was watching him like a lynx, it was clear enough. His ease of manner towards the world was a little less perfect, and when we were alone he was more silent than before. I did not think that he had begun to suspect any danger to his plans, but the day for their consummation was approaching, and even his cold assurance may have been flawed by little quivers of nervousness. As I saw it, once the big liquidation took place and he realised the assets which were to be the foundation of his main career, it mattered little what became of the hostages. He might let them go; they would wander back to their old world unable to give any account of their absence, and, if the story got out, there would be articles in the medical journals about these unprecedented cases of lost memory. So far I was certain that they had taken no lasting harm. But if the liquidation failed, God knew what their fate would be. They would never be seen again, for if his possession of them failed to avert disaster to his plans, he would play for safety, and, above all, for revenge. Revenge to a mind like his would be a consuming passion.

The fact that I had solved one conundrum and laid my hand on one of the hostages put me in a perfect fever of restlessness. Our time was very short, and there were still two poor souls hidden in his black underworld. It was the little boy I thought most of, and perhaps my preoccupation with him made me stupid about other things. My thoughts were always on the Blind Spinner, and there I could not advance one single inch. Macgillivray's watchers had nothing to report. It was no use my paying another visit to Madame Breda, and going through the same rigmarole. I could only stick to Medina and pray for luck. I had resolved that if he asked me again to take up my quarters with him in Hill Street I would accept, though it might be hideously awkward in a score of ways.

I longed for Sandy, but no word came from him, and I had his strict injunctions not to try to reach him. The only friend I saw in those early days of May was Archie Roylance who seemed to have forgotten his Scotch greenshanks and settled down in London for the season. He started playing polo, which was not a safe game for a man with a crooked leg, and he opened his house in Grosvenor Street and roosted in a corner of it. He knew I was busy in a big game, and he was mad to be given a share in it, but I had to be very careful with Archie. He was the best fellow alive, but discretion had never been his strong point. So I refused to tell him anything at present, and I warned Turpin, who was an ancient friend of his, to do the same. The three of us dined together one night, and poor old Turpin was rallied by Archie on his glumness.

"You're a doleful bird, you know," he told him. "I heard somewhere you were goin' to be married and I expect that's the cause. What do you call it — ranger yourself? Cheer up, my son. It can't be as bad as it sounds. Look at Dick there."

I switched him on to other subjects, and we got his opinion on the modern stage. Archie had been doing a course of plays, and had very strong views on the drama. Something had got to happen, he said, or he fell asleep in the first act, and something very rarely happened, so he was left to slumber peacefully till he was awakened and turned out by the attendants. He liked plays with shooting in them, and knockabout farce — anything indeed with a noise in it. But he had struck a vein of serious drama which he had found soporific. One piece in especial, which showed the difficulties of a lady of fifty who fell in love with her stepson, he seriously reprobated.

"Rotten," he complained. "What did it matter to anyone what the old cat did? But I assure you, everybody round me was gloatin' over it. A fellow said to me it was a masterpiece of tragic irony. What's irony, Dick? I thought it was the tone your commandin' officer adopted, when you had made an ass of yourself, and he showed it by complimentin' you on your intelligence. . . . Oh, by the way, you remember the girl in green we saw at that dancin' place? Well, I saw her at the show — at least I'm pretty sure it was her — in a box with the black-bearded fellow. She didn't seem to be takin' much of it in. Wonder who she is and what she was doin' there? Russian, d'you think? I believe the silly play was translated from the Russian. I want to see that girl dance again."

The next week was absolutely blank, except for my own perpetual worrying. Medina kept me close to him, and I had to relinquish any idea of going down to Fosse for an occasional night. I longed badly for the place and for a sight of Peter

John, and Mary's letters didn't comfort me, for they were getting scrappier and scrappier. My hope was that Medina would act on Kharáma's advice, and in order to establish his power over his victims bring them into the open and exercise it in the environment to which they had been accustomed. That wouldn't help me with the little boy, but it might give me a line on Miss Victor. I rather hoped that at some ball I would see him insisting on some strange woman dancing with him, or telling her to go home, or something, and then I would have cause to suspect. But no such luck. He never spoke to a woman in my presence who wasn't somebody perfectly well known. I began to think that he had rejected the Indian's advice as too dangerous.

Kharáma, more by token, was back in town, and Medina took me to see him again. The fellow had left Claridge's and was living in a little house in Eaton Place, and away from the glitter of a big hotel he looked even more sinister and damnable. We went there one evening after dinner, and found him squatting on the usual couch in a room lit by one lamp and fairly stinking with odd scents. He seemed to have shed his occidental dress, for he wore flowing robes, and I could see his beastly bare feet under the skirts of them, when he moved to rearrange a curtain.

They took no more notice of me than if I had been a grandfather's clock, and to my disgust they conducted the whole conversation in some Eastern tongue. I gathered nothing from it, except a deduction as to Medina's state of mind. There was an unmistakable hint of nervousness in his voice. He seemed to be asking urgent questions, and the Indian was replying calmly and soothingly. By and by Medina's voice became quieter, and suddenly I realised that the two were speaking of me. Kharáma's heavy eyes were raised for a second in my direction, and Medina turned ever so little towards me. The Indian asked some question about me, and Medina replied carelessly with a shrug of his shoulders and a slight laugh. The laugh rasped my temper. He was evidently saying that I was packed up and sealed and safe on the shelf.

That visit didn't make me feel happier, and next day, when I had a holiday from Medina's company, I had nothing better to do than to wander about London and think dismal thoughts. Yet, as luck would have it, that aimless walk had its consequences. It was a Sunday, and on the edge of Battersea Park I encountered a forlorn little company of Salvationists conducting a service in the rain. I stopped to listen — I always do — for I am the eternal average man who is bound to halt at every street show, whether it be a motor accident or a Punch and Judy. I listened to the tail-end of an address from a fat man who looked like a reformed publican, and a few words from an earnest lady in spectacles. Then they sang a hymn to a trombone accompaniment, and lo and behold, it was my old friend, which I had last whistled in Tom Greenslade's bedroom at Fosse. "There is rest for the weary," they sang:

"On the other side of Jordan,
In the green fields of Eden,
Where the Tree of Life is blooming,
There is rest for you."

I joined heartily in the singing, and contributed two half-crowns to the collecting box, for somehow the thing seemed to be a good omen.

I had been rather neglecting that item in the puzzle, and that evening and during the night I kept turning it over till my brain was nearly addled.

"Where the sower casts his seed in
Furrows of the fields of Eden."

That was the version in the rhyme, and in Tom Greenslade's recollection the equivalent was a curiosity shop in North London kept by a Jew with a dyed beard. Surely the two must correspond, though I couldn't just see how. The other two items had panned out so well that it was reasonable to suppose that the third might do the same. I could see no light, and I finally dropped off to sleep with that blessed "fields of Eden" twittering about my head.

I awoke with the same obsession, but other phrases had added themselves to it. One was the "playing-fields of Eton," about which some fellow had said something, and for a moment I wondered if I hadn't got hold of the right trail. Eton was a school for which Peter John's name was down, and therefore it had to do with boys, and might have to do with David Wardcliff. But after breakfast I gave up that line, for it led nowhere. The word was "Eden," to rhyme with "seed in." There were other fields haunting me — names like Tothill Fields and Bunhill Fields. These were places in London, and that was what I wanted. The Directory showed no name like that of "Fields of Eden," but was it not possible that there had once in old days been a place called by that odd title?

I spent the morning in the Club library, which was a very good one, reading up Old London. I read all about Vauxhall

Gardens and Ranelagh and Cremorne, and a dozen other ancient haunts of pleasure, but I found nothing to my purpose. Then I remembered that Bullivant — Lord Artinswell — had had for one of his hobbies the study of bygone London, so I telephoned to him and invited myself to lunch.

He was very pleased to see me, and it somehow comforted me to find myself again in the house in Queen Anne's Gate where I had spent some of the most critical moments of my life.

"You've taken on the work I wrote to you about," he said. "I knew you would. How are you getting on?"

"So-so. It's a big job and there's very little time. I want to ask you a question. You're an authority on Old London. Tell me, did you ever come across in your researches the name of the 'Fields of Eden'?"

He shook his head. "Not that I remember. What part of London?"

"I fancy it would be somewhere north of Oxford Street."

He considered. "No. What is your idea? A name of some private gardens or place of amusement?"

"Yes. Just like Cremorne or Vauxhall."

"I don't think so, but we'll look it up. I've a good collection of old maps and plans, and some antique directories."

So after luncheon we repaired to his library and set to work. The maps showed nothing, nor did the books at first. We were searching too far back, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when you went fox-hunting in what is now Regent's Park and Tyburn gallows stood near the Marble Arch. Then, by sheer luck, I tried a cast nearer our own time, and found a ribald work belonging to about the date of the American War, which purported to be a countryman's guide to the amusements of town. There was all sorts of information about "Cider Cellars" and "Groves of Harmony," which must have been pretty low pubs, and places in the suburbs for cock-fighting and dog-fighting. I turned up the index, and there to my joy I saw the word "Eden."

I read the passage aloud, and I believe my hands were shaking. The place was, as I hoped, north of Oxford Street in what we now call Marylebone. "The Fields of Eden," said the book, "were opened by Mr. Askew as a summer resort for the gentlemen and sportsmen of the capital. There of a fine afternoon may be seen Lord A— and the Duke of B— roving among the shady, if miniature, groves, not unaccompanied by the fair nymphs of the garden, while from adjacent arbours comes the cheerful tinkle of glasses and the merry clatter of dice, and the harmonious strains of Signora F—'s Italian choir." There was a good deal more of it, but I stopped reading. There was a plan of London in the book, and from it I was able to plot out the boundaries of that doubtful paradise.

Then I got a modern map, and fixed the location on it. The place had been quite small, only a few acres, and today it was covered by the block defined by Wellesley Street, Apwith Lane, Little Fardell Street, and the mews behind Royston Square. I wrote this down in my note-book and took my leave.

"You look pleased, Dick. Have you found what you want? Curious that I never heard the name, but it seems to have belonged to the dullest part of London at the dullest period of its history." Lord Artinswell, I could see, was a little nettled, for your antiquary hates to be caught out in his own subject.

I spent the rest of the afternoon making a very thorough examination of a not very interesting neighbourhood. What I wanted was a curiosity shop, and at first I thought I was going to fail. Apwith Lane was a kind of slum, with no shops but a disreputable foreign chemist's and a small dirty confectioner's, round the door of which dirty little children played. The inhabitants seemed to be chiefly foreigners. The mews at the back of Royston Square were of course useless; it was long since any dweller in that square had kept a carriage, and they seemed to be occupied chiefly with the motor vans of a steam laundry and the lorries of a coal merchant. Wellesley Street, at least the part of it in my area, was entirely occupied with the show-rooms of various American automobile companies. Little Fardell Street was a curious place. It had one odd building which may have been there when the Fields of Eden flourished, and which now seemed to be a furniture repository of a sort, with most of the windows shuttered. The other houses were perhaps forty years old, most of them the offices of small wholesale businesses, such as you find in back streets in the City. There was one big French baker's shop at the corner, a picture-framer's, a watch-maker's and a small and obviously decaying optician's. I walked down the place twice, and my heart sank, for I could see nothing in the least resembling an antique-shop.

I patrolled the street once more, and then I observed that the old dwelling, which looked like a furniture depository, was also some kind of shop. Through a dirty lower window I caught a glimpse of what seemed to be Persian rugs and the bland face of a soap-stone idol. The door had the air of never having been used, but I tried it and it opened, tinkling a bell

far in the back premises. I found myself in a small dusty place, littered up like a lumber room with boxes and carpets and rugs and bric-a-brac. Most of the things were clearly antiques, though to my inexperienced eye they didn't look worth much. The Turcoman rugs, especially, were the kind of thing you can buy anywhere in the Levant by the dozen.

A dishevelled Jewess confronted me, wearing sham diamond earrings.

"I'm interested in antiques," I said pleasantly, taking off my hat to her. "May I look round?"

"We do not sell to private customers," she said. "Only to the trade."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But may I look round? If I fancied something, I dare say I could get some dealer I know to offer for it."

She made no answer, but fingered her earrings with her plump grubby hands.

I turned over some of the rugs and carpets, and my first impression was confirmed. They were mostly trash, and a lacquer cabinet I uncovered was a shameless fake.

"I like that," I said, pointing to a piece of Persian embroidery. "Can't you put a price on it for me?"

"We only sell to the trade," she repeated, as if it were a litany. Her beady eyes, which never left my face, were entirely without expression.

"I expect you have a lot of things upstairs," I said. "Do you think I might have a look at them? I'm only in London for the day, and I might see something I badly wanted. I quite understand that you are wholesale people, but I can arrange any purchase through a dealer. You see, I'm furnishing a country house."

For the first time her face showed a certain life. She shook her head vigorously. "We have no more stock at present. We do not keep a large stock. Things come in and go out every day. We only sell to the trade."

"Well, I'm sorry to have taken up your time. Good afternoon." As I left the shop, I felt that I had made an important discovery. The business was bogus. There was very little that any dealer would touch, and the profits from all the trade done would not keep the proprietor in Virginian cigarettes.

I paid another visit to the neighbourhood after dinner. The only sign of life was in the slums of Apwith Lane, where frowsy women were chattering on the kerb. Wellesley Street was shuttered and silent from end to end. So was Little Fardell Street. Not a soul was about in it, not a ray of light was seen at any window, in the midst of the din of London it made a little enclave like a graveyard. I stopped at the curiosity shop, and saw that the windows were heavily shuttered and that the flimsy old door was secured by a strong outer frame of iron which fitted into a groove at the edge of the pavement and carried a stout lock. The shutters on the ground-floor windows were substantial things, preposterously substantial for so worthless a show. As I looked at them I had a strong feeling that the house behind that palisade was not as dead as it looked, that somewhere inside it there was life, and that in the night things happened there which it concerned me tremendously to know. Next morning I went to see Macgillivray. "Can you lend me a first-class burglar?" I asked. "Only for one night. Some fellow who won't ask any questions and will hold his tongue."

"I've given up being surprised when you're about," he said. "No. We don't keep tame burglars here, but I can find you a man who knows rather more about the art than any professional. Why?"

"Simply because I want to get inside a certain house to-night, and I see no chance of doing it except by breaking my way in. I suppose you could so arrange it that the neighbouring policemen would not interfere. In fact I want them to help to keep the coast clear."

I went into details with him, and showed him the lie of the land. He suggested trying the back of the house, but I had reconnoitred that side and seen that it was impossible, for the building seemed to join on with the houses in the street behind. In fact there was no back door. The whole architecture was extremely odd, and I had a notion that the entrance in Little Fardell Street might itself be a back door. I told Macgillivray that I wanted an expert who could let me in by one of the ground-floor windows, and replace everything so that there should be no trace next morning. He rang a bell and asked for Mr. Abel to be sent for. Mr. Abel was summoned, and presently appeared, a small wizened man, like a country tradesman. Macgillivray explained what was required of him, and Mr. Abel nodded. It was a job which offered no difficulties, he said, to an experienced man. He would suggest that he investigated the place immediately after closing time, and began work about ten o'clock. If I arrived at ten-thirty, he promised to have a means of entrance prepared. He inquired as to who were the constables at the nearest points, and asked that certain special ones should be put on duty, with whom he could arrange matters. I never saw anyone approach what seemed to me to be a delicate job with such businesslike

assurance.

“Do you want anyone to accompany you inside?” Macgillivray asked.

I said no. I thought I had better explore the place alone, but I wanted somebody within call in case there was trouble, and of course if I didn’t come back, say within two hours, he had better come and look for me.”

“We may have to arrest you as a housebreaker,” he said. “How are you going to explain your presence if there’s nothing wrong indoors and you disturb the sleep of a respectable caretaker?”

“I must take my chance,” I said. I didn’t feel nervous about that point. The place would either be empty, or occupied by those who would not invite the aid of the police.

After dinner I changed into an old tweed suit and rubber-soled shoes, and as I sat in the taxi I began to think that I had entered too lightly on the evening’s business. How was that little man Abel to prepare an entrance without alarming the neighbourhood, even with the connivance of the police; and if I found anybody inside, what on earth was I to say? There was no possible story to account for a clandestine entry into somebody else’s house, and I had suddenly a vision of the earringed Jewess screeching in the night and my departure for the cells in the midst of a crowd of hooligans from Apwith Lane. Even if I found something very shady indoors it would only be shady in my own mind in connection with my own problem, and would be all right in the eyes of the law. I was not likely to hit on anything patently criminal, and, even if I did, how was I to explain my presence there? I suffered from a bad attack of cold feet, and would have chucked the business there and then but for that queer feeling at the back of my head that it was my duty to risk it — that if I turned back I should be missing something of tremendous importance. But I can tell you I was feeling far from happy when I dismissed the taxi at the corner of Royston Square, and turned into Little Fardell Street.

It was a dark cloudy evening, threatening rain, and the place was none too brilliantly lit. But to my disgust I saw opposite the door of the curiosity shop a brazier of hot coals and the absurd little shelter which means that part of the street is up. There was the usual roped-in enclosure, decorated with red lamps, a heap of debris, and a hole where some of the setts had been lifted. Here was bad luck with a vengeance, that the Borough Council should have chosen this place and moment of all others for investigating the drains. And yet I had a kind of shamefaced feeling of relief, for this put the lid on my enterprise. I wondered why Macgillivray had not contrived the thing better.

I found I had done him an injustice. It was the decorous face of Mr. Abel which regarded me out of the dingy pent-house.

“This seemed to me the best plan, sir,” he said respectfully. “It enables me to wait for you here without exciting curiosity. I’ve seen the men on point duty, and it is all right in that quarter. This street is quiet enough, and taxis don’t use it as a short cut. You’ll find the door open. The windows might have been difficult, but I had a look at the door first, and that big iron frame is a piece of bluff. The bolt of the lock runs into the side-bar of the frame, but the frame itself is secured to the wall by another much smaller lock which you can only detect by looking closely. I have opened that for you — quite easily done.”

“But the other door — the shop door — that rings a bell inside.”

“I found it unlocked,” he said, with the ghost of a grin. “Whoever uses this place after closing hours doesn’t want to make much noise. The bell is disconnected. You have only to push it open and walk in.”

Events were forcing me against all my inclinations to go forward.

“If anyone enters when I am inside? . . . ” I began.

“You will hear the sound and must take measures accordingly. On the whole, sir, I am inclined to think that there’s something wrong with the place. You are armed? No. That is as well. Your position is unauthorised, as one would say, and arms might be compromising.”

“If you hear me cry?”

“I will come to your help. If you do not return within — shall we say? — two hours, I will make an entrance along with the nearest constable. The unlocked door will give us a pretext.”

“And if I come out in a hurry?”

“I have thought of that. If you have a fair start there is room for you to hide here,” and he jerked his thumb towards the pent-house. “If you are hard-pressed I will manage to impede the pursuit.”

The little man's calm matter-of-factness put me on my mettle. I made sure that the street was empty, opened the iron frame, and pushed through the shop-door, closing it softly behind me.

The shop was as dark as the inside of a nut, not a crack of light coming through the closely-shuttered windows. I felt very eerie, as I tiptoed cautiously among the rugs and tables. I listened, but there was no sound of any kind either from within or without, so I switched on my electric torch and waited breathlessly. Still no sound or movement. The conviction grew upon me that the house was uninhabited, and with a little more confidence I started out to explore.

The place did not extend far to the back, as I had believed. Very soon I came upon a dead wall against which every kind of litter was stacked, and that way progress was stopped. The door by which the Jewess had entered lay to the right, and that led me into a little place like a kitchen, with a sink, a cupboard or two, a gas-fire, and in the corner a bed — the kind of lair which a caretaker occupies in a house to let. I made out a window rather high up in the wall, but I could discover no other entrance save that by which I had come. So I returned to the shop and tried the passage to the left.

Here at first I found nothing but locked doors, obviously cupboards. But there was one open, and my torch showed me that it contained a very steep flight of stairs — the kind of thing that in old houses leads to the attics. I tried the boards, for I feared that they would creak, and I discovered that all the treads had been renewed. I can't say I liked diving into that box, but there was nothing else for it unless I were to give up.

At the top I found a door, and I was just about to try to open it when I heard steps on the other side.

I stood rigid in that narrow place, wondering what was to happen next. The man — it was a man's foot — came up to the door and to my consternation turned the handle. Had he opened it I would have been discovered, for he had a light, and Lord knows what mix-up would have followed. But he didn't; he tried the handle and then turned a key in the lock. After that I heard him move away.

This was fairly discouraging, for it appeared that I was now shut off from the rest of the house. When I had waited for a minute or two for the coast to clear, I too tried the handle, expecting to find it fast. To my surprise the door opened; the man had not locked, but unlocked it. This could mean only one of two things. Either he intended himself to go out by this way later, or he expected someone and wanted to let him in.

From that moment I recovered my composure. My interest was excited, there was a game to play and something to be done. I looked round the passage in which I found myself and saw the explanation of the architecture which had puzzled me. The old building in Little Fardell Street was the merest slip, only a room thick, and it was plastered against a much more substantial and much newer structure in which I now found myself. The passage was high and broad, and heavily carpeted, and I saw electric fittings at each end. This alarmed me, for if anyone came along and switched on the light, there was not cover to hide a cockroach. I considered that the boldest plan would be the safest, so I tiptoed to the end, and saw another passage equally bare going off at right angles. This was no good, so I brazenly assaulted the door of the nearest room. Thank Heaven! it was empty, so I could have a reconnoitring base.

It was a bedroom, well furnished in the Waring & Gillow style, and to my horror I observed that it was a woman's bedroom. It was a woman's dressing-table I saw, with big hair-brushes and oddments of scents and powders. There was a wardrobe with the door ajar full of hanging dresses. The occupant had been there quite lately, for wraps had been flung on the bed and a pair of slippers lay by the dressing-table, as if they had been kicked off hurriedly.

The place put me into the most abject fright. I seemed to have burgled a respectable flat and landed in a lady's bedroom, and I looked forward to some appalling scandal which would never be hushed up. Little Abel roosting in his pent-house seemed a haven of refuge separated from me by leagues of obstacles. I reckoned I had better get back to him as soon as possible, and I was just starting, when that happened which made me stop short. I had left the room door ajar when I entered, and of course I had switched off my torch after my first look round. I had been in utter darkness, but now I saw a light in the passage.

It might be the confounded woman who owned the bedroom, and my heart went into my boots. Then I saw that the passage lights had not been turned on, and that whoever was there had a torch like me. The footsteps were coming by the road I had come myself. Could it be the man for whom the staircase door had been unlocked?

It was a man all right, and, whatever his errand, it was not with my room. I watched him through the crack left by the door, and saw his figure pass. It was someone in a hurry who walked swiftly and quietly, and, beyond the fact that he wore a dark coat with the collar turned up and a black soft hat, I could make out nothing. The figure went down the corridor,

and at the end seemed to hesitate. Then it turned into a room on the left and disappeared.

There was nothing to do but wait, and happily I had not to wait long, for I was becoming pretty nervous. The figure reappeared, carrying something in its hand, and as it came towards me I had a glimpse of its face. I recognised it at once as that of the grey melancholy man whom I had seen the first night in Medina's house, when I was coming out of my stupor. For some reason or another that face had become stamped on my memory, and I had been waiting to see it again. It was sad, forlorn, and yet in a curious way pleasant; anyhow there was nothing repellent in it. But he came from Medina, and at that thought every scrap of hesitation and funk fled from me. I had been right in my instinct; this place was Medina's, it was the Fields of Eden of the rhyme. A second ago I had felt a futile blunderer; now I was triumphant.

He passed my door and turned down the passage which ran at right angles. I stepped after him and saw the light halt at the staircase door, and then disappear. My first impulse was to follow, tackle him in the shop, and get the truth out of him, but I at once discarded that notion, which would have given the whole show away. My business was to make further discoveries. I must visit the room which had been the object of his visit.

I was thankful to be out of that bedroom. In the passage I listened, but could hear no sound anywhere. There was indeed a sound in the air, but it appeared to come from the outer world, a sound like an organ or an orchestra a long way off. I concluded that there must be a church somewhere near where the choir-boys were practising.

The room I entered was a very queer place. It looked partly like a museum, partly like an office, and partly like a library. The curiosity shop had been full of rubbish, but I could see at a glance that there was no rubbish here. There were some fine Italian plaques — I knew something about these, for Mary collected them — and a set of green Chinese jars which looked the real thing. Also, there was a picture which seemed good enough to be a Hobbema. For the rest there were several safes of a most substantial make; but there were no papers lying about, and every drawer of a big writing-table was locked. I had not the wherewithal to burgle the safes and the table, even if I had wanted to. I was certain that most valuable information lurked somewhere in that place, but I did not see how I could get at it.

I was just about to leave, when I realised that the sound of music which I had heard in the passage was much louder here. It was no choir-boys' practising, but strictly secular music, apparently fiddles and drums, and the rhythm suggested a dance. Could this odd building abut on a dance-hall? I looked at my watch and saw that it was scarcely eleven and that I had only been some twenty minutes indoors. I was now in a mood of almost foolhardy confidence, so I determined to do a little more research.

The music seemed to come from somewhere to the left. The windows of the room, so far as I could judge, must look into Wellesley Street, which showed me how I had misjudged that thoroughfare. There might be a dancing-hall tucked in among the automobile shops. Anyhow I wanted to see what lay beyond this room, for there must be an entrance to it other than by the curiosity shop. Sure enough I found a door between two bookcases covered with a heavy portière, and emerged into still another passage.

Here the music sounded louder, and I seemed to be in a place like those warrens behind the stage in a theatre, where rooms are of all kinds of shapes and sizes. The door at the end was locked, and another door which I opened gave on a flight of wooden steps. I did not want to descend just yet, so I tried another door, and then shut it softly. For the room it opened upon was lighted, and I had the impression of human beings not very far off. Also the music, as I opened the door, came out in a great swelling volume of sound.

I stood for a moment hesitating, and then I opened that door again. For I had a notion that the light within did not come from anything in the room. I found myself in a little empty chamber, dusty and cheerless, like one of those cubby-holes you see in the Strand, where the big plate-glass front window reaches higher than the shop, and there is a space between the ceiling and the next floor. All one side was of glass, in which a casement was half open, and through the glass came the glare of a hundred lights from somewhere beyond. Very gingerly I moved forward, till I could look down on what was happening below.

For the last few seconds I think I had known what I was going to see. It was the dancing-club which I had visited some weeks before with Archie Roylance. There were the sham Chinese decorations, the blaze of lights, the nigger band, the whole garish spectacle. Only the place was far more crowded than on my previous visit. The babble of laughter and talk which rose from it added a further discord to the ugly music, but there was a fierce raucous gaiety about it all, an overpowering sense of something which might be vulgar but was also alive and ardent. Round the skirts of the hall was the

usual rastaquouère crowd of men and women drinking liqueurs and champagne, and mixed with fat Jews and blue-black dagos the flushed faces of boys from barracks or college who imagined they were seeing life. I thought for a moment that I saw Archie, but it was only one of Archie's kind, whose lean red visage made a queer contrast with the dead white of the woman he sat by.

The dancing was madder and livelier than on the last occasion. There was more vigour in the marionettes, and I was bound to confess that they knew their trade, little as I valued it. All the couples were expert, and when now and then a bungler barged in he did not stay long. I saw no sign of the girl in green whom Archie had admired, but there were plenty like her. It was the men I most disliked, pallid skeletons or puffy Latins, whose clothes fitted them too well, and who were sometimes as heavily made-up as the women.

One especially I singled out for violent disapproval. He was a tall young man, with a waist like a wasp, a white face, and hollow drugged eyes. His lips were red like a chorus-girl's, and I would have sworn that his cheeks were rouged. Anyhow he was a loathsome sight. But ye gods! he could dance. There was no sign of animation in him, so that he might have been a corpse, galvanised by some infernal power and compelled to move through an everlasting dance of death. I noticed that his heavy eyelids were never raised.

Suddenly I got a bad shock. For I realised that this mannequin was no other than my ancient friend, the Marquis de la Tour du Pin.

I hadn't recovered from that when I got a worse. He was dancing with a woman whose hair seemed too bright to be natural. At first I could not see her face clearly, for it was flattened against his chest, but she seemed to be hideously and sparsely dressed. She too knew how to dance, and the slim grace of her body was conspicuous even in her vulgar clothes. Then she turned her face to me, and I could see the vivid lips and the weary old pink and white enamel of her class. Pretty, too . . .

And then I had a shock which nearly sent me through the window. For in this painted dancer I recognised the wife of my bosom and the mother of Peter John.



CHAPTER XIV

SIR ARCHIBALD ROYLANCE PUTS HIS FOOT IN IT

Three minutes later I was back in the curiosity shop. I switched off my light, and very gently opened the street door. There was a sound of footsteps on the pavement, so I drew back till they had passed. Then I emerged into the quiet street, with Abel's little brazier glowing in front of me, and Abel's little sharp face poked out of his pent-house.

"All right, sir?" he asked cheerfully.

"All right," I said. "I have found what I wanted."

"There was a party turned up not long after you had gone in. Lucky I had locked the door after you. He wasn't inside more than five minutes. A party with a black topcoat turned up at the collar — respectable party he looked — oldish — might have been a curate. Funny thing, sir, but I guessed correctly when you were coming back, and had the door unlocked ready for you. . . . If you've done with me I'll clear off."

"Can you manage alone?" I asked. "There's a good deal to tidy up."

He winked solemnly. "In an hour there won't be a sign of anything. I have my little ways of doing things. Good night, sir, and thank you." He was like a boots seeing a guest off from an hotel.

I found that the time was just after half-past eleven, so I walked to Tottenham Court Road and picked up a taxi, telling the man to drive to Great Charles Street in Westminster. Mary was in London, and I must see her at once. She had chosen to take a hand in the game, probably at Sandy's instigation, and I must find out what exactly she was doing. The business was difficult enough already with Sandy following his own trail and me forbidden to get into touch with him, but if Mary was also on the job it would be naked chaos unless I knew her plans. I own I felt miserably nervous. There was nobody in the world whose wisdom I put higher than hers, and I would have trusted her to the other side of Tophet, but I hated to think of a woman mixed up in something so ugly and perilous. She was far too young and lovely to be safe on the back-stairs. And yet I remembered that she had been in uglier affairs before this and I recalled old Blenkiron's words: "She can't scare and she can't soil." And then I began to get a sort of comfort from the feeling that she was along with me in the game; it made me feel less lonely. But it was pretty rough luck on Peter John. Anyhow I must see her, and I argued that she would probably be staying with her Wymondham aunts, and that in any case I could get news of her there.

The Misses Wymondham were silly ladies, but their butler would have made Montmartre respectable. He and I had always got on well, and I think the only thing that consoled him when Fosse was sold was that Mary and I were to have it. The house in Great Charles Street was one of those tremendously artistic new dwellings with which the intellectual plutocracy have adorned the Westminster slums.

"Is her ladyship home yet?" I asked.

"No, Sir Richard, but she said she wouldn't be late. I expect her any moment."

"Then I think I'll come in and wait. How are you, Barnard? Found your city legs yet?"

"I am improving, Sir Richard, I thank you. Very pleased to have Miss Mary here, if I may take the liberty of so speaking of her. Miss Claire is in Paris still, and Miss Wymondham is dancing to-night, and won't be back till very late. How are things at Fosse, sir, if I may make so bold? And how is the young gentleman? Miss Mary has shown me his photograph. A very handsome young gentleman, sir, and favours yourself."

"Nonsense, Barnard. He's the living image of his mother. Get me a drink, like a good fellow. A tankard of beer, if you have it, for I've a throat like a grindstone."

I drank the beer and waited in a little room which would have been charming but for the garish colour scheme which Mary's aunts had on the brain. I was feeling quite cheerful again, for Peter John's photograph was on the mantelpiece and I reckoned that any minute Mary might be at the doorway.

She came in just before midnight. I heard her speak to Barnard in the hall, and then her quick step outside the door. She was preposterously dressed, but she must have done something to her face in the taxi, for the paint was mostly rubbed from it, leaving it very pale.

"Oh, Dick, my darling," she cried, tearing off her cloak and running to my arms. "I never expected you. There's nothing wrong at home?"

"Not that I know of, except that it's deserted. Mary, what on earth brought you here?"

"You're not angry, Dick?"

"Not a bit — only curious."

"How did you know I was here?"

"Guessed. I thought it the likeliest cover to draw. You see I've been watching you dancing to-night. Look here, my dear, if you put so much paint and powder on your face and jam it so close to old Turpin's chest, it won't be easy for the poor fellow to keep his shirt-front clean."

"You — watched — me — dancing! Were you in that place?"

"Well, I wouldn't say IN it. But I had a prospect of the show from the gallery. And it struck me that the sooner we met and had a talk the better."

"The gallery! Were you in the house? I don't understand."

"No more do I. I burgled a certain house in a back street for very particular reasons of my own. In the process I may mention that I got one of the worst frights of my life. After various adventures I came to a place where I heard the dickens of a row which I made out to be dance music. Eventually I found a dirty little room with a window and to my surprise looked down on a dancing-hall. I know it, for I had once been there with Archie Roylance. That was queer enough, but imagine my surprise when I saw my wedded wife, raddled like a geisha, dancing with an old friend who seemed to have got himself up to imitate a wax-work."

She seemed scarcely to be listening. "But in the house! Did you see no one?"

"I saw one man and I heard another. The fellow I saw was a man I once met in the small hours with Medina."

"But the other? You didn't see him? You didn't hear him go out?"

"No." I was puzzled at her excitement. "Why are you so keen about the other?"

"Because I think — I'm sure — it was Sandy — Colonel Arbuthnot."

This was altogether beyond me. "Impossible!" I cried. "The place is a lair of Medina's. The man I saw was Medina's servant or satellite. Do you mean to say that Sandy has been exploring that house?"

She nodded. "You see it is the Fields of Eden."

"Oh, I know. I found that out for myself. Do you tell me that Sandy discovered it too?"

"Yes. That is why I was there. That is why I have been living a perfectly loathsome life and am now dressed like a chorus girl."

"Mary," I said solemnly, "my fine brain won't support any more violent shocks. Will you please to sit down beside me, and give me the plain tale of all you have been doing since I said good-bye to you at Fosse?"

"First," she said, "I had a visit from a dramatic critic on holiday, Mr. Alexander Thomson. He said he knew you and that you had suggested that he should call. He came three times to Fosse, but only once to the house. Twice I met him in the woods. He told me a good many things, and one was that he couldn't succeed and you couldn't succeed, unless I helped. He thought that if a woman was lost only a woman could find her. In the end he persuaded me. You said yourself, Dick, that Nanny was quite competent to take charge of Peter John, with Dr. Greenslade so close at hand. And I hear from her every day, and he is very well and happy."

"You came to London. But when?"

"The day you came back from Norway."

"But I've been having letters regularly from you since then."

"That is my little arrangement with Paddock. I took him into my confidence. I send him the letters in batches and he posts one daily."

"Then you've been here more than a fortnight. Have you seen Sandy?"

"Twice. He has arranged my life for me, and has introduced me to my dancing partner, the Marquis de la Tour du Pin, whom you call Turpin. I think I have had the most horrible, the most wearing time that any woman ever had. I have moved

in raffish circles and have had to be the most raffish of the lot. Do you know, Dick, I believe I'm really a good actress? I have acquired a metallic voice, and a high silly laugh, and hard eyes, and when I lie in bed at night I blush all over for my shamelessness. I know you hate it, but you can't hate it more than I do. But it had to be done. I couldn't be a 'piker,' as Mr. Blenkiron used to say."

"Any luck?"

"Oh, yes," she said wearily. "I have found Miss Victor. It wasn't very difficult, really. When I had made friends with the funny people that frequent these places it wasn't hard to see who was different from the others. They're all mannequins, but the one I was looking for was bound to be the most mannequinish of the lot. I wanted someone without mind or soul, and I found her. Besides, I had a clue to start with. Odell, you know."

"It was the green girl."

She nodded. "I couldn't be certain, of course, till I had her lover to help me. He is a good man, your French Marquis. He has played his part splendidly. You see, it would never do to try to AWAKE Adela Victor now. We couldn't count on her being able to keep up appearances without arousing suspicion, till the day of release arrived. But something had to be done, and that is my business especially. I have made friends with her, and I talk to her and I have attached her to me just a little, like a dog. That will give me the chance to do the rest quickly when the moment comes. You cannot bring back a vanished soul all at once unless you have laid some foundation. We have to be very, very careful, for she is keenly watched, but I think — yes, I am sure — it is going well."

"Oh, bravo!" I cried. "That makes Number Two. I may tell you that I have got Number One." I gave her a short account of my doings in Norway. "Two of the poor devils will get out of the cage anyhow. I wonder if it wouldn't be possible to pass the word to Victor and the Duke. It would relieve their anxiety."

"I thought of that," she replied, "but Colonel Arbuthnot says No, on no account. He says it might ruin everything. He takes a very solemn view of the affair, you know. And so do I. I have seen Mr. Medina."

"Where?" I asked in astonishment.

"I got Aunt Doria to take me to a party where he was to be present. Don't be worried. I wasn't introduced to him, and he never heard my name. But I watched him, and knowing what I did I was more afraid than I have ever been in my life. He is extraordinarily attractive — no, not attractive — seductive, and he is as cold and hard as chilled steel. You know these impressions I get of people which I can't explain — you say they are always right. Well, I felt him almost superhuman. He exhales ease and power like a god, but it is a god from a lost world. I can see that, like a god too, it is souls that he covets. Ordinary human badness seems decent in comparison with that Lucifer's pride of his. I think if I ever could commit murder it would be his life I would take. I should feel like Charlotte Corday. Oh, I'm dismally afraid of him."

"I'm not," I said stoutly, "and I see him at closer quarters than most people." The measure of success we had attained was beginning to make me confident.

"Colonel Arbuthnot is afraid for you," she said. "The two times I have seen him in London he kept harping on the need of your keeping very near to him. I think he meant me to warn you. He says that when you are fighting a man with a long-range weapon the only chance is to hug him. Dick, didn't you tell me that Mr. Medina suggested that you should stay in his house? I have been thinking a lot about that, and I believe it would be the safest plan. Once he saw you secure in his pocket he might forget about you."

"It would be most infernally awkward, for I should have no freedom of movement. But all the same I believe you are right. Things may grow very hectic as we get near the day."

"Besides, you might find out something about Number Three. Oh, it is the little boy that breaks my heart. The others might escape on their own account — some day, but unless we find HIM he is lost for ever. And Colonel Arbuthnot says that, even if we found him, it might be hard to restore the child's mind. Unless — unless —"

Mary's face had become grim, if one could use the word of a thing so soft and gentle. Her hands were tightly clasped, and her eyes had a strained far-away look.

"I am going to find him," she cried. "Listen, Dick. That man despises women and rules them out of his life, except in so far as he can make tools of them. But there is one woman who is going to stop at nothing to beat him. . . . When I think of that little David I grow mad and desperate. I am afraid of myself. Have you no hope to give me?"

"I haven't the shadow of a clue," I said dolefully. "Has Sandy none?"

She shook her head. "He is so small, the little fellow, and so easy to hide."

"If I were in Central Africa, I would get Medina by the throat, and peg him down and torture him till he disgorged."

Again she shook her head. "Those methods are useless here. He would laugh at you, for he isn't a coward — at least I think not. Besides, he is certain to be magnificently guarded. And for the rest he has the entrenchments of his reputation and popularity, and a quicker brain than any of us. He can put a spell of blindness on the world — on all men and nearly all women."

The arrival of Miss Wymondham made me get up to leave. She was still the same odd-looking creature, with a mass of tow-coloured hair piled above her long white face. She had been dancing somewhere, and looked at once dog-tired and excited. "Mary has been having such a good time," she told me. "Even I can scarcely keep pace with her ardent youth. Can't you persuade her to do her hair differently? The present arrangement is so *démodé* and puts her whole figure out of drawing. Nancy Travers was speaking about it only to-night. Properly turned out, she said, Mary would be the most ravishing thing in London. By the way, I saw your friend Sir Archie Roylance at the Parminers'. He is lunching here on Thursday. Will you come, Richard?"

I told her that my plans were vague and that I thought I might be out of town. But I arranged with Mary before I left to keep me informed at the Club of any news that came from Sandy. As I walked back I was infected by her distress over little David Warcliff. That was the most grievous business of all, and I saw no light in it, for though everything else happened according to plan, we should never be able to bring Medina to book. The more I thought of it the more hopeless our case against him seemed to be. We might free the hostages, but we could never prove that he had had anything to do with them. I could give damning evidence, to be sure, but who would take my word against his? And I had no one to confirm me. Supposing I indicted him for kidnapping and told the story of what I knew about the Blind Spinner and Newhover and Odell? He and the world would simply laugh at me, and I should probably have to pay heavy damages for libel. None of his satellites, I was certain, would ever give him away; they couldn't, even if they wanted to, for they didn't know anything. No, Sandy was right. We might have a measure of success, but there would be no victory. And yet only victory would give us full success, for only to get him on his knees, gibbering with terror, would restore the poor little boy. I strode through the empty streets with a sort of hopeless fury in my heart.

One thing puzzled me. What was Sandy doing in that house behind the curiosity shop, if indeed it was Sandy? Whoever had been there had been in league with the sad grey man whom I watched from behind the bedroom door. Now the man was part of Medina's entourage: I had no doubt about the accuracy of my recollection. Had Sandy dealings with someone inside the enemy's citadel? I didn't see how that was possible, for he had told me he was in deadly danger from Medina, and that his only chance was to make him believe that he was out of Europe. . . . As I went to bed, one thing was very clear in my mind. If Medina asked me to stay with him, I would accept. It would probably be safer, though I wasn't so much concerned about that, and it would possibly be more fruitful. I might find out something about the grey man.

Next day I went to see Medina, for I wanted him to believe that I couldn't keep away from him. He was in tremendous spirits about something or other, and announced that he was going off to the country for a couple of days. He made me stay to luncheon, when I had another look at Odell, who seemed to be getting fat. "Your wind, my lad," I said to myself, "can't be as good as it should be. You wouldn't have my money in a scrap." I hoped that Medina was going to have a holiday, for he had been doing a good deal lately in the way of speaking, but he said "No such luck." He was going down to the country on business — an estate of which he was a trustee wanted looking into. I asked in what part of England, and he said Shropshire. He liked that neighbourhood and had an idea of buying a place there when he had more leisure.

Somehow that led me to speak of his poetry. He was surprised to learn that I had been studying the little books, and I could see took it as a proof of my devotion. I made a few fulsome observations on their merits, and said that even an ignorant fellow like me could see how dashed good they were. I also remarked that they seemed to me a trifle melancholy.

"Melancholy!" he said. "It's a foolish world, Hannay, and a wise man must have his moods of contempt. Victory loses some of its salt when it is won over fools."

And then he said what I had been waiting for. "I told you weeks ago that I wanted you to take up your quarters with me. Well, I repeat the offer and will take no refusal."

"It is most awfully kind of you," I stammered. "But wouldn't I be in the way?"

"Not in the least. You see the house — it's as large as a barracks. I'll be back from Shropshire by Friday, and I expect

you to move in here on Friday evening. We might dine together.”

I was content, for it gave me a day or two to look about me. Medina went off that afternoon, and I spent a restless evening. I wanted to be with Mary, but it seemed to me that the less I saw her the better. She was going her own way, and if I showed myself in her neighbourhood it might ruin all. Next day was no better; I actually longed for Medina to return so that I might feel I was doing something, for there was nothing I could turn my hand to, and when I was idle the thought of David Warcliff was always present to torment me. I went out to Hampton Court and had a long row on the river; then I dined at the Club and sat in the little back smoking-room, avoiding anyone I knew, and trying to read a book of travels in Arabia. I fell asleep in my chair, and, waking about half-past eleven, was staggering off to bed, when a servant came to tell me that I was wanted on the telephone.

It was Mary; she was speaking from Great Charles Street and her voice was sharp with alarm.

“There’s been an awful mishap, Dick,” she said breathlessly. “Are you alone? You’re sure there’s no one there? . . . Archie Roylance has made a dreadful mess of things. . . . He came to that dancing-place to-night, and Adela Victor was there, and Odell with her. Archie had seen her before, you know, and apparently was much attracted. No! He didn’t recognise me, for when I saw him I kept out of range. But of course he recognised the Marquis. He danced with Adela, and I suppose he talked nonsense to her — anyhow he made himself conspicuous. The result was that Odell proposed to take her away — I suppose he was suspicious of anybody of Archie’s world — and, well, there was a row. The place was very empty — only about a dozen, and mostly a rather bad lot. Archie asked what right he had to carry off the girl, and lost his temper, and the manager was called in — the man with the black beard. He backed up Odell, and then Archie did a very silly thing. He said he was Sir Archibald Roylance and wasn’t going to be dictated to by any Jew, and, worse, he said his friend was the Marquis de la Tour du Pin, and that between them they would burst up this show, and that he wouldn’t have a poor girl ordered about by a third-rate American bully. . . . I don’t know what happened afterwards. The women were hustled out, and I had to go with the rest. . . . But, Dick, it’s bad trouble. I’m not afraid so much for Archie, though he has probably had a bad mauling, but the Marquis. They’re sure to know who he is and all about him and remember his connection with Adela. They’re almost certain to make certain in some horrible way that he can’t endanger them again.

“Lord,” I groaned, “what a catastrophe! And what on earth can I do? I daren’t take any part!”

“No,” came a hesitating voice. “I suppose not. But you can warn the Marquis — if nothing has happened to him already.”

“Precious poor chance. These fellows don’t waste time. But go to bed and sleep, my dear. I’ll do my best.”

My best at that time of night was pretty feeble. I rang up Victor’s house and found, as I expected, that Turpin had not returned. Then I rang up Archie’s house in Grosvenor Street and got the same answer about him. It was no good my going off to the back streets of Marylebone, so I went to bed and spent a wretched night.

Very early next morning I was in Grosvenor Street, and there I had news. Archie’s man had just had a telephone message from a hospital to say that his master had had an accident, and would he come round and bring clothes. He packed a bag and he and I drove there at once, and found the miserable Archie in bed, the victim officially of a motor accident. He did not seem to be very bad, but it was a rueful face, much battered about the eyes and bandaged as to the jaw, which was turned on me when the nurse left us.

“You remember what I said about the pug with the diamond studs,” he whistled through damaged teeth. “Well, I took him on last night and got tidily laid out. I’m not up to professional standards, and my game leg made me slow.”

“You’ve put your foot into it most nobly,” I said. “What do you mean by brawling in a dance-club? You’ve embarrassed me horribly in the job I’m on.”

“But how?” he asked, and but for the bandage his jaw would have dropped.

“Never mind how at present. I want to know exactly what happened. It’s more important than you think.”

He told me the same story that I had heard from Mary, but much garlanded with objurgations. He denied that he had dined too well — “nothing but a small whisky-and-soda and one glass of port.” He had been looking for the girl in green for some time, and having found her, was not going to miss the chance of making her acquaintance. “A melancholy little being with nothin’ to say for herself. She’s had hard usage from some swine — you could see it by her eyes — and I expect the pug’s the villain. Anyway, I wasn’t goin’ to stand his orderin’ her about like a slave. So I told him so, and a fellow with a black beard chipped in and they began to hustle me. Then I did a dam’ silly thing. I tried to solemnise ’em by sayin’ who I

was, and old Turpin was there, so I dragged his name in. Dashed caddish thing to do, but I thought a Marquis would put the wind up that crowd.”

“Did he join in?”

“I don’t know — I rather fancy he got scragged at the start. Anyhow I found myself facin’ the pug, seein’ bright red, and inclined to fight a dozen. I didn’t last for more than one round — my game leg cramped me, I suppose. I got in one or two on his ugly face, and then I suppose I took a knock-out. After that I don’t remember anything till I woke up in this bed feelin’ as if I had been through a mangle. The people here say I was brought in by two bobbies and a fellow with a motor-car, who said I had walked slap into his bonnet at a street corner and hurt my face. He was very concerned about me, but omitted to leave his name and address. Very thoughtful of the sweeps to make sure there would be no scandal. . . . I say, Dick, you don’t suppose this will get into the newspapers? I don’t want to be placarded as havin’ been in such a vulgar shindy just as I’m thinkin’ of goin’ in for Parliament.”

“I don’t think there’s the remotest chance of your hearing another word about it, unless you talk too much yourself. Look here, Archie, you’ve got to promise me never to go near that place again, and never on any account whatever to go hunting for that girl in green. I’ll tell you my reasons some day, but you can take it that they’re good ones. Another thing. You’ve got to keep out of Turpin’s way. I only hope you haven’t done him irreparable damage because of your idiocy last night.”

Archie was desperately penitent. “I know I behaved like a cad. I’ll go and grovel to old Turpin as soon as they let me up. But he’s all right — sure to be. He wasn’t lookin’ for a fight like me. I expect he only got shoved into the street and couldn’t get back again.”

I did not share Archie’s optimism, and very soon my fear was a certainty. I went straight from the hospital to Carlton House Terrace, and found Mr. Victor at breakfast. I learned that the Marquis de la Tour du Pin had been dining out on the previous evening and had not returned.



CHAPTER XV

HOW A FRENCH NOBLEMAN DISCOVERED FEAR

I have twice heard from Turpin the story I am going to set down — once before he understood much of it, a second time when he had got some enlightenment — but I doubt whether to his dying day he will ever be perfectly clear about what happened to him.

I have not had time to introduce Turpin properly, and in any case I am not sure that the job is not beyond me. My liking for the French is profound, but I believe there is no race on earth which the average Briton is less qualified to comprehend. For myself, I could far more easily get inside the skin of a Boche. I knew he was as full of courage as a Berserker, pretty mad, but with that queer core of prudence which your Latin possesses and which in the long run makes his madness less dangerous than an Englishman's. He was high-strung, excitable, imaginative, and I should have said in a general way very sensitive to influences such as Medina wielded. But he was forewarned. Mary had told him the main lines of the business, and he was playing the part she had set him as dutifully as a good child. I had not done justice to his power of self-control. He saw his sweetheart leading that blind unearthly life, and it must have been torture to him to do nothing except look on. But he never attempted to wake her memory, but waited obediently till Mary gave orders, and played the part to perfection of the ordinary half-witted dancing mountebank.

When the row with Archie started, and the scurry began, he had the sense to see that he must keep out of it. Then he heard Archie speak his real name, and saw the mischief involved in that, for nobody knew him except Mary, and he had passed as a Monsieur Claud Simond from Buenos Aires. When he saw his friend stand up to the bruiser, he started off instinctively to his help, but stopped in time and turned to the door. The man with the black beard was looking at him, but said nothing.

There seemed to be a good deal of racket at the foot of the stairs. One of the girls caught his arm. "No good that way," she whispered. "It's a raid all right. There's another road out. You don't want your name in tomorrow's papers."

He followed her into a little side passage, which was almost empty and very dark, and there he lost her. He was just starting to prospect, when he saw a little dago whom he recognised as one of the bar-tenders. "Up the stairs, monsieur," the man said. "Then first to the left and down again. You come out in the yard of the Apollo Garage. Quick, monsieur, or les flics will be here."

Turpin sped up the steep wooden stairs, and found himself in another passage fairly well lit, with a door at each end. He took the one to the left, and dashed through, wondering how he was to recover his hat and coat, and also what had become of Mary. The door opened easily enough, and in his haste he took two steps forward. It swung behind him, so that he was in complete darkness, and he turned back to open it again to give him light. But it would not open. With the shutting of that door he walked clean out of the world.

At first he was angry, and presently, when he realised his situation, a little alarmed. The place seemed to be small, it was utterly dark, and as stuffy as the inside of a safe. His chief thought at the moment was that it would never do for him to be caught in a raid on a dance-club, for his true name might come out and the harm which Archie's foolish tongue had wrought might be thereby aggravated. But soon he saw that he had stepped out of one kind of danger into what was probably a worse. He was locked in an infernal cupboard in a house which he knew to have the most unholy connections.

He started to grope around, and found that the place was larger than he thought. The walls were bare, the floor seemed to be of naked boards, and there was not a stick of furniture anywhere, nor, so far as he could see, any window. He could not discover the door he had entered by, which on the inside must have been finished dead level with the walls. Presently he found that his breathing was difficult, and that almost put him in a panic, for the dread of suffocation had always been for him the private funk from which the bravest man is not free. To breathe was like having his face tightly jammed against a pillow. He made an effort and controlled himself, for he realised that if he let himself become hysterical he would only suffocate the faster. . . .

Then he declares that he felt a hand pressing on his mouth. . . . It must have been imagination, for he admits that the place was empty, but all the same the hand came again and again — a large soft hand smelling of roses. His nerves began to

scream, and his legs to give under him. The roses came down on him in a cloud, and that horrible flabby hand, as big as a hill, seemed to smother him. He tried to move, to get away from it, and before he knew he found himself on his knees. He struggled to get up, but the hand was on him, flattening him out, and that intolerable sweet sickly odour swathed him in its nauseous folds. . . . And then he lost consciousness. . . .

How long he was senseless he doesn't know, but he thinks it must have been a good many hours. When he came to he was no longer in the cupboard. He was lying on what seemed to be a couch in a room which felt spacious, for he could breathe freely, but it was still as black as the nether pit. He had a blinding headache, and felt rather sick and as silly as an owl. He couldn't remember how he had come there, but as his hand fell on his shirt-front, and he realised he was in dress clothes, he recollected Archie's cry. That was the last clear thing in his head, but it steadied him, for it reminded him how grave was his danger. He has told me that at first he was half stifled with panic, for he was feeling abominably weak; but he had just enough reason left in him to let him take a pull on his nerves. "You must be a man," he repeated to himself. "Even if you have stumbled into hell, you must be a man."

Then a voice spoke out of the darkness, and at the sound of it most of his fright disappeared. It was no voice that he knew, but a pleasant voice, and it spoke to him in French. Not ordinary French, you understand, but the French of his native valley in the South, with the soft slurring patois of his home. It seemed to drive away his headache and nausea, and to soothe every jangled nerve, but it made him weaker. Of that he has no doubt. This friendly voice was making him a child again.

His memory of what it said is hopelessly vague. He thinks that it reminded him of the life of his boyhood — the old chateau high in a fold of the limestone hills, the feathery chestnuts in the valley bottom, the clear pools where the big trout lived, the snowy winters when the wolves came out of the forests to the farmyard doors, the hot summers when the roads were blinding white and the turf on the downs grew as yellow as corn. The memory of it was all jumbled, and whatever the voice said its effect was more like music than spoken words. It smoothed out the creases in his soul, but it stole also the manhood from him. He was becoming limp and docile and passive like a weak child.

The voice stopped and he felt a powerful inclination to sleep. Then suddenly, between sleeping and waking, he became aware of a light, a star which glowed ahead of him in the darkness. It waxed and then waned, and held his eyes like a vice. At the back of his head he knew that there was some devilry in the business, that it was something which he ought to resist, but for the life of him he could not remember why.

The light broadened till it was like the circle which a magic-lantern makes on a screen. Into the air there crept a strange scent — not the sickly smell of roses, but a hard pungent smell which tantalised him with its familiarity. Where had he met it before? . . . Slowly out of it there seemed to shape a whole world of memories.

Now Turpin before the War had put in some years' service in Africa with the Armée Coloniale as a lieutenant of Spahis, and had gone with various engineering and military expeditions south of the Algerian frontier into the desert. He used to rave to me about the glories of those lost days, that first youth of a man which does not return. . . . This smell was the desert, that unforgettable, untameable thing which stretches from the Mediterranean to the Central African forests, the place where, in the days when it was sea, Ulysses wandered, and where the magic of Circe and Calypso for all the world knows may still linger.

In the moon of light a face appeared, a face so strongly lit up that every grim and subtle line of it was magnified. It was an Eastern face, a lean high-boned Arab face, with the eyes set in a strange slant. He had never seen it before, but he had met something like it when he had dabbled in the crude magic of the sands, the bubbling pot, and the green herb fire. At first it was only a face, half averted, and then it seemed to move so that the eyes appeared, like lights suddenly turned on at night as one looks from without at a dark house.

He felt in every bone a thing he had almost forgotten, the spell and the terror of the desert. It was a cruel and inhuman face, hiding God knows what of ancient horror and sin, but wise as the Sphinx and eternal as the rocks. As he stared at it the eyes seemed to master and envelop him, and, as he put it, suck the soul out of him.

You see he had never been told about Kharáma. That was the one mistake Mary made, and a very natural one, for it was not likely that he and the Indian would foregather. So he had nothing in his poor muddled head to help him to combat this mastering presence. He didn't try. He said he felt himself sinking into a delicious lethargy, like the coma which overtakes a man who is being frozen to death.

I could get very little out of Turpin about what happened next. The face spoke to him, but whether in French or some African tongue he didn't know — French, he thought — certainly not English. I gather that, while the eyes and the features were to the last degree awe-inspiring, the voice was, if anything, friendly. It told him that he was in instant danger, and that the only hope lay in utter impassivity. If he attempted to exercise his own will, he was doomed, and there was sufficient indication of what that doom meant to shake his lethargy into spasms of childish fear. "Your body is too feeble to move," said the voice, "for Allah has laid His hand on it." Sure enough Turpin realised that he hadn't the strength of a kitten. "You have surrendered your will to Allah till He restores it to you." That also was true, for Turpin knew he could not summon the energy to brush his hair, unless he was ordered to. "You will be safe," said the voice, "so long as you sleep. You will sleep till I bid you awake."

Sleep he probably did, for once again came a big gap in his consciousness. . . . The next he knew he was being jolted in something that ran on wheels, and he suddenly rolled over on his side, as the vehicle took a sharp turn. This time it didn't take him quite so long to wake up. He found he was in a big motor-car, with his overcoat on, and his hat on the seat beside him. He was stretched out almost at full length, and comfortably propped up with cushions. All this he realised fairly soon, but it was some time before he could gather up the past, and then it was all blurred and sketchy. . . . What he remembered most clearly was the warning that he was in grave peril and was only safe while he did nothing. That was burned in on his mind, and the lesson was pointed by the complete powerlessness of his limbs. He could hardly turn over from his side to his back, and he knew that if he attempted to stand he would fall down in a heap. He shut his eyes and tried to think.

Bit by bit the past pieced itself together. He remembered Archie's cry — and things before that — Mary — the girl in green. Very soon the truth smote him in the face. He had been kidnapped like the rest, and had had the same tricks played on him. . . . But they had only affected his body. As he realised this tremendous fact Turpin swelled with pride. Some devilry had stolen his physical strength, but his soul was his own still, his memory and his will. A sort of miasma of past fear still clung about him, like the after-taste of influenza, but this only served to make him angry. He was most certainly not going to be beaten. The swine had miscalculated this time; they might have a cripple in their hands, but it would be a very watchful, wary, and determined cripple, quick to seize the first chance to be even with them. His anger made his spirits rise. All his life he had been a man of tropical loves and tempestuous hates. He had loathed the Boche, and free-masons, and communists and the deputies of his own land, and ever since Adela's disappearance he had nursed a fury against a person or persons unknown: and now every detestation of which he was capable had been focussed against those who were responsible for this night's work. The fools! They thought they had got a trussed sheep, when all the time it was a lame tiger.

The blinds of the car were down, but by small painful movements he managed to make out that there was a man in the front seat beside the chauffeur. By and by he got a corner of the right-hand blind raised, and saw that it was night time and that they were moving through broad streets that looked like a suburb. From the beat of the engine he gathered that the car was a Rolls-Royce, but not, he thought, one of the latest models. Presently the motion became less regular, and he realised that the suburban streets were giving place to country roads. His many expeditions in his Delage had taught him a good deal about the ways out of London, but, try as he might, he could not pick up any familiar landmark. The young moon had set, so he assumed that it was near midnight; it was a fine, clear night, not very dark, and he picked up an occasional inn and church, but they never seemed to pass through any village. Probably the driver was taking the less frequented roads — a view he was confirmed in by the frequent right-angled turns and the many patches of indifferent surface.

Very soon he found his efforts at reconnaissance so painful that he gave them up, and contented himself with planning his policy. Of course he must play the part of the witless sheep. That duty, he thought, presented no difficulties, for he rather fancied himself as an actor. The trouble was his bodily condition. He did not believe that a constitution as good as his could have taken any permanent damage from the night's work. . . . The night's! He must have been away for more than one night, for the row with Archie had taken place very near twelve o'clock. This must be the midnight following. He wondered what Mr. Victor was thinking about it — and Mary — and Hannay. The miserable Hannay had now four lost ones to look for instead of three! . . . Anyhow the devils had got an ugly prisoner in him. His body must soon be all right, unless of course they took steps to keep it all wrong. At that thought Turpin's jaw set. The rôle of the docile sheep might be difficult to keep up very long.

The next he knew the car had turned in at a gate and was following a dark tree-lined avenue. In another minute it had stopped before the door of a house, and he was being lifted out by the chauffeur and the man from the front seat, and

carried into a hall. But first a dark bandanna was tied over his eyes, and, as he could do nothing with his arms or legs, he had to submit. He felt himself carried up a short staircase, and then along a corridor into a bedroom, where a lamp was lit. Hands undressed him — his eyes still bandaged — and equipped him with pyjamas which were not his own, and were at once too roomy and too short. Then food was brought, and an English voice observed that he had better have some supper before going to sleep. The bandage was taken off and he saw two male backs disappearing through the door.

Up till now he had felt no hunger or thirst, but the sight of food made him realise that he was as empty as a drum. By twisting his head he could see it all laid out on the table beside his bed — a good meal it looked — cold ham and galantine, an omelette, a salad, cheese and a small decanter of red wine. His soul longed for it, but what about his feeble limbs? Was this some new torture of Tantalus?

Desire grew, and like an automaton he moved to it. He felt all numbed, with needles and pins everywhere, but surely he was less feeble than he had been in the car. First he managed to get his right arm extended, and by flexing the elbow and wrist a certain life seemed to creep back. Then he did the same thing with his right leg, and presently found that he could wriggle by inches to the edge of the bed. He was soon out of breath, but there could be no doubt about it — he was getting stronger. A sudden access of thirst enabled him to grasp the decanter, and, after some trouble with the stopper, to draw it to his lips. Spilling a good deal, he succeeded in getting a mouthful. “Larose,” he murmured, “and a good vintage. It would have been better if it had been cognac.”

But the wine put new life into him. He found he could use both arms, and he began wolfishly on the omelette, making a rather messy job of it. By this time he was feeling a remarkably vigorous convalescent, and he continued with the cold meat, till the cramp in his left shoulder forced him to lie back on the pillow. It soon passed, and he was able in fair comfort to finish the meal down to the last lettuce leaf of the salad, and the last drop of the claret. The Turpin who reclined again on the bed was to all intents the same vigorous young man who the night before had stumbled through that fateful door into the darkness. But it was a Turpin with a profoundly mystified mind.

He would have liked to smoke, but his cigarettes were in the pocket of his dress clothes which had been removed. So he started to do for his legs what he had already achieved for his arms, and with the same happy results. It occurred to him that, while he was alone, he had better discover whether or not he could stand. He made the effort, rolled out of bed on to the floor, hit the little table with his head and set the dishes rattling.

But after a few scrambles he got to his feet and managed to shuffle round the room. The mischief was leaving his body — so much was plain, and but for a natural stiffness in the joints he felt as well as ever. But what it all meant he hadn’t a notion. He was inclined to the belief that somehow he had scored off his enemies, and was a tougher proposition than they had bargained for. They had assuredly done no harm to his mind with their witchcraft, and it looked as if they had also failed with his body. The thought emboldened him. The house seemed quiet; why should he not do a little exploration?

He cautiously opened the door, finding it, somewhat to his surprise, unlocked. The passage was lit by a hanging oil-lamp, carpeted with an old-fashioned drugget, and its walls decorated with a set of flower pictures. Turpin came to the conclusion that rarely in his life had he been in a dwelling which seemed more innocent and homelike. He considered himself sensitive to the nuances of the sinister in an atmosphere, and there was nothing of that sort in this. He took a step or two down the passage, and then halted, for he thought he heard a sound. Yes, there could be no doubt of it. It was water gushing from a tap. Someone in the establishment was about to have a bath.

Then he slipped back to his room just in time. The someone was approaching with light feet and a rustle of draperies. He had his door shut when the steps passed, and then opened it and stuck his head out. He saw a pink dressing-gown, and above it a slender neck and masses of dark hair. It was the figure which he of all men was likely to know best.

It seemed that the place for him was bed, so he got between the sheets again and tried to think. Adela Victor was here; therefore he was in the hands of her captors, and made a fourth in their bag. But what insanity had prompted these wary criminals to bring the two of them to the same prison? Were they so utterly secure, so confident of their power, that they took this crazy risk? The insolence of it made him furious. In the name of every saint he swore that he would make them regret it. He would free the lady and himself, though he had to burn down the house and wring the neck of every inmate. And then he remembered the delicacy of the business, and the need of exact timing if the other two hostages were not to be lost, and at the thought he groaned.

There was a tap at the door, and a man entered to clear away the supper table. He seemed an ordinary English valet,

with his stiff collar and decent black coat and smug expressionless face.

“Beg pardon, my lord,” he said, “at what hour would you like your shavin’ water? Seein’ it’s been a late night I make so bold as to suggest ten o’clock.”

Turpin assented, and the servant had hardly gone when another visitor appeared. It was a slim pale man, whom he was not conscious of having seen before, a man with grey hair and a melancholy droop of the head. He stood at the foot of the bed, gazing upon the prostrate Turpin, and his look was friendly. Then he addressed him in French of the most Saxon type.

“Êtes-vous comfortable, monsieur? C’est bien. Soyez tranquille. Nous sommes vos amis. Bon soir.”



CHAPTER XVI

OUR TIME IS NARROWED

I lunched that day with Mary — alone, for her aunts were both in Paris — and it would have been hard to find in the confines of the British islands a more dejected pair. Mary, who had always a singular placid gentleness, showed her discomposure only by her pallor. As for me I was as restless as a bantam.

“I wish I had never touched the thing,” I cried. “I have done more harm than good.”

“You have found Lord Mercot,” she protested.

“Yes, and lost Turpin. The brutes are still three up on us. We thought we had found two, and now we have lost Miss Victor again. And Turpin! They’ll find him an ugly customer, and probably take strong measures with him. They’ll stick to him and the girl and the little boy now like wax; for last night’s performance is bound to make them suspicious.”

“I wonder,” said Mary, always an optimist. “You see, Sir Archie only dragged him in because of his rank. It looked odd his being in Adela’s company, but then all the times he has seen her he never spoke a word to her. They must have noticed that. I’m anxious about Sir Archie. He ought to leave London.”

“Confound him! He’s going to, as soon as he gets out of hospital, which will probably be this afternoon. I insisted on it, but he meant to in any case. He’s heard an authentic report of a green sandpiper nesting somewhere. It would be a good thing if Archie would stick to birds. He has no head for anything else. . . . And now we’ve got to start again at the beginning.”

“Not quite the beginning,” she interposed.

“Dashed near it. They won’t bring Miss Victor into that kind of world again, and all your work goes for nothing, my dear. It’s uncommon bad luck that you didn’t begin to wake her up, for then she might have done something on her own account. But she’s still a dummy, and tucked away, you may be sure, in some place where we can never reach her. And we have little more than three weeks left.”

“It is bad luck,” Mary agreed. “But, Dick, I’ve a feeling that I haven’t lost Adela Victor. I believe that somehow or other we’ll soon get in touch with her again. You remember how children when they lose a ball sometimes send another one after it in the hope that one will find the other. Well, we’ve sent the Marquis after Adela, and I’ve a notion we may find them both together. We always did that as children.” . . . She paused at the word ‘children’ and I saw pain in her eyes. “Oh, Dick, the little boy! We’re no nearer him, and he’s far the most tragic of all.”

The whole business looked so black that I had no word of comfort to give her.

“And to put the lid on it,” I groaned, “I’ve got to settle down in Medina’s house this evening. I hate the idea like poison.”

“It’s the safest way,” she said.

“Yes, but it puts me out of action. He’ll watch me like a lynx, and I won’t be able to take a single step on my own — simply sit there and eat and drink and play up to his vanity. Great Scott, I swear I’ll have a row with him and break his head.”

“Dick, you’re not going to — how do you say it? — chuck in your hand? Everything depends on you. You’re our scout in the enemy’s headquarters. Your life depends on your playing the game. Colonel Arbuthnot said so. And you may find out something tremendous. It will be horrible for you, but it isn’t for long, and it’s the only way.”

That was Mary all over. She was trembling with anxiety for me, but she was such a thorough sportsman that she wouldn’t take any soft option.

“You may hear something about David Warcliff,” she added.

“I hope to God I do. Don’t worry, darling. I’ll stick it out. But, look here, we must make a plan. I shall be more or less shut off from the world, and I must have a line of communication open. You can’t telephone to me at that house, and I daren’t ring you up from there. The only chance is the Club. If you have any message, ring up the head porter and make him write it down. I’ll arrange that he keeps it quiet, and I’ll pick up the messages when I get the chance. And I’ll ring you

up occasionally to give you the news. But I must be jolly careful, for, likely as not, Medina will keep an eye on me even there. You're in touch with Macgillivray?"

She nodded.

"And with Sandy?"

"Yes, but it takes some time — a day at least. We can't correspond direct."

"Well, there's the lay-out. I'm a prisoner — with qualifications. You and I can keep up some sort of communication. As you say, there's only about another three weeks."

"It would be nothing if only we had some hope."

"That's life, my dear. We've got to go on to the finish anyhow, trusting that luck will turn in the last ten minutes."

I arrived in Hill Street after tea and found Medina in the back smoking-room, writing letters.

"Good man, Hannay," he said; "make yourself comfortable. There are cigars on that table."

"Had a satisfactory time in Shropshire?" I asked.

"Rotten. I motored back this morning, starting very early. Some tiresome business here wanted my attention. I'm sorry, but I'll be out to dinner to-night. The same thing always happens when I want to see my friends — a hideous rush of work."

He was very hospitable, but his manner had not the ease it used to have. He seemed on the edge about something, and rather preoccupied. I guessed it was the affair of Archie Roylance and Turpin.

I dined alone and sat after dinner in the smoking-room, for Odell never suggested the library, though I would have given a lot to fossick about that place. I fell asleep over the Field and was wakened about eleven by Medina. He looked almost tired, a rare thing for him; also his voice was curiously hard. He made some trivial remark about the weather, and a row in the Cabinet which was going on. Then he said suddenly:

"Have you seen Arbuthnot lately?"

"No," I replied, with real surprise in my tone. "How could I? He has gone back to the East."

"So I thought. But I have been told that he has been seen again in England."

For a second I had a horrid fear that he had got on the track of my meeting with Sandy at the Cotswold inn and his visit to Fosse. His next words reassured me.

"Yes. In London. Within the last few days."

It was easy enough for me to show astonishment. "What a crazy fellow he is! He can't stay put for a week together. All I can say is that I hope he won't come my way. I've no particular wish to see him again."

Medina said no more. He accompanied me to my bedroom, asked if I had everything I wanted, bade me good night, and left me.

Now began one of the strangest weeks in my life. Looking back, it has still the inconsequence of a nightmare, but one or two episodes stand out like reefs in a tide-race. When I woke the first morning under Medina's roof I believed that somehow or other he had come to suspect me. I soon saw that that was nonsense, that he regarded me as a pure chattel; but I saw, too, that a most active suspicion of something had been awakened in his mind. Probably Archie's fiasco, together with the news of Sandy, had done it, and perhaps there was in it something of the natural anxiety of a man nearing the end of a difficult course. Anyhow I concluded that this tension of mind on his part was bound to make things more difficult for me. Without suspecting me, he kept me perpetually under his eye. He gave me orders as if I were a child, or rather he made suggestions, which in my character of worshipping disciple I had to treat as orders.

He was furiously busy night and day, and yet he left me no time to myself. He wanted to know everything I did, and I had to give an honest account of my doings, for I had a feeling that he had ways of finding out the truth. One lie discovered would, I knew, wreck my business utterly, for if I were under his power, as he believed I was, it would be impossible for me to lie to him. Consequently I dared not pay many visits to the Club, for he would want to know what I did there. I was on such desperately thin ice that I thought it best to stay most of my time in Hill Street, unless he asked me to accompany him. I consulted Mary about this, and she agreed that it was the wise course.

Apart from a flock of maids, there was no other servant in the house but Odell. Twice I met the grey, sad-faced man on the stairs, the man I had seen on my first visit, and had watched a week before in the house behind the curiosity shop. I

asked who he was, and was told a private secretary, who helped Medina in his political work. I gathered that he did not live regularly in the house, but only came there when his services were required.

Now Mary had said that the other man that evening in Little Fardell Street had been Sandy. If she was right, this fellow might be a friend, and I wondered if I could get in touch with him. The first time I encountered him he never raised his eyes. The second time I forced him by some question to look at me, and he turned on me a perfectly dead expressionless face like a codfish. I concluded that Mary had been in error, for this was the genuine satellite, every feature of whose character had been steam-rollered out of existence by Medina's will.

I was seeing Medina now at very close quarters, and in complete undress, and the impression he had made on me at our first meeting — which had been all overlaid by subsequent happenings — grew as vivid again as daylight. The "good fellow," of course, had gone; I saw behind all his perfection of manner to the naked ribs of his soul. He would talk to me late at night in that awful library, till I felt that he and the room were one presence, and that all the diabolic lore of the ages had been absorbed by this one mortal. You must understand that there was nothing wrong in the ordinary sense with anything he said. If there had been a phonograph recording his talk it could have been turned on with perfect safety in a girls' school. . . . He never spoke foully, or brutally. I don't believe he had a shadow of those faults of the flesh which we mean when we use the word "vice." But I swear that the most wretched libertine before the bar of the Almighty would have shown a clean sheet compared to his.

I know no word to describe how he impressed me except "wickedness." He seemed to annihilate the world of ordinary moral standards, all the little rags of honest impulse and stumbling kindness with which we try to shelter ourselves from the winds of space. His consuming egotism made life a bare cosmos in which his spirit scorched like a flame. I have met bad men in my day, fellows who ought to have been quietly and summarily put out of existence, but if I had had the trying of them I would have found bits of submerged decency and stunted remnants of good feeling. At any rate they were human, and their beastliness was a degeneration of humanity, not its flat opposite. Medina made an atmosphere which was like a cold bright air in which nothing can live. He was utterly and consumedly wicked, with no standard which could be remotely related to ordinary life. That is why, I suppose, mankind has had to invent the notion of devils. He seemed to be always lifting the corner of a curtain and giving me peeps into a hoary mystery of iniquity older than the stars. . . . I suppose that someone who had never felt his hypnotic power would have noticed very little in his talk except its audacious cleverness, and that someone wholly under his dominion would have been less impressed than me because he would have forgotten his own standards, and been unable to make the comparison. I was just in the right position to understand and tremble. . . . Oh, I can tell you, I used to go to bed solemnised, frightened half out of my wits, and yet in a violent revulsion, and hating him like hell. It was pretty clear that he was mad, for madness means just this dislocation of the modes of thought which mortals have agreed upon as necessary to keep the world together. His head used to seem as round as a bullet, like nothing you find even in the skulls of cave-men, and his eyes to have a blue light in them like the sunrise of death in an arctic waste.

One day I had a very narrow escape. I went to the Club, to see if there was anything from Mary, and received instead a long cable from Gaudian in Norway. I had just opened it, when I found Medina at my elbow. He had seen me enter, and followed me, in order that we should walk home together.

Now I had arranged a simple code with Gaudian for his cables, and by the mercy of Heaven that honest fellow had taken special precautions, and got some friend to send this message from Christiania. Had it borne the Merdal stamp it would have been all up with me.

The only course was the bold one, though I pursued it with a quaking heart.

"Hullo," I cried, "here's a cable from a pal of mine in Norway. Did I tell you I had been trying to get a beat on the Leardal for July? I had almost forgotten about the thing. I started inquiring in March, and here's my first news."

I handed him the two sheets and he glanced at the place of dispatch.

"Code," he said. "Do you want to work it out now?"

"If you don't mind waiting a few seconds. It's a simple code of my own invention, and I ought to be able to decipher it pretty fast."

We sat down at one of the tables in the hall, and I took up a pen and a sheet of notepaper. As I think I have mentioned before, I am rather a swell at codes, and this one in particular I could read without much difficulty. I jotted down some

letters and numbers, and then wrote out a version which I handed to Medina. This was what he read:

“Upper beat Leardal available from first of month. Rent two hundred and fifty with option of August at one hundred more. No limit to rods. Boat on each pool. Tidal waters can also be got for sea trout by arrangement. If you accept please cable word ‘Yes.’ You should arrive not later than June 29th. Bring plenty of bottled prawns. Motor boat can be had from Bergen. Andersen, Grand Hotel, Christiania.”

But all the time I was scribbling this nonsense, I was reading the code correctly and getting the message by heart. Here is what Gaudian really sent:

“Our friend has quarrelled with keeper and beaten him soundly. I have taken charge at farm and frightened latter into docility. He will remain prisoner in charge of ally of mine till I give the word to release. Meantime, think it safer to bring friend to England and start on Monday. Will wire address in Scotland and wait your instructions. No danger of keeper sending message. Do not be anxious, all is well.”

Having got that clear in my head, I tore the cable into small pieces and flung them into the waste-paper basket.

“Well, are you going?” Medina asked.

“Not I. I’m off salmon-fishing for the present.” I took a cable form from the table and wrote: “Sorry, must cancel Leardal plan,” signed it “Hannay,” addressed it to “Andersen, Grand Hotel, Christiania,” and gave it to the porter to send off. I wonder what happened to that telegram. It is probably still stuck up on the hotel-board, awaiting the arrival of the mythical Andersen.

On our way back to Hill Street Medina put his arm in mine, and was very friendly. “I hope to get a holiday,” he said, “perhaps just after the beginning of June. Only a day or two off now. I may go abroad for a little. I would like you to come with me.”

That puzzled me a lot. Medina could not possibly leave town before the great liquidation, and there could be no motive in his trying to mislead me on such a point, seeing that I was living in his house. I wondered if something had happened to make him change the date. It was of the first importance that I should find this out, and I did my best to draw him about his plans. But I could get nothing out of him except that he hoped for an early holiday, and “early” might apply to the middle of June as well as to the beginning, for it was now the 27th of May.

Next afternoon at tea-time to my surprise Odell appeared in the smoking-room, followed by the long lean figure of Tom Greenslade. I never saw anybody with greater pleasure, but I didn’t dare to talk to him alone. “Is your master upstairs?” I asked the butler. “Will you tell him that Dr. Greenslade is here? He is an old friend of his.”

We had rather less than two minutes before Medina appeared. “I come from your wife,” Greenslade whispered. “She has told me all about the business, and she thought this was the safest plan. I was to tell you that she has news of Miss Victor and the Marquis. They are safe enough. Any word of the little boy?”

He raised his voice as Medina entered. “My dear fellow, this is a great pleasure. I had to be in London for a consultation, and I thought I would look up Hannay. I hardly hoped to have the luck to catch a busy man like you.”

Medina was very gracious — no, that is not the word, for there was nothing patronising in his manner. He asked in the most friendly way about Greenslade’s practice, and how he liked English country life after his many wanderings. He spoke with an air of regret of the great valleys of loess and the windy Central Asian tablelands where they had first foregathered. Odell brought in tea, and we made as pleasant a trio of friends as you could find in London. I asked a few casual questions about Fosse, and then I mentioned Peter John. Here Greenslade had an inspiration; he told me afterwards that he thought it might be a good thing to open a channel for further communications.

“I think he’s all right,” he said slowly. “He’s been having occasional stomach-aches, but I expect that is only the result of hot weather and the first asparagus. Lady Hannay is a little anxious — you know what she is, and all mothers today keep thinking about appendicitis. So I’m keeping my eye on the little man. You needn’t worry, Dick.”

I take credit to myself for having divined the doctor’s intention. I behaved as if I scarcely heard him, and as if Fosse Manor and my family were things infinitely remote. Indeed I switched off the conversation to where Medina had last left it, and I behaved towards Tom Greenslade as if his presence rather bored me, and I had very little to say to him. When he got up to go, it was Medina who accompanied him to the front door. All this was a heavy strain upon my self-command, for I would have given anything for a long talk with him — though I had the sense not to believe his news about Peter John.

“Not a bad fellow, that doctor of yours,” Medina observed on his return.

"No," I said carelessly. "Rather a dull dog all the same, with his country gossip. But I wish him well, for it is to him that I owe your friendship."

I must count that episode one of my lucky moments, for it seemed to give Medina some special satisfaction. "Why do you make this your only sitting-room?" he asked. "The library is at your disposal, and it is pleasanter in summer than any other part of the house."

"I thought I might be disturbing your work," I said humbly.

"Not a bit of it. Besides, I've nearly finished my work. After to-night I can slack off, and presently I'll be an idle man."

"And then the holiday?"

"Then the holiday." He smiled in a pleasant boyish way, which was one of his prettiest tricks.

"How soon will that be?"

"If all goes well, very soon. Probably after the second of June. By the way, the Thursday Club dines on the first. I want you to be my guest again."

Here was more food for thought. The conviction grew upon me that he and his friends had put forward the date of liquidation; they must have suspected something — probably from Sandy's presence in England — and were taking no risks. I smoked that evening till my tongue was sore and went to bed in a fever of excitement. The urgency of the matter fairly screamed in my ears, for Macgillivray must know the truth at once, and so must Mary. Mercot was safe, and there was a chance apparently of Turpin and Miss Victor, which must be acted upon instantly if the main date were changed. Of the little boy I had given up all hope. . . . But how to find the truth! I felt like a man in a bad dream who is standing on the line with an express train approaching, and does not know how to climb back on to the platform.

Next morning Medina never left me. He took me in his car to the City, and I waited while he did his business, and then to call in Carlton House Terrace a few doors from the Victors' house. I believe it was the residence of the man who led his party in the Lords. After luncheon he solemnly installed me in the library. "You're not much of a reader, and in any case you would probably find my books dull. But there are excellent arm-chairs to doze in."

Then he went out and I heard the wheels of his car move away. I felt a kind of awe creeping over me when I found myself left alone in the uncanny place, which I knew to be the devil's kitchen for all his schemes. There was a telephone on his writing-table, the only one I had seen in the house, though there was no doubt one in the butler's pantry. I turned up the telephone book and found a number given, but it was not the one on the receiver. This must be a private telephone, by means of which he could ring up anybody he wanted, but of which only his special friends knew the number. There was nothing else in the room to interest me, except the lines and lines of books, for his table was as bare as a bank-manager's.

I tried the books, but most of them were a long sight too learned for me. Most were old, and many were in Latin, and some were evidently treasures, for I would take one down and find it a leather box with inside it a slim battered volume wrapped in wash-leather. But I found in one corner a great array of works of travel, so I selected one of Aurel Stein's books and settled down in an arm-chair with it. I tried to fix my attention, but found it impossible. The sentences would not make sense to my restless mind, and I could not follow the maps. So I got up again, replaced the work on its shelf, and began to wander about. It was a dull close day, and out in the street a water-cart was sprinkling the dust and children were going park-wards with their nurses. . . . I simply could not account for my disquiet, but I was like a fine lady with the vapours. I felt that somewhere in that room there was something that it concerned me deeply to know.

I drifted towards the bare writing-table. There was nothing on it but a massive silver inkstand in the shape of an owl, a silver tray of pens and oddments, a leather case of notepaper and a big blotting-book. I would never have made a good thief, for I felt both nervous and ashamed as, after listening for steps, I tried the drawers.

They were all locked — all, that is, except a shallow one at the top which looked as if it were meant to contain one of those big engagement tablets which busy men affect. There was no tablet there, but there were two sheets of paper.

Both had been torn from a loose-leaf diary, and both covered the same dates — the fortnight between Monday the 29th of May, and Sunday the 11th of June. In the first the space for the days was filled with entries in Medina's neat writing, entries in some sort of shorthand. These entries were close and thick up to and including Friday the 2nd of June; after that there was nothing. The second sheet of paper was just the opposite. The spaces were virgin up to and including the 2nd of June; after that, on till the 11th, they were filled with notes.

As I stared at these two sheets, some happy instinct made me divine their meaning. The first sheet contained the steps

that Medina would take up to the day of liquidation, which was clearly the 2nd of June. After that, if all went well, came peace and leisure. But if it didn't go well, the second sheet contained his plans — plans I have no doubt for using the hostages, for wringing safety out of certain great men's fears. . . . My interpretation was confirmed by a small jotting in long-hand on the first sheet in the space for 2nd June. It was the two words "Dies irae," which my Latin was just good enough to construe.

I had lost all my tremors now, but I was a thousandfold more restless. I must get word to Macgillivray at once — no, that was too dangerous — to Mary. I glanced at the telephone and resolved to trust my luck.

I got through to the Wymondhams' house without difficulty. Barnard the butler answered, and informed me that Mary was at home. Then after a few seconds I heard her voice.

"Mary," I said, "the day is changed to the 2nd of June. You understand, warn everybody . . . I can't think why you are worrying about that child."

For I was conscious that Medina was entering the room. I managed with my knee to close the shallow drawer with the two sheets in it, and I nodded and smiled to him, putting my hand over the receiver.

"Forgive me using your telephone. Fact is, my wife's in London and she sent me round a note here asking me to ring her up. She's got the boy on her mind."

I put the tube to my ear again. Mary's voice sounded sharp and high-pitched.

"Are you there? I'm in Mr. Medina's library and I can't disturb him talking through this machine. There's no cause to worry about Peter John. Greenslade is usually fussy enough, and if he's calm there's no reason why you shouldn't be. But if you want another opinion, why not get it? We may as well get the thing straightened out now, for I may be going abroad early in June. . . . Yes, some time after the 2nd."

Thank God Mary was quick-witted.

"The 2nd is very near. Why do you make such sudden plans, Dick? I can't go home without seeing you. I think I'll come straight to Hill Street."

"All right," I said, "do as you please." I rang off and looked at Medina with a wry smile. "What fussers women are! Do you mind if my wife comes round here? She won't be content till she has seen me. She has come up with a crazy notion of taking down a surgeon to give an opinion on the child's appendix. Tommy rot! But that's a woman's way."

He clearly suspected nothing. "Certainly let Lady Hannay come here. We'll give her tea. I'm sorry that the drawing-room is out of commission just now. She might have liked to see my miniatures."

Mary appeared in ten minutes, and most nobly she acted her part. It was the very model of a distraught silly mother who bustled into the room. Her eyes looked as if she had been crying and she had managed to disarrange her hat and untidy her hair.

"Oh, I've been so worried," she wailed, after she had murmured apologies to Medina. "He really has had a bad tummy pain, and nurse thought last night that he was feverish. I've seen Mr. Dobson-Wray, and he can come down by the four-forty-five. . . . He's such a precious little boy, Mr. Medina, that I feel we must take every precaution with him. If Mr. Dobson-Wray says it is all right, I promise not to fuss any more. I think a second opinion would please Dr. Greenslade, for he too looked rather anxious. . . . Oh, no, thank you so much, but I can't stay for tea. I have a taxi waiting, and I might miss my train. I'm going to pick up Mr. Dobson-Wray in Wimpole Street."

She departed in the same tornado in which she had come, just stopping to set her hat straight at one of the mirrors in the hall.

"Of course I'll wire when the surgeon has seen him. And, Dick, you'll come down at once if there's anything wrong, and bring nurses. Poor, poor little darling! . . . Did you say after the 2nd of June, Dick? I do hope you'll be able to get off. You need a holiday away from your tiresome family. . . . Good-bye, Mr. Medina. It was so kind of you to be patient with a silly mother. Look after Dick and don't let him worry."

I had preserved admirably the aloof air of the bored and slightly ashamed husband. But now I realised that Mary was not babbling at large, but was saying something which I was meant to take in.

"Poor, poor little darling!" she crooned as she got into the taxi. "I do pray he'll be all right — I THINK he may, Dick. . . . I hope, oh I hope . . . to put your mind at ease . . . before the 2nd of June." As I turned back to Medina I had a notion that the poor little darling was no longer Peter John.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DISTRICT-VISITOR IN PALMYRA SQUARE

During the last fortnight a new figure had begun to appear in Palmyra Square. I do not know if Macgillivray's watchers reported its presence, for I saw none of their reports, but they must have been cognisant of it, unless they spent all their time in the nearest public-house. It was a district-visitor of the familiar type — a woman approaching middle age, presumably a spinster, who wore a plain black dress and, though the weather was warm, a cheap fur round her neck, and carried a rather old black silk satchel. Her figure was good, and had still a suggestion of youth, but her hair, which was dressed very flat and tight and coiled behind in an unfashionable bun, seemed — the little that was seen of it — to be sprinkled with grey. She was dowdy, and yet not altogether dowdy, for there was a certain faded elegance in her air, and an observer might have noted that she walked well. Besides the black satchel she carried usually a sheaf of papers, and invariably and in all weathers a cheap badly-rolled umbrella.

She visited at the doctor's house with the brass plate, and the music-teacher's, and at the various lodging-houses. She was attached, it appeared, to the big church of St. Jude's a quarter of a mile off, which had just got a new and energetic vicar. She was full of enthusiasm for her vicar, praised his earnestness and his eloquence, and dwelt especially, after the way of elderly maiden ladies, on the charm of his youth. She was also very ready to speak of herself, and eager to explain that her work was voluntary — she was a gentlewoman of modest but independent means, and had rooms in Hampstead, and her father had been a clergyman at Eastbourne. Very full of her family she was to those who would hear her. There was a gentle simplicity about her manners, and an absence of all patronage, which attracted people and made them willing to listen to her when they would have shut the door on another, for the inhabitants of Palmyra Square are not a courteous or patient or religious folk.

Her aim was to enlist the overworked general servants of the Square in some of the organisations of St. Jude's. There were all kinds of activities in that enlightened church — choral societies, and mothers' meetings, and country holiday clubs, and classes for adult education. She would hand out sheaves of literature about the Girls' Friendly Society, and the Mothers' Union, and such-like, and try to secure a promise of attendance at some of the St. Jude's functions. I do not think she had much success at the doctor's and the music-teacher's, though she regularly distributed her literature there. The wretched little maids were too downtrodden and harassed to do more than listen dully on the doorstep and say "Yes'm." Nor was she allowed to see the mistresses, except one of the lodging-house keepers, who was a Primitive Methodist and considered St. Jude's a device of Satan. But she had better fortune with the maid at No. 4.

The girl belonged to a village in Kent, and the district-visitor, it seemed, had been asked to look her up by the rector of her old parish. She was a large flat-faced young woman, slow of speech, heavy of movement, and suspicious of nature. At first she greeted the district-visitor coldly, but thawed at the mention of familiar names and accepted a copy of the St. Jude's Magazine. Two days later, when on her afternoon out, she met the district-visitor and consented to walk a little way with her. Now the girl's hobby was dress, and her taste was better than most of her class and aspired to higher things. She had a new hat which her companion admired, but she confessed that she was not quite satisfied with it. The district-visitor revealed a knowledge of fashions which one would have scarcely augured from her own sombre clothes. She pointed out where the trimming was wrong, and might easily be improved, and the girl — her name was Elsie Outhwaite — agreed. "I could put it right for you in ten minutes," she was told. "Perhaps you would let me come and see you when you have a spare half-hour, and we could do it together. I'm rather clever at hats, and used to help my sisters."

The ice was broken and the aloof Miss Outhwaite became confidential. She liked her place, had no cause to complain, received good wages, and above all was not fussed. "I minds my own business, and Madame minds 'ers," she said. Madame was a foreigner, and had her queer ways, but had also her good points. She did not interfere unnecessarily, and was not mean. There were handsome presents at Christmas, and every now and then the house would be shut up and Miss Outhwaite returned to Kent on generous board wages. It was not a hard billet, though of course there were a lot of visitors, Madame's clients. "She's a massoose, you know, but very respectable." When asked if there were no other inmates of the house she became reticent. "Not what you would call reg'lar part of the family," she admitted. "There's an old lady, Madame's aunt, that stops with us a but, but I don't see much of 'er. Madame attends to 'er 'erself, and she 'as her private

room. And of course there's . . . " Miss Outhwaite seemed suddenly to recollect something, and changed the subject.

The district-visitor professed a desire to make Madame's acquaintance, but was not encouraged. "She's not the sort for the likes of you. She don't 'old with churches and God and such-like — I've 'eard 'er say so. You won't be getting 'er near St. Jude's, miss."

"But if she is so clever and nice I would like to meet her. She could advise me about some of the difficult questions in this big parish. Perhaps she would help with our Country Holidays."

Miss Outhwaite primmed her lips and didn't think so. "You've got to be ill and nervy for Madame to have an interest in you. I'll take in your name if you like, but I expect Madame won't be at 'ome to you."

It was eventually arranged that the district-visitor should call at No. 4 the following afternoon and bring the materials for the reconstructed hat. She duly presented herself, but was warned away by a flustered Miss Outhwaite. "We're that busy today I 'aven't a minute to myself." Sunday was suggested, but it appeared that that was the day when the district-visitor was fully occupied, so a provisional appointment was made for the next Tuesday evening.

This time all went well. Madame was out, and the district-visitor spent a profitable hour in Miss Outhwaite's room. Her nimble fingers soon turned the hat, purchased in Queen's Crescent for ten and sixpence, into a distant imitation of a costlier mode. She displayed an innocent interest in the household, and asked many questions which Miss Outhwaite, now in the best of tempers, answered readily. She was told of Madame's habits, her very occasional shortness of temper, her love of every tongue but English. "The worst of them furriners," said Miss Outhwaite, "is that you can't never be sure what they thinks of you. Half the time I'm with Madame and her aunt they're talking some 'eathen language."

As she departed the district-visitor was given a sketch of the topography of the house about which she showed an unexpected curiosity. Before she left there was a slight contretemps. Madame's latch-key was heard in the door and Miss Outhwaite had a moment of panic. "Here, miss, I'll let you out through the kitchen," she whispered. But her visitor showed no embarrassment. "I'd like to meet Madame Breda," she declared. "This is a good chance."

Madame's plump dark face showed surprise, and possibly annoyance, as she observed the two. Miss Outhwaite hastened to explain the situation with a speed which revealed nervousness. "This is a lady from St. Jude's, Madame," she said. "She comes 'ere districk-visiting and she knows the folk in Radhurst, where I comes from, so I made bold to ask her in."

"I am very glad to meet you, Madame Breda," said the district-visitor. "I hope you don't mind my calling on Elsie Outhwaite. I want her to help in our Girls' Friendly Society work."

"You have been here before, I think," was the reply in a sufficiently civil tone. "I have seen you in the Square sometimes. There is no objection on my part to Outhwaite's attending your meetings, but I warn you that she has very little free time." The woman was a foreigner, no doubt, but on this occasion her English showed little trace of accent.

"That is very good of you. I should have asked your permission first, but you were unfortunately not at home when I called, and Elsie and I made friends by accident. I hope you will let me come again."

As the visitor descended the steps and passed through the bright green gate into the gathering dusk of the Square, Madame Breda watched her contemplatively from one of the windows.

The lady came again four days later — it must, I think, have been the 29th of May. Miss Outhwaite, when she opened the door, looked flustered. "I can't talk to you to-night, miss. Madame's orders is that when you next came you was to be shown in to her room."

"How very kind of her!" said the lady. "I should greatly enjoy a talk with her. And, Elsie — I've got such a nice present for you — a hat which a friend gave me and which is too young — really too young — for me to wear. I'm going to give it you, if you'll accept it. I'll bring it in a day or two."

The district-visitor was shown into the large room on the right-hand side of the hall where Madame received her patients. There was no one there except a queer-looking little girl in a linen smock, who beckoned her to follow to the folding-doors which divided the apartment from the other at the back. The lady did a strange thing, for she picked up the little girl, held her a second in her arms, and kissed her — after the emotional habit of the childless *dévôte*. Then she passed through the folding-doors.

It was an odd apartment in which she found herself — much larger than could have been guessed from the look of the house, and, though the night was warm, there was a fire lit, a smouldering fire which gave off a fine blue smoke. Madame

Breda was there, dressed in a low-cut gown as if she had been dining out, and looking handsome and dark and very foreign in the light of the shaded lamps. In an armchair by the hearth sat a wonderful old lady, with a thing like a mantilla over her snow-white hair. It was a room so unlike anything in her narrow experience that the newcomer stood hesitating as the folding-doors shut behind her.

"Oh, Madame Breda, it is so very kind of you to see me," she faltered.

"I do not know your name," Madame said, and then she did a curious thing, for she lifted a lamp and held it in the visitor's face, scrutinising every line of her shabby figure.

"Clarke — Agnes Clarke. I am the eldest of three sisters — the other two are married — you may have heard of my father — he wrote some beautiful hymns, and edited —"

"How old are you?" Madame broke in, still holding up the lamp.

The district-visitor gave a small nervous laugh. "Oh, I am not so very old — just over forty — well, to be quite truthful, nearly forty-seven. I feel so young sometimes that I cannot believe it, and then — at other times — when I am tired — I feel a hundred. Alas! I have many useless years behind me. But then we all have, don't you think? The great thing is to be resolved to make the most of every hour that remains to us. Mr. Empson at St. Jude's preached such a beautiful sermon last Sunday about that. He said we must give every unforgiving minute its sixty seconds' worth of distance run — I think he was quoting poetry. It is terrible to think of unforgiving minutes."

Madame did not appear to be listening. She said something to the older lady in a foreign tongue.

"May I sit down, please?" the visitor asked. "I have been walking a good deal today."

Madame waved her away from the chair she seemed about to take. "You will sit there, if you please," she said, pointing to a low couch beside the old woman.

The visitor was obviously embarrassed. She sat down on the edge of the couch, a faded nervous figure compared to the two masterful personages, and her fingers played uneasily with the handle of her satchel.

"Why do you come to this house?" Madame asked, and her tone was almost menacing. "We have nothing to do with your church."

"Oh, but you live in the parish, and it's such a large and difficult parish, and we want help from everyone. You cannot imagine how horrible some of the slums are — what bitter poverty in these bad times — and the worn-out mothers and the poor little neglected children. We are trying to make it a brighter place."

"Do you want money?"

"We always want money." The district-visitor's face wore an ingratiating smile. "But we want chiefly personal service. Mr. Empson always says that one little bit of personal service is better than a large subscription — better for the souls of the giver and the receiver."

"What do you expect to get from Outhwaite?"

"She is a young girl from a country village and alone in London. She is a good girl, I think, and I want to give her friends and innocent amusement. And I want her help too in our work."

The visitor started, for she found the hand of the old woman on her arm. The long fingers were running down it and pressing it. Hitherto the owner of the hand had not spoken, but now she said:

"This is the arm of a young woman. She has lied about her age. No woman of forty-seven ever had such an arm."

The soft passage of the fingers had suddenly become a grip of steel, and the visitor cried out.

"Oh, please, please, you are hurting me. . . . I do not tell lies. I am proud of my figure — just a little. It is like my mother's, and she was so pretty. But oh! I am not young. I wish I was. I'm afraid I'm quite old when you see me by daylight."

The grip had relaxed, and the visitor moved along the couch to be out of its reach. She had begun to cry in a helpless silly way, as if she were frightened. The two other women spoke to each other in a strange tongue, and then Madame said:

"I will not have you come here. I will not have you meddle with my servants. I do not care a fig for your church. If you come here again you will repent it."

Her tone was harsh, and the visitor looked as if her tears would begin again. Her discomposure had deprived her of the faded grace which had been in her air before, and she was now a pathetic and flimsy creature, like some elderly governess

pleading against dismissal.

“You are cruel,” she sighed. “I am so sorry if I have done anything wrong, but I meant it for the best. I thought that you might help me, for Elsie said you were clever and kind. Won’t you think of poor Elsie? She is so young and far from her people. Mayn’t she come to St. Jude’s sometimes?”

“Outhwaite has her duties at home, and so I dare say have you, if truth was spoken. Bah! I have no patience with restless English old maids. They say an Englishman’s house is his castle, and yet there is a plague of barren virgins always buzzing round it in the name of religion and philanthropy. Listen to me. I will not have you in this house. I will not have you talking to Outhwaite. I will not have an idle woman spying on my private affairs.”

The visitor dabbed her eyes with a wisp of handkerchief. The old woman had stretched out her hand again and would have laid it on her breast, but she had started up violently. She seemed to be in a mood between distress and fear. She swallowed hard before her voice came, and then it quavered.

“I think I had better go. You have wounded me very deeply. I know I’m not clever, but I try so hard . . . and . . . and — it pains me to be misunderstood. I am afraid I have been tactless, so please forgive me . . . I won’t come again . . . I’ll pray that your hearts may some day be softened.”

She seemed to make an effort to regain composure, and with a final dab at her eyes smiled shakily at the unrelenting Madame, who had touched an electric bell. She closed the folding-doors gently behind her, like a repentant child who has been sent to bed. The front room was in darkness, but there was a light in the hall where Miss Outhwaite waited to show her out.

At the front door the district-visitor had recovered herself.

“Elsie,” she whispered, “Madame Breda does not want me to come again. But I must give you the hat I promised you. I’ll have it ready by Thursday night. I’m afraid I may be rather late — after eleven perhaps — but don’t go to bed till I come. I’ll go round to the back door. It’s such a smart pretty hat. I know you’ll love it.”

Once in the Square she looked sharply about her, cast a glance back at No. 4, and then walked away briskly. There was a man lounging at the corner to whom she spoke; he nodded and touched his hat, and a big motor car, which had been waiting in the shadows on the other side, drew up at the kerb. It seemed a strange conveyance for the district-visitor, but she entered it as if she were used to it, and when it moved off it was not in the direction of her rooms in Hampstead.



CHAPTER XVIII

THE NIGHT OF THE FIRST OF JUNE

The last two days of May were spent by me in the most miserable restlessness and despondency. I was cut off from all communications with my friends and I did not see how I could reopen them. For Medina, after his late furious busyness, seemed to have leisure again, and he simply never let me out of his sight. I dare say I might have managed a visit to the Club and a telephone message to Mary, but I durst not venture it, for I realised as I had never done before how delicate was the ground I walked on and how one false step on my part might blow everything sky-high. It would have mattered less if I had been hopeful of success, but a mood of black pessimism had seized me. I could count on Mary passing on my news to Macgillivray and on Macgillivray's taking the necessary steps to hasten the rounding-up; by the second of June Mercot would be restored to his friends, and Miss Victor too, if Mary had got on her track again. But who was arranging all that? Was Mary alone in the business, and where was Sandy? Mercot and Gaudian would be arriving in Scotland, and telegraphing to me any moment, and I could not answer them. I had the maddening feeling that everything was on a knife edge, that the chances of a blunder were infinite, and that I could do nothing. To crown all, I was tortured by the thought of David Warcliff. I had come to the conclusion that Mary's farewell words at Hill Street had meant nothing: indeed, I couldn't see how she could have found out anything about the little boy, for as yet we had never hit on the faintest clue, and the thought of him made success with the other two seem no better than failure. Likewise I was paying the penalty for the assurance about Medina which I had rashly expressed to Mary. I felt the terror of the man in a new way; he seemed to me impregnable beyond the hope of assault; and while I detested him I also shuddered at him — a novel experience, for hitherto I had always found that hatred drove out fear.

He was abominable during those two days — abominable but also wonderful. He seemed to love the sight of me, as if I were a visible and intimate proof of his power, and he treated me as an Oriental tyrant might treat a favourite slave. He unbent to me as a relief to his long spiritual tension, and let me see the innermost dreams of his heart. I realised with a shudder that he thought me a part of that hideous world he had created, and — I think for the first time in the business — I knew fear on my own account. If he dreamed I could fail him he would become a ravening beast. . . . I remember that he talked a good deal of politics, but, ye gods! what a change from the respectable conservative views which he had once treated me to — a Tory revival owing to the women and that sort of thing! He declared that behind all the world's creeds, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and the rest, lay an ancient devil-worship and that it was raising its head again. Bolshevism, he said, was a form of it, and he attributed the success of Bolshevism in Asia to a revival of what he called Shamanism — I think that was the word. By his way of it the War had cracked the veneer everywhere and the real stuff was showing through. He rejoiced in the prospect, because the old faiths were not ethical codes but mysteries of the spirit, and they gave a chance for men who had found the ancient magic. I think he wanted to win everything that civilisation would give him, and then wreck it, for his hatred of Britain was only a part of his hatred of all that most men hold in love and repute. The common anarchist was a fool to him, for the cities and temples of the whole earth were not sufficient sacrifice to appease his vanity. I knew now what a Goth and a Hun meant, and what had been the temper of scourges like Attila and Timour. . . . Mad, you will say. Yes, mad beyond doubt, but it was the most convincing kind of madness. I had to fight hard by keeping my mind firm on my job, to prevent my nerve giving.

I went to bed on the last night of May in something very near despair, comforting myself, I remember, by what I had said to Mary, that one must go on to the finish and trust to luck changing in the last ten minutes. I woke to a gorgeous morning, and when I came down to breakfast I was in a shade better spirits. Medina proposed a run out into the country and a walk on some high ground. "It will give us an appetite for the Thursday dinner," he said. Then he went upstairs to telephone, and I was in the smoking-room filling my pipe when suddenly Greenslade was shown in.

I didn't listen to what he had to say, but seized a sheet of paper and scribbled a note: "Take this to the head porter at the Club and he will give you any telegram there is for me. If there is one from Gaudian, as there must be, wire him to start at once and go straight to Julius Victor. Then wire the Duke to meet him there. Do you understand? Now, what have you to tell me?"

"Only that your wife says things are going pretty well. You must turn up to-night at ten-thirty at the Fields of Eden.

Also somehow you must get a latch-key for this house, and see that the door is not chained.”

“Nothing more?”

“Nothing more.”

“And Peter John?”

Greenslade was enlarging on Peter John’s case when Medina entered. “I came round to tell Sir Richard that it was all a false alarm. Only the spring fret. The surgeon was rather cross at being taken so far on a fool’s errand. Lady Hannay thought he had better hear it from me personally, for then he could start on his holiday with an easy mind.”

I was so short with him that Medina must have seen how far my thoughts were from my family. As we motored along the road to Tring I talked of the approaching holiday, like a toadying schoolboy who has been asked to stay for a cricket week with some senior. Medina said he had not fixed the place, but it must be somewhere south in the sun — Algiers, perhaps, and the fringes of the desert, or better still some remote Mediterranean spot where we could have both sunlight and blue sea. He talked of the sun like a fire-worshipper. He wanted to steep his limbs in it, and wash his soul in light, and swim in wide warm waters. He rhapsodised like a poet, but what struck me about his rhapsodies was how little sensuous they were. The man’s body was the most obedient satellite of his mind, and I don’t believe he had any weakness of the flesh. What he wanted was a bath of radiance for his spirit.

We walked all day on the hills around Ivinghoe, and had a late lunch in the village inn. He spoke very little, but strode over the thymy downs with his eyes abstracted. Once, as we sat on the summit, he seemed to sigh and his face for a moment was very grave.

“What is the highest pleasure?” he asked suddenly. “Attainment? . . . No. Renunciation.”

“So I’ve heard the parsons say,” I observed.

He did not heed me. “To win everything that mankind has ever striven for, and then to cast it aside. To be Emperor of the Earth and then to slip out of the ken of mankind and take up the sandals and begging-bowl. The man who can do that has conquered the world — he is not a king but a god. Only he must be a king first to achieve it.”

I cannot hope to reproduce the atmosphere of that scene, the bare top of the hill in the blue summer weather, and that man, nearing, as he thought, the summit of success, and suddenly questioning all mortal codes of value. In all my dealings with Medina I was obsessed by the sense of my inferiority to him, that I was like a cab horse compared to an Arab stallion, and now I felt it like a blow in the face. That was the kind of thing Napoleon might have said — and done — had his schemes not gone astray. I knew I was contending with a devil, but I know also that it was a great devil.

We returned to town just in time to dress for dinner, and all my nervousness revived a hundredfold. This was the night of crisis, and I loathed having to screw myself up to emergencies late in the day. Such things should take place in the early morning. It was like going over the top in France; I didn’t mind it so much when it happened during a drizzling dawn, when one was anyhow depressed and only half-awake, but I abominated an attack in the cold-blooded daylight, or in the dusk when one wanted to relax.

That evening I shaved, I remember, very carefully, as if I were decking myself out for a sacrifice. I wondered what would be my feelings when I next shaved. I wondered what Mary and Sandy were doing. . . .

What Mary and Sandy were doing at that precise moment I do not know, but I can now unfold certain contemporary happenings which were then hid from me. . . . Mercot and Gaudian were having a late tea in the Midland express, having nearly broken their necks in a furious motor race to catch the train at Hawick. The former was clean and shaven, his hair nicely cut, and his clothes a fairly well-fitting ready-made suit of flannels. He was deeply sunburnt, immensely excited, and constantly breaking in on Gaudian’s study of the works of Sir Walter Scott.

“Newhover is to be let loose today. What do you suppose he’ll do?” he asked.

“Nothing — yet awhile,” was the answer. “I said certain things to him. He cannot openly go back to Germany, and I do not think he dare come to England. He fears the vengeance of his employer. He will disappear for a little, and then emerge in some new crime with a new name and a changed face. He is the eternal scoundrel.”

The young man’s face lighted up pleasantly. “If I live to be a hundred,” he said, “I can’t enjoy anything half as much as that clip I gave him on the jaw.”

In a room in a country house on the Middlesex and Bucks borders Turpin was talking to a girl. He was in evening

dress, a very point-device young man, and she was wearing a wonderful gown, grass-green in colour and fantastically cut. Her face was heavily made up, and her scarlet lips and stained eyebrows stood out weirdly against the dead white of her skin. But it was a different face from that which I first saw in the dancing-hall. Life had come back to it, the eyes were no longer dull like pebbles, but were again the windows of a soul. There was still fear in those eyes and bewilderment, but they were human again, and shone at this moment with a wild affection.

"I am terrified," she said. "I have to go to that awful place with that awful man. Please, Antoine, please, do not leave me. You have brought me out of a grave, and you cannot let me slip back again."

He held her close to him and stroked her hair.

"I think it is — how do you say it? — the last lap. My very dear one, we cannot fail our friends. I follow you soon. The grey man — I do not know his name — he told me so, and he is a friend. A car is ordered for me half an hour after you drive off with that Odell."

"But what does it all mean?" she asked.

"I do not know, but I think — I am sure — it is the work of our friends. Consider, my little one. I am brought to the house where you are, but those who have charge of you do not know I am here. When Odell comes I am warned and locked in my room. I am not allowed out of it. I have had no exercise except sparring with that solemn English valet. He indeed has been most amiable, and has allowed me to keep myself in form. He boxes well, too, but I have studied under our own Jules and he is no match for me. But when the coast is clear I am permitted to see you, and I have waked you from sleep, my princess. Therefore so far it is good. As to what will happen to-night I do not know, but I fancy it is the end of our troubles. The grey man has told me as much. If you go back to that dance place, I think I follow you, and then we shall see something. Have no fear, little one. You go back as a prisoner no more, but as an actress to play a part, and I know you will play the part well. You will not permit the man Odell to suspect. Presently I come, and I think there will be an *éclaircissement* — also, please God, a reckoning."

The wooden-faced valet entered and signed to the young man, who kissed the girl and followed him. A few minutes later Turpin was in his own room, with the door locked behind him. Then came a sound of the wheels of a car outside, and he listened with a smile on his face. As he stood before the glass putting the finishing touches to his smooth hair he was still smiling — an ominous smile.

Other things, which I did not know about, were happening that evening. From a certain modest office near Tower Hill a gentleman emerged to seek his rooms in Mayfair. His car was waiting for him at the street corner, but to his surprise as he got into it someone entered also from the other side, and the address to which the car ultimately drove was not Clarges Street. The office, too, which he had left locked and bolted was presently open, and men were busy there till far into the night — men who did not belong to his staff. An eminent publicist, who was the special patron of the distressed populations of Central Europe, was starting out to dine at his club, when he was unaccountably delayed, and had to postpone his dinner. The Spanish copper company in London Wall had been doing little business of late, except to give luncheons to numerous gentlemen, but that night its rooms were lit, and people who did not look like city clerks were investigating its documents. In Paris a certain French count of royalist proclivities, who had a box that night for the opera and was giving a little dinner beforehand, did not keep his appointment, to the discomfiture of his guests, and a telephone message to his rooms near the Champs Elysées elicited no reply. There was a gruff fellow at the other end who discouraged conversation. A worthy Glasgow accountant, an elder of the kirk and a prospective candidate for Parliament, did not return that evening to his family, and the police, when appealed to, gave curious answers. The office, just off Fleet Street, of the Christian Advocate of Milwaukee, a paper which cannot have had much of a circulation in England, was filled about six o'clock with silent preoccupied people, and the manager, surprised and rather wild of eye, was taken off in a taxi by two large gentlemen who had not had previously the honour of his acquaintance. Odd things seemed to be happening up and down the whole world. More than one ship did not sail at the appointed hour because of the interest of certain people in the passenger lists; a meeting of decorous bankers in Genoa was unexpectedly interrupted by the police; offices of the utmost respectability were occupied and examined by the blundering minions of the law; several fashionable actresses did not appear to gladden their admirers, and more than one pretty dancer was absent from the scene of her usual triumphs; a Senator in Western America, a high official in Rome, and four deputies in France found their movements restricted, and a Prince of the Church, after receiving a telephone message, fell to his prayers. A mining magnate in Westphalia, visiting Antwerp on business, found that he was not permitted to catch the train he had settled on. Five men, all highly placed, and

one woman, for no cause apparent to their relatives, chose to rid themselves of life between the hours of six and seven. There was an unpleasant occurrence in a town on the Loire, where an Englishman, motoring to the south of France — a typical English squire, well known in hunting circles in Shropshire — was visited at his hotel by two ordinary Frenchmen, whose conversation seemed unpalatable to him. He was passing something from his waistcoat pocket to his mouth, when they had the audacity to lay violent hands on him, and to slip something over his wrists.

It was a heavenly clear evening when Medina and I set out to walk the half-mile to Mervyn Street. I had been so cloistered and harassed during the past weeks that I had missed the coming of summer. Suddenly the world seemed to have lighted up, and the streets were filled with that intricate odour of flowers, scent, hot wood pavements and asphalt which is the summer smell of London. Cars were waiting at house-doors, and women in pretty clothes getting into them; men were walking dinner-wards, with some of whom we exchanged greetings; the whole earth seemed full of laughter and happy movement. And it was shut off from me. I seemed to be living on the other side of a veil from this cheerful world, and I could see nothing but a lonely old man with a tragic face waiting for a lost boy. There was one moment at the corner of Berkeley Square when I accidentally jostled Medina, and had to clench my hands and bite my lips to keep myself from throttling him there and then.

The dining-room in Mervyn Street looked west, and the evening light strove with the candles on the table, and made a fairy-like scene of the flowers and silver. It was a full meeting — fifteen, I think — and the divine weather seemed to have put everybody in the best of spirits. I had almost forgotten Medina's repute with the ordinary man, and was staggered anew at the signs of his popularity. He was in the chair that evening, and a better chairman of such a dinner I have never seen. He had the right word for everybody, and we sat down to table like a party of undergraduates celebrating a successful cricket-match.

I was on the chairman's right hand, next to Burminster, with Palliser-Yeates opposite me. At first the talk was chiefly about the Derby and Ascot entries, about which Medina proved uncommonly well posted. He had a lot of inside knowledge from the Chilton stables, and showed himself a keen critic of form; also he was a perfect pundit about the pedigree of race-horses, and made Burminster, who fancied himself in the same line, gape with admiration. I suppose a brain like his could get up any subject at lightning speed, and he thought this kind of knowledge useful to him, for I don't believe he cared more for a horse than for a cat.

Once, during the Somme battle, I went to dine at a French château behind the lines, as the guest of the only son of the house. It was an ancient place, with fishponds and terraces, and there were only two people in it, an old Comtesse and a girl of fifteen called Simone. At dinner, I remember, a decrepit butler filled for me five glasses of different clarets, till I found the one I preferred. Afterwards I walked in the garden with Simone in a wonderful yellow twilight, watching the fat carp in the ponds, and hearing the grumbling of the distant guns. I felt in that hour the poignant contrast of youth and innocence and peace with that hideous world of battle a dozen miles off. To-night I had the same feeling — the jolly party of clean, hard, decent fellows, and the abominable hinterland of mystery and crime of which the man at the head of the table was the master. I must have been poor company, but happily everybody was talkative, and I did my best to grin at Burminster's fooling.

Presently the talk drifted away from sport. Palliser-Yeates was speaking, and his fresh boyish colour contrasted oddly with his wise eyes and grave voice.

"I can't make out what is happening," he said in reply to a remark of Leithen's. "The City has suddenly become jumpy, and there's no reason in the facts that I can see for it. There's been a good deal of realisation of stocks, chiefly by foreign holders, but there are a dozen explanations of that. No, there's a kind of malaise about, and it's unpleasantly like what I remember in June 1914. I was in Whittingtons' then, and we suddenly found the foundations beginning to crumble — oh yes, before the Serajevo murders. You remember Charlie Esmond's smash — well, that was largely due to the spasm of insecurity that shook the world. People now and then get a feeling in their bones that something bad is going to happen. And probably they are right, and it has begun to happen."

"Good Lord!" said Leithen. "I don't like this. Is it another war?"

Palliser-Yeates did not answer at once. "It looks like it. I admit it's almost unthinkable, but then all wars are really unthinkable, till you're in the middle of them."

"Nonsense!" Medina cried. "There's no nation on the globe fit to go to war, except half-civilised races with whom it is

the normal condition. You forget how much we know since 1914. You couldn't get even France to fight without provoking a revolution — a middle-class revolution, the kind that succeeds."

Burminster looked relieved. "The next war," he said, "will be a dashed unpleasant affair. So far as I can see there will be very few soldiers killed, but an enormous number of civilians. The safest place will be the front. There will be such a rush to get into the army that we'll have to have conscription to make people remain in civil life. The embusqués will be the regulars."

As he spoke someone entered the room, and to my amazement I saw that it was Sandy.

He was looking extraordinarily fit and as brown as a berry. He murmured an apology to the chairman for being late, patted the bald patch on Burminster's head, and took a seat at the other end of the table. "I'll cut in where you've got to," he told the waiters. "No — don't bother about fish. I want some English roast beef and a tankard of beer."

There was a chorus of questions.

"Just arrived an hour ago. I've been in the East — Egypt and Palestine. Flew most of the way back."

He nodded to me, and smiled at Medina and raised his tankard to him.

I was not in a good position for watching Medina's face, but so far as I could see it was unchanged. He hated Sandy, but he didn't fear him now, when his plans had practically come to fruition. Indeed he was very gracious to him, and asked in his most genial tones what he had been after.

"Civil aviation," said Sandy. "I'm going to collar the pilgrim traffic to the Holy Places. You've been in Mecca?" he asked Pugh, who nodded. "You remember the hamelidari crowd who used to organise the transport from Mesopotamia. Well, I'm a hamelidari on a big scale. I am prepared to bring the rank of hadji within reach of the poorest and feeblest. I'm going to be the great benefactor of the democracy of Islam, by means of a fleet of patched-up 'planes and a few kindred spirits that know the East. I'll let you fellows in on the ground-floor when I float my company. John"— he addressed Palliser—Yeates—"I look to you to manage the flotation."

Sandy was obviously ragging, and no one took him seriously. He sat there with his merry brown face, looking absurdly young and girlish, so that the most suspicious could have seen nothing more in him than the ordinary mad Englishman who lived for adventure and novelty. Me he never addressed, and I was glad of it, for I was utterly at sea. What did he mean by turning up now? What part was he to play in the events of the night? I could not have controlled the anxiety in my voice if I had been forced to speak to him.

A servant brought Medina a note, which he opened at leisure and read. "No answer," he said, and stuffed it into his pocket. I had a momentary dread that he might have got news of Macgillivray's round-up, but his manner reassured me.

There were people there who wanted to turn Sandy to other subjects, especially Fulleylove and the young Cambridge don, Nightingale. They wanted to know about South Arabia, of which at the time the world was talking. Some fellow, I forget his name, was trying to raise an expedition to explore it.

"It's the last geographical secret left unriddled," he said, and now he spoke seriously. "Well, perhaps not quite the last. I'm told there's still something to be done with the southern tributaries of the Amazon. Mornington, you know, believes there's a chance of finding some of the Inca people still dwelling in the unexplored upper glens. But all the rest have gone. Since the beginning of the century we've made a clean sweep of the jolly old mysteries that made the world worth living in. We have been to both the Poles, and to Lhasa, and to the Mountains of the Moon. We haven't got to the top of Everest yet, but we know what it is like. Mecca and Medina are as stale as Bournemouth. We know that there's nothing very stupendous in the Brahmaputra gorges. There's little left for a man's imagination to play with, and our children will grow up in a dull, shrunken world. Except, of course, the Great Southern Desert of Arabia."

"Do you think it can be crossed?" Nightingale asked.

"It's hard to say, and the man who tried it would take almighty risks. I don't fancy myself pinning my life to milk camels. They're chancy brutes."

"I don't believe there's anything there," said Fulleylove, "except eight hundred miles of soft sand."

"I'm not so sure. I've heard strange stories. There was a man I met once in Oman, who went west from the Manah oasis.. ."

He stopped to taste the club madeira, then set down the glass and looked at his watch.

"Great Scott!" he said. "I must be off. I'm sorry, Mr. President, but I felt I must see you all again. You don't mind my butting in?"

He was half-way to the door, when Burminster asked where he was going.

"To seek the straw in some sequestered grange. . . . Meaning the ten-thirty from King's Cross. I'm off to Scotland to see my father. Remember, I'm the last prop of an ancient house. Good-bye, all of you. I'll tell you about my schemes at the next dinner."

As the door closed on him I had a sense of the blackest depression and loneliness. He was my one great ally, and he came and disappeared like a ship in the night, without a word to me. I felt like a blind bat, and I must have showed my feeling in my face, for Medina saw it and put it down, I dare say, to my dislike of Sandy. He asked Palliser-Yeates to take his place. "It's not the Scotch express, like Arbuthnot, but I'm off for a holiday very soon, and I have an appointment I must keep." That was all to the good, for I had been wondering how I was to make an excuse for my visit to the Fields of Eden. He asked me when I would be back and I said listlessly within the next hour. He nodded. "I'll be home by then, and can let you in if Odell has gone to bed." Then with a little chaff of Burminster he left, so much at ease that I was positive he had had no bad news. I waited for five minutes and followed suit. The time was a quarter past ten.

At the entrance to the Club in Wellesley Street I expected to have some difficulty, but the man in the box at the head of the stairs, after a sharp glance at me, let me pass. He was not the fellow who had been there on my visit with Archie Roylance and yet I had a queer sense of having seen his face before. I stepped into the dancing-room with its heavy flavour of scent and its infernal din of mountebank music, sat down at a side table and ordered a liqueur.

There was a difference in the place, but at first I could not put my finger on it. Everything seemed the same; the only face I knew was Miss Victor's, and that had the same mask-like pallor; she was dancing with a boy, who seemed to be trying to talk to her and getting few replies. Odell I did not see, nor the Jew with the beard. I observed with interest the little casement above from which I had looked when I burgled the curiosity shop. There were fewer people to-night, but apparently the same class.

No, not quite the same class. The women were the same, but the men were different. They were older and more — how shall I put it? — responsible-looking, and had not the air of the professional dancing partner or the young man on the spree. They were heavier footed, too, though good enough performers. Somehow I got the notion that most of them were not habitués of this kind of place and were here with a purpose.

As soon as this idea dawned on me I began to notice other things. There were fewer foreign waiters, and their number was steadily decreasing. Drinks would be ordered and would be long in coming; a servant, once he left the hall, seemed to be unaccountably detained. And then I observed another thing. There was a face looking down from the casement above; I could see it like a shadow behind the dirty glass.

Presently Odell appeared, a resplendent figure in evening dress, with a diamond solitaire in his shirt and a red silk handkerchief in his left sleeve. He looked massive and formidable, but puffer than ever, and his small pig's eyes were very bright. I fancied he had been having a glass or two, just enough to excite him. He swaggered about among the small tables, turning now and then to stare at the girl in green, and then went out again. I looked at my watch, and saw that it was a quarter to eleven.

When I lifted my head Mary had arrived. No more paint and powder and bizarre clothes. She was wearing the pale blue gown she had worn at our Hunt Ball in March, and her hair was dressed in the simple way I loved, which showed all the lights and shadows in the gold. She came in like a young queen, cast a swift glance round the room, and then, shading her eyes with her hand, looking up towards the casement. It must have been a signal, for I saw a hand wave.

As she stood there, very still and poised like a runner, the music stopped suddenly. The few men who were still dancing spoke to their partners and moved towards the door. I observed the bearded Jew hurry in and look round. A man touched him on the arm and drew him away, and that was the last I saw of him.

Suddenly Odell reappeared. He must have had some warning which required instant action. I shall never know what it was, but it may have announced the round-up, and the course to be followed towards the hostages. He signed peremptorily to Miss Victor and went forward as if to take her arm. "You gotta come along," I heard, when my eyes were occupied with a new figure.

Turpin was there, a pale taut young man with his brows knit, as I remembered them in tight corners in France. The

green girl had darted to Mary's side, and Turpin strode up to her.

"Adela, my dear," he said, "I think it is time for you to be going home."

The next I saw was Miss Victor's hand clutching his arm and Odell advancing with a flush on his sallow face.

"You letta go that goil," he was saying. "You got no business with her. She's my goil."

Turpin was smiling. "I think not, my friend." He disengaged Adela's arm and put her behind him, and with a swift step struck Odell a resounding smack on the cheek with the flat of his hand.

The man seemed to swell with fury. "Hell!" he cried, with a torrent of Bowery oaths. "My smart guy, I've got something in my mitt for you. You for the sleep pill."

I would have given a fortune to be in Turpin's place, for I felt that a scrap was what I needed to knit up my ragged nerves. But I couldn't chip in, for this was clearly his special quarrel, and very soon I saw that he was not likely to need my help.

Smiling wickedly, he moved round the pug, who had his fists up. "Fiche-moi la paix," he crooned. "My friend, I am going to massacre you."

I stepped towards Mary, for I wanted to get the women outside, but she was busy attending to Miss Victor, whom the strain of the evening had left on the verge of swooning. So I only saw bits of the fight. Turpin kept Odell at long range, for infighting would have been fatal, and he tired him with his lightning movements, till the professional's bad training told and his wind went. When the Frenchman saw his opponent puffing and his cheeks mottling he started to sail in. That part I witnessed, and I hope that Mary and Miss Victor did not understand old Turpin's language, for he spoke gently to himself the whole time, and it was the quintessence of all the esoteric abuse that the French *poilu* accumulated during the four years of war. His tremendous reach gave him an advantage, he was as light on his legs as a fencer, and his arms seemed to shoot out with the force of a steam-hammer. I realised what I had never known before, that his slimness was deceptive, and that stripped he would be a fine figure of sinew and bone. Also I understood that a big fellow, however formidable, if he is untrained and a little drunk, will go down before speed and quick wits and the deftness of youth.

They fought for just over six minutes. Turpin's deadliest blows were on Odell's body, but the knockout came with one on the point of the chin. The big man crumpled up in a heap, and the back of his head banged on the floor. Turpin wrapped a wisp of a handkerchief round his knuckles, which had suffered from Odell's *solitaire*, and looked about him.

"What is to become of this offal?" he asked.

One of the dancers replied. "We will look after him, sir. The whole house is in our hands. This man is wanted on a good many grounds."

I walked up to the prostrate Odell, and took the latch-key from his waistcoat pocket. Turpin and Adela had gone, and Mary stood watching me. I observed that she was very pale.

"I am going to Hill Street," I said.

"I will come later," was her answer. "I hope in less than an hour. The key will let you in. There will be people there to keep the door open for me."

Her face had the alert and absorbed look that old Peter Pienaar's used to have when he was after big game. There was no other word spoken between us. She entered a big saloon-car which was waiting in the street below, and I walked to Royston Square to find a taxi. It was not yet eleven o'clock.



CHAPTER XIX

THE NIGHT OF THE FIRST OF JUNE — LATER

A little after eleven that night a late walker in Palmyra Square would have seen a phenomenon rare in the dingy neighbourhood. A large motor-car drew up at the gate of No. 7, where dwelt the teacher of music who had long retired to rest. A woman descended, wearing a dark cloak and carrying a parcel, and stood for a second looking across the road to where the lean elms in the centre of the square made a patch of shade. She seemed to find there what she expected, for she hastened to the gate of No. 4. She did not approach the front door, but ran down the path to the back where the tradesmen called, and as soon as she was out of sight several figures emerged from the shadow and moved towards the gate.

Miss Outhwaite opened to her tap. "My, but you're late, miss," she whispered, as the woman brushed past her into the dim kitchen. Then she gasped, for some transformation had taken place in the district-visitor. It was no longer a faded spinster that she saw, but a dazzling lady, gorgeously dressed as it seemed to her, and of a remarkable beauty.

"I've brought your hat, Elsie," she said. "It's rather a nice one, and I think you'll like it. Now go at once and open the front door."

"But Madame . . ." the girl gasped.

"Never mind Madame. You are done with Madame. To-morrow you will come and see me at this address," and she gave her a slip of paper. "I will see that you do not suffer. Now hurry, my dear."

The girl seemed to be mesmerised, and turned to obey. The district-visitor followed her, but did not wait in the hall. Instead, she ran lightly up the stairs, guiding herself by a small electric torch, and when the front door was open and four silent figures had entered she was nowhere to be seen.

For the next quarter of an hour an inquisitive passer-by would have noted lights spring out and then die away in more than one room of No. 4. He might have also heard the sound of low excited speech. At the end of that space of time he would have seen the district-visitor descend the steps and enter the big car which had moved up to the gate. She was carrying something in her arms.

Within, in a back room, a furious woman was struggling with a telephone, from which she got no answer, since the line had been cut. And an old woman sat in a chair by the hearth, raving and muttering, with a face like death.

When I got to Hill Street, I waited till the taxi had driven off before I entered. There was a man standing in the porch of the house opposite, and as I waited another passed me, who nodded. "Good evening, Sir Richard," he said, and though I did not recognise him I knew where he came from. My spirits were at their lowest ebb, and not even the sight of these arrangements could revive them. For I knew that, though we had succeeded with Miss Victor and Mercot, we had failed with the case which mattered most. I was going to try to scare Medina or to buy him, and I felt that both purposes were futile, for the awe of him was still like a black fog on my soul.

I let myself in with Odell's latch-key and left the heavy door ajar. Then I switched on the staircase lights and mounted to the library. I left the lights burning behind me, for they would be needed by those who followed.

Medina was standing by the fireplace, in which logs had been laid ready for a match. As usual, he had only the one lamp lit, that on his writing-table. He had a slip of paper in his hand, one of the two which had lain in the top drawer, as I saw by the dates and the ruled lines. I fancy he had been attempting in vain to ring up Palmyra Square. Some acute suspicion had been aroused in him, and he had been trying to take action. His air of leisure was the kind which is hastily assumed; a minute before I was convinced he had been furiously busy.

There was surprise in his face when he saw me.

"Hullo!" he said, "how did you get in? I didn't hear you ring. I told Odell to go to bed."

I was feeling so weak and listless that I wanted to sit down, so I dropped into a chair out of the circle of the lamp.

"Yes," I said. "Odell's in bed all right. I let myself in with his key. I've just seen that Bowery tough put to sleep with a crack on the chin from Turpin. You know — the Marquis de la Tour du Pin."

I had a good strategic position, for I could see his face clearly and he could only see the outline of mine.

"What on earth are you talking about?" he said.

"Odell has been knocked out. You see, Turpin has taken Miss Victor back to her father." I looked at my watch. "And by this time Lord Mercot should be in London — unless the Scotch express is late."

A great tide of disillusion must have swept over his mind, but his face gave no sign of it. It had grown stern, but as composed as a judge's.

"You're behaving as if you were mad. What has come over you? I know nothing of Lord Mercot — you mean the Alcester boy? Or Miss Victor."

"Oh yes, you do," I said wearily. I did not know where to begin, for I wanted to get him at once to the real business. "It's a long story. Do you want me to tell it when you know it all already?" I believe I yawned and I felt so tired I could hardly put the sentences together.

"I insist that you explain this nonsense," was his reply. One thing he must have realised by now, that he had no power over me, for his jaw was set and his eyes stern, as if he were regarding not a satellite, but an enemy and an equal.

"Well, you and your friends for your own purposes took three hostages, and I have made it my business to free them. I let you believe that your tomfoolery had mastered me — your performance in this room and Newhover and Madame Breda and the old blind lady and all the rest of it. When you thought I was drugged and demented I was specially wide awake. I had to abuse your hospitality — rather a dirty game, you may say, but then I was dealing with a scoundrel. I went to Norway when you thought I was in bed at Fosse, and I found Mercot, and I expect at this moment Newhover is feeling rather cheap. . . . Miss Victor, too. She wasn't very difficult, once we hit on the Fields of Eden. You're a very clever man, Mr. Medina, but you oughtn't to circulate doggerel verses. Take my advice and stick to good poetry."

By this time the situation must have been clear to him, but there was not a quiver in that set hard face. I take off my hat to the best actor I have ever met — the best but one, the German count who lies buried at the farm of Gavrelle. "You've gone off your head," he said, and his quiet considerate voice belied his eyes.

"Oh no! I rather wish I had. I hate to think that there can be so base a thing in the world as you. A man with the brains of a god and living only to glut his rotten vanity! You should be scotched like a snake."

For a moment I had a blessed thought that he was about to go for me, for I would have welcomed a scrap like nothing else on earth. There may have been a flicker of passion, but it was quickly suppressed. His eyes had become grave and reproachful.

"I have been kind to you," he said, "and have treated you as a friend. This is my reward. The most charitable explanation is that your wits are unhinged. But you had better leave this house."

"Not before you hear me out. I have something to propose, Mr. Medina. You have still a third hostage in your hands. We are perfectly aware of the syndicate you have been working with — the Barcelona nut business, and the Jacobite count, and your friend the Shropshire master-of-hounds. Scotland Yard has had its hand over the lot for months, and to-night the hand will be closed. That shop is shut for good. Now listen to me, for I have a proposal to make. You have the ambition of the devil, and have already made for yourself a great name. I will do nothing to smirch that name. I will swear a solemn oath to hold my tongue. I will go away from England, if you like. I will bury the memory of the past months, and my knowledge will never be used to put a spoke in your wheel. Also, since your syndicate is burst up, you will want money. Well, I will give you one hundred thousand pounds. And in return for my silence and my cash I ask you to restore to me David Warcliff, safe and sane. Sane, I say, for whatever you have made of the poor little chap you have got to unmake it."

I had made up my mind about this offer as I came along in the taxi. It was a big sum, but I had more money than I needed, and Blenkiron, who had millions, would lend a hand.

His face showed no response, no interest, only the same stern melancholy regard.

"Poor devil!" he said. "You're madder than I thought."

My lassitude was disappearing, and I began to get angry.

"If you do not agree," I said, "I will blacken your reputation throughout the civilised world. What use will England have for a kidnapper and a blackmailer and — a — a bogus magician?"

But as I spoke I knew that my threats were foolish. He smiled, a wise, pitying smile, which made me shiver with wrath.

"No, it is you who will appear as the blackmailer," he said softly. "Consider. You are making the most outrageous

charges. I don't quite follow your meaning, but clearly they are outrageous — and what evidence have you to support them? Your own dreams. Who will believe you? I have had the good fortune to make many friends, and they are loyal friends." There was a gentle regret in his voice. "Your story will be laughed to scorn. Of course people will be sorry for you, for you are popular in a way. They will say that a meritorious soldier, more notable perhaps for courage than for brains, has gone crazy, and they will comment on the long-drawn-out effects of the War. I must of course protect myself. If you blackguard me I will prosecute you for slander and get your mental condition examined."

It was only too true. I had no evidence except my own word. I knew that it would be impossible to link up Medina with the doings of the syndicate — he was too clever for that. His blind mother would die on the rack before she spoke, and his tools could not give him away, because they were tools and knew nothing. The world would laugh at me if I opened my mouth. At that moment I think I had my first full realisation of Medina's quality. Here was a man who had just learned that his pet schemes were shattered, who had had his vanity wounded to the quick by the revelation of how I had fooled him, and yet he could play what was left of the game with coolness and precision. I had struck the largest size of opponent.

"What about the hundred thousand pounds, then?" I asked. "That is my offer for David Warcliff."

"You are very good," he said mockingly. "I might feel insulted, if I did not know you were a lunatic."

I sat there staring at the figure in the glow of the one lamp, which seemed to wax more formidable as I looked, and a thousandfold more sinister. I saw the hideous roundness of his head, the mercilessness of his eyes, so that I wondered how I had ever thought him handsome. But now that most of his game was spoiled he only seemed the greater, the more assured. Were there no gaps in his defences? He had kinks in him — witness the silly rhyme which had given me the first clue. . . . Was there no weakness in that panoply which I could use? Physical fear — physical pain — could anything be done with that?

I got to my feet with a blind notion of closing with him. He divined my intention, for he showed something in his hand which gleamed dully. "Take care," he said. "I can defend myself against any maniac."

"Put it away," I said hopelessly. "You're safe enough from me. My God, I hope that somewhere there is a hell." I felt as feeble as a babe, and all the while the thought of the little boy was driving me mad.

Suddenly I saw Medina's eyes look over my shoulder. Someone had come into the room, and I turned and found Kharáma.

He was in evening dress, wearing a turban, and in the dusk his dark malign face seemed an embodied sneer at my helplessness. I did not see how Medina took his arrival, for all at once something seemed to give in my head. For the Indian I felt now none of the awe which I had for the other, only a flaming, overpowering hate. That this foul thing out of the East should pursue his devilries unchecked seemed to me beyond bearing. I forgot Medina's pistol and everything else, and went for him like a wild beast.

He dodged me, and, before I knew, had pulled off his turban, and tossed it in my face.

"Don't be an old ass, Dick," he said.

Panting with fury, I stopped short and stared. The voice was Sandy's, and so was the figure. . . . And the face, too, when I came to look into it. He had done something with the corners of his eyebrows and tinted the lids with kohl, but the eyes, which I had never before seen properly opened, were those of my friend.

"What an artist the world has lost in me!" he laughed, and tried to tidy his disordered hair.

Then he nodded to Medina. "We meet again sooner than we expected. I missed my train, and came to look for Dick. . . . Lay down that pistol, please. I happen to be armed too, you see. It's no case for shooting anyhow. Do you mind if I smoke?"

He flung himself into an arm-chair and lit a cigarette. Once more I was conscious of my surroundings, for hitherto for all I knew I might have been arguing in a desert. My eyes had cleared and my brain was beginning to work again. I saw the great room with its tiers of books, some glimmering, some dusky; Sandy taking his ease in his chair and gazing placidly up into Medina's face; Medina with his jaw set but his eyes troubled — yes, for the first time I saw flickers of perplexity in those eyes.

"Dick, I suppose, has been reasoning with you," Sandy said mildly. "And you have told him that he was a madman? Quite right. He is. You have pointed out to him that his story rests on his unsupported evidence, which no one will believe, for I admit it is an incredible tale. You have warned him that if he opens his mouth you will have him shut up as a lunatic.

Is that correct, Dick?

"Well," he continued, looking blandly at Medina, "that was a natural view for you to take. Only, of course, you made one small error. His evidence will not be unsupported."

Medina laughed, but there was no ease in his laugh. "Who are the other lunatics?"

"Myself for one. You have interested me for quite a long time, Mr. Medina. I will confess that one of my reasons for coming home in March was to have the privilege of your acquaintance. I have taken a good deal of pains about it. I have followed your own line of studies — indeed, if the present situation weren't so hectic, I should like to exchange notes with you as a fellow-inquirer. I have traced your career in Central Asia and elsewhere with some precision. I think I know more about you than anybody else in the world."

Medina made no answer. The tables were turning, and his eyes were chained to the slight figure in the arm-chair.

"All that is very interesting," Sandy went on, "but it is not quite germane to the subject before us. Kharáma, whom we both remember in his pride, unfortunately died last year. It was kept very secret for obvious reasons — the goodwill of his business was very valuable and depended upon his being alive — and I only heard of it by a lucky accident. So I took the liberty of borrowing his name, Mr. Medina. As Kharáma I was honoured with your confidence. Rather a cad's trick, you will say, and I agree, but in an affair like this one has no choice of weapons. . . . You did more than confide in me. You trusted me with Miss Victor and the Marquis de la Tour du Pin, when it was important that they should be in safe keeping.. .. I have a good deal of evidence to support Dick."

"Moonshine!" said Medina. "Two lunacies do not make sense. I deny every detail of your rubbish."

"Out of the mouth of two or three witnesses," said Sandy pleasantly. "There is still a third . . . Lavater," he cried, "come in, we're ready for you."

There entered the grey melancholy man, whom I had seen on my first visit here, and in the house behind Little Fardell Street. I noticed that he walked straight to Sandy's chair, and did not look at Medina.

"Lavater you know already, I think. He used to be a friend of mine, and lately we have resumed the friendship. He was your disciple for some time, but has now relinquished that honour. Lavater will be able to tell the world a good deal about you."

Medina's face had become like a mask, and the colour had gone out of it. He may have been a volcano within, but outside he was cold ice. His voice, acid and sneering, came out like drops of chilly water.

"Three lunatics," he said. "I deny every word you say. No one will believe you. It is a conspiracy of madmen."

"Let's talk business anyhow," said Sandy. "The case against you is proven to the hilt, but let us see how the world will regard it. The strong point on your side is that people don't like to confess they have been fools. You have been a very popular man, Mr. Medina, and your many friends will be loath to believe that you are a scoundrel. You've the hedge of your reputation to protect you. Again, our story is so monstrous that the ordinary Englishman may call it unbelievable, for we are not an imaginative nation. Again we can get no help from the principal sufferers. Miss Victor and Lord Mercot can tell an ugly story of kidnapping, which may get a life-sentence for Odell, and for Newhover if he is caught, but which does not implicate you. That will be a stumbling-block to most juries, who are not as familiar with occult science as you and I These are your strong points. But consider what we can bring on the other side. You are a propagandist of genius, as I once told Dick, and I can explain just how you have fooled the world — your exploits with Denikin and such-like. Then the three of us can tell a damning story, and tell it from close quarters. It may sound wild, but Dick has some reputation for good sense, and a good many people think that I am not altogether a fool. Finally we have on our side Scotland Yard, which is now gathering in your associates, and we have behind us Julius Victor, who is not without influence. . . . I do not say we can send you to prison, though I think it likely, but we can throw such suspicion on you that for the rest of your days you will be a marked man. You will recognise that for you that means utter failure, for to succeed you must swim in the glory of popular confidence."

I could see that Medina was shaken at last. "You may damage me with your lies," he said slowly, "but I will be even with you. You will find me hard to beat."

"I don't doubt it," was Sandy's answer. "I and my friends do not want victory, we want success. We want David Warcliff."

There was no answer, and Sandy went on.

"We make you a proposal. The three of us will keep what we know to ourselves. We will pledge ourselves never to breathe a word of it — if you like we will sign a document to say that we acknowledge our mistake. So far as we are concerned you may go on and become Prime Minister of Britain or Archbishop of Canterbury, or anything you jolly well like. We don't exactly love you, but we will not interfere with the adoration of others. I'll take myself off again to the East with Lavater, and Dick will bury himself in Oxfordshire mud. And in return we ask that you hand over to us David Warcliff in his right mind."

There was no answer.

Then Sandy made a mistake in tactics. "I believe you are attached to your mother," he said. "If you accept our offer she will be safe from annoyance. Otherwise — well, she is an important witness."

The man's pride was stung to the quick. His mother must have been for him an inner sanctuary, a thing apart from and holier than his fiercest ambitions, the very core and shrine of his monstrous vanity. That she should be used as a bargaining counter stirred something deep and primeval in him, something — let me say it — higher and better than I had imagined. A new and a human fury burned the mask off him like tissue paper.

"You fools!" he cried, and his voice was harsh with rage. "You perfect fools! You will sweat blood for that insult."

"It's a fair offer," said Sandy, never moving a muscle. "Do I understand that you refuse?"

Medina stood on the hearthrug like an animal at bay, and upon my soul I couldn't but admire him. The flame in his face would have scorched most people into abject fear.

"Go to hell, the pack of you! Out of this house! You will never hear a word from me till you are bleating for mercy. Get out . . ."

His eyes must have been dimmed by his rage, for he did not see Mary enter. She had advanced right up to Sandy's chair before even I noticed her. She was carrying something in her arms, something which she held close as a mother holds a child.

It was the queer little girl from the house in Palmyra Square. Her hair had grown longer and fell in wisps over her brow and her pale tear-stained cheeks. A most piteous little object she was, with dull blind eyes which seemed to struggle with perpetual terror. She still wore the absurd linen smock, her skinny little legs and arms were bare, and her thin fingers clutched at Mary's gown.

Then Medina saw her, and Sandy ceased to exist for him. He stared for a second uncomprehendingly, till the passion in his face turned to alarm. "What have you done with her?" he barked, and flung himself forward.

I thought he was going to attack Mary, so I tripped him up. He sprawled on the floor, and since he seemed to have lost all command of himself I reckoned that I had better keep him there. I looked towards Mary, who nodded. "Please tie him up," she said, and passed me the turban cloth of the late Kharáma.

He fought like a tiger, but Lavater and I with a little help from Sandy managed to truss him fairly tight, supplementing the turban with one of the curtain cords. We laid him in an arm-chair.

"What have you done with her?" he kept on, screwing his head round to look at Mary.

I could not understand his maniacal concern for the little girl, till Mary answered, and I saw what he meant by "her."

"No one has touched your mother. She is in the house in Palmyra Square."

Then Mary laid the child down very gently in the chair where Sandy had been sitting and stood erect before Medina.

"I want you to bring back this little boy's mind," she said.

I suppose I should have been astonished, but I wasn't — at least not at her words, though I had not had an inkling beforehand of the truth. All the astonishment I was capable of was reserved for Mary. She stood there looking down on the bound man, her face very pale, her eyes quite gentle, her lips parted as if in expectation. And yet there was something about her so formidable, so implacable, that the other three of us fell into the background. Her presence dominated everything, and the very grace of her body and the mild sadness of her eyes seemed to make her the more terrifying. I know now how Joan of Arc must have looked when she led her troops into battle.

"Do you hear me?" she repeated. "You took away his soul and you can give it back again. That is all I ask of you."

He choked before he replied. "What boy? I tell you I know nothing. You are all mad."

"I mean David Warcliff. The others are free now, and he must be free to-night. Free, and in his right mind, as when

you carried him off. Surely you understand.”

There was no answer.

“That is all I ask. It is such a little thing. Then we will go away.”

I broke in. “Our offer holds. Do as she asks, and we will never open our mouths about to-night’s work.”

He was not listening to me, nor was she. It was a duel between the two of them, and as she looked at him, his face seemed to grow more dogged and stone-like. If ever he had felt hatred it was for this woman, for it was a conflict between two opposite poles of life, two worlds eternally at war.

“I tell you I know nothing of the brat . . .”

She stopped him with lifted hand. “Oh, do not let us waste time, please. It is far too late for arguing. If you do what I ask we will go away, and you will never be troubled with us again. I promise — we all promise. If you do not, of course we must ruin you.”

I think it was the confidence in her tone which stung him.

“I refuse,” he almost screamed. “I do not know what you mean . . . I defy you. . . . You can proclaim your lies to the world. . . . You will not crush me. I am too strong for you.”

There was no mistaking the finality of that defiance. I thought it put the lid on everything. We could blast the fellow’s reputation no doubt, and win victory; but we had failed, for we were left with that poor little mindless waif. Mary’s face did not change.

“If you refuse, I must try another way”; her voice was as gentle as a mother’s. “I must give David Warcliff back to his father. . . . Dick,” she turned to me, “will you light the fire.”

I obeyed, not knowing what she meant, and in a minute the dry faggots were roaring up the chimney, lighting up our five faces and the mazed child in the chair.

“You have destroyed a soul,” she said, “and you refuse to repair the wrong. I am going to destroy your body, and nothing will ever repair it.”

Then I saw her meaning, and both Sandy and I cried out. Neither of us had led the kind of life which makes a man squeamish, but this was too much for us. But our protests died half-born, after one glance at Mary’s face. She was my own wedded wife, but in that moment I could no more have opposed her than could the poor bemused child. Her spirit seemed to transcend us all and radiate an inexorable command. She stood easily and gracefully, a figure of motherhood and pity rather than of awe. But all the same I did not recognise her; it was a stranger that stood there, a stern goddess that wielded the lightnings. Beyond doubt she meant every word she said, and her quiet voice seemed to deliver judgment as aloof and impersonal as Fate. I could see creeping over Medina’s sullenness the shadow of terror.

“You are a desperate man,” she was saying. “But I am far more desperate. There is nothing on earth that can stand between me and the saving of this child. You know that, don’t you? A body for a soul — a soul for a body — which shall it be?”

The light was reflected from the steel fire-irons, and Medina saw it and shivered.

“You may live a long time, but you will have to live in seclusion. No woman will ever cast eyes on you except to shudder. People will point at you and say ‘There goes the man who was maimed by a woman — because of the soul of a child.’ You will carry your story written on your face for the world to read and laugh and revile.”

She had got at the central nerve of his vanity, for I think that he was ambitious less of achievement than of the personal glory that attends it. I dared not look at her, but I could look at him, and I saw all the passions of hell chase each other over his face. He tried to speak, but only choked. He seemed to bend his whole soul to look at her, and to shiver at what he saw.

She turned her head to glance at the clock on the mantelpiece.

“You must decide before the quarter strikes,” she said. “After that there will be no place for repentance. A body for a soul — a soul for a body.”

Then from her black silk reticule she took a little oddly-shaped green bottle. She held it in her hand as if it had been a jewel, and I gulped in horror.

“This is the elixir of death — of death in life, Mr. Medina. It makes comeliness a mockery. It will burn flesh and bone

into shapes of hideousness, but it does not kill. Oh no — it does not kill. A body for a soul — a soul for a body.”

It was that, I think, which finished him. The threefold chime which announced the quarter had begun when out of his dry throat came a sound like a clucking hen’s. “I agree,” a voice croaked, seeming to come from without, so queer and far away it was.

“Thank you,” she said, as if someone had opened a door for her. “Dick, will you please make Mr. Medina more comfortable. . . .”

The fire was not replenished, so the quick-burning faggots soon died down. Again the room was shadowy, except for the single lamp that glowed behind Medina’s head.

I cannot describe that last scene, for I do not think my sight was clear, and I know that my head was spinning. The child sat on Mary’s lap, with its eyes held by the glow of light. “You are Gerda . . . you are sleepy . . . now you sleep”— I did not heed the patter, for I was trying to think of homely things which would keep my wits anchored. I thought chiefly of Peter John.

Sandy was crouched on a stool by the hearth. I noticed that he had his hands on his knees, and that from one of them protruded something round and dark, like the point of a pistol barrel. He was taking no chances, but the thing was folly, for we were in the presence of far more potent weapons. Never since the world began was there a scene of such utter humiliation. I shivered at the indecency of it. Medina performed his sinister ritual, but on us spectators it had no more effect than a charade. Mary especially sat watching it with the detachment with which one watches a kindergarten play. The man had suddenly become a mountebank under those fearless eyes.

The voices droned on, the man asking questions, the child answering in a weak unnatural voice. “You are David Warcliff. . . you lost your way coming from school . . . you have been ill and have forgotten. . . . You are better now . . . you remember Haverham and the redshanks down by the river. . . . You are sleepy . . . I think you would like to sleep again.”

Medina spoke. “You can wake him now. Do it carefully.”

I got up and switched on the rest of the lights. The child was peacefully asleep in Mary’s arms, and she bent and kissed him. “Speak to him, Dick,” she said.

“Davie,” I said loudly. “Davie, it’s about time for us to get home.”

He opened his eyes and sat up. When he found himself on Mary’s knee, he began to clamber down. He was not accustomed to a woman’s lap, and felt a little ashamed.

“Davie,” I repeated. “Your father will be getting tired waiting for us. Don’t you think we should go home?”

“Yes, sir,” he said, and put his hand in mine.

To my dying day I shall not forget my last sight of that library — the blazing lights which made the books, which I had never seen before except in shadow, gleam like a silk tapestry, the wood-fire dying on the hearth, and the man sunk in the chair. It may sound odd after all that had happened, but my chief feeling was pity. Yes, pity! He seemed the loneliest thing on God’s earth. You see he had never had any friends except himself, and his ambitions had made a barrier between him and all humanity. Now that they were gone he was stripped naked, and left cold and shivering in the arctic wilderness of his broken dreams.

Mary leaned back in the car.

“I hope I’m not going to faint,” she said. “Give me the green bottle, please.”

“For Heaven’s sake!” I cried.

“Silly!” she said. “It’s only eau-decologne.”

She laughed, and the laugh seemed to restore her a little though she still looked deadly pale. She fumbled in her reticule, and drew out a robust pair of scissors.

“I’m going to cut Davie’s hair. I can’t change his clothes, but at any rate I can make his head like a boy’s again, so that his father won’t be shocked.”

“Does he know we are coming?”

“Yes. I telephoned to him after dinner, but of course I said nothing about Davie.”

She clipped assiduously, and by the time we came to the Pimlico square where Sir Arthur Warcliff lived she had got rid of the long locks, and the head was now that of a pallid and thin but wonderfully composed little boy. “Am I going back to

Dad?" he had asked, and seemed content.

I refused to go in—I was not fit for any more shocks — so I sat in the car while Mary and David entered the little house. In about three minutes Mary returned. She was crying, and yet smiling too.

"I made Davie wait in the hall, and went into Sir Arthur's study alone. He looked ill — and oh, so old and worn. I said: 'I have brought Davie. Never mind his clothes. He's all right!' Then I fetched him in. Oh, Dick, it was a miracle. That old darling seemed to come back to life. . . . The two didn't run into each other's arms . . . they shook hands . . . and the little boy bowed his head and Sir Arthur kissed the top of it, and said 'Dear Mouse-head, you've come back to me.' . . . And then I slipped away."

There was another scene that night in which I played a part, for we finished at Carlton House Terrace. Of what happened there I have only a confused recollection. I remember Julius Victor kissing Mary's hand, and the Duke shaking mine as if he would never stop. I remember Mercot, who looked uncommonly fit and handsome, toasting me in champagne, and Adela Victor sitting at a piano and singing to us divinely. But my chief memory is of a French nobleman whirling a distinguished German engineer into an extemporised dance of joy.



CHAPTER XX

MACHRAY

A week later, after much consultation with Sandy, I wrote Medina a letter. The papers said he had gone abroad for a short rest, and I could imagine the kind of mental purgatory he was enduring in some Mediterranean bay. We had made up our mind to be content with success. Victory meant a long campaign in the courts and the Press, in which no doubt we should have won, but for which I at any rate had no stomach. The whole business was a nightmare which I longed to shut the door on; we had drawn his fangs, and for all I cared he might go on with his politics and dazzle the world with his gifts, provided he kept his hands out of crime. I wrote and told him that; told him that the three people who knew everything would hold their tongues, but that they reserved the right to speak if he ever showed any sign of running crooked. I had no reply and did not expect one. I had lost all my hate for the man, and, so strangely are we made, what I mostly felt was compassion. We are all, even the best of us, egotists and self-deceivers, and without a little comfortable make-believe to clothe us we should freeze in the outer winds. I shuddered when I thought of the poor devil with his palace of cards about his ears and his naked soul. I felt that further triumph would be an offence against humanity.

He must have got my message, for in July he was back at his work, and made a speech at a big political demonstration which was highly commended in the papers. Whether he went about in society I do not know, for Sandy was in Scotland and I was at Fosse, and not inclined to leave it. . . . Meantime Macgillivray's business was going on, and the Press was full of strange cases, which no one seemed to think of connecting. I gathered from Macgillivray that though the syndicate was smashed to little bits he had failed to make the complete bag of malefactors that he had hoped. In England there were three big financial exposures followed by long sentences; in Paris there was a first-rate political scandal and a crop of convictions; a labour agitator and a copper magnate in the Middle West went to gaol for life, and there was the famous rounding-up of the murder gang in Turin. But Macgillivray and his colleagues, like me, had success rather than victory; indeed in this world I don't think you can get both at once — you must make your choice.

We saw Mercot at the "House" Ball at Oxford, none the worse for his adventures, but rather the better, for he was a man now and not a light-witted boy. Early in July Mary and I went to Paris for Adela Victor's wedding, the most gorgeous show I have ever witnessed, when I had the privilege of kissing the bride and being kissed by the bridegroom. Sir Arthur Warcliff brought David to pay us a visit at Fosse, where the boy fished from dawn to dusk, and began to get some flesh on his bones. Archie Roylance arrived and the pair took such a fancy to each other that the three of them went off to Norway to have a look at the birds on Flacksholm.

I was busy during those weeks making up arrears of time at Fosse, for my long absence had put out the whole summer programme. One day, as I was down in the Home Meadow, planning a new outlet for one of the ponds, Sandy turned up, announcing that he must have a talk with me and could only spare twenty minutes.

"When does your tenancy of Machray begin?" he asked.

"I have got it now — ever since April. The sea-trout come early there."

"And you can go up whenever you like?"

"Yes. We propose starting about the 5th of August."

"Take my advice and start at once," he said.

I asked why, though I guessed his reason.

"Because I'm not very happy about you here. You've insulted to the marrow the vainest and one of the cleverest men in the world. Don't imagine he'll take it lying down. You may be sure he is spending sleepless nights planning how he is to get even with you. It's you he is chiefly thinking about. Me he regards as a rival in the same line of business — he'd love to break me, but he'll trust to luck for the chance turning up. Lavater has been his slave and has escaped — but at any rate he once acknowledged his power. YOU have fooled him from start to finish and left his vanity one raw throbbing sore. He won't be at ease till he has had his revenge on you — on you and your wife."

"Peter John!" I exclaimed.

He shook his head. "No, I don't think so. He won't try that line again — at any rate not yet awhile. But he would be

much happier, Dick, if you were dead.”

The thought had been in my own mind for weeks, and had made me pretty uncomfortable. It is not pleasant to walk in peril of your life, and move about in constant expectation of your decease. I had considered the thing very carefully, and had come to the conclusion that I could do nothing but try to forget the risk. If I ever allowed myself to think about it, my whole existence would be poisoned. It was a most unpleasant affair, but after all the world is full of hazards. I told Sandy that.

“I’m quite aware of the danger,” I said. “I always reckoned that as part of the price I had to pay for succeeding. But I’m hanged if I’m going to allow the fellow to score off me to the extent of disarranging my life.”

“You’ve plenty of fortitude, old fellow,” said Sandy, “but you owe a duty to your family and your friends. Of course you might get police protection from Macgillivray, but that would be an infernal nuisance for you, and, besides, what kind of police protection would avail against an enemy as subtle as Medina? . . . No, I want you to go away. I want you to go to Machray now, and stay there till the end of October.”

“What good would that do? He can follow me there, if he wants to, and anyhow the whole thing would begin again when I came back.”

“I’m not so sure,” he said. “In three months’ time his wounded vanity may have healed. It’s no part of his general game to have a vendetta with you, and only a passion of injured pride would drive him to it. Presently that must die down, and he will see his real interest. Then as for Machray — why a Scotch deer-forest is the best sanctuary on earth. Nobody can come up that long glen without your hearing about it, and nobody can move on the hills without half a dozen argus-eyed stalkers and gillies following him. They’re the right sort of police protection. I want you for all our sakes to go to Machray at once.”

“It looks like funking,” I objected.

“Don’t be an old ass. Is there any man alive, who is not a raving maniac, likely to doubt your courage? You know perfectly well that it is sometimes a brave man’s duty to run away.”

I thought for a bit. “I don’t think he’ll hire ruffians to murder me,” I said.

“Why.”

“Because he challenged me to a duel. Proposed a place in the Pyrenees and offered to let me choose both seconds.”

“What did you reply?”

“I wired, ‘Try not to be a fool.’ It looks as if he wanted to keep the job of doing me in for himself.”

“Very likely, and that doesn’t mend matters. I’d rather face half a dozen cut-throats than Medina. What you tell me strengthens my argument.”

I was bound to admit that Sandy talked sense, and after he had gone I thought the matter out and decided to take his advice. Somehow the fact that he should have put my suspicions into words made them more formidable, and I knew again the odious feeling of the hunted. It was hardly fear, for I think that, if necessary, I could have stayed on at Fosse and gone about my business with a stiff lip. But all the peace of the place had been spoiled. If a bullet might at any moment come from a covert — that was the crude way I envisaged the risk — then good-bye to the charm of my summer meadows.

The upshot was that I warned Tom Greenslade to be ready to take his holiday, and by the 20th of July he and I and Mary and Peter John were settled in a little white-washed lodge tucked into the fold of a birch-clad hill, and looking alternately at a shrunken river and a cloudless sky, while we prayed for rain.

Machray in calm weather is the most solitary place on earth, lonelier and quieter even than a Boer farm lost in some hollow of the veld. The mountains rise so sheer and high, that it seems that only a bird could escape, and the road from the sea-loch ten miles away is only a strip of heather-grown sand which looks as if it would end a mile off at the feet of each steep hill-shoulder. But when the gales come, and the rain is lashing the roof, and the river swirls at the garden-edge, and the birches and rowans are tossing, then a thousand voices talk, and one lives in a world so loud that one’s ears are deafened and one’s voice acquires a sharp pitch of protest from shouting against the storm.

We had few gales, and the last week of July was a very fair imitation of the Tropics. The hills were cloaked in a heat haze, the Aicill river was a chain of translucent pools with a few reddening salmon below the ledges, the burns were thin trickles, the sun drew hot scents out of the heather and bog-myrtle, and movement was a weariness to man and beast. That

was for the day-time; but every evening about five o'clock there would come a light wind from the west, which scattered the haze, and left a land swimming in cool amber light. Then Mary and Tom Greenslade and I would take to the hills, and return well on for midnight to a vast and shameless supper. Sometimes in the hot noontides I went alone, with old Angus the head stalker, and long before the season began I had got a pretty close knowledge of the forest.

The reader must bear with me while I explain the lie of the land. The twenty thousand acres of Machray extend on both sides of the Aicill glen, but principally to the south. West lies the Machray sea-loch, where the hills are low and green and mostly sheep-ground. East, up to the river-head, is Glenaicill Forest, the lodge of which is beyond the watershed on the shore of another sea-loch, and on our side of the divide there is only a stalker's cottage. Glenaicill is an enormous place, far too big to be a single forest. It had been leased for years by Lord Glenfinnan, an uncle of Archie Roylance, but he was a frail old gentleman of over seventy who could only get a stag when they came down to the low ground in October. The result was that the place was ridiculously undershot, and all the western end, which adjoined Machray, was virtually a sanctuary. It was a confounded nuisance, for it made it impossible to stalk our northern beat except in a south-west wind, unless you wanted to shift the deer on to Glenaicill, and that beat had all our best grazing and seemed to attract all our best heads.

Haripol Forest to the south was not so large, but I should think it was the roughest ground in Scotland. Machray had good beats south of the Aicill right up to the watershed, and two noble corries, the Corrie-na-Sidhe and the Corrie Easain. Beyond the watershed was the glen of the Reascuill, both sides of which were Haripol ground. The Machray heights were all over the 3,000 feet, but rounded and fairly easy going, but the Haripol peaks beyond the stream were desperate rock mountains — Stob Bán, Stob Coire Easain, Sgurr Mor — comprising some of the most difficult climbing in the British Isles. The biggest and hardest top of all was at the head of the Reascuill — Sgurr Dearg, with its two pinnacle ridges, its three prongs, and the awesome precipice of its eastern face. Machray marched with Haripol on its summit, but it wasn't often that any of our stalkers went that way. All that upper part of the Reascuill was a series of cliffs and chasms, and the red deer — who is no rock-climber — rarely ventured there. For the rest these four southern beats of ours were as delightful hunting-ground as I have ever seen, and the ladies could follow a good deal of the stalking by means of a big telescope in the library window of the Lodge. Machray was a young man's forest, for the hills rose steep almost from the sea-level, and you might have to go up and down 3,000 feet several times in a day. But Haripol — at least the north and east parts of it — was fit only for athletes, and it seemed to be its fate to fall to tenants who were utterly incapable of doing it justice. In recent years it had been leased successively to an elderly distiller, a young racing ne'er-do-well who drank, and a plump American railway king. It was now in the hands of a certain middle-aged Midland manufacturer, Lord Claybody, who had won an easy fortune and an easier peerage during the War. "Ach, he will be killed," Angus said. "He will never get up a hundred feet of Haripol without being killed." So I found myself, to my disgust, afflicted with another unauthorised sanctuary.

Angus was very solemn about it. He was a lean anxious man, just over fifty, with a face not unlike a stag's, amazingly fast on the hills, a finished cragsman, and with all the Highlander's subtle courtesy. Kennedy, the second stalker, was of Lowland stock; his father had come to the North from Galloway in the days of the boom in sheep, and had remained as a keeper when sheep prices fell. He was a sturdy young fellow, apt to suffer on steep slopes on a warm day, but strong as an ox and with a better head than Angus for thinking out problems of weather and wind. Though he had the Gaelic, he was a true Lowlander, plain-spoken and imperturbable. It was a contrast of new and old, for Kennedy had served in the War, and learned many things beyond the other's ken. He knew, for example, how to direct your eye to the point he wanted, and would give intelligent directions like a battery observer, whereas with Angus it was always "D'ye see yon stone? Ay, but d'ye see another stone?" — and so forth. Kennedy, when we sat down to rest, would smoke a cigarette in a holder, while Angus lit the dottle in a foul old pipe.

In the first fortnight of August we had alternate days of rain, real drenching torrents, and the Aicill rose and let the fish up from the sea. There were few sea-trout that year, but there was a glorious run of salmon. Greenslade killed his first, and by the end of a week had a bag of twelve, while Mary, with the luck which seems to attend casual lady anglers, had four in one day to her own rod. Those were pleasant days, though there were mild damp afternoons when the midges were worse than tropical mosquitoes. I liked it best when a breeze rose and the sun was hot and we had all our meals by the waterside. Once at luncheon we took with us an iron pot, made a fire, and boiled a fresh-killed salmon "in his broo" — a device I recommend to anyone who wants the full flavour of that noble fish.

Archie Roylance arrived on August 16th, full of the lust of hunting. He reported that they had seen nothing remarkable

in the way of birds at Flacksholm, but that David Warcliff had had great sport with the sea-trout. "There's a good boy for you," he declared. "First-class little sportsman, and to see him and his father together made me want to get wedded straight off. I thought him a bit hipped at Fosse, but the North Sea put him right, and I left him as jolly as a grig. By the way, what was the matter with him in the summer? I gathered that he had been seedy or something, and the old man can't let him out of his sight. . . . Let's get in Angus, and talk deer."

Angus was ready to talk deer till all hours. I had fixed the 21st for the start of the season, though the beasts were in such forward condition that we might have begun four days earlier. Angus reported that he had already seen several stags clear of velvet. But he was inclined to be doleful about our neighbours.

"My uncle Alexander is past prayin' for," said Archie. "He lives for that forest of his, and he won't have me there early in the season, for he says I have no judgment about beasts and won't listen to the stalkers. In October, you see, he has me under his own eye. He refuses to let a stag be killed unless it's a hummel or a diseased ancient. Result is, the place is crawlin' with fine stags that have begun to go back and won't perish till they're fairly moulderin'. Poor notion of a stud has my uncle Alexander. . . . What about Haripol? Who has it this year?"

When he heard he exclaimed delightedly. "I know old Claybody. Rather a good old fellow in his way, and uncommon free-handed. Rum old bird, too! He once introduced his son to me as 'The Honourable Johnson Claybody.' Fairly wallows in his peerage. You know he wanted to take the title of Lord Oxford, because he had a boy goin' up to Magdalen, but even the Heralds' College jibbed at that. But he'll never get up those Haripol hills. He's a little fat puffin' old man. I'm not very spry on my legs now, but compared to Claybody I'm a gazelle."

"He'll maybe have veesitors," said Angus.

"You bet he will. He'll have the Lodge stuffed with young men, for there are various Honourable Claybody daughters. Don't fancy they'll be much good on the hill, though."

"They will not be good, Sir Archibald," said the melancholy Angus. "There will have been some of them on the hill already. They will be no better than towrists."

"Towrists" I should explain were the poison in Angus's cup. By that name he meant people who trespassed on a deer forest during, or shortly before, the stalking season, and had not the good manners to give him notice and ask his consent. He distinguished them sharply from what he called "muntaneers," a class which he respected, for they were modest and civil folk who came usually with ropes and ice axes early in the spring, and were accustomed to feast off Angus's ham and eggs and thaw their frozen limbs by Angus's fire. If they came at other seasons it was after discussing their routes with Angus. They went where no deer could travel, and spent their time, as he said, "shamming themselves into shimneys." But the "towrist" was blatant and foolish and abundantly discourteous. He tramped, generally in a noisy party, over deer-ground, and, if remonstrated with, became truculent. A single member of the species could wreck the stalking on a beat for several days. "The next I see on Machray," said Angus, "I will be rolling down a big stone on him." Some of the Haripol guests, it appeared, were of this malign breed, and had been wandering thoughtlessly over the forest, thereby wrecking their own sport — and mine.

"They will have Alan Macnicol's heart broke," he concluded. "And Alan was saying to me that they was afful bad shots. They was shooting at a big stone and missing it. And they will have little ponies to ride on up to the tops, for the creatures is no use at walking. I hope they will fall down and break their necks."

"They can't all be bad shots," said Archie. "By the way, Dick, I forgot to tell you. You know Medina, Dominick Medina? You once told me you knew him. Well, I met him on the steamer, and he said he was going to put in a week with old Claybody."

That piece of news took the light out of the day for me. If Medina was at Haripol it was most certainly with a purpose. I had thought little about the matter since I arrived at Machray, for the place had an atmosphere of impregnable seclusion, and I seemed to have shut a door on my recent life. I had fallen into a mood of content and whole-hearted absorption in the ritual of wild sport. But now my comfort vanished. I looked up at the grim wall of hills towards Haripol and wondered what mischief was hatching behind it.

I warned Angus and Kennedy and the gillies to keep a good look-out for trespassers. Whenever one was seen, they were to get their glasses on him and follow him and report his appearance and doings to me. Then I went out alone to shoot a brace of grouse for the pot, and considered the whole matter very carefully. I had an instinct that Medina had come

to these parts to have a reckoning with me, and I was determined not to shirk it. I could not go on living under such a menace; I must face it and reach a settlement. To Mary, of course, I could say nothing, and I saw no use in telling either Archie or Greenslade. It was, metaphorically, and perhaps literally, my own funeral. But next morning I did not go fishing. Instead, I stayed at home and wrote out a full account of the whole affair up to Medina's appearance at Haripol, and I set down baldly what I believed to be his purpose. This was in case I went out one day and did not return. When I finished it, I put the document in my dispatch-box, and felt easier, as a man feels when he has made his will. I only hoped the time of waiting would not be prolonged.

The 21st was a glorious blue day, with a morning haze which promised heat. What wind there was came from the south-east, so I sent Archie out on the Corrie Easain beat, and went myself, with one gillie, to Clach Glas, which is the western peak on the north bank of the Aicill. I made a practice of doing my own stalking, and by this time I knew the ground well enough to do it safely. I saw two shootable stags, and managed to get within range of one of them, but spared him for the good of the forest, as he was a young beast whose head would improve. I had a happy and peaceful day, and found to my relief that I wasn't worrying about the future. The clear air and the great spaces seemed to have given me the placid fatalism of an Arab.

When I returned I was greeted by Mary with the news that Archie had got a stag, and that she had followed most of his stalk through the big telescope. Archie himself arrived just before dinner, very cheerful and loquacious. He found that his game leg made him slow, but he declared that he was not in the least tired. At dinner we had to listen to every detail of his day, and we had a sweep on the beast's weight, which Mary won. Afterwards in the smoking-room he told me more.

"Those infernal tailors from Haripol were out today. Pretty wild shots they must be. When we were lunchin' a spent bullet whistled over our heads — a long way off, to be sure, but I call it uncommon bad form. You should have heard Angus curse in Gaelic. Look here, Dick, I've a good mind to drop a line to old Claybody and ask him to caution his people. The odds are a million to one, of course, against their doin' any harm, but there's always that millionth chance. I had a feelin' today as if the War had started over again."

I replied that if anything of the sort happened a second time I would certainly protest, but I pretended to make light of it, as a thing only possible with that particular brand of wind. But I realised now what Medina's plans were. He had been tramping about Haripol, getting a notion of the lie of the land, and I knew that he had a big-game hunter's quick eye for country. He had fostered the legend of wild shooting among the Haripol guests, and probably he made himself the wildest of the lot. The bullet which sang over Archie's head was a proof, but he waited on the chance of a bullet which would not miss. If a tragedy happened, everyone would believe it was a pure accident, there would be heart-broken apologies, and, though Sandy and one or two others would guess the truth, nothing could be proved, and in any case it wouldn't help ME. . . . Of course I could stalk only on the north beats of Machray, but the idea no sooner occurred to me than I dismissed it. I must end this hideous suspense. I must accept Medina's challenge and somehow or other reach a settlement.

When Angus came in for orders, I told him that I was going stalking on the Corrie-na-Sidhe beat the day after tomorrow, and I asked him to send word privately to Alan Macnicol at Haripol.

"It will be no use, sir," he groaned. "The veesitors will no heed Alan."

But I told him to send word nevertheless. I wanted to give Medina the chance he sought. It was my business to draw his fire.

Next day we slacked and fished. In the afternoon I went a little way up the hill called Clach Glas, from which I could get a view of the ground on the south side of the Aicill. It was a clear quiet day, with the wind steady in the south-east, and promising to continue there. The great green hollow of Corrie-na-Sidhe was clear in every detail; much of it looked like a tennis-court, but I knew that what seemed smooth sward was really matted blaeberreries and hidden boulders, and that the darker patches were breast-high bracken and heather. Corrie Easain I could not see, for it was hidden by the long spur of Bheinn Fhada, over which peeped the cloven summit of Sgurr Dearg. I searched all the ground with my glasses, and picked up several lots of hinds, and a few young stags, but there was no sign of human activity. There seemed to be a rifle out, however, on Glenaicill Forest, for I heard two far-away shots towards the north-east. I lay a long time amid the fern, with bees humming around me and pipits calling, and an occasional buzzard or peregrine hovering in the blue, thinking precisely the same thoughts that I used to have in France the day before a big action. It was not exactly nervousness that I felt, but a sense that the foundations of everything had got loose, and that the world had become so insecure that I had

better draw down the blinds on hoping and planning and everything, and become a log. I was very clear in my mind that next day was going to bring the crisis.

Of course I didn't want Mary to suspect, but I forgot to caution Archie, and that night at dinner, as ill luck would have it, he mentioned that Medina was at Haripol. I could see her eyes grow troubled, for I expect she had been having the same anxiety as myself those past weeks, and had been too proud to declare it. As we were going to bed she asked me point-blank what it meant. "Nothing in the world," I said. "He is a great stalker and a friend of the Claybodys. I don't suppose he has the remotest idea that I am here. Anyhow that affair is all over. He is not going to cross our path if he can help it. The one wish in his heart is to avoid us."

She appeared to be satisfied, but I don't know how much she slept that night. I never woke till six o'clock, but when I opened my eyes I felt too big a load on my heart to let me stay in bed, so I went down to the Garden Pool and had a swim. That invigorated me, and indeed it was not easy to be depressed in that gorgeous morning, with the streamers of mist still clinging to the high tops, and the whole glen a harmony of singing birds and tumbling waters. I noticed that the wind, what there was of it, seemed to have shifted more to the east — a very good quarter for the Corrie-na-Sidhe beat.

Angus and Kennedy were waiting outside the smoking-room, and even the pessimism of the head stalker was mellowed by the weather. "I think," he said slowly, "we will be getting a sta-ag. There was a big beast on Bheinn Fhada yesterday — Kennedy seen him — a great beast he was — maybe nineteen stone, but Kennedy never right seen his head. . . . We'd better be moving on, sir."

Mary whispered in my ear. "There's no danger, Dick? You're sure?" I have never heard her voice more troubled.

"Not a scrap," I laughed. "It's an easy day and I ought to be back for tea. You'll be able to follow me all the time through the big telescope."

We started at nine. As I left, I had a picture of Greenslade sitting on a garden-seat busy with fly-casts, and Archie smoking his pipe and reading a three-days-old Times, and Peter John going off with his nurse, and Mary looking after me with a curious tense gaze. Behind, the smoke of the chimneys was rising straight into the still air, and the finches were twittering among the Prince Charlie roses. The sight gave me a pang. I might never enter my little kingdom again. Neither wife nor friends could help me: it was my own problem, which I must face alone.

We crossed the bridge, and began to plod upwards through a wood of hazels. In such fashion I entered upon the strangest day of my life.



CHAPTER XXI

HOW I STALKED WILDER GAME THAN DEER

I

9 A.M. TO 2.15 P.M.

Obviously I could make no plan, and I had no clear idea in my head as to what kind of settlement I wanted with Medina. I was certain that I should find him somewhere on the hill, and that, if he got a chance, he would try to kill me. The odds were, of course, against his succeeding straight off, but escape was not what I sought — I must get rid of this menace for ever. I don't think that I wanted to kill him, but indeed I never tried to analyse my feelings. I was obeying a blind instinct, and letting myself drift on the tides of fate.

Corrie-na-Sidhe is an upper corrie, separated from the Aicill valley by a curtain of rock and scree which I dare say was once the moraine of a glacier and down which the Alt-na-Sidhe tumbled in a fine chain of cascades. So steep is its fall that no fish can ascend it, so that, while at the foot it is full of sizable trout, in the Corrie itself it holds nothing, as Greenslade reported, but little dark fingerlings. It was very warm as we mounted the chaos of slabs and boulders, where a very sketchy and winding track had been cut for bringing down the deer. Only the toughest kind of pony could make that ascent. Though the day was young the heat was already great, and the glen behind us swam in a glassy sheen. Kennedy, as usual, mopped his brow and grunted, but the lean Angus strode ahead as if he were on the flat.

At the edge of the corrie we halted for a spy. Deep hollows have a trick of drawing the wind, and such faint currents of air as I could detect seemed to be coming on our left rear from the north-east. Angus was positive, however, that though the south had gone out of the wind, it was pretty well due east, with no north in it, and maintained that when we were farther up the corrie we would have it fair on our left cheek. We were not long in finding beasts. There was a big drove of hinds on the right bank of the burn, and another lot, with a few small stags, on the left bank, well up on the face of Bheinn Fhada. But there was nothing shootable there.

"The big stags will be all on the high tops," said Angus. "We must be getting up to the burnhead."

It was easier said than done, for there were the hinds to be circumvented, so we had to make a long circuit far up the hill called Clonlet, which is the westernmost of the Machray tops south of the Aicill. It was rough going, for we mounted to about the 3,000 feet level, and traversed the hill-side just under the upper scarp of rock. Presently we were looking down upon the cup which was the head of the corrie, and over the col could see the peak of Stob Coire Easain and the ridge of Stob Bán, both on Haripol and beyond the Reascuill. We had another spy, and made out two small lots of stags on the other side of the Alt-na-Sidhe. They were too far off to get a proper view of them, but one or two looked good beasts, and I decided to get nearer.

We had to make a cautious descent of the hill-side in case of deer lying in pockets, for the place was seamed with gullies. Before we were half-way down I got my telescope on one of the lots, and picked out a big stag with a poor head, which clearly wanted shooting. Angus agreed, and we started down a sheltering ravine to get to the burnside. The sight of a quarry made me forget everything else, and for the next hour and a half I hadn't a thought in the world except how to get within range of that beast. One stalk is very much like another, and I am not going to describe this. The only trouble came from a small stag in our rear, which had come over Clonlet and got the scent of our track on the hill-face. This unsettled him and he went off at a great pace towards the top of the burn. I thought at first that the brute would go up Bheinn Fhada and carry off our lot with him, but he came to a halt, changed his mind, and made for the Haripol march and the col.

After that it was plain sailing. We crawled up the right of the Alt-na-Sidhe, which was first-class cover, and then turned up a tributary gully which came down from Bheinn Fhada. Indeed the whole business was too simple to be of much interest to anyone, except the man with the rifle. When I judged I was about the latitude of my stag, I crept out of the burn and reached a hillock from which I had a good view of him. The head, as I suspected, was poor — only nine points, though the horns were of the rough, thick, old Highland type, but the body was heavy, and he was clearly a back-going beast. After a wait of some twenty minutes he got up and gave me a chance at about two hundred yards, and I dropped him dead with a shot in the neck, which was the only part of him clear.

It was for me the first stag of the season, and it is always a pleasant moment when the tension relaxes and you light your pipe and look around you. As soon as the gralloch was over I proposed lunch, and we found for the purpose a little nook by a spring. We were within a few hundred yards of the Haripol march, which there does not run along the watershed but crosses the corrie about half a mile below the col. In the old days of sheep there had been a fence, the decaying posts of which could be observed a little way off on a knoll. Between the fence and the col lay some very rough ground, where the Alt-na-Sidhe had its source, ground so broken that it was impossible, without going a good way up the hill, to see from it the watershed ridge.

I finished Mary's stuffed scones and ginger biscuits, and had a drink of whisky and spring water, while Angus and Kennedy ate their lunch a few yards off in the heather. I was just lighting my pipe, when a sound made me pause with the match in my hand. A rifle bullet sang over my head. It was not very near — fifty feet or so above me, and a little to the left.

"The tamned towrists!" I heard Angus exclaim.

I knew it was Medina as certainly as if I had seen him. He was somewhere in the rough ground between the Haripol march and the col — probably close to the col, for the sound of the report seemed to come from a good way off. He could not have been aiming at me, for I was perfectly covered, but he must have seen me when I stalked the stag. He had decided that his chance was not yet come, and the shot was camouflage — to keep up the reputation of Haripol for wild shooting.

"It would be the staggie that went over the march," grunted Angus. "The towrists — to be shooting at such a wee beast!"

I had suddenly made up my mind. I would give Medina the opportunity he sought. I would go and look for him.

I got up and stretched my legs. "I'm going to try a stalk on my own," I told Angus. "I'll go over to Corrie Easain. You had better pull this beast down to the burnside, and then fetch the pony. You might send Hughie and the other pony up Glenaicill to the Mad Burn. If I get a stag I'll gralloch him and get him down somehow to the burn, so tell Hughie to look out for my signal. I'll wave a white handkerchief. The wind is backing round to the north, Angus. It should be all right for Corrie Easain, if I take it from the south."

"It would be better for Sgurr Dearg," said Angus, "but that's ower far. Have you the cartridges, sir?"

"Plenty," I said, patting a side pocket. "Give me that spare rope, Kennedy. I'll want it for hauling down my stag, if I get one."

I put my little.240 into its cover, nodded to the men, and turned down the gully to the main burn. I wasn't going to appear on the bare hill-side so long as it was possible for Medina to have a shot at me. But soon a ridge shut off the view from the Haripol ground, and I then took a slant up the face of Bheinn Fhada.

Mary had spent most of the morning at the big telescope in the library window. She saw us reach the rim of the corrie and lost us when we moved up the side of Clonlet. We came into view again far up the corrie, and she saw the stalk and the death of the stag. Then she went to luncheon, but hastened back in the middle of it in time to see me scrambling alone among the screes of Bheinn Fhada. At first she was reassured because she thought I was coming home. But when she realised that I was mounting higher and was making for Corrie Easain her heart sank, and, when I had gone out of view, she could do nothing but range miserably about the garden.

II

2.15 P.M. TO ABOUT 5 P.M.

It was very hot on Bheinn Fhada, for I was out of the wind, but when I reached the ridge and looked down on Corrie Easain I found a fair breeze, which had certainly more north than east in it. There was not a cloud in the sky, and every top for miles round stood out clear, except the Haripol peaks which were shut off by the highest part of the ridge I stood on. Corrie Easain lay far below — not a broad cup like Corrie-na-Sidhe, but a deep gash in the hills, inclined at such an angle that the stream in it was nothing but white water. We called it the Mad Burn — its Gaelic name, I think, was the Alt-a-mhuillin — and half-way up and just opposite me a tributary, the Red Burn, came down from the cliffs of Sgurr Dearg. I could see the northern peak of that mountain, a beautiful cone of rock, rising like the Matterhorn from its glacis of scree.

I argued that Medina would have seen me going up Bheinn Fhada and would assume that I was bound for Corrie

Easain. He would recross the col and make for the Haripol side of the beallach which led from that corrie to the Reascuill. Now I wanted to keep the higher ground, where I could follow his movements, so it was my aim to get to the watershed ridge looking down on Haripol before he did. The wind was a nuisance, for it was blowing from me and would move any deer towards him, thereby giving him a clue to my whereabouts. So I thought that if I could once locate him, I must try to get the lee side of him. At that time I think I had a vague notion of driving him towards Machray.

I moved at my best pace along the east face of Bheinn Fhada towards the beallach — which was a deep rift in the grey rock-curtain through which deer could pass. My only feeling was excitement, such as I had never known before in any stalk. I slipped and sprawled among the slabs, slithered over the screes, had one or two awkward traverses round the butt-end of cliffs, but in about twenty minutes I was at the point where the massif of Bheinn Fhada joined the watershed ridge. The easy way was now to get on to the ridge, but I dared not appear on the sky-line, so I made a troublesome journey along the near side of the ridge-wall, sometimes out on the face of sheer precipices, but more often involved in a chaos of loose boulders which were the debris of the upper rocks. I was forced pretty far down, and eventually struck the beallach path about five hundred feet below the summit.

At the crest I found I had no view of the Reascuill valley — only a narrow corrie blocked by a shoulder of hill and the bald top of Stob Coire Easain beyond. A prospect I must have, so I turned east along the watershed ridge in the direction of Sgurr Dearg. I was by this time very warm, for I had come at a brisk pace; I had a rifle to carry, and had Angus's rope round my shoulders like a Swiss guide; I was wearing an old grey suit, which, with bluish stockings, made me pretty well invisible on that hill-side. Presently as I mounted the ridge, keeping of course under the sky-line, I came to a place where a lift of rock enabled me to clear the spurs and command a mile or so of the Reascuill.

The place was on the sky-line, bare and exposed, and I crawled to the edge where I could get a view. Below me, after a few hundred yards of rocks and scree, I saw a long tract of bracken and deep heather sweeping down to the stream. Medina, I made sure, was somewhere thereabouts, watching the ridge. I calculated that, with his recrossing of the col at the head of Corrie-na-Sidhe and his working round the south end of Bheinn Fhada, he could not have had time to get to the beallach, or near the beallach, before me, and must still be on the lower ground. Indeed I hoped to catch sight of him, for, while I was assured he was pursuing me, he could not know that I was after him, and might be off his guard.

But there was no sign of life in that sunny stretch of green and purple, broken by the grey of boulders. I searched it with my glass and could see no movement except pipits, and a curlew by a patch of bog. Then it occurred to me to show myself. He must be made to know that I had accepted his challenge.

I stood up straight on the edge of the steep, and decided to remain standing till I had counted fifty. It was an insane thing to do, I dare say, but I was determined to force the pace. . . . I had got to forty-one without anything happening. Then a sudden instinct made me crouch and step aside. That movement was my salvation. There was a sound like a twanged fiddle-string, and a bullet passed over my left shoulder. I felt the wind of it on my cheek.

The next second I was on my back wriggling below the sky-line. Once there I got to my feet and ran — up the ridge on my left to get a view from higher ground. The shot, so far as I could judge, had come from well below and a little to the east of where I had been standing. I found another knuckle of rock, and crept to the edge of it, so that I looked from between two boulders into the glen.

The place was still utterly quiet. My enemy was hidden there, probably not half a mile off, but there was nothing to reveal his presence. The light wind stirred the bog cotton, a merlin sailed across to Stob Coire Easain, a raven croaked in the crags, but these were the only sounds. There was not even a sign of deer.

My glass showed that half-way down an old ewe was feeding — one of those melancholy beasts which stray into a forest from adjacent sheep-ground, and lead a precarious life among the rocks, lean and matted and wild, till some gillie cuts their throats. They are far sharper-eyed and quicker of hearing than a stag, and an unmitigated curse to the stalker. The brute was feeding on a patch of turf near a big stretch of bracken, and suddenly I saw her raise her head and stare. It was the first time I had ever felt well disposed towards a sheep.

She was curious about something in a shallow gully which flanked the brackens, and so was I. I kept my glass glued on her, and saw her toss her disreputable head, stamp her foot, and then heard her whistle through her nose. This was a snag Medina could not have reckoned with. He was clearly in that gully, working his way upward in its cover, unwitting that the ewe was giving him away. I argued that he must want to reach the high ground as soon as possible. He had seen me on the

ridge, and must naturally conclude that I had beaten a retreat. My first business, therefore, was to reassure him.

I got my rifle out of its cover, which I stuffed into my pocket. There was a little patch of gravel just on the lip of the gully, and I calculated that he would emerge beside it, under the shade of a blueberry-covered stone. I guessed right. .. I saw first an arm, and then a shoulder part the rushes, and presently a face which peered up-hill. My glass showed me that the face was Medina's, very red, and dirty from contact with the peaty soil. He slowly reached for his glass, and began to scan the heights.

I don't know what my purpose was at this time, if indeed I had any purpose. I didn't exactly mean to kill him, I think, though I felt it might come to that. Vaguely I wanted to put him out of action, to put the fear of God into him, and make him come to terms. Of further consequences I never thought. But now I had one clear intention — to make him understand that I accepted his challenge.

I put a bullet neatly into the centre of the patch of gravel, and then got my glass on it. He knew the game all right. In a second like a weasel he was back in the gully.

I reckoned that now I had my chance. Along the ridge I went, mounting fast, and keeping always below the skyline. I wanted to get to the lee side of him and so be able to stalk him up-wind, and I thought that I had an opportunity now to turn the head of the Reascuill by one of the steep corries which descend from Sgurr Dearg. Looking back, it all seems very confused and amateurish, for what could I hope to do, even if I had the lee side, beyond killing or wounding him? and I had a chance of that as long as I had the upper ground. But in the excitement of the chase the mind does not take long views, and I was enthralled by the crazy sport of the thing. I did not feel any fear, because I was not worrying about consequences.

Soon I came to the higher part of the ridge and saw frowning above me the great rock face of Sgurr Dearg. I saw, too, a thing I had forgotten. There was no way up that mountain direct from the ridge, for the tower rose as perpendicular as a house-wall. To surmount it a man must traverse on one side or the other — on the Machray side by a scree slope, or on the Haripol side by a deep gully which formed the top of the corrie into which I was now looking. Across that corrie was the first of the great buttresses which Sgurr Dearg sends down to the Reascuill. It was the famous Pinnacle Ridge (as mountaineers called it); I had climbed it three weeks before and found it pretty stiff; but then I had kept the ridge all the way from the valley bottom, and I did not see any practicable road up the corrie face of it, which seemed nothing but slabs and rotten rocks, while the few chimneys had ugly overhangs.

I lay flat and reconnoitred. What was Medina likely to do? After my shot he could not follow up the ridge — the cover was too poor on the upper slopes. I reasoned that he would keep on in the broken ground up the glen till he reached this corrie, and try to find a road to the high ground either by the corrie itself or by one of the spurs. In that case it was my business to wait for him. But first I thought I had better put a fresh clip in my magazine, for the shot I had fired had been the last cartridge in the old clip.

It was now that I made an appalling discovery. I had felt my pockets and told Angus that I had plenty of cartridges. So I had, but they didn't fit. . . . I remembered that two days before I had lent Archie my .240 and had been shooting with a Mannlicher. What I had in my pocket were Mannlicher clips left over from that day. . . . I might chuck my rifle away, for it was no more use than a poker.

At first I was stunned by the fatality. Here was I, engaged in a duel on a wild mountain with one of the best shots in the world, and I had lost my gun! The sensible course would have been to go home. There was plenty of time for that, and long before Medina reached the ridge I could be in cover in the gorge of the Mad Burn. But that way out of it never occurred to me. I had chosen to set the course, and the game must be played out here and now. But I confess I was pretty well in despair and could see no plan. I think I had a faint hope of protracting the thing till dark and then trusting to my hill-craft to get even with him, but I had an unpleasant feeling that he was not likely to oblige me with so long a delay.

I forced myself to think, and decided that Medina would either come up the corrie or take the steep spur which formed the right-hand side of it and ran down to the Reascuill. The second route would give him cover, but also render him liable to a surprise at close quarters if I divined his intention, for I might suddenly confront him four yards off at the top of one of the pitches. He would therefore prefer the corrie, which was magnificently broken up with rocks, and seamed with ravines, and at the same time gave a clear view of all the higher ground.

With my face in a clump of louse-wort I raked the place with my glass; and to my delight saw deer feeding about half-way down in the right-hand corner. Medina could not ascend the corrie without disturbing these deer — a batch of some

thirty hinds, with five small and two fairish stags among them. Therefore I was protected from that side, and had only the ridge to watch.

But as I lay there I thought of another plan. Medina, I was pretty certain, would try the corrie first, and would not see the deer till he was well inside it, for they were on a kind of platform which hid them from below. Opposite me across the narrow corrie rose the great black wall of the Pinnacle Ridge, with the wind blowing from me towards it. I remembered a trick which Angus had taught me — how a stalker might have his wind carried against the face of an opposite mountain and then, so to speak, reflected from it and brought back to his own side, so that deer below him would get it and move away from it up TOWARDS HIM. If I let my scent be carried to the Pinnacle Ridge and diverted back, it would move the deer on the platform up the corrie towards me. It would be a faint wind, so they would move slowly away from it — no doubt towards a gap under the tower of Sgurr Dearg which led to the little corrie at the head of the Red Burn. We never stalked that corrie, because it was impossible to get a stag out of it without cutting him up, so the place was a kind of sanctuary to which disturbed deer would naturally resort.

I stood on the sky-line, being confident that Medina could not yet be within sight, and let the wind, which was now stronger and nearly due north, ruffle my hair. I did this for about five minutes, and then lay down to watch the result, with my glass on the deer. Presently I saw them become restless, first the hinds and then the small stags lifting their heads and looking towards the Pinnacle Ridge. Soon a little fellow trotted a few yards up-hill; then a couple of hinds moved after him; and then by a sudden and simultaneous impulse the whole party began to drift up the corrie. It was a quiet steady advance; they were not scared, only a little doubtful. I saw with satisfaction that their objective seemed to be the gap which led over to the Red Burn.

Medina must see this and would assume that wherever I was I was not ahead of the deer. He might look for me on the other side, but more likely would follow the beasts so as to get the high ground. Once there he could see my movements, whether I was on the slopes of the Pinnacle Ridge, or down on the Machray side. He would consider no doubt that his marksmanship was so infinitely better than mine that he had only to pick me out from the landscape to make an end of the business.

What I exactly intended I do not know. I had a fleeting notion of lying hidden and surprising him, but the chances against that were about a million to one, and even if I got him at close quarters he was armed and I was not. I moved a little to the right so as to keep my wind from the deer, and waited with a chill beginning to creep over my spirit. . . . My watch told me it was five o'clock. Mary and Peter John would be having tea among the Prince Charlie roses, and Greenslade and Archie coming up from the river. It would be heavenly at Machray now among greenery and the cool airs of evening. Up here there was loveliness enough, from the stars of butterwort and grass of Parnassus by the wellheads to the solemn tops of Sgurr Dearg, the colour of stormy waves against a faint turquoise sky. But I knew now that the beauty of earth depends on the eye of the beholder, for suddenly the clean airy world around me had grown leaden and stifling.

III

5 P.M. TO ABOUT 7.30 P.M.

It was a good hour before he came. I had guessed rightly, and he had made the deduction I hoped for. He was following the deer towards the gap, assuming that I was on the Machray side. I was in a rushy hollow at a junction of the main ridge and the spur I have mentioned, and I could see him clearly as, with immense circumspection and the use of every scrap of cover, he made his way up the corrie. Once he was over the watershed, I would command him from the higher ground and have the wind to my vantage. I had some hope now, for I ought to be able to keep him on the hill till the light failed, when my superior local knowledge would come to my aid. He must be growing tired, I reflected, for he had had far more ground to cover. For myself I felt that I could go on for ever.

That might have been the course of events but for a second sheep. Sgurr Dearg had always been noted for possessing a few sheep even on its high rocks — infernal tattered outlaws, strays originally from some decent flock, but now to all intents a new species, unclassified by science. How they lived and bred I knew not, but there was a legend of many a good stalk ruined by their diabolical cunning. I heard something between a snort and a whistle behind me, and, screwing my head round, saw one of these confounded animals poised on a rock and looking in my direction. It could see me perfectly,

too, for on that side I had no cover.

I lay like a mouse watching Medina. He was about half a mile off, almost on the top of the corrie, and he had halted for a rest and a spy. I prayed fervently that he would not see the sheep.

He heard it. The brute started its whistling and coughing, and a novice could have seen that it suspected something and knew where that something was. I observed him get his glass on my lair, though from the place where he was he could see nothing but rushes. Then he seemed to make up his mind and suddenly disappeared from view.

I knew what he was after. He had dropped into a scaur, which would take him to the sky-line and enable him to come down on me from above, while he himself would be safe from my observation.

There was nothing to do but to clear out. The spur dropping to the Reascuill seemed to give me the best chance, so I started off, crouching and crawling, to get round the nose of it and on to the steep glen-ward face. It was a miserable job till I had turned the corner, for I expected every moment a bullet in my back. Nothing happened, however, and soon I was slithering down awesome slabs on to insecure ledges of heather. I am a fairly experienced mountaineer, and a lover of rock, but I dislike vegetation mixed up with a climb, and I had too much of it now. There was perhaps a thousand feet of that spur, and I think I must hold the speed record for its descent. Scratched, bruised, and breathless, I came to anchor on a bed of screes, with the infant Reascuill tumbling below me, and beyond it, a quarter of a mile off, the black cliffs of the Pinnacle Ridge.

But what was my next step to be? The position was reversed. Medina was above me with a rifle, and my own weapon was useless. He must find out the road I had taken and would be after me like a flame. . . . It was no good going down the glen; in the open ground he would get the chance of twenty shots. It was no good sticking to the spur or the adjacent ridge, for the cover was bad. I could not hide for long in the corrie. . . . Then I looked towards the Pinnacle Ridge and considered that, once I got into those dark couloirs, I might be safe. The Psalmist had turned to the hills for his help — I had better look to the rocks.

I had a quarter of a mile of open to cross, and a good deal more if I was to reach the ridge at a point easy of ascent. There were chimneys in front of me, deep black gashes, but my recollection of them was that they had looked horribly difficult, and had been plentifully supplied with overhangs. Supposing I got into one of them and stuck. Medina would have me safe enough. . . . But I couldn't wait to think. With an ugly cold feeling in my inside I got into the ravine of the burn, and had a long drink from a pool. Then I started down-stream, keeping close to the right-hand bank, which mercifully was high and dotted with rowan saplings. And as I went I was always turning my head to see behind and above me what I feared.

I think Medina, who of course did not know about my rifle, may have suspected a trap, for he came on slowly, and when I caught sight of him it was not on the spur I had descended but farther up the corrie. Two things I now realised. One was that I could not make the easy end of the Pinnacle Ridge without exposing myself on some particularly bare ground. The other was that to my left in the Ridge was a deep gully which looked climbable. Moreover, the foot of that gully was not a hundred yards from the burn, and the mouth was so deep that a man would find shelter as soon as he entered it.

For the moment I could not see Medina, and I don't think he had yet caught sight of me. There was a trickle of water coming down from the gully to the burn, and that gave me an apology for cover. I ground my nose into the flowe-moss and let the water trickle down my neck, as I squirmed my way up, praying hard that my enemy's eyes might be sealed.

I think I had got about half-way, when a turn gave me a view of the corrie, and there was Medina halted and looking towards me. By the mercy of Providence my boots were out of sight, and my head a little lower than my shoulders, so that I suppose among the sand and gravel and rushes I must have been hard to detect. Had he used his telescope I think he must have spotted me, though I am not certain. I saw him staring. I saw him half-raise his rifle to his shoulder, while I heard my heart thump. Then he lowered his weapon, and moved out of sight.

Two minutes later I was inside the gully.

The place ran in like a cave with a sandy floor, and then came a steep pitch of rock, while the sides narrowed into a chimney. This was not very difficult. I swung myself up into the second storey, and found that the cleft was so deep that the back wall was about three yards from the opening, so that I climbed in almost complete darkness and in perfect safety from view. This went on for about fifty feet, and then, after a rather awkward chockstone, I came to a fork. The branch on the left looked hopeless, while that on the right seemed to offer some chances. But I stopped to consider, for I remembered

something.

I remembered that this was the chimney which I had prospected three weeks before when I climbed the Pinnacle Ridge. I had prospected it from above, and had come to the conclusion that, while the left fork MIGHT be climbed, the right was impossible or nearly so, for, modestly as it began, it ran out into a fearsome crack on the face of the cliff, and did not become a chimney again till after a hundred feet of unclimbable rotten granite.

So I tried the left fork, which looked horribly unpromising. The first trouble was a chockstone, which I managed to climb round, and then the confounded thing widened and became perpendicular. I remembered that I had believed a way could be found by taking to the right-hand face, and in the excitement of the climb I forgot all precautions. It simply did not occur to me that this face route might bring me in sight of eyes which at all costs I must avoid.

It was not an easy business, for there was an extreme poverty of decent holds. But I have done worse pitches in my time, and had I not had a rifle to carry (I had no sling), might have thought less of it. Very soon I was past the worst, and saw my way to returning to the chimney, which had once more become reasonable. I stopped for a second to prospect the route, with my foot on a sound ledge, my right elbow crooked round a jag of rock, and my left hand, which held the rifle, stretched out so that my fingers could test the soundness of a certain handhold.

Suddenly I felt the power go out of those fingers. The stone seemed to crumble and splinters flew into my eye. There was a crashing of echoes, which drowned the noise of my rifle as it clattered down the precipice. I remember looking at my hand spread-eagled against the rock, and wondering why it looked so strange.

The light was just beginning to fail, so it must have been about half-past seven.

IV

7:30 P.M. AND ONWARDS

Had anything of the sort happened to me during an ordinary climb I should beyond doubt have lost my footing with the shock and fallen. But, being pursued, I suppose my nerves were keyed to a perpetual expectancy, and I did not slip. The fear of a second bullet saved my life. In a trice I was back in the chimney, and the second bullet spent itself harmlessly on the granite.

Mercifully it was now easier going — honest knee-and-back work, which I could manage in spite of my shattered fingers. I climbed feverishly with a cold sweat on my brow, but every muscle was in order, and I knew I would make no mistake. The chimney was deep, and a ledge of rock hid me from my enemy below. . . . Presently I squeezed through a gap, swung myself up with my right hand and my knees to a shelf, and saw that the difficulties were over. A shallow gully, filled with scree, led up to the crest of the ridge. It was the place I had looked down on three weeks before.

I examined my left hand, which was in a horrid mess. The top of my thumb was blown off, and the two top joints of my middle and third fingers were smashed to pulp. I felt no pain in them, though they were dripping blood, but I had a queer numbness in my left shoulder. I managed to bind the hand up in a handkerchief, where it made a gory bundle. Then I tried to collect my wits.

Medina was coming up the chimney after me. He knew I had no rifle. He was, as I had heard, an expert cragsman, and he was the younger man by at least ten years. My first thought was to make for the upper part of the Pinnacle Ridge, and try to hide or to elude him somehow till the darkness. But he could follow me in the transparent Northern night, and I must soon weaken from loss of blood. I could not hope to put sufficient distance between us for safety, and he had his deadly rifle. Somewhere in the night or in the dawning he would get me. No, I must stay and fight it out.

Could I hold the chimney? I had no weapon but stones, but I might be able to prevent a man ascending by those intricate rocks. In the chimney at any rate there was cover, and he could not use his rifle. . . . But would he try the chimney? Why should he not go round by the lower slopes of the Pinnacle Ridge and come on me from above?

It was the dread of his bullets that decided me. My one passionate longing was for cover. I might get him in a place where his rifle was useless and I had a chance to use my greater muscular strength. I did not care what happened to me provided I got my hands on him. Behind all my fear and confusion and pain there was now a cold fury of rage.

So I slipped back into the chimney and descended it to where it turned slightly to the left past a nose of rock. Here I

had cover, and could peer down into the darkening deeps of the great couloir.

A purple haze filled the corrie, and the Machray tops were like dull amethysts. The sky was a cloudy blue sprinkled with stars, and mingled with the last flush of sunset was the first tide of the afterglow. . . . At first all was quiet in the gully. I heard the faint trickle of stones which are always falling in such a place, and once the croak of a hungry raven. . . . Was my enemy there? Did he know of the easier route up the Pinnacle Ridge? Would he not assume that if I could climb the cleft he could follow, and would he feel any dread of a man with no gun and a shattered hand?

Then from far below came a sound I recognised — iron hobnails on rock. I began to collect loose stones and made a little pile of such ammunition beside me. . . . I realised that Medina had begun the ascent of the lower pitches. Every breach in the stillness was perfectly clear — the steady scraping in the chimney, the fall of a fragment of rock as he surmounted the lower chockstone, the scraping again as he was forced out on to the containing wall. The light must have been poor, but the road was plain. Of course I saw nothing of him, for a bulge prevented me, but my ears told me the story. Then there was silence. I realised that he had come to the place where the chimney forked.

I had my stones ready, for I hoped to get him when he was driven out on the face at the overhang, the spot where I had been when he fired.

The sounds began again, and I waited in a desperate choking calm. In a minute or two would come the crisis. I remember that the afterglow was on the Machray tops and made a pale light in the corrie below. In the cleft there was still a kind of dim twilight. Any moment I expected to see a dark thing in movement fifty feet below, which would be Medina's head.

But it did not come. The noise of scraped rock still continued, but it seemed to draw no nearer. Then I realised that I had misjudged the situation. Medina had taken the right-hand fork. He was bound to, unless he had made, like me, an earlier reconnaissance. My route in the half-light must have looked starkly impossible.

The odds were now on my side. No man in the fast-gathering darkness could hope to climb the cliff face and rejoin that chimney after its interruption. He would go on till he stuck — and then it would not be too easy to get back. I reascended my own cleft, for I had a notion that I might traverse across the space between the two forks, and find a vantage point for a view.

Very slowly and painfully, for my left arm was beginning to burn like fire and my left shoulder and neck to feel strangely paralysed, I wriggled across the steep face till I found a sort of gendarme of rock, beyond which the cliff fell smoothly to the lip of the other fork. The great gully below was now a pit of darkness, but the afterglow still lingered on this upper section and I saw clearly where Medina's chimney lay, where it narrowed and where it ran out. I fixed myself so as to prevent myself falling, for I feared I was becoming light-headed. Then I remembered Angus's rope, got it unrolled, took a coil round my waist, and made a hitch over the gendarme.

There was a smothered cry from below, and suddenly came the ring of metal on stone, and then a clatter of something falling. I knew what it meant. Medina's rifle had gone the way of mine and lay now among the boulders at the chimney foot. At last we stood on equal terms, and, befogged as my mind was, I saw that nothing now could stand between us and a settlement.

It seemed to me that I saw something moving in the half-light. If it was Medina, he had left the chimney and was trying the face. That way I knew there was no hope. He would be forced back, and surely would soon realise the folly of it and descend. Now that his rifle had gone my hatred had ebbed. I seemed only to be watching a fellow-mountaineer in a quandary.

He could not have been forty feet from me, for I heard his quick breathing. He was striving hard for holds, and the rock must have been rotten, for there was a continuous dropping of fragments, and once a considerable boulder hurtled down the couloir.

"Go back, man," I cried instinctively. "Back to the chimney. You can't get further that way."

I suppose he heard me, for he made a more violent effort, and I thought I could see him sprawl at a foothold which he missed, and then swing out on his hands. He was evidently weakening, for I heard a sob of weariness. If he could not regain the chimney, there was three hundred feet of a fall to the boulders at the foot.

"Medina," I yelled, "I've a rope. I'm going to send it down to you. Get your arm in the loop."

I made a noose at the end with my teeth and my right hand, working with a maniac's fury.

"I'll fling it straight out," I cried. "Catch it when it falls to you."

My cast was good enough, but he let it pass, and the rope dangled down into the abyss.

"Oh, damn it, man," I roared, "you can trust me. We'll have it out when I get you safe. You'll break your neck if you hang there."

Again I threw, and suddenly the rope tightened. He believed my word, and I think that was the greatest compliment ever paid me in all my days.

"Now you're held," I cried. "I've got a belay here. Try and climb back into the chimney."

He understood and began to move. But his arms and legs must have been numb with fatigue, for suddenly that happened which I feared. There was a wild slipping and plunging, and then he swung out limply, missing the chimney, right on to the smooth wall of the cliff.

There was nothing for it but to haul him back. I knew Angus's ropes too well to have any confidence in them, and I had only the one good hand. The rope ran through a groove of stone which I had covered with my coat, and I hoped to work it even with a single arm by moving slowly upwards.

"I'll pull you up," I yelled, "but for God's sake give me some help. Don't hang on the rope more than you need."

My loop was a large one and I think he had got both arms through it. He was a monstrous weight, limp and dead as a sack, for though I could feel him scraping and kicking at the cliff face, the rock was too smooth for fissures. I held the rope with my feet planted against boulders, and wrought till my muscles cracked. Inch by inch I was drawing him in, till I realised the danger.

The rope was grating on the sharp brink beyond the chimney and might at any moment be cut by a knife-edge.

"Medina"— my voice must have been like a wild animal's scream — "this is too dangerous. I'm going to let you down a bit so that you can traverse. There's a sort of ledge down there. For Heaven's sake go canny with this rope."

I slipped the belay from the gendarme, and hideously difficult it was. Then I moved farther down to a little platform nearer the chimney. This gave me about six extra yards.

"Now," I cried, when I had let him slip down, "a little to your left. Do you feel the ledge?"

He had found some sort of foothold, and for a moment there was a relaxation of the strain. The rope swayed to my right towards the chimney. I began to see a glimmer of hope.

"Cheer up," I cried. "Once in the chimney you're safe. Sing out when you reach it."

The answer out of the darkness was a sob. I think giddiness must have overtaken him, or that atrophy of muscle which is the peril of rock-climbing. Suddenly the rope scorched my fingers and a shock came on my middle which dragged me to the very edge of the abyss.

I still believe that I could have saved him if I had had the use of both my hands, for I could have guided the rope away from that fatal knife-edge. I knew it was hopeless, but I put every ounce of strength and will into the effort to swing it with its burden into the chimney. He gave me no help, for I think — I hope — that he was unconscious. Next second the strands had parted, and I fell back with a sound in my ears which I pray God I may never hear again — the sound of a body rebounding dully from crag to crag, and then a long soft rumbling of scree like a snowslip.

I managed to crawl the few yards to the anchorage of the gendarme before my senses departed. There in the morning Mary and Angus found me.



JOHN MACNAB

I. — IN WHICH THREE GENTLEMEN CONFESS THEIR ENNUI

THE great doctor stood on the hearth-rug looking down at his friend who sprawled before him in an easy-chair. It was a hot day in early July, and the windows were closed and the blinds half-down to keep out the glare and the dust. The standing figure had bent shoulders, a massive clean-shaven face, and a keen interrogatory air, and might have passed his sixtieth birthday. He looked like a distinguished lawyer, who would soon leave his practice for the Bench. But it was the man in the chair who was the lawyer, a man who had left forty behind him, but was still on the pleasant side of fifty.

“I tell you for the tenth time that there’s nothing the matter with you.”

“And I tell you for the tenth time that I’m miserably ill.”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. “Then it’s a mind diseased, to which I don’t propose to minister. What do you say is wrong?”

“Simply what my housekeeper calls a ‘no-how’ feeling.”

“It’s clearly nothing physical. Your heart and lungs are sound. Your digestion’s as good as anybody’s can be in London in

Midsummer. Your nerves—well, I’ve tried all the stock tests, and they appear to be normal.”

“Oh, my nerves are all right,” said the other wearily.

“Your brain seems good enough, except for this dismal obsession that you are ill. I can find no earthly thing wrong, except that you’re stale. I don’t say run-down, for that you’re not. You’re stale in mind. You want a holiday.”

“I don’t. I may need one, but I don’t want it. That’s precisely the trouble. I used to be a glutton for holidays, and spent my leisure moments during term planning what I was going to do. Now there seems to be nothing in the world I want to do—neither work nor play.”

“Try fishing. You used to be keen.”

“I’ve killed all the salmon I mean to kill. I never want to look the ugly brutes in the face again.”

“Shooting?”

“Too easy and too dull.”

“A yacht.”

“Stop it, old fellow. Your catalogue of undesired delights only makes it worse. I tell you that there’s nothing at this moment which has the slightest charm for me. I’m bored with my work, and I can’t think of anything else of any kind for which I would cross the street. I don’t even want to go into the country and sleep. It’s been coming on for a long time—I did not feel it so badly, for I was in a service and not my own master. Now I’ve nothing to do except to earn an enormous income, which I haven’t any need for. Work comes rolling in—I’ve got retainers for nearly every solvent concern in this land—and all that happens is that I want to strangle my clerk and a few eminent solicitors. I don’t care a tinker’s curse for success, and what is worse, I’m just as apathetic about the modest pleasures which used to enliven my life.”

“You may be more tired than you think.”

“I’m not tired at all.” The speaker rose from his chair yawning, and walked to the windows to stare into the airless street. He did not look tired, for his movements were vigorous, and, though his face had the slight pallor of his profession, his eye was clear and steady. He turned round suddenly.

“I tell you what I’ve got, it’s what the Middle Ages suffered from— I read a book about it the other day—and it’s called *Tedium Vitae*. It’s a special kind of ennui. I can diagnose my ailment well enough and Shakespeare has the words for it. I’ve come to a pitch where I find ‘nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon.’”

Then why do you come to me, if the trouble is not with your body?”

“Because you’re you. I should come to you just the same if you were a vet., or a bone-setter, or a Christian Scientist. I want your advice, not as a fashionable consultant, but as an old friend and a wise man. It’s a state of affairs that can’t go on. What am I to do to get rid of this infernal disillusionment? I can’t go through the rest of my life dragging my wing.”

The doctor was smiling.

“If you ask my professional advice,” he said, “I am bound to tell you that medical science has no suggestion to offer. If you consult me as a friend, I advise you to steal a horse in some part of the world where a horse-thief is usually hanged.”

The other considered. “Pretty drastic prescription for a man who has been a Law Officer of the Crown.”

“I speak figuratively. You’ve got to rediscover the comforts of your life by losing them for a little. You have good food and all the rest of it at your command—well, you’ve got to be in want for a bit to appreciate them. You’re secure and respected and rather eminent—well, somehow or other get under the weather. If you could induce the newspapers to accuse you of something shady and have the devil of a job to clear yourself it might do the trick. The fact is, you’ve grown too competent. You need to be made to struggle for your life again—your life or your reputation. You have to find out the tonic of difficulty, and you can’t find it in your profession. Therefore I say ‘Steal a horse.’”

A faint interest appeared in the other’s eyes.

“That sounds to me good sense. But, hang it all, it’s utterly unpractical. I can’t go looking for scrapes. I should feel like play-acting if in cold blood I got myself into difficulties, and I take it that the essence of your prescription is that I must feel desperately in earnest.”

“I’m not prescribing. Heaven forbid that I should advise a friend to look for trouble. I’m merely stating how in the abstract I regard your case.”

The patient rose to go. “Miserable comforters are ye all,” he groaned. “Well, it appears you can do nothing for me except to suggest the advisability of crime. I suppose it’s no good trying to make you take a fee?”

The doctor shook his head. “I wasn’t altogether chaffing. Honestly, you would be the better of dropping for a month or two into another world—a harder one. A hand on a cattle-boat, for instance.”

Sir Edward Leithen sighed deeply as he turned from the doorstep down the long hot street. He did not look behind him, or he would have seen another gentleman approach cautiously round the corner of a side-street, and, when the coast was clear, ring the doctor’s bell. He was so completely fatigued with life that he neglected to be cautious at crossings, as was his habit, and was all but slain by a motor-omnibus. Everything seemed weary and over-familiar—the summer smell of town,

the din of traffic, the panorama of faces, pretty women shopping, the occasional sight of a friend. Long ago, he reflected with disgust, there had been a time when he had enjoyed it all.

He found sanctuary at last in the shade and coolness of his club. He remembered that he was dining out, and bade the porter telephone that he could not come, giving no reason. He remembered, too, that there was a division in the House that night, an important division advertised by a three-line whip. He declined to go near the place. At any rate, he would have the dim consolation of behaving badly. His clerk was probably at the moment hunting feverishly for him, for he had missed a consultation in the great Argentine bank case which was in the paper next morning. That could also slide. He wanted, nay, he was determined, to make a mess of it.

Then he discovered that he was hungry, and that it was nearly the hour when a man may dine. "I've only one positive feeling left," he told himself, "the satisfaction of my brute needs. Nice position for a gentleman and a Christian!"

There was one other man in the dining-room, sitting at the little table in the window. At first sight he had the look of an undergraduate, a Rugby Blue, perhaps, who had just come down from the University, for he had the broad, slightly stooped shoulders of the football-player. He had a ruddy face, untidy sandy hair, and large reflective grey eyes. It was those eyes which declared his age, for round them were the many fine wrinkles which come only from the passage of time.

"Hullo, John," said Leithen. "May I sit at your table?"

The other, whose name was Palliser-Yeates, nodded.

"You may certainly eat in my company, but I've got nothing to say to you, Ned. I'm feeling as dried-up as a dead starfish."

They ate their meal in silence, and so preoccupied was Sir Edward Leithen with his own affairs that it did not seem to him strange that Mr Palliser-Yeates, who was commonly a person of robust spirits and plentiful conversation, should have the air of a deaf-mute. When they had reached the fish, two other diners took their seats and waved them a greeting. One of them was a youth with lean, high-coloured cheeks, who limped slightly; the other a tallish older man with a long dark face, a small dark moustache, and a neat pointed chin which gave him something of the air of a hidalgo. He looked weary and glum, but his companion seemed to be in the best of tempers, for his laugh rang out in that empty place with a startling boyishness. Mr Palliser-Yeates looked up angrily, with a shiver.

"Noisy brute, Archie Roylance!" he observed. "I suppose he's above himself since Ascot. His horse won some beastly race, didn't it? It's a good thing to be young and an ass."

There was that in his tone which roused Leithen from his apathy. He cast a sharp glance at the other's face.

"You're off-colour."

"No," said the other brusquely. "I'm perfectly fit. Only I'm getting old."

This was food for wonder, inasmuch as Mr Palliser-Yeates had a reputation for a more than youthful energy and, although forty-five years of age, was still accustomed to do startling things on the Chamonix Aiguilles. He was head of an eminent banking firm and something of an authority on the aberrations of post-war finance.

A gleam of sympathy came into Leithen's eyes.

"How does it take you?" he asked.

"I've lost zest. Everything seems more or less dust and ashes. When you suddenly wake up and find that you've come to regard your respectable colleagues as so many fidgety old women and the job you've given your life to as an infernal squabble about trifles—why, you begin to wonder what's going to happen."

"I suppose a holiday ought to happen."

"The last thing I want. That's my complaint. I have no desire to do anything, work or play, and yet I'm not tired—only bored."

Leithen's sympathy had become interest.

"Have you seen a doctor?"

The other hesitated. "Yes," he said at length. "I saw old Acton Croke this afternoon. He was no earthly use. He advised me to go to Moscow and fix up a trade agreement. He thought that might make me content with my present lot."

"He told me to steal a horse."

Mr Palliser-Yeates stared in extreme surprise. "You! Do you feel the same way? Have you been to Croke?"

"Three hours ago. I thought he talked good sense. He said I must get into a rougher life so as to appreciate the blessings of the life that I'm fed up with. Probably he is right, but you can't take that sort of step in cold blood."

Mr. Palliser-Yeates assented. The fact of having found an associate in misfortune seemed to enliven slightly, very slightly, the spirits of both. From the adjoining table came, like an echo from a happier world, the ringing voice and hearty laughter of youth. Leithen jerked his head towards them.

"I would give a good deal for Archie's gusto," he said. "My sound right leg, for example. Or, if I couldn't I'd like Charles

Lamancha's insatiable ambition. If you want as much as he wants, you don't suffer from tedium."

Palliser-Yeates looked at the gentleman in question, the tall dark one of the two diners. "I'm not so sure. Perhaps he had got too much too easily. He has come on uncommon quick, you know, and, if you do that, there's apt to arrive a moment when you flag."

Lord Lamancha—the title had no connection with Don Quixote and Spain, but was the name of a shieling in a Border glen which had been the home six centuries ago of the ancient house of Merkland—was an object of interest to many of his countrymen. The Marquis of Liddesdale, his father, was a hale old man who might reasonably be expected to live for another ten years and so prevent his son's career being compromised by a premature removal to the House of Lords. He had a safe seat for a London division, was a member of the Cabinet, and had a high reputation for the matter-of-fact oratory which has replaced the pre-war grandiloquence. People trusted him, because, in spite of his hidalgo-ish appearance, he was believed to have that combination of candour and intelligence which England desires in her public men. Also he was popular, for his record in the war and the rumour of a youth spent in adventurous travel touched the imagination of the ordinary citizen. At the moment he was being talked of for a great Imperial post which was soon to become vacant, and there was gossip, in the alternative, of a Ministerial readjustment which would make him the pivot of a controversial Government. It was a remarkable position for a man to have won in his early forties, who had entered public life with every disadvantage of birth.

"I suppose he's happy," said Leithen. "But I've always held that there was a chance of Charles kicking over the traces. I doubt if his ambition is an organic part of him and not stuck on with pins. There's a fundamental daftness in all Merklands. I remember him at school."

The two men finished their meal and retired to the smoking-room, where they drank their coffee abstractedly. Each was thinking about the other, and wondering what light the other's case could shed on his own. The speculation gave each a faint glimmer of comfort.

Presently the voice of Sir Archibald Roylance was heard, and that ebullient young man flung himself down on a sofa beside Leithen, while Lord Lamancha selected a cigar. Sir Archie settled his game leg to his satisfaction, and filled an ancient pipe.

"Heavy weather," he announced. "I've been tryin' to cheer up old Charles and it's been like castin' a fly against a thirty-mile gale. I can't make out what's come over him. Here's a deservin' lad like me struggling at the foot of the ladder and not cast down, and there's Charles high up on the top rungs as glum as an owl and declarin' that the whole thing's foolishness. Shockin' spectacle for youth."

Lamancha, who had found an arm-chair beside Palliser-Yeates, looked at the others and smiled wryly.

"Is that true, Charles?" Leithen asked. "Are you also feeling hipped? Because John and I have just been confessing to each other that we're more fed up with everything in this gay world than we've ever been before in our useful lives."

Lamancha nodded. "I don't know what has come over me. I couldn't face the House to-night, so I telephoned to Archie to come and cheer me. I suppose I'm stale, but it's a new kind of staleness, for I'm perfectly fit in body, and I can't honestly say I feel weary in mind. It's simply that the light has gone out of the landscape. Nothing has any savour."

The three men had been a school together, they had been contemporaries at the University, and close friends ever since. They had no secrets from each other. Leithen, into whose face and voice had come a remote hint of interest, gave a sketch of his own mood, and the diagnosis of the eminent consultant. Archie Roylance stared blankly from one to the other, as if some new thing had broken in upon his simple philosophy of life.

"You fellows beat me," he cried. "Here you are, every one of you a swell of sorts, with every thing to make you cheerful, and you're grousin' like a labour battalion! You should be jolly well ashamed of yourselves. It's fairly temptin' Providence. What you want is some hard exercise. Go and sweat ten hours a day on a steep hill, and you'll get rid of these notions."

"My dear Archie," said Leithen. "your prescription is too crude. I used to be fond enough of sport, but I wouldn't stir a foot to catch a sixty-pound salmon or kill a fourteen pointer. I don't want to. I see no fun in it. I'm blasé. It's too easy."

"Well, I'm dashed! You're the worst spoiled chap I ever heard of, and a nice example to democracy." Archie spoke as if his gods had been blasphemed.

"Democracy, anyhow, is a good example to us. I know now why workmen strike sometimes and can't give any reason. We're on strike—against our privileges."

Archie was not listening. "Too easy, you say?" he repeated. "I call that pretty fair conceit. I've seen you miss birds often enough, old fellow."

"Nevertheless, it seems to me too easy. Everything has become too easy, both work and play."

"You can screw up the difficulty, you know. Try shootin' with a twenty bore, or fishin' for salmon with a nine-foot rod and a dry-fly cast."

"I don't want to kill anything," said Palliser-Yeates. "I don't see the fun of it."

Archie was truly shocked. Then a light of reminiscence came into his eye. "You remind me of poor old Jim Tarras," he said thoughtfully.

There were no inquiries about Jim Tarras, so Archie volunteered further news.

"You remember Jim? He had a little place somewhere in Moray, and spent most of his time shootin' in East Africa. Poor chap, he went back there with Smuts in the war and perished of blackwater. Well, when his father died and he came home to settle down, he found it an uncommon dull job. So, to enliven it, he invented a new kind of sport. He knew all there was to be known about Shikar, and from trampin' about the Highlands he had a pretty accurate knowledge of the country-side. So he used to write to the owner of a deer forest and present his compliments, and beg to inform him that between certain dates he proposed to kill one of his stags. When he had killed it he undertook to deliver it to the owner, for he wasn't a thief."

"I call that poaching on the grand scale," observed Palliser-Yeates.

"Wasn't it? Most of the fellows he wrote to accepted his challenge and told him to come and do his damndest. Little Avington, I remember, turned on every man and boy about the place for three nights to watch the forest. Jim usually worked at night, you see. One or two curmudgeons talked of the police and prosecutin' him, but public opinion was against them—too dashed unsportin'."

"Did he always get his stag?" Leithen asked.

"In-var-iably, and got it off the ground and delivered it to the owner, for that was the rule of the game. Sometimes he had a precious near squeak, and Avington, who was going off his head at the time, tried to pot him—shot a gillie in the leg too. But Jim always won out. I should think he was the best Shikari God ever made."

"Is that true, Archie?" Lamancha's voice had a magisterial tone.

"True—as—true. I know all about it, far Wattie Lithgow, who was Jim's man, is with me now. He and his wife keep house for me at Crask. Jim never took but the one man with him, and that was Wattie, and he made him just about as cunning an old dodger as himself."

Leithen yawned. "What sort of a place is Crask?" he inquired.

"Tiny little place. No fishin' except some hill lochs and only rough shootin'. I take it for the birds. Most marvellous nestin' ground in Britain barrin' some of the Outer Islands. I don't know why it should be, but it is. Something to do with the Gulf Stream, maybe. Anyhow, I've got the greenshank breedin' regularly and the red-throated diver, and half a dozen rare duck. It's a marvellous stoppin' place in spring too, for birds goin' north."

"Are you much there?"

"Generally in April, and always from the middle of August till the middle of October. You see, it's about the only place I know where you can do exactly as you like. The house is stuck away up on a long slope of moor, and you see the road for a mile from the windows, so you've plenty of time to take to the hills if anybody comes to worry you. I roost there with old Sime, my butler, and the two Lithgows, and put up a pal now and then who likes the life. It's the jolliest bit of the year for me."

"Have you any neighbours?"

"Heaps, but they don't trouble me much. Crask's the earthenware pot among the brazen vessels—mighty hard to get to and nothing to see when you get there. So the brazen vessels keep to themselves."

Lamancha went to a shelf of books above a writing-table and returned with an atlas. "Who are your brazen vessels?" he asked.

"Well, my brassiest is old Claybody at Haripol—that's four miles off across the hill."

"Bit of a swine, isn't he?" said Leithen.

"Oh, no. He's rather a good old bird himself. Don't care so much for his family. Then there's Glenraden t'other side of the Larrig—he indicated a point on the map which Lamancha was studying—"with a real old Highland grandee living in it—Alastair Raden—commanded the Scots Guards, I believe, in the year One. Family as old as the Flood and very poor, but just manage to hang on. He's the last Raden that will live there, but that doesn't matter so much as he has no son—only a brace of daughters. Then, of course, there's the show place, Strathlarrig—horrible great house as large as a factory, but wonderful fine salmon-fishin'. Some Americans have got it this year—Boston or Philadelphia, I don't remember which—very rich and said to be rather high-brow. There's a son, I believe."

Lamancha closed the atlas.

"Do you know any of these people, Archie?" he asked.

"Only the Claybody's—very slightly. I stayed with them in Suffolk for a covert shoot two years ago. The Radens have been to call on me, but I was out. The Bandicotts—that's the Americans—are new this year."

"Is the sport good?"

"The very best. Haripol is about the steepest and most sportin' forest in the Highlands, and Glenraden is nearly as good. There's no forest at Strathlarrig, but, as I've told you, amazin' good salmon fishin'. For a west coast river, I should put the Larrig only second to the Laxford."

Lamancha consulted the atlas again and appeared to ponder. Then he lifted his head, and his long face, which had a certain heaviness and sullenness in repose, was now lit by a smile which made it handsomer and younger.

"Could you have me at Crask this autumn?" he asked. "My wife has to go to Aix for a cure and I have no plans after the House rises."

"I should jolly well think so," cried Archie. "There's heaps of room in the old house, and I promise you I'll make you comfortable. Look here, you fellows! Why shouldn't all three of you come? I can get in a couple of extra maids from Inverlarrig."

"Excellent idea," said Lamancha. "But you mustn't bother about the maids. I'll bring my own man, and we'll have a male establishment, except for Mrs. Lithgow...By the way, I suppose you can count on Mrs. Lithgow?"

"How do you mean, 'count'?" asked Archie, rather puzzled. Then a difficulty struck him. "But wouldn't you be bored? I can't show you much in the way of sport, and you're not naturalists like me. It's a quiet life, you know."

"I shouldn't be bored," said Lamancha, "I should take steps to prevent it."

Leithen and Palliser-Yeates seemed to divine his intention, for they simultaneously exclaimed.—"It isn't fair to excite Archie, Charles," the latter said. "You know that you'll never do it."

"I intend to have a try. Hang it, John, it's the specific we were talking about—devilish difficult, devilish unpleasant, and calculated to make a man long for a dull life. Of course you two fellows will join me."

"What on earth are you talkin' about?" said the mystified Archie. "Join what?"

"We're proposing to quarter ourselves on you, my lad, and take a leaf out of Jim Tarras's book."

Sir Archie first stared, then he laughed nervously, then he called upon his gods, then he laughed freely and long. "Do you really mean it? What an almighty rag!...But hold on a moment. It will be rather awkward for me to take a hand. You see I've just been adopted as prospective candidate for that part of the country."

"So much the better. If you're found out—which you won't be—you'll get the poaching vote solid, and a good deal more. Most men at heart are poachers."

Archie shook a doubting head. "I don't know about that. They're an awfully respectable lot up there, and all those dashed stalkers and keepers and gillies are a sort of trade-union. The scallywags are a hopeless minority. If I get sent to quod—"

"You won't get sent to quod. At the worst it will be a fine, and you can pay that. What's the extreme penalty for this kind of offence, Ned?"

"I don't know," Leithen answered. "I'm not an authority on Scots law. But Archie's perfectly right. We can't go making a public exhibition of ourselves like this. We're too old to be listening to the chimes at midnight."

"Now, look here." Lamancha had shaken off his glumness and was as tense and eager as a schoolboy. "Didn't your doctor advise you to steal a horse? Well, this is a long sight easier than horse-stealing. It's admitted that we three want a tonic. On second thoughts Archie had better stand out—he hasn't our ailment, and a healthy man doesn't need medicine. But we three need it, and this idea is an inspiration. Of course we take risks, but they're sound sporting risks. After all, I've a reputation of a kind, and I put as much into the pool as anyone."

His hearers regarded him with stony faces, but this in no way checked his ardour.

"It's a perfectly first-class chance. A lonely house where you can see visitors a mile off, and an unsociable dog like Archie for a host. We write the letters and receive the answers at a London address. We arrive at Crask by stealth, and stay there unbeknown to the country-side, for Archie can count on his people and my man in a sepulchre. Also we've got Lithgow, who played the same game with Jim Tarras. We have a job which will want every bit of our nerve and ingenuity with a reasonable spice of danger—for, of course, if we fail we should cut queer figures. The thing is simply ordained by Heaven for our benefit. Of course you'll come."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," said Leithen.

"No more will I," said Palliser-Yeates.

"Then I'll go alone," said Lamancha cheerfully. "I'm out for a cure, if you're not. You've a month to make up your mind, and meanwhile a share in the syndicate remains open to you."

Sir Archie looked as if he wished he had never mentioned the fatal name of Jim Tarras, "I say, you know, Charles," he began hesitatingly, but was cut short.

"Are you going back on your invitation?" asked Lamancha sternly. "Very well, then, I've accepted it, and what's more I'm going to draft a specimen letter that will go to your Highland grandee, and Claybody and the American."

He rose with a bound and fetched a pencil and a sheet of notepaper from the nearest writing-table. "Here goes—"

"Sir, I have the honour to inform you that I propose to kill a stag—or a salmon as the case may be—on your ground between midnight on—and midnight—. We can leave the dates open for the present. The animal, of course, remains your property and will be duly delivered to you. It is a condition that it must be removed wholly outside your bounds. In the event of the undersigned failing to achieve his purpose he will

pay as forfeit one hundred pounds, and if successful fifty pounds to any charity you may appoint.

"I have the honour to be, your obedient humble servant."

"What do you say to that?" he asked. "Formal, a little official, but perfectly civil, and the writer proposes to pay his way like a gentleman. Bound to make a good impression."

"You've forgotten the signature," Leithen observed dryly.

"It must be signed with a *nom de guerre*." He thought for a moment. "I've got it. At once business-like and mysterious."

At the bottom of the draft he scrawled the name "John Macnab."

II. — DESPERATE CHARACTERS IN COUNCIL

CRASK—which is properly Craoisg and is so spelled by the Ordnance Survey—when the traveller approaches it from the Larrig Bridge has the air of a West Highland terrier, couchant and regardant. You are to picture a long tilt of moorland running east and west, not a smooth lawn of heather, but seamed with gullies and patched with bogs and thickets and crowned at the summit with a low line of rocks above which may be seen peeping the spikes of the distant Haripol hills. About three-quarters of the way up the slope stands the little house, whitewashed, slated, grey stone framing the narrow windows, with that attractive jumble of masonry which belongs to an adapted farm. It is approached by a road which scorns detours and runs straight from the glen highway, and it looks south over broken moorland to the shining links of the Larrig, and beyond them to the tributary vale of the Raden and the dark mountains of its source. Such is the view from the house itself, but from the garden behind there is an ampler vista, since to the left a glimpse may be had of the policies of Strathlarrig and even of a corner of that monstrous mansion, and to the right of the tidal waters of the river and the yellow sands on which in the stillest weather the Atlantic frets. Crask is at once a sanctuary and a watchtower; it commands a wide countryside and yet preserves its secrecy, for, though officially approached by a road like a ruler, there are a dozen sheltered ways of reaching it by the dips and crannies of the hill-side.

So thought a man who about five o'clock on the afternoon of the 24th of August was inconspicuously drawing towards it by way of a peat road which ran from the east through a wood of birches. Sir Edward Leithen's air was not more cheerful than when we met him a month ago, except that there was now a certain vigour in it which came from ill-temper. He had been for a long walk in the rain, and the scent of wet bracken and birches and bog myrtle, the peaty fragrance of the hills salted with the tang of the sea, had failed to comfort, though, not so long ago, it had had the power to intoxicate. Scrambling in the dell of a burn, he had observed both varieties of the filmy fern and what he knew to be a very rare cerast, and, though an ardent botanist, he had observed them unmoved. Soon the rain had passed, the west wind blew aside the cloud-wrack, and the Haripol tops had come out black against a turquoise sky, with Sgurr Dearg, awful and remote, towering above all. Though a keen mountaineer, the spectacle had neither exhilarated nor tantalised him. He was in a bad temper, and he knew that at Crask he should find three other men in the same case, for even the debonair Sir Archie was in the dumps with a toothache.

He told himself that he had come on a fool's errand, and the extra absurdity was that he could not quite see how he had been induced to come. He had consistently refused: so had Palliser-Yeates; Archie as a prospective host had been halting and nervous; there was even a time when Lamancha, the source of all the mischief, had seemed to waver. Nevertheless, some occult force—false shame probably—had shepherded them all here, unwilling, unconvinced, cold-footed, destined to a preposterous adventure for which not one of them had the slightest zest...Yet they had taken immense pains to arrange the thing, just as if they were all exulting in the prospect. His own clerk was to attend to the forwarding of their letters including any which might be addressed to "John Macnab."

The newspapers had contained paragraphs announcing that the Countess of Lamancha had gone to Aix for a month, where she would presently be joined by her husband, who intended to spend a week drinking the waters before proceeding to his grouse-moor of Leriote on the Borders. The Times, three days ago, had recorded Sir Edward Leithen and Mr John Palliser-Yeates as among those who had left Euston for Edinburgh, and more than one social paragrapher had mentioned that the ex-Attorney-General would be spending his holiday fishing on the Tay, while the eminent banker was to be the guest of the Chancellor of the Exchequer at an informal vacation conference on the nation's precarious finances. Lamancha had been fetched under cover of night by Archie from a station so remote that no one but a lunatic would think of using it. Palliser-Yeates had tramped for two days across the hills from the south, and Leithen himself, having been instructed to bring a Ford car, had had a miserable drive of a hundred and fifty miles in the rain, during which he had repeatedly lost his way. He had carried out his injunctions as to secrecy by arriving at two in the morning by means of this very peat road. The troops had achieved their silent concentration, and the silly business must now begin. Leithen groaned, and anathematised the memory of Jim Tarras.

As he approached the house he saw, to his amazement, a large closed car making its way down the slope. Putting his glass on it, he watched it reach the glen road and then turn east, passing the gates of Strathlarrig, till he lost it behind a shoulder of hill. Hurrying across the stable-yard, he entered the house by the back-door, disturbing Lithgow the Keeper in the midst of a whispered confabulation with Lamancha's man, whose name was Shapp. Passing through the gun-room he found, in the big smoking-room which looked over the valley, Lamancha and Palliser-Yeates with the crouch of conspirators flattening their noses on the windowpane.

The sight of him diverted the attention of the two from the landscape.

"This is an infernal plant," Palliser-Yeates exclaimed. "Archie swore to us that no one ever came here, and the second day a confounded great car arrives. Charles and I had just time to nip in here and lock the door, while Archie parleyed with them. He's been uncommon quick about it. The brutes didn't stay for more than five minutes."

"Who were they?" Leithen asked.

"Only got a side glance at them. They seemed to be a stout woman and a girl—oh, and a yelping little dog. I expect Archie kicked him, for he was giving tongue from the drawing-room."

The door opened to admit their host, who bore in one hand a large whisky-and-soda. He dropped wearily into a chair, where he sipped the beverage. An observer might have noted that what could be seen of his wholesome face was much inflamed, and that a bandage round chin and cheeks which ended in a top-knot above his scalp gave him the appearance of Ricquet with the Tuft in the Fairytale.

"That's all right," he said, in the tone of a man who has done a good piece of work. "I've choked off visitors at Crask for a bit, for the old lady will put it all round the country-side."

"Put what?" said Leithen, and "Who is the old lady?" asked Lamancha, and "Did you kick the dog?" demanded Palliser-Yeates.

Archie looked drearily at his friends. "It was Lady Claybody and a daughter—I think the second one—and their horrid little dog. They won't come back in a hurry—nobody will come back—I'm marked down as a pariah. Hang it, I may as well chuck my candidature. I've scuppered my prospects for the sake of you three asses."

"What has the blessed martyr been and done?" asked Palliser-Yeates.

"I've put a barrage round this place, that's all. I was very civil to the Claybodys, though I felt a pretty fair guy with my head in a sling. I hustled about, talking nonsense and offerin' tea, and then, as luck would have it, I trod on the hound. That's the worst of my game leg. The brute nearly had me over, and it started howlin'—you must have heard it. That dog's a bit weak in the head, for it can't help barkin' just out of pure cussedness—Lady Claybody says it's high-strung because of its fine breedin'. It got something to bark for this time, and the old woman had it in her arms fondlin' it and lookin' very old-fashioned at me. It seems the beast's name is Roguie and she called it her darlin' Wee Roguie, for she's pickin' up a bit of Scots since she came to live in these parts...Lucky Mackenzie wasn't at home. He'd have eaten it...Well, after that things settled down, and I was just goin' to order tea, when it occurred to the daughter to ask what was wrong with my face. Then I had an inspiration."

Archie paused and smiled sourly.

"I said I didn't know, but I feared I might be sickenin' for small-pox. I hinted that my face was a horrid sight under the bandage."

"Good for you, Archie," said Lamancha. "What happened then?"

"They bolted—fairly ran for it. They did record time into their car—scarcely stopped to say goodbye. I suppose you realise what I've done, you fellows. The natives here are scared to death of infectious diseases, and if we hadn't our own people we wouldn't have a servant left in the house. The story will be all over the country-side in two days, and my only fear is that it may bring some medical officer of health nosin' round...Anyhow, it will choke off visitors."

"Archie, you're a brick," was Lamancha's tribute.

"I'm very much afraid I'm a fool, but thank Heaven I'm not the only one. Sime," he shouted in a voice of thunder, "what's happened to tea?"

The shout brought the one-armed butler and Shapp with the apparatus of the meal, and an immense heap of letters all addressed to Sir Archibald Roylance.

"Hullo! the mail has arrived," cried the master of the house. "Now let's see what's the news of John Macnab?"

He hunted furiously among the correspondence, tearing open envelopes and distributing letters to the others with the rapidity of a conjurer. One little sealed packet he reserved to the last, and drew from it three missives bearing the same superscription.

These he opened, glanced at, and handed to Lamancha.

"Read 'em out, Charles," he said. "It's the answers at last."

Lamancha read slowly the first document, of which this is the text:

"Glenraden Castle, Strathlarrig, Aug.—, 19—

"Sir, I have received your insolent letter. I do not know what kind of rascal you may be, except that you have the morals of a bandit and the assurance of a halfpenny journalist. But since you seem in your perverted way to be a sportsman, I am not the man to refuse your challenge. My reply is, sir, damn your eyes and have a try. I defy you to kill a stag in my forest between midnight on the 28th of August and midnight of the 30th. I will give instructions to my men to guard my marches, and if you should be

roughly handled by them you have only to blame yourself.

"Yours faithfully, Alastair Raden.

"John Macnab, Esq."

"That's a good fellow," said Archie with conviction. "Just the sort of letter I'd write myself. He takes things in the proper spirit. But it's a blue look-out for your chances, my lads. What old Raden doesn't know about deer isn't knowledge."

Lamancha read the second reply:

"Strathlarrig House, Strathlarrig, Aug.—, 19—.

"My Dear Sir,

"Your letter was somewhat of a surprise, but as I am not yet familiar with the customs of this country, I forbear to enlarge on this point, and since you have marked it 'Confidential' I am unable to take advice. You state that you intend to kill a salmon in the Strathlarrig water between midnight on September 1 and midnight on September 3, this salmon, if killed, to remain my property. I have consulted such books as might give me guidance, and I am bound to state that in my view the laws of Scotland are hostile to your suggested enterprise. Nevertheless, I do not take my stand on the law, for I presume that your proposition is conceived in a sporting spirit, and that you dare me to stop you. Well sir, I will see you on that hand. The fishing is not that good at present that I am inclined to quarrel about one salmon. I give you leave to use every method that may occur to you to capture that fish, and I promise to use every method that may occur to me to prevent you. In your letter you undertake to use only 'legitimate means.' I would have pleasure in meeting you in the same spirit, but I reckon that all means are counted legitimate in the capture of poachers.

"Cordially, Junius Theodore Bandicott.

"Mr. J. Macnab."

"That's the young'un," Archie observed. "The old man was christened 'Acheson,' and don't take any interest in fishin'. He spends his time in lookin' for Norse remains."

"He seems a decent sort of fellow," said Palliser-Yeates, "but I don't quite like the last sentence. He'll probably try shooting, same as his countrymen once did on the Beauuly. Whoever gets this job will have some excitement for his money."

Lamancha read out the last letter:

"227 North Melville Street, Edinburgh, Aug.—, 19—

"Sir, Re Haripol Forest.

"Our client, the Right Honourable Lord Claybody, has read to us on the telephone your letter of Aug.—and has desired us to reply to it. We are instructed to say that our client is at a loss to understand how to take your communication, whether as a piece of impertinence or as a serious threat. If it is the latter, and you persist in your intention, we are instructed to apply to the Court for a summary interdict to prevent your entering upon his lands. We would also point out that under the Criminal Law of Scotland, any person whatsoever who commits a trespass in the daytime by entering upon any land without leave of the proprietor, in pursuit of, inter alia, deer, is liable to a fine of two pounds, while, if such person have his face blackened, or if five or more persons acting in concert commit the trespass, the penalty is five pounds (2 & 3 William IV, C. 68). We are, sir, Your obedient servants, Prosser, McKelpie, and MacLymont.

"John Macnab, Esq."

Lamancha laughed. "Is that good law, Ned?"

Leithen read the letter again. "I suppose so. Deer being *ferae naturae*, there is no private property in them or common law crime in killing them, and the only remedy is to prevent trespass in pursuit of them or to punish the trespasser."

"It seems to me that you get off pretty lightly," said Archie. "Two quid is not much in the way of a fine, for I don't suppose you want to black your faces or march five deep into Haripol...But what a rotten sportsman old Claybody is!"

Palliser-Yeates heaved a sigh of apparent relief. "I am bound to say the replies are better than I expected. It will be a devil of a business, though, to circumvent that old Highland chief, and that young American sounds formidable. Only, if we're caught out there, we're dealing with sportsmen and can appeal to their higher nature, you know. Claybody is probably the easiest proposition so far as getting a stag is concerned, but if we're nobbled by him we needn't look for mercy. Still, it's only a couple of pounds."

"You're an ass, John," said Leithen. "It's only a couple of pounds for John Macnab. But if these infernal Edinburgh

lawyers get on the job, it will be a case of producing the person of John Macnab, and then we're all in the cart. Don't you realise that in this fool's game we simply cannot afford to lose—none of us?"

"That," said Lamancha, "is beyond doubt the truth, and it's just there that the fun comes in."

The reception of the three letters had brightened the atmosphere. Each man had now something to think about, and, till it was time to dress for dinner, each was busy with sheets of the Ordnance maps. The rain had begun again, the curtains were drawn, and round a good fire of peats they read and smoked and dozed. Then they had hot baths, and it was a comparatively cheerful and very hungry party that assembled in the dining-room. Archie proposed champagne, but the offer was unanimously declined. "We ought to be in training," Lamancha warned him. "Keep the Widow for the occasions when we need comforting. They'll come all right."

Palliser-Yeates was enthusiastic about the food. "I must say, you do us very well," he told his host. "These haddocks are the best things I've ever eaten. How do you manage to get fresh sea-fish here?"

Archie appealed to Sime. "They come from Inverlarrig, Sir Erchibald," said the butler. "There's a wee laddie comes up here selling haddies verra near every day."

"Bless my soul, Sime. I thought no one came up here. You know my orders."

"This is just a tinker laddie, Sir Erchibald. He sleeps in a cairt down about Larrigmore. He just comes wi' his powny and awa' back, and doesna' bide twae minutes. Mistress Lithgow was anxious for haddies, for she said gentlemen got awfu' tired of saumon and trout."

"All right, Sime. I'll speak to Mrs. Lithgow. She'd better tell him we don't want any more. By the way, we ought to see Lithgow after dinner. Tell him to come to the smoking-room."

When Sime had put the port on the table and withdrawn, Leithen lifted up his voice.

"Look here, before we get too deep into this thing, let's make sure that we know where we are. We're all three turned up here—why, I don't know. But there's still time to go back. We realise now what we're in for. Are you clear in your minds that you want to go on?"

"I am," said Lamancha doggedly. "I'm out for a cure. Hang it, I feel a better man already."

"I suppose your profession makes you take risks," said Leithen dryly, "Mine doesn't. What about you, John?"

Palliser-Yeates shifted uneasily in his chair. "I don't want to go on. I feel no kind of keenness, and my feet are rather cold. And yet—you know—I should feel rather ashamed to turn back."

Archie uplifted his turbaned head. "That's how I feel, though I'm not on myself in this piece. We've given hostages, and the credit of John Macnab is at stake. We've dared old Raden and young Bandicott, and we can't decently cry off. Besides, I'm advertised as a smallpox patient, and it would be a pity to make a goat of myself for nothing. Mind you, I stand to lose as much as anybody, if we bungle things."

Leithen had the air of bowing to the inevitable. "Very well, that's settled. But I wish to Heaven I saw myself safely out of it. My only inducement to go on is to score off that boulder Claybody. He and his attorney's letter put my hackles up."

In the smoking-room Lamancha busied himself with preparing three slips of paper and writing on them three names.

"We must hold a council of war," he said. "First of all, we have taken measures to keep our presence here secret. My man Shapp is all right. What about your people, Archie?"

"Sime and Carfrae have been warned, and you may count on them. They're the class of lads that ask no questions. So are the Lithgows. We've no neighbours, and they're anyway not the gossiping kind, and I've put them on their Bible oath. I fancy they think the reason is politics. They're a trifle scared of you, Charles, and your reputation, for they're not accustomed to hidin' Cabinet Ministers in the scullery. Lithgow's a fine crusted old Tory."

"Good. Well, we'd better draw for beats, and get Lithgow in."

The figure that presently appeared before them was a small man, about fifty years of age, with a great breadth of shoulder and a massive face decorated with a wispy tawny beard. His mouth had the gravity and primness of an elder of the Kirk, but his shrewd blue eyes were not grave. The son of a Tweeddale shepherd who had emigrated years before to a cheviot farm in Sutherland, he was in every line and feature the Lowlander, and his speech had still the broad intonation of the Borders. But all his life had been spent in the Highlands on this and that deer forest, and as a young stalker he had been picked out by Jim Tarras for his superior hill craft. To Archie his chief recommendation was that he was a passionate naturalist, who was as eager to stalk a rare bird with a field-glass as to lead a rifle up to deer. Other traits will appear in the course of this narrative; but it may be noted here that he was a voracious reader and in the long winter nights had amassed a store of varied knowledge, which was patently improving his master's mind. Archie was accustomed to quote him for most of his views on matters other than ornithology and war.

"Do you mind going over to that corner and shuffling these slips? Now, John, you draw first."

Mr. Palliser-Yeates extracted a slip from Lithgow's massive hand.

"Glenraden," he cried. "Whew, I'm for it this time."

Leithen drew next. His slip read Strathlarrig.

"Thank God, I've got old Claybody," said Lamancha. "Unless you want him very badly, Ned?"

Leithen shook his head. "I'm content. It would be a bad start to change the draw."

"Sit down, Wattie," said Archie. "Here's a dram for you. We've summoned you to a consultation. I daresay you've been wonderin' what all this fuss about secrecy has meant. I'm going to tell you. You were with Jim Tarras, and you've often told me about his poachin'. Well, these three gentlemen want to have a try at the same game. They're tired of ordinary sport, and want something more excitin'. It wouldn't do, of course, for them to appear under their real names, so they've invented a nom de guerre—that's a bogus name, you know. They call themselves collectively, as you might say, John Macnab. John Macnab writes from London to three proprietors, same as Jim Tarras used to do, and proposes to take a deer or a salmon on their property between certain dates. There's a copy of the letter, and here are the replies that arrived tonight. Just you read 'em."

Lithgow, without moving a muscle of his face, took the documents. He nodded approvingly over the original letter. He smiled broadly at Colonel Raden's epistle, puzzled a little at Mr. Bandicott's, and wrinkled his brows over that of the Edinburgh solicitors. Then he stared into the fire, and emitted short grunts which might have equally well been chuckles or groans.

"Well, what do you think of the chances?" asked Archie at length.

"Would the gentlemen be good shots?" asked Lithgow.

"Mr Palliser-Yeates, who has drawn Glenraden, is a very good shot," Archie replied, "and he has stalked on nearly every forest in Scotland. Lord Lamancha—Charles, you're pretty good, aren't you?"

"Fair," was the answer. "Good on my day."

"And Sir Edward Leithen is a considerable artist on the river. Now, Wattie, you understand that they want to win—want to get the stags and the salmon—but it's absolute sheer naked necessity that, whether they fail or succeed, they mustn't be caught. John Macnab must remain John Macnab, an unknown blighter from London. You know who Lord Lamancha is, but perhaps you don't know that Sir Edward Leithen is a great lawyer, and Mr. Pallisers-Yeates is one of the biggest bankers in the country."

"I ken all about the gentlemen," said Lithgow gravely. "I was readin' Mr Yeates's letter in The Times about the debt we was owin' America, and I mind fine Sir Edward's speeches in Parliament about the Irish Constitution. I didna altogether agree with him."

"Good for you, Wattie. You see, then, how desperately important it is that the thing shouldn't get out. Mr Tarras didn't much care if he was caught, but if John Macnab is uncovered there will be a high and holy row. Now you grasp the problem, and you've got to pull up your socks and think it out. I don't want your views to-night, but I should like to have your notion of the chances in a general way. What's the bettin'? Twenty to one against?"

"Mair like a thousand," said Lithgow grimly. "It will be verra, verra deeficult. It will want a deal o' thinkin'." Then he added, "Mr Tarras was an awfu' grand shot. He would kill a runnin' beast at fower hundred yards—aye, he could make certain of it."

"Good Lord, I'm not in that class," Palliser-Yeates exclaimed.

"Aye, and he was more than a grand shot. He could creep up to a sleepin' beast in the dark and pit a knife in its throat. The sauvages in Africa had learned him that. There was plenty o' times when him and me were out that it was no possible to use the rifle."

"We can't compete there," said Lamancha dolefully.

"But I wad not say it was impossible," Lithgow added more briskly. "It will want a deal o' thinkin'. It might be done on Haripol—I wadna say but it might be done, but yon auld man at Glenraden will be ill to get the better of. And the Strathlarrig water is an easy water to watch. Ye'll be for only takin' shootable beasts, like Mr Tarras, and ye'll not be wantin' to cleek a fish? It might be not so hard to get a wee staggie, or to sniggle a salmon in one of the deep pots."

"No, we must play the game by the rules. We're not poachers."

"Then it will be verra, verra deeficult."

"You understand," put in Lamancha, "that, though we count on your help, you yourself mustn't be suspected. It's as important for you as for us to avoid suspicion, for if they got you it would implicate your master, and that mustn't happen on any account."

"I ken that. It will be verra, verra deeficult. I said the odds were a thousand to one, but I think ten thousand wad be liker the thing."

"Well, go and sleep on it, and we'll see you in the morning. And tell your wife I don't want any boys comin' up to the house with fish. She must send elsewhere and buy 'em. Good-night, Wattie."

When Lithgow had withdrawn the four men sat silent and meditative in their chairs. One would rise now and then and knock out his pipe, but scarcely a word was spoken. It is to be presumed that the thoughts of each were on the task in hand,

but Leithen's must have wandered. "By the way, Archie," he said, "I saw a very pretty girl on the road this afternoon, riding a yellow pony. Who could she be?"

"Lord knows!" said Archie. "Probably one of the Raden girls. I haven't seen 'em yet."

When the clock struck eleven Sir Archie arose and ordered his guests to bed.

"I think my toothache is gone," he said, switching off his turban and revealing a ruffled head and scarlet cheek. Then he muttered: "A thousand to one! Ten thousand to one! It can't be done, you know. We've got to find some way of shortenin' the odds!"

III. — RECONNAISSANCE

ROSY-FINGERED Dawn, when, attended by mild airs and a sky of Italian blue, she looked in at Crask next morning, found two members of the household already astir. Mr Palliser-Yeates, coerced by Wattie Lithgow, was starting with bitter self-condemnation to prospect what his guide called "the yont side o' Glenraden." A quarter of an hour later Lamancha, armed with a map and a telescope, departed alone for the crest of hill behind which lay the Haripol forest. After that peace fell on the place, and it was not till the hour of ten that Sir Edward Leithen descended for breakfast.

The glory of the morning had against his convictions made him cheerful. The place smelt so good within and without, Mrs Lithgow's scones were so succulent, the bacon so crisp, and Archie, healed of the toothache, was so preposterous and mirthful a figure that Leithen found a faint zest again in the contemplation of the future. When Archie advised him to get busy about the Larrig he did not complain, but accompanied his host to the gun-room, where he studied attentively on a large-scale map the three miles of the stream in the tenancy of Mr Bandicott.

It seemed to him that he had better equip himself for the part by some simple disguise, so, declining Archie's suggestion of a kilt, he returned to his bedroom to refit. Obviously the best line was the tourist, so he donned a stiff white shirt and a stiff dress collar with a tartan bow-tie contributed from Sime's wardrobe. Light brown boots in which he had travelled from London took the place of his nailed shoes, and his thick knickerbocker stockings bulged out above them. Sime's watch-chain, from which depended a football club medal, a vulgar green Homburg hat of Archie's, and a camera slung on his shoulders completed the equipment. His host surveyed him with approval.

"The Blackpool season is beginning," he observed. "You're the born tripper, my lad. Don't forget the picture post cards." A bicycle was found, and the late Attorney-General zigzagged warily down the steep road to the Larrig bridge.

He entered the highway without seeing a human soul, and according to plan turned down the glen towards Inverlarrig. There at the tiny post-office he bought the regulation picture post cards, and conversed in what he imagined to be the speech of Cockaigne with the aged post-mistress. He was eloquent on the beauties of the weather and the landscape and not reticent as to his personal affairs. He was, he said, a seeker for beauty-spots, and had heard that the best were to be found in the demesne of Strathlarrig. "It's private grund," he was told, "but there's Americans bidin' there and they're kind folk and awfu' free with their siller. If ye ask at the lodge, they'll maybe let ye in to photograph." The sight of an array of ginger-beer bottles inspired him to further camouflage, so he purchased two which he stuck in his side-pockets.

East of the Bridge of Larrig he came to the chasm in the river above which he knew began the Strathlarrig water. The first part was a canal-like stretch among bogs, which promised ill for fishing, but beyond a spit of rock the Larrig curled in towards the road edge, and ran in noble pools and swift streams under the shadow of great pines. This, Leithen knew from the map, was the Wood of Larrigmore, a remnant of the ancient Caledonian Forest. By the water's edge the covert was dark, but towards the roadside the trees thinned out, and the ground was delicately carpeted with heather and thymy turf. There grazed an aged white pony, and a few yards off, on the shaft of a dilapidated fish-cart, sat a small boy.

Leithen, leaning his bicycle against a tree, prospected the murky pools with the air rather of an angler than a photographer, and in the process found his stiff shirt and collar a vexation. Also the ginger-beer bottles bobbed unpleasantly at his side. So, catching sight of the boy, he beckoned him near. "Do you like ginger-beer?" he asked, and in reply to a vigorous nod bestowed the pair on him. The child returned like a dog to the shelter of the cart, whence might have been presently heard the sound of gluttonous enjoyment. Leithen, having satisfied himself that no mortal could take a fish in that thicket, continued up-stream till he struck the wall of the Strathlarrig domain and a vast castellated lodge.

The lodge-keeper made no objection when he sought admittance, and he turned from the gravel drive towards the river, which now flowed through a rough natural park. For a fisherman it was the water of his dreams. The pools were long and shelving, with a strong stream at the head and, below, precisely the right kind of boulders and outjutting banks to shelter fish. There were three of these pools—the "Duke's," the "Black Scour," and "Davie's Pot," were the names Archie had told him—and beyond, almost under the windows of the house, "Lady Maisie's," conspicuous for its dwarf birches and the considerable waterfall above it. Here he made believe to take a photograph, though he had no idea how a camera worked, and reflected dismally upon the magnitude of his task. The whole place was as bright and open as the Horse Guards Parade. The house commanded all four pools, which he knew to be the best, and even at midnight, with the owner unsuspecting, poaching would be nearly impossible. What would it be when the owner was warned, and legitimate methods of fishing were part of the contract?

After a glance at the house, which seemed to be deep in noontide slumber, he made his inconspicuous way past the end of a formal garden to a reach where the Larrig flowed wide and shallow over pebbles. Then came a belt of firs, and then a

long tract of broken water which was obviously not a place to hold salmon. He realised, from his memory of the map, that he must be near the end of the Strathlarrig beat, for the topmost mile was a series of unfishable linns. But presently he came to a noble pool. It lay in a meadow where the hay had just been cut and was liker a bit of Tweed or Eden than a Highland stream. Its shores were low and on the near side edged with fine gravel, the far bank was a green rise unspoiled by scrub, the current entered it with a proud swirl, washed the high bank, and spread itself out in a beautifully broken tail, so that every yard of it spelled fish. Leithen stared at it with appreciative eyes. The back of a moving monster showed in mid-stream and automatically he raised his arm in an imaginary cast.

The next second he observed a man walking across the meadow towards him, and remembered his character. Directing his camera hastily at the butt-end of a black-faced sheep on the opposite shore, he appeared to be taking a careful photograph, after which he restored the apparatus to its case and turned to reconnoitre the stranger. This proved to be a middle-aged man in ancient tweed knickerbockers of an outrageous pattern known locally as the "Strathlarrig tartan." He was obviously a river-keeper, and was advancing with a resolute and minatory air.

Leithen took off his hat with a flourish.

"Have I the honour, sir, to address the owner of this lovely spot?" he asked in what he hoped was the true accent of a tripper.

The keeper stopped short and regarded him sternly.

"What are ye daein' here?" he demanded.

"Picking up a few pictures, sir. I inquired at your lodge, and was told that I might presume upon your indulgence. Pardon me, if I 'ave presumed too far. If I 'ad known that the proprietor was at 'and I would have sought 'im out and addressed my 'umble request to 'imself."

"Ye're makin' a mistake. I'm no the laird. The laird's awa' about India. But Mr Bandicott—that's him that's the tenant—has given strict orders that naeboddy's to gang near the watter. I wonder Mactavish at the lodge hadna mair sense."

"I fear the blame is mine," said the agreeable tourist. "I only asked leave to enter the grounds, but the beauty of the scenery attracted me to the river. Never 'ave I seen a more exquisite spot." He waved his arm towards the pool.

"It's no that bad. But ye maun awa' out o' this. Ye'd better gang by the back road, for fear they see ye frae the hoose."

Leithen followed him obediently, after presenting him with a cigarette, which he managed to extract without taking his case from his pocket. It should have been a fag, he reflected, and not one of Archie's special Egyptians. As they walked he conversed volubly.

"What's the name of the river?" he asked. "Is it the Strathlarrig?"

"No, it's the Larrig, and that bit you like sae weel is the Minister's Pool. There's no a pool like it in Scotland."

"I believe you. There is not," was the enthusiastic reply.

"I mean for fish. Ye'll no ken muckle aboot fishin'."

"I've done a bit of anglin' at 'ome. What do you catch here? Jack and perch?"

"Jack and perch!" cried the keeper scornfully. "Saumon, man. Saumon up to thirty pounds' wecht."

"Oh, of course, salmon. That must be a glorious sport. But a friend of mine, who has seen it done, told me it wasn't 'ard. He said that even I could catch a salmon."

"Mair like a saumon wad catch you. Now, you haud down the back road, and ye'll come out aside the lodge gate. And dinna you come here again. The orders is strict, and if auld Angus was to get a grip o' ye, I wadna say what wad happen. Guid day to ye, and dinna stop till ye're out o' the gates."

Leithen did as he was bid, circumnavigated the house, struck a farm track, and in time reached the high road. It was a very doleful tourist who trod the wayside heather past the Wood of Larrigmore. Never had he seen a finer stretch of water or one so impregnably defended. No bluff or ingenuity would avail an illicit angler on that open greensward, with every keeper mobilised and on guard. He thought less now of the idiocy of the whole proceeding than of the folly of plunging in the dark upon just that piece of river. There were many streams where Jim Tarras's feat might be achieved, but he had chosen the one stretch in all Scotland where it was starkly impossible.

The recipient of the ginger-beer was still sitting by the shafts of his cart. He seemed to be lunching, for he was carving attentively a hunk of cheese and a loaf-end with a gully-knife. As he looked up from his task Leithen saw a child of perhaps twelve summers, with a singularly alert and impudent eye, a much-freckled face, and a thatch of tow-coloured hair bleached almost white by the sun. His feet were bare, his trousers were those of a grown man, tucked up at the knees and hitched up almost under his armpits, and for a shirt he appeared to have a much-torn jersey. Weather had tanned his whole appearance into the blend of greys and browns which one sees on a hill-side boulder. The boy nodded gravely to Leithen, and continued to munch.

Below the wood lay the half-mile where the Larrig wound sluggishly through a bog before precipitating itself into the chasm above the Bridge of Larrig. Leithen left his bicycle by the roadside and crossed the waste of hags and tussocks to the water's edge. It looked a thankless place for the angler. The clear streams of the Larrig seemed to have taken on the colour

of their banks, and to drowse dark and deep and sullen in one gigantic peat-hole. In spite of the rain of yesterday there was little current. The place looked oily, stagnant, and unfishable—a tract through which salmon after mounting the fall would hurry to the bright pools above.

Leithen sat down in a clump of heather and lit his pipe. Something might be done with a worm after a spate, he considered, but any other lure was out of the question. The place had its merits for every purpose but taking salmon. It was a part of the Strathlarrig water outside the park pale, and it was so hopeless that it was not likely to be carefully patrolled. The high road, it was true, ran near, but it was little frequented. If only...He suddenly sat up, and gazed intently at a ripple on the dead surface. Surely that was a fish on the move...He kept his eyes on the river, until he saw something else which made him rub them, and fall into deep reflection...

He was roused by a voice at his shoulder.

“What for will they no let me come up to Crask ony mair?” the voice demanded in a sort of tinker’s whine.

Leithen turned and found the boy of the ginger-beer.

“Hullo! You oughtn’t to do that, my son. You’ll give people heart disease. What was it you asked?”

“What...for...will...they...no...let...me come...up to Crask...ony mair?”

“I’m sure I don’t know. What’s Crask?”

“Ye ken it fine. It’s the big hoose up the hill. I seen you come doon frae it yoursel’ this mornin’.

Leithen was tempted to deny this allegation and assert his title of tourist, but something in the extreme intelligence of the boy’s face suggested that such a course might be dangerous. Instead he said, “Tell me your name, and what’s your business at Crask?”

“My name’s Benjamin Bogle, but I get Fish Benjie frae most folks. I’ve sell’t haddies and flukes to Crask these twa months. But this mornin’ I was tell’t no to come back, and when I speired what way, the auld wife shut the door on me.”

A recollection of Sir Archie’s order the night before returned to Leithen’s mind, and with it a great sense of insecurity. The argus-eyed child, hot with a grievance, had seen him descend from Crask, and was therefore in a position to give away the whole show. What chance was there for secrecy with this malevolent scout hanging around?

“Where do you live, Benjie?”

“I bide in my cart. My father’s in jyle, and my mither’s lyin’ badly in Muirtown. I sell fish to a’ the gentry.”

“And you want to know why you can’t sell them at Crask?”

“Aye, I wad like to ken that. The auld wife used to be a kind body and gie me jeely pieces. What’s turned he into a draygon?”

Leithen was accustomed, in the duties of his profession, to quick decisions on tactics, and now he took one which was destined to be momentous.

“Benjie,” he said solemnly, “there’s a lot of things in the world that I don’t understand, and it stands to reason that there must be more that you don’t. I’m in a position in which I badly want somebody to help me. I like the look of you. You look a trusty fellow and a keen one. Is all your time taken up selling haddies?”

“Deed no. Just twa hours in the mornin’, and twa hours at nicht when I gang down to the cobbles at Inverlarrig. I’ve a heap o’ time on my hands.”

“Good. I think I can promise that you may resume your trade at Crask. But first I want you to do a job for me. There’s a bicycle lying by the roadside. Bring it up to Crask this evening between six and seven. Have you a watch?”

“No, but I can tell the time braw and fine.”

“Go to the stables and wait for me there. I want to have a talk with you.” Leithen produced half a crown, on which the grubby paw of Fish Benjie instantly closed.

“And look here, Benjie. You haven’t seen me here, or anybody like me. Above all, you didn’t see me come down from Crask this morning. If anybody asks you questions, you only saw a man on a bicycle on the road to Inverlarrig.”

The boy nodded, and his solemn face flickered for a second with a subtle smile.

“Well, that’s a bargain.” Leithen got up from his couch and turned down the river, making for the Bridge of Larrig, where the highway crossed. He looked back once, and saw Fish Benjie wheeling his bicycle into the undergrowth of the wood. He was in two minds as to whether he had done wisely in placing himself in the hands of a small ragamuffin, who for all he knew might be hand-in-glove with the Strathlarrig keepers. But the recollection of Benjie’s face reassured him. He did not look like a boy who would be the pet of any constituted authority; he had the air rather of the nomad against whom the orderly waged war. There had been an impish honesty in his face, and Leithen, who had a weakness for disreputable urchins, felt that he had taken the right course. Besides, the young sleuth-hound had got on his trail, and there had been nothing for it but to make him an ally.

He crossed the bridge, avoided the Crask road, and struck up hill by a track which followed the ravine of a burn. As he

walked his mind went back to a stretch on a Canadian river, a stretch of still unruffled water warmed all day by a July sun. It had been as full as it could hold of salmon, but no artifice of his could stir them. There in the later afternoon had come an aged man from Boston, who fished with a light trout rod and cast a deft line, and placed a curious little dry fly several feet above a fish's snout. Then, by certain strange manoeuvres, he had drawn the fly under water. Leithen had looked on and marvelled, while before sunset that ancient man hooked and landed seven good fish...Somehow that bit of shining sunflecked Canadian river reminded him of the unpromising stretch of the Larrig he had just been reconnoitring.

At a turn of the road he came upon his host, tramping homeward in the company of a most unprepossessing hound. I pause for an instant to introduce Mackenzie. He was a mongrel collie of the old Highland stock, known as "beardies," and his tousled head, not unlike an extra-shaggy Dandie Dinmont's, was set upon a body of immense length, girth and muscle. His manners were atrocious to all except his master, and local report accused him of every canine vice except worrying sheep. He had been christened "The Bluidy Mackenzie" after a noted persecutor of the godly, by someone whose knowledge of history was greater than Sir Archie's, for the latter never understood the allusion. The name, however, remained his official one; commonly he was addressed as Mackenzie, but in moments of expansion he was referred to by his master as Old Bloody.

The said master seemed to be in a strange mood. He was dripping wet, having apparently fallen into the river, but his spirits soared, and he kept on smiling in a light-hearted way. He scarcely listened to Leithen, when he told him of his compact with Fish Benjie. "I daresay it will be all right." He observed idiotically. "Is your idea to pass off one of his haddies as a young salmon on the guileless Bandicott?" For an explanation of Sir Archie's conduct the chronicler must retrace his steps.

After Leithen's departure it had seemed good to him to take the air, so, summoning Mackenzie from a dark lair in the yard, he made his way to the river—the beat below the bridge and beyond the high road, which was on Crask ground. There it was a broad brawling water, boulder-strewn and shallow, which an active man could cross dry-shod by natural stepping-stones. Sir Archie sat for a time on the near shore, listening to the sandpipers—birds which were his special favourites—and watching the whinchats on the hill-side and the flashing white breasts of the water-ousels. Mackenzie lay beside him, an uneasy sphinx, tormented by a distant subtle odour of badger.

Presently Sir Archie arose and stepped out on the half-submerged boulder. He was getting very proud of the way he had learned to manage his game leg, and it occurred to him that here was a chance of testing his balance. If he could hop across on the stones to the other side he might regard himself as an able-bodied man. Balancing himself with his stick as a rope-dancer uses his pole, he in due course reached the middle of the current. After that it was more difficult, for the stones were smaller and the stream more rapid, but with an occasional splash and flounder he landed safely, to be saluted with a shower of spray from Mackenzie, who had taken the deep-water route.

"Not so bad that, for a crock," he told himself, as he lay full length in the sun watching the faint line of the Haripol hills overtopping the ridge of Crask.

Half an hour was spent in idleness till the dawning of hunger warned him to return. The crossing as seen from this side looked more formidable, for the first stones could only be reached by jumping a fairly broad stretch of current. Yet the jump was achieved, and with renewed confidence Sir Archie essayed the more solid boulders. All would have gone well had not he taken his eyes from the stones and observed on the bank beyond a girl's figure. She had been walking by the stream and had stopped to stare at the portent of his performance. Now Sir Archie was aware that his style of jumping was not graceful and he was discomposed by his sudden gallery. Nevertheless, the thing was so easy that he could scarcely have failed had it not been for the faithful Mackenzie. That animal had resolved to follow his master's footsteps, and was jumping steadily behind him. But three boulders from the shore they jumped simultaneously, and there was not standing-room for both. Sir Archie, already nervous, slipped, recovered himself, slipped again, and then, accompanied by Mackenzie, subsided noisily into three feet of water.

He waded ashore to find himself faced by a girl in whose face concern struggled with amusement. He lifted a dripping hand and grinned.

"Silly exhibition, wasn't it? All the fault of Mackenzie! Idiotic brute of a dog, not to remember my game leg!"

"You're horribly wet," the girl said, "but it was sporting of you to try that crossing. What about dry clothes?"

"Oh, no trouble about that. I've only to get up to Crask."

"You're Sir Archibald Roylance, aren't you? I'm Janet Raden. I've been with papa to call on you, but you're never at home."

Sir Archie, having now got the water out of his eyes and hair was able to regard his interlocutor. He saw a slight girl with what seemed to him astonishingly bright hair and very blue and candid eyes. She appeared to be anxious about his dry clothes, for she led the way up the bank at a great pace, while he lingered behind her. Suddenly she noticed the limp.

"Oh, please forgive me, I forgot about your leg. You had another smash, hadn't you, besides the one in the war—steeplechasing, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but it didn't signify. I'm all right again and get about anywhere, but I'm a bit slower on the wing, you know."

"You're keen about horses?"

"Love 'em."

"So do I. Agatha—that's my sister—doesn't care a bit about them. She would like to live all the year at Glenraden, but—I'm ashamed to say it—I would rather have a foggy November in Warwickshire than August in Scotland. I simply dream of hunting."

The ardent eyes and the young grace of the girl seemed marvellous things to Sir Archie. "I expect you go uncommon well," he murmured.

"No, only moderate. I only get scratch mounts. You see I stay with my Aunt Barbara, and she's too old to hunt, and has nothing in her stables but camels. But this year..." She broke off as she caught sight of the pools forming round Sir Archie's boots. "I mustn't keep you here talking. You be off home at once."

"Don't worry about me. I'm wet for days on end when I'm watchin' birds in the spring. You were sayin' about this year?"

Her answer was a surprising question. "Do you know anybody called John Macnab?"

Sir Archibald Roylance was a resourceful mountebank and did not hesitate.

"Yes. The distiller, you mean? Dhuniewassel Whisky? I've seen his advertisements—"They drink Dhuniewassel, In cottage and castle—" That chap?"

"No, no, somebody quite different. Listen, please, if you're not too wet, for I want you to help me. Papa has had the most extraordinary letter from somebody called John Macnab, saying he means to kill a stag in our forest between certain dates, and daring us to prevent him. He is going to hand over the beast to us if he gets it and pay fifty pounds, but if he fails he is to pay a hundred pounds. Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

"Some infernal swindler," said Archie darkly.

"No, he can't be. You see the fifty pounds arrived this morning."

"God bless my soul!"

"Yes. In Bank of England notes, posted from London. Papa at first wanted to tell him to go to—well, where Papa tells people he doesn't like to go. But I thought the offer so sporting that I persuaded him to take up the challenge. Indeed, I wrote the reply myself. Mr Macnab said that the money was to go to a charity, so Agatha is having the fifty pounds for her native weaving and dyeing—she's frightfully keen about that. But if we win the other fifty pounds papa says the best charity he can think of is to prevent me breaking my neck on hirelings, and I'm to have it to buy a hunter. So I'm very anxious to find out about Mr John Macnab."

"Probably some rich Colonial who hasn't learned manners."

"I don't think so. His manners are very good, to judge by his letter. I think he is a gentleman, but perhaps a little mad. We simply must beat him, for I've got to have that fifty pounds. And—and I want you to help me."

"Oh, well, you know—I mean to say—I'm not much of a fellow..."

"You're very clever, and you've done all kinds of things. I feel that if you advised us we should win easily, for I'm sure you had far harder jobs in the war."

To have a pretty young woman lauding his abilities and appealing with melting eyes for his aid was a new experience in Sir Archie's life. It was so delectable an experience that he almost forgot its awful complications. When he remembered them he flushed and stammered.

"Really, I'd love to, but I wouldn't be any earthly good. I'm an old crock, you see. But you needn't worry—your Glenraden gillies will make short work of this bandit...By Jove, I hope you get your hunter, Miss Raden. You've got to have it somehow. Tell you what, if I've any bright idea I'll let you know."

"Thank you so much. And may I consult you if I'm in difficulties?"

"Yes, of course. I mean to say, No. Hang it, I don't know, for I don't like interferin' with your father's challenge."

"That means you will. Now, you mustn't wait another moment. Good-bye. Will you come over to lunch at Glenraden?"

Then she broke off and stared at him. "I forgot. Haven't you smallpox?"

"What! Smallpox? Oh, I see! Has old Mother Claybody been putting that about?"

"She came to tea yesterday twittering with terror, and warned us all not to go within a mile of Crask."

Sir Archie laughed somewhat hollowly. "I had a bad toothache and my head tied up, and I daresay I said something silly, but I never thought she would take it for gospel. You see for yourself that I've nothing the matter with me."

"You'll have pneumonia the matter with you, unless you hurry home. Good-bye. We'll expect you to lunch the day after to-morrow." And with a wave of her hand she was gone.

The extraordinary fact was that Sir Archie was not depressed by the new tangle which encumbered him. On the contrary, he was in the best of spirits. He hobbled gaily up the by-road to Crask, listened to Leithen, when he met him, with less than half an ear, and was happy with his own thoughts. I am at a loss to know how to describe the first shattering impact of youth and beauty on a susceptible mind. The old plan was to borrow the language of the world's poetry, the new seems to

be to have recourse to the difficult jargon of psychologists and physicians; but neither, I fear, would suit Sir Archie's case. He did not think of nymphs and goddesses or of linnets in spring; still less did he plunge into the depths of a subconscious self which he was not aware of possessing. The unromantic epithet which rose to his lips was "jolly." This was for certain the jolliest girl he had ever met— regular young sportswoman and amazingly good-lookin', and he was dashed if she wouldn't get her hunter. For a delirious ten minutes, which carried him to the edge of the Crask lawn, he pictured his resourcefulness placed at her service, her triumphant success, and her bright-eyed gratitude.

Then he suddenly remembered that alliance with Miss Janet Raden was treachery to his three guests. The aid she had asked for could only be given at the expense of John Macnab. He was in the miserable position of having a leg in both camps, of having unhappily received the confidences of both sides, and whatever he did he must make a mess of it. He could not desert his friends, so he must fail the lady; wherefore there could be no luncheon for him, the day after tomorrow, since another five minutes' talk with her would entangle him beyond hope. There was nothing for it but to have a return of smallpox. He groaned aloud.

"A twinge of that beastly toothache," he explained in reply to his companion's inquiry.

When the party met in the smoking-room that night after dinner two very weary men occupied the deepest arm-chairs. Lamancha was struggling with sleep; Palliser-Yeates was limp with fatigue, far too weary to be sleepy. "I've had the devil of a day," said the latter. "Wattie took me at a racing gallop about thirty miles over bogs and crags. Lord! I'm stiff and footsore. I believe I crawled more than ten miles, and I've no skin left on my knees. But we spied the deuce of a lot of ground, and I see my way to the rudiments of a plan. You start off, Charles, while I collect my thoughts."

But Lamancha was supine.

"I'm too drunk with sleep to talk," he said. "I prospected all the south side of Haripol—all this side of the Reascuill, you know. I got a good spy from Sgurr Mor, and I tried to get up Sgurr Dearg, but stuck on the rocks. That's a fearsome mountain, if you like. Didn't see a blessed soul all day—no rifles out—but I heard a shot from the Machray ground. I got my glasses on to several fine beasts. It struck me that the best chance would be in the corrie between Sgurr Mor and Sgurr Dearg—there's a nice low pass at the head to get a stag through and the place is rather tucked away from the rest of the forest. That's as far as I've got at present. I want to sleep."

Palliser-Yeates was in a very different mood. With an ordnance map spread out on his knees he expounded the result of his researches, waving his pipe excitedly.

"It's a stiff problem, but there's just the ghost of a hope. Wattie admitted that on the way home. Look here, you fellows— Glenraden is divided, like Gaul, into three parts. There's the Home beat—all the low ground of the Raden glen and the little hills behind the house. Then there's the Carnbeg beat to the east, which is the best I fancy—very easy going, not very high and with peat roads and tracks where you could shift a beast. Last there's Carnmore, miles from anywhere, with all the highest tops and as steep as Torridon. It would be the devil of a business, if I got a stag there, to move it. Wattie and I went round the whole marches, mostly on our bellies. No, we weren't seen—Wattie took care of that. What a noble shikari the old chap is!"

"Well, what's your conclusion?" Leithen asked.

Palliser-Yeates shook his head. "That's just where I'm stumped. Try to put yourself in old Raden's place. He has only one stalker and two gillies for the whole forest, for he's very short-handed, and as a matter of fact he stalks his beasts himself. He'll consider where John Macnab is likeliest to have his try, and he'll naturally decide on the Carnmore beat, for that's by far the most secluded. You may take it from me that he has only enough men to watch one beat properly. But he'll reflect that John Macnab has got to get his stag away, and he'll wonder how he'll manage it on Carnmore, for there's only one bad track up from Inverlarrig. Therefore he'll conclude that John Macnab may be more likely to try Carnbeg, though it's a bit more public. You see, his decision isn't any easier than mine. On the whole, I'm inclined to think he'll plump for Carnmore, for he must think John Macnab a fairly desperate fellow who will aim first at killing his stag in peace, and will trust to Providence for the rest. So at the moment I favour Carnbeg."

Leithen wrinkled his brow. "There are three of us," he said. "That gives us a chance of a little finesse. What about letting Charles or me make a demonstration against Carnmore, while you wait at Carnbeg?"

"Good idea! I thought of that too."

"You'd better assume Colonel Raden to be in very full possession of his wits," Leithen continued. "The simple bluff won't do—he'll see through it. He'll think that John Macnab is the same wary kind of old bird as himself. I found out in the war that it didn't do to underrate your opponent's brains. He's pretty certain to expect a feint and not to be taken in. I'm for something a little subtler."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you feint in one place, so that your opponent believes it to be a feint and pays no attention—and then you sail in and get to work in that very place."

Palliser-Yeates whistled. "That wants thinking over...How about yourself?"

"I've studied the river, and you never in your life saw such a hopeless proposition, All the good pools are as open as the Serpentine. Wattie stated the odds correctly."

"Nothing doing there?"

"Nothing doing, unless I take steps to shorten the odds. So I've taken in a partner."

The others stared, and even Lamancha woke up.

"Yes. I interviewed him in the stable before dinner. It's the little ragamuffin who sells fish—Fish Benjie is the name he goes by. Archie, I hope you don't mind, but I told him to resume his morning visits. They're my best chance for consultations."

"You're taking a pretty big risk, Ned," said his host. "D'you mean to say you've let that boy into the whole secret?"

"I've told him everything. It was the only way, for he had begun to suspect. I admit it's a gamble, but I believe I can trust the child. I think I know a sportsman when I see him."

Archie still shook his head. "There's something else I may as well tell you. I met one of the Raden girls to-day—the younger—she was on the bank when I fell into the Larrig. She asked me point-blank if I knew anybody called John Macnab?"

Lamancha was wide awake. "What did you say?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, lied of course. Said I supposed she meant the distiller. Then she told me the whole story—said she had written the letter her father signed. She's mad keen to win the extra fifty quid. For it means a hunter for her this winter down in Warwickshire. Yes, and she asked me to help. I talked a lot of rot about my game leg and that sort of thing, but I sort of promised to go and lunch at Glenraden the day after to-morrow."

"That's impossible," said Lamancha.

"I know it is, but there's only one way out of it. I've got to have smallpox again."

"You've got to go to bed and stay there for a month," said Palliser-Yeates severely. "Now, look here, Archie. We simply can't have you getting mixed up with the enemy, especially the enemy women. You're much too susceptible and far too great an ass."

"Of course not," said Archie, with a touch of protest in his voice. "I see that well enough, but it's a black look-out for me. I wish to Heaven you fellows had chosen to take your cure somewhere else. I'm simply wreckin' all my political career. I had a letter from my agent to-night, and I should be touring the constituency instead of playin' the goat here. All I've got to say is that you've a dashed lot more than old Raden against you. You've got that girl, crazy about her hunter, and anyone can see that she's clever as a monkey."

But the laird of Crask was not thinking of Miss Janet Raden's wits as he went meditatively to bed. He was wondering why her eyes were so blue, and as he ascended the stairs he thought he had discovered the reason. Her hair was spun-gold, but she had dark eye-lashes.

IV. — FISH BENJIE

ON the roads of the north of Scotland, any time after the last snow-wreaths have melted behind the dykes, you will meet a peculiar kind of tinker. They are not the copper-nosed scarecrows of the lowlands, sullen and cringing, attended by sad infants in ramshackle perambulators. Nor are they in any sense gipsies, for they have not the Romany speech or colouring. They travel the roads with an establishment, usually a covered cart and one or more lean horses, and you may find their encampments any day by any burnside. Of a rainy night you can see their queer little tents, shaped like a segment of sausage, with a fire hissing at the door, and the horses cropping the roadside grass; of a fine morning the women will be washing their duds on the loch shore and their young fighting like ferrets among the shingle. You will meet with them in the back streets of the little towns, and at the back doors of wayside inns, but mostly in sheltered hollows of the moor or green nooks among the birches, for they are artists in choosing camping-grounds. They are children of Esau who combine a dozen crafts—tinkering, fish-hawking, besom-making, and the like—with their natural trades of horse-coping and poaching. At once brazen and obsequious, they beg rather as an art than a necessity; they will whine to a keeper with pockets full of pheasant's eggs, and seek permission to camp from a laird with a melting tale of hardships, while one of his salmon lies hidden in the bracken on their cart floor. The men are an upstanding race, keen-eyed, resourceful, with humour in their cunning; the women, till life bears too hardly on them, are handsome and soft-spoken; and the children are burned and weathered like imps of the desert. Their speech is neither lowland nor highland, but a sing-song Scots of their own, and if they show the Celt in their secret ways there is a hint of Norse blood in the tawny hair and blue eyes so common among them.

Ebenezer Bogle was born into this life, and for fifty-five years travelled the roads from the Reay country to the Mearns and from John o' Groats to the sea-lochs of Appin. Sickness overtook him one October when camped in the Black Isle, and, feeling the hand of death on him, he sent for two people. One was the nearest Free Kirk minister—for Ebenezer was theologically of the old school; the other was a banker from Muirtown. What he said to the minister I do not know; but what the banker said to him may be gathered from the fact that he informed his wife before he died that in the Muirtown bank there lay to his credit a sum of nearly three thousand pounds. Ebenezer had been a sober and careful man, and a genius at horse-coping. He had bought the little rough shelties of the North and the Isles, and sold them at lowland fairs, he had dabbled in black cattle, he had done big trade in sheep-skins when a snowstorm decimated the Sutherland flocks,

and he had engaged, perhaps, in less reputable ventures, which might be forbidden by the law of the land, but were not contrary, so he believed, to the Bible. Year by year his bank balance had mounted, for he spent little, and now he had a fortune to bequeath. He made no will; all went to his wife, with the understanding that it would be kept intact for his son; and in this confidence Ebenezer closed his eyes.

The wife did not change her habit of life. The son Benjamin accompanied her as before in the long rounds between May and October, and in the winter abode in the fishing quarter of Muirtown, and intermittently attended school. Presently his mother took a second husband, a Catholic Macdonald from the West, for the road is a lonely occupation for a solitary woman. Her new man was a cheerful being—very little like the provident Ebenezer—much addicted to the bottle and a lover of all things but legitimate trade. But he respected the dead man's wishes and made no attempt to touch the hoard in the Muirtown bank; he was kind, too, to the boy, and taught him many things that are not provided for in the educational system of Scotland. From him Benjie learned how to take a nesting grouse, how to snare a dozen things, from hares to roebuck, how to sniggle salmon in the clear pools, and how to poach a hind when the deer came down in hard weather to the meadows. He learned how to tell the hour by the sun, and to find his way by the stars, and what weather was foretold by the starlings packing at nightfall, or the crows sitting with their beaks to the wind, or a badger coming home after daylight. The boy knew how to make cunning whistles from ash and rowan with which to imitate a snipe's bleat or the call of an otter, and he knew how at all times and in all weathers to fend for himself and find food and shelter. A tough little nomad he became under this tutelage, knowing no boys' games, with scarcely an acquaintance of his age, but able to deal on equal terms with every fisherman, gillie, and tinker north of the Highland line.

It chanced that in the spring of this year Mrs Bogle had fallen ill for the first time in her life. It was influenza, and, being neglected, was followed by pneumonia, so that when May came she was in no condition to take the road. By ill luck her husband had been involved in a drunken row, when he had assaulted two of his companions with such violence and success that he was sent for six months to prison. In these circumstances there was nothing for it but that Benjie should set out alone with the cart, and it is a proof of the stoutheartedness of the family tradition that his mother never questioned the propriety of this arrangement. He departed with her blessing, and weekly despatched to her a much-blotted scrawl describing his doings. There was something of his father's hard fibre in the child, for he was a keen bargainer and as wary as a fox against cajolery. He met friends of his family who let him camp beside them, and with their young he did battle, when they dared to threaten his dignity. Benjie fought in no orthodox way, but like a weasel, using every weapon of tooth and claw, but in his sobbing furies he was unconquerable, and was soon left in peace. Presently he found that he preferred to camp alone, so with his old cart and horse he made his way up and down the long glens of the West to the Larrig. There, he remembered, the fish trade had been profitable in past years, so he sat himself down by the roadside, to act a middleman between the fishing-cobles of Inverlarrig and the kitchens of the shooting lodges. It would be untrue to say that this was his only means of livelihood, and I fear that the contents of Benjie's pot, as it bubbled of an evening in the Wood of Larrigmore, would not have borne inspection by any keeper who chanced to pass. The weekly scrawls went regularly to his now convalescent mother, and once a parcel arrived for him at the Inverlarrig post-office containing a gigantic new shirt, which he used as a blanket. For the rest, he lived as Robinson Crusoe lived, on the country-side around him, asking no news of the outer world.

On the morning of the 27th of August he might have been seen, a little after seven o'clock, driving his cart up the fine beech avenue which led to Glenraden Castle. It was part of his morning round, but hitherto he had left his cart at the lodge-gate, and carried his fish on foot to the house; wherefore he had some slight argument with the lodge-keeper before he was permitted to enter. He drove circumspectly to the back regions, left his fish at the kitchen door, and then proceeded to the cottage of the stalker, one Macpherson, which stood by itself in a clump of firs. There he waited for some time till Mrs Macpherson came to feed her hens. A string of haddocks changed hands, and Benjie was bidden indoors, where he was given a cup of tea, while old Macpherson smoked his early pipe and asked questions. Half an hour later Benjie left, with every sign of amity, and drove very slowly down the woodland road towards the haugh where the Raden, sweeping from the narrows of the glen, spreads into broad pools and shining shallows. There he left the cart and squatted inconspicuously in the heather in a place which commanded a prospect of the home woods. From his observations he was aware that one of the young ladies regularly took her morning walk in this quarter.

Meantime in the pleasant upstairs dining-room of the Castle breakfast had begun. Colonel Alastair Raden, having read prayers to a row of servants from a chair in the window—there was a family tradition that he once broke off in a petition to call excitedly his Maker's attention to a capercailzie on the lawn—and having finished his porridge, which he ate standing, with bulletins interjected about the weather, was doing good work on bacon and eggs. Breakfast, he used to declare, should consist of no kickshaws like kidneys and omelettes; only bacon and eggs, and plenty of 'em. The master of the house was a lean old gentleman dressed in an ancient loud-patterned tweed jacket and a very faded kilt. Still erect as a post, he had a barrack-square voice, and high-boned, aquiline face, and a kindly but irritable blue eye. His daughters were devoting what time was left to them from attending to the breakfasts of three terriers to an animated discussion of a letter which lay before them. The morning meal at Glenraden was rarely interrupted by correspondence, for the post did not arrive till the evening, but this missive had been delivered by hand.

"He can't come," the younger cried. "He says he's seedy again. It may really be smallpox this time."

"Who can't come, and who has smallpox?" her father demanded.

"Sir Archibald Roylance. I told you I met him and asked him to lunch here to-day. We really ought to get to know our nearest neighbour, and he seems a very pleasant young man."

"I think he is hiding a dark secret," said the elder Miss Raden. "Nobody who calls there ever finds him in—except Lady Claybody, and then he told her he had smallpox. Old Mr Bandicott said he went up the long hill to Crask yesterday, and found nobody at home, though he was perfectly certain he saw one figure slinking into the wood and another moving away from a window. I wonder if Sir Archibald is really all right. We don't know anything about him, do we?"

"Of course he's all right—bound to be—dashed gallant sporting fellow. Sorry he's not coming to luncheon—I want to meet him. He's probably afraid of Nettie, and I don't blame him, for she's a brazen hussy, and he does well to be shy of old Bandicott. I'm scared to death by the old fellow myself."

"You know you've promised to let him dig in the Piper's Ring, Papa."

"I know I have, and I would have promised to let him dig up my lawn to keep him quiet. Never met a man with such a flow of incomprehensible talk. He had the audacity to tell me that I was no more Celtic than he was, but sprung from some blackguard Norse raiders a thousand years back. Judging by the sketch he gave me of their habits, I'd sooner the Radens were descended from Polish Jews."

"I thought him a darling," said his elder daughter, "and with such a beautiful face."

"He may be a darling for all I know, but his head is stuffed with maggots. If you admired him so much, why didn't you take him off my hands? I liked the look of the young fellow and wanted to have a word with him. More by token—the Colonel was hunting about for the marmalade—"what were you two plotting with him in the corner after dinner?"

"We were talking about John Macnab."

The Colonel's face became wrathful.

"Then I call it dashed unfilial conduct of you not to have brought me in. There was I, deafened with the old man's chatter—all about a fellow called Harald Blacktooth or Bottlenose or some such name, that he swears is buried in my grounds and means to dig up—when I might have been having a really fruitful conversation. What was young Bandicott's notion of John Macnab?"

"Mr Junius thinks he is a lunatic," said the elder Miss Raden. She was in every way her sister's opposite, dark of hair and eye where Janet was fair, tall where Janet was little, slow and quiet of voice where Janet was quick and gusty.

"I entirely differ from him. I think John Macnab is perfectly sane, and probably a good fellow, though a dashed insolent one. What's Bandicott doing about his river?"

"Patrolling it day and night between the 1st and 3rd of September. He says he's taking no chances, though he'd bet Wall Street to a nickel that the poor poop hasn't the frozenest outside."

"Nettie, he said nothing of the kind!" Miss Agatha was indignant. "He talks beautiful English, with no trace of an accent—all Bostonians do, he told me."

"Anyhow, he asked what steps we were taking and advised us to get busy. We come before him, you know...Heavens, papa, it begins to-morrow night! Oh, and I did so want to consult Sir Archibald. I'm sure he could help."

Colonel Raden, having made a satisfactory breakfast, was lighting a pipe.

"You need not worry, my dear. I'm an old campaigner and have planned out the thing thoroughly. I've been in frequent consultation with Macpherson, and yesterday we had Alan and James Fraser in, and they entirely agreed."

He produced from his pocket a sheet of foolscap on which had been roughly drawn a map of the estate.

"Now, listen to me. We must assume this fellow Macnab to be in possession of his senses, and to have more or less reconnoitred the ground—though I don't know how the devil he can have managed it, for the gillies have kept their eyes open, and nobody's been seen near the place. Well, here are the three beats. Unless young Bandicott is right and the man's a lunatic, he won't try the Home beat, for the simple reason that a shot there would be heard by twenty people and he could not move a beast twenty yards without being caught. There remains Carnmore and Carnbeg. Macpherson was clear that he would try Carnmore, as being farthest away from the house. But I, with my old campaigning experience—here Colonel Raden looked remarkably cunning—"pointed out at once that such reasoning was rudimentary. I said 'He'll bluff us, and just because he thinks that we think he'll try Carnmore, he'll try Carnbeg. Therefore, since we can only afford to watch one beat thoroughly, we'll watch Carnbeg.' What do you think of that, my dears?"

"I think you're very clever, papa," said Agatha. "I'm sure you're right."

"And you, Nettie?"

Janet was knitting her brows and looking thoughtful.

"I'm...not...so...sure. You see we must assume that John Macnab is very ingenious. He probably made his fortune in the colonies by every kind of dodge. He's sure to be very clever."

"Well put, my dear," said her father, "it's just that cleverness that I propose to match."

"But do you think you have quite matched it? You have tried to imagine what John Macnab would be thinking, and he will have done just the same by you. Why shouldn't he have guessed the solution you have reached and be deciding to go one better?"

"How do you mean, Nettie?" asked her puzzled parent. He was inclined to be annoyed, but experience had taught him that his younger daughter's wits were not to be lightly disregarded.

Nettie took the estate map from his hand and found a stump of pencil in the pocket of her jumper.

"Please look at this, papa. Here is A and B. B offers a better chance, so Macpherson says John Macnab will take B. You say, acutely, that John Macnab is not a fool, and will try to bluff us by taking A. I say that John Macnab will have anticipated your acumen."

"Yes, yes," said her father impatiently. "And then?"

"And then will take B after all."

The Colonel stood rapt in unpleasant meditation for the space of five seconds...

"God bless my soul!" he cried. "I see what you mean. Confound it, of course he'll go for Carnmore. Lord, this is a puzzle. I must see Macpherson at once. Are you sure you're right, Nettie?"

"I'm not in the least sure. We've only a choice of uncertainties, and must gamble. But, as far as I see, if we must plump for one we should plump for Carnmore."

Colonel Raden departed from his study, after summoning Macpherson to that shrine of the higher thought, and Janet Raden, after one or two brief domestic interviews, collected her two terriers and set out for her morning walk. The morning was as fresh and bright as April, the rain in the night had set every burn singing, and the thickets and lawns were still damp where the sun had not penetrated. Her morning walk was wont to be a scamper, a thing of hops, skips, and jumps, rather than a sedate progress; but on this occasion, though two dogs and the whole earth invited to hilarity, she walked slowly and thoughtfully. The mossy broken tops of Carnbeg showed above a wood of young firs, and to the right rose the high blue peaks of the Carnmore ground. On which of these on the morrow would John Macnab begin his depredations? He had two days for his exploit; probably he would make his effort on the second day, and devote the first to confusing the minds of the defence. That meant that the problem would have to be thought out anew each day, for the alert intelligence of John Macnab—she now pictured him as a sort of Sherlock Holmes in knickerbockers—would not stand still. The prospect exhilarated, but it also alarmed her; the desire to win a new hunter was now a fixed resolution; but she wished she had a colleague. Agatha was no use, and her father, while admirable in tactics, was weak in strategy; she longed more than ever for the help of that frail vessel, Sir Archie.

Her road led her by a brawling torrent through the famous Glenraden beechwood to the spongy meadows of the haugh, beyond which could be seen the shining tides of the Raden sweeping to the high-backed bridge across which ran the road to Carnmore. The haugh was all bog-myrtle and heather and bracken, sprinkled with great boulders which the river during the ages had brought down from the hills. Half a mile up it stood the odd tumulus called the Piper's Ring, crowned with an ancient gnarled fir, where reposed, according to the elder Bandicott, the dust of that dark progenitor, Harald Blacktooth. If Mr Bandicott proposed to excavate there he had his work cut out; the place was encumbered with giant stones since a thousand floods had washed its sides since it first received the dead Viking. Great birch woods from both sides of the valley descended to the stream, thereby making the excellence of the Home beat, for the woodland stag is a heavier beast than his brother of the high tops.

Close to the road, in a small hollow where one of the rivulets from the woods cut its way through the haugh, she came on an ancient cart resting on its shafts, an ancient horse grazing on a patch of turf among the peat, and a small boy diligently whittling his way through a pile of heather roots. The urchin sprang to his feet and saluted like a soldier.

"Please, lady," he explained in a high falsetto whine, "I've gotten permission from Mr Macpherson to make heather besoms on this muir. He's been awfu' kind to me, lady."

"You're the boy who sells fish? I've seen you on the road."

"Aye, lady, I'm Fish Benjie. I sell my fish in the mornin's and evenin's, and I've a' the day for other jobs. I've aye wanted to come here, for it's the grandest heather i' the country-side; and Mr Macpherson, he kens I'll do nae harm, and I've promised no to kindle a fire."

The child with the beggar's voice looked at her with such sage and solemn eyes that Janet, who had a hopeless weakness for small boys, sat down on a sun-warmed hillock and stared at him, while he turned resolutely to business.

"If you're hungry, Benjie," she said, "and they won't let you make a fire, you can come up to the Castle and get tea from Mrs Fraser. Tell her I sent you."

"Thank you, lady, but if you please, I was gaun to my tea at Mrs Macpherson's. She's fell fond o' my haddies, and she tell't me to tak a look in when I stoppit work. I'm ettlin' to be here for a guid while."

"Will you come every day?"

"Aye, every day about eight o'clock, and bide till maybe five in the afternoon when I go down to the cobbles at Inverlarrig."

"Now, look here, Benjie. When you're sitting quietly working here I want you to keep your eyes open, and if you see any strange man, tell Mr Macpherson. By strange man I mean somebody who doesn't belong to the place. We're rather troubled by poachers just now."

Benjie raised a ruminant eye from his besom.

"Aye, lady. I seen a queer man already this mornin'. He cam up the road and syne started off over the bog. He was sweatin' sore, and there was twa men from Strathlarrig wi' him carryin' picks and shovels...Losh, there he is comin' back."

Following Benjie's pointing finger Janet saw, approaching her from the direction of the Piper's Ring, a solitary figure which laboured heavily among the peat-bogs. Presently it was revealed as an elderly man wearing a broad grey wide-awake and a suit of flannel knickerbockers. His enormous horn spectacles clearly did not help his eyesight, for he had almost fallen over the shafts of the fish-cart before he perceived Janet Raden. He removed his hat, bowed with an antique courtesy, and asked permission to recover his breath.

"I was on my way to see your father," he said at length. "This morning I have prospected the barrow of Harald Blacktooth, and it is clear to me that I can make no progress unless I have Colonel Raden's permission to use explosives. Only the very slightest use, I promise you. I have located, I think, the ceremonial entrance, but it is blocked with boulders which it would take a gang of navvies to raise with crowbars. A discreet application of dynamite would do the work in half an hour. I cannot think that Colonel Raden would object to my using it when I encounter such obstacles. I assure you it will not spoil the look of the barrow."

"I'm sure papa will be delighted. You're certain the noise won't frighten the deer. You know the Piper's Ring is in the forest."

"Not in the least, my dear young lady. The reports will be very slight, scarcely louder than a rifle-shot. I ought to tell you that I am an old hand at explosives, for in my young days I mined in Colorado, and recently I have employed them in my Alaska researches..."

"If we go home now," said Janet, rising, "we'll just catch papa before he goes out. You're very warm, Mr Bandicott, and I think you would be the better for a rest and a drink."

"I certainly should, my dear. I was so eager to begin that I bolted my breakfast, and started off before Junius was ready. He proposes to meet me here."

Benjie, left alone, wrought diligently at his heather roots, whistling softly to himself, and every now and then raising his head to scan the haugh and the lower glen. Presently a tall young man appeared, who was identified as the younger American, and who was duly directed to follow his father to the Castle. The two returned in a little while, accompanied by Agatha Raden, and, while the elder Mr Bandicott hastened to the Piper's Ring, the young people sauntered to the Raden bridge and appeared to be deep in converse. "That twa's weel agreed," was Benjie's comment. A little before one o'clock the party adjourned to the Castle, presumably for luncheon, and Benjie, whose noon-tide meal was always sparing, nibbled a crust of bread and a rind of cheese. In the afternoon Macpherson and one of the gillies strolled past, and the head-stalker proved wonderfully gracious, adjuring him, as Janet had done, to keep his eyes open and report the presence of any stranger. "There'll be the three folk from Strathlarrig howkin' awa there, but if ye see anybody else, away up to the house and tell the wife. They'll no be here for any good." Benjie promised fervently. "I've grand een, Mr Macpherson, sir, and though they was to be crawlin' like a serpent I'd be on them." The head-stalker observed that he was a "gleg one," and went his ways.

Despite his industry Benjie was remarkably observant that day, but he was not looking for poachers. He had suddenly developed an acute interest in the deer. His unaided eyes were as good as the ordinary man's telescope, and he kept a keen watch on the fringes of the great birch woods. The excavation at the Piper's Ring kept away any beasts from the east side of the haugh, but on the west bank of the stream he saw two lots of hinds grazing, with one or two young stags among them, and even on the east bank, close in to the edge of the river, he saw hinds with calves. He concluded that on the fringes of the Raden the feeding must be extra good, and, as a steady west wind was blowing, the deer there would not be alarmed by Mr Bandicott's quest. Just after he had finished his bread and cheese he was rewarded with the spectacle of a hummel, a great fellow of fully twenty stone, who rolled in a peat hole and then stood blowing in the shallow water as unconcerned as if he had been on the top of Carnmore. Later in the afternoon he saw a good ten-pointer in the same place, and a little later an eight-pointer with a damaged horn. He concluded that that particular hag was a favourite mud-bath for stags, and that with the wind in the west it was no way interfered with by the activities at the Piper's Ring.

About four o'clock Benjie backed the old horse into the shafts, and jogged up the beech-avenue to Mrs Macpherson's where he was stayed with tea and scones. There was a gathering outside the door of Macpherson himself and the two gillies, and a strange excitement seemed to have fallen on that stolid community. Benjie could not avoid—indeed, I am not sure that he tried to avoid—hearing scraps of their talk.

"I've been a' round Carnmore," said Alan, "and I seen some fine beasts. They're mostly in a howe atween the two tops, and a man at the Grey Beallach could keep an eye on all the good ground."

"Aye, but there's the Carn Moss, and the burnheads—there will be beasts there too," said James Fraser.

"There will have to be a man there, for him at the Grey Beallach would not ken what was happening."

"And what about Corrie Gall?" asked Macpherson fiercely.

"Ye canna post men on Carnmore—they will have to keep moving; it is that awful broken ground."

"Well, there's you and me and James," said Alan, "and there's Himself."

“And that’s the lot of us, and every man wanted.” said Macpherson.

“It’s what I was always saying—ye will need every man for Carnmore, and must let Carnbeg alone, or ye can watch Carnbeg and not go near Carnmore. We’re far ower few.”

“I was thinking,” said James Fraser, “that the youngest leddy might be watching Carnbeg.”

“Aye, James”—this satirically from Macpherson—“and how would the young leddy be keeping a wild man from killing a stag and getting him away?”

“Deed, I don’t ken,” said the puzzled James, “without she took a gun with her and had a shot at him.”

Benjie drove quietly to Inverlarrig for his supply of fish, and did not return to his head-quarters in the Wood of Larrigmore till nearly seven o’clock. At eight, having cooked and eaten his supper, he made a simple toilet, which consisted in washing the fish-scales and the stains of peat from his hands, holding his head in the river, parting his damp hair with a broken comb, and putting over his shoulders a waterproof cape, which had dropped from some passing conveyance and had been found by him on the road. Thus accoutred, he crossed the river and by devious paths ascended to Crask.

He ensconced himself in the stable, where he was greeted sourly by the Bluidy Mackenzie, who was tied up in one of the stalls. There he occupied himself in whistling strathspeys and stuffing a foul clay pipe with the stump of a cigar which he had picked up in the yard. Benjie smoked not for pleasure, but from a sense of duty, and a few whiffs were all he could manage with comfort. The gloaming had fallen before he heard his name called, and Wattie Lithgow appeared. “Ye’re there, ye monkey? The gentlemen are asking for ye. Quick and follow me. They’re in a awfu’ ill key the nicht and maunna be keepit waitin’.”

There certainly seemed trouble in the smoking-room when Benjie was ushered in. Lamancha was standing on the hearth-rug with a letter crumpled in his hand, and Sir Archie, waving a missive, was excitedly confronting him. The other two sat in arm-chairs with an air of protest and dejection.

“I forgot all about the infernal thing till I got Montgomery’s letter. The 4th of September! Hang it, my assault on old Claybody is timed to start on the 5th. How on earth can I get to Muirtown and back and deliver a speech, and be ready for the 5th? Besides, it betrays my presence in this part of the world. It simply can’t be done...and yet I don’t know how on earth to get out of it? Apparently the thing was arranged months ago.”

“You’re for it all right, my son,” cried Sir Archie, “and so am I. Here’s the beastly announcement. ‘A Great Conservative Meeting will be held in the Town Hall, Muirtown, on Thursday, September 4th, to be addressed by the Right Hon. the Earl of Lamancha, M.P., His Majesty’s Secretary of State for the Dominions. The chair will be taken at 3 p.m. by His Grace the Duke of Angus, K.G. Among the speakers will be Colonel Wavertree, M.P., the Hon. W.J. Murdoch, Ex-Premier of New Caledonia, and Captain Sir Archibald Roylance, D.S.O., prospective Conservative candidate for Wester Ross.’ Oh, will he? Not by a long chalk! Catch me going to such a fiasco, with Charles hidin’ here and the show left to the tender mercies of two rotten bad speakers and a prosy chairman.”

“Did you forget about it too?” Leithen asked.

“Course I did,” said Archie wildly. “How could I think of anything with you fellows turnin’ my house into a den of thieves? I forgot about it just as completely as Charles, only it doesn’t matter about me, and it matters the devil of a lot about him. I don’t stand an earthly chance of winnin’ the seat, if, first of all, I mustn’t canvass because of smallpox, and, second, my big meetin’, on which all my fellows counted, is wrecked by Charles playin’ the fool.”

Lamancha’s dark face broke into a smile.

“Don’t worry, old chap. I won’t let you down. But it looks as if I must let down John Macnab, and just when I was gettin’ keen about him...Hang it, no! There must be a way. I’m not going to be beaten either by Claybody or this damned Tory rally. Ned, you slacker, what’s your advice?”

“Have a try at the double event,” Leithen drawled. “You’ll probably make a mess of both, but it’s a sporting proposition.”

Archie’s face brightened. “You don’t realise how sportin’ a proposition it is. The Claybodys will be there, and they’ll be all over you—brother nobleman, you know, and you goin’ to poach their stags next day! Hang it, why shouldn’t you turn the affair into camouflage? ‘Out of my stony griefs Bethel I’ll raise,’ says the hymn...We’ll have to think the thing out ve-ry carefully.—Anyway, Charles, you’ve got to help me with my speech. I don’t mind so much lyin’ doggo here if I can put in a bit of good work on the 5th...Now, Benjie my lad, for your report.”

Benjie, not without a certain shyness, cleared his throat and began. He narrated how, following his instructions, he had secured Macpherson’s permission to cut heather for besoms on the Raden haugh. He had duly taken up his post there, had remained till four o’clock, and had seen such and such people and heard this and that talk. He recounted what he could remember of the speeches of Macpherson and the gillies.

“They’ve got accustomed to the sight of you, I suppose,” Palliser-Yeates said at length.

“Aye, they’re accustomed right enough. Both the young lady and Macpherson was tellin’ me to keep a look-out for poachers.” Benjie chuckled.

“Then to-morrow you begin to move up to the high ground by the Carnmore peat-road. Still keep busy at your besoms. You understand what I want you for, Benjie? If I kill a stag I have to get it off Glenraden land, and your old fish-cart won’t

be suspected.'

"Aye, I see that fine. But I've been thinkin' that there's maybe a better way."

"Go ahead, and let's have it."

Benjie began his speech nervously, but he soon warmed to it, and borrowed a cigar-box and the fire-irons to explain his case. The interest of his hearers kindled, until all four men were hanging on his words. When he concluded and had answered sundry questions, Sir Archie drew a deep breath and laughed excitedly.

"I suppose there's nothing in that that isn't quite cricket...I thought I knew something about bluff, but this—this absolutely vanquishes the band. Benjie, I'm goin' to have you taught poker. You've the right kind of mind for it."

V. — THE ASSAULT ON GLENRADEN

SHORTLY after midnight of the 28th day of August three men foregathered at the door of Macpherson's cottage, and after a few words took each a different road into the dark wastes of wood and heather. Macpherson contented himself with a patrol of the low ground in the glen, for his legs were not as nimble as they once had been and his back had a rheumatically stiffness. Alan departed with great strides for the Carnbeg tops, and James Fraser, the youngest and the leanest, set out for Carnmore, with the speed of an Indian hunter... Darkness gave place to the translucence of early dawn: the badger trotted home from his wanderings: the hill-fox barked in the cairns to summon his household: sleepy pipits awoke: the peregrine who lived above the Grey Beallach drifted down into the glens to look for breakfast: hinds and calves moved up from the hazel shows to the high fresh pastures: the tiny rustling noises of night disappeared in that hush which precedes the awakening of life: and then came the flood of morning gold from behind the dim eastern mountains, and in an instant the earth had wheeled into a new day. A thin spire of smoke rose from Mrs Macpherson's chimney, and presently the three wardens of the marches arrived for breakfast. They reported that the forest was still unviolated, that no alien foot had yet entered its sacred confines. Herd-boys, the offspring of Alan and James Fraser, had taken up their post at key-points, so that if a human being was seen on the glacis of the fort the fact would at once be reported to the garrison.

"I'm thinkin' he'll no come to-day," said Macpherson after this third cup of tea. "It will be the morn. The day he will be tryin' to confuse our minds, and that will no be a difficult job wi' you, Alan, my son."

"He'll come in the da-ark," said Alan crossly.

"And how would he be gettin' a beast in the dark? The Laird was sayin' that this man John Macnab was a gra-and sportsman. He will not be shootin' at any little staggie, but takin' a sizeable beast, and it's not a howlet could be tellin' a calf from a stag in these da-ark nights. Na, he will not shoot in the night, but he might be travellin' in the night and gettin' his shot in the early mornin'."

"What for," Alan asked, "should he not be havin' his shot in the gloamin' and gettin' the beast off the ground in the da-ark?"

"Because we will be watchin' all hours of the day. Ye heard what the Laird said, Alan Macdonald, and you, James Fraser. This John Macnab is not to shoot a Glenraden beast at all, at all, but if he shoots one he is not to move it one foot. If it comes to fightin', you are young lads and must break the head of him. But the Laird said for God's sake you was to have no guns, but to fight like honest folks with your fists, and maybe a wee bit stick. The Laird was sayin' the law was on our side, except for shootin'...Now, James Fraser, you will take the outer marches the day, and keep an eye on the peat-roads from Inverlarrig, and you, Alan, will watch Carnbeg, and I will be takin' the woods myself. The Laird was sayin' that it would be Carnmore the man Macnab would be tryin', most likely at skreigh of day the morn, and he would be hidin' the beast, if he got one, in some hag, and waitin' till the da-ark to shift him. So the morn we will all be on Carnmore, and I can tell you the Laird has the ground planned out so that a snipe would not be movin' without us seein' him."

The early morning broadened into day, and the glen slept in the windless heat of late August. Janet Raden, sauntering down from the Castle towards the river about eleven o'clock, thought that she had never seen the place so sabbatically peaceful. To her unquiet soul the calm seemed unnatural, like a thick cloak covering some feverish activity. All the household were abroad since breakfast—her father on a preliminary reconnaissance of Carnmore, Agatha and Mr Junius Bandicott on a circuit of Carnbeg, while the gillies and their youthful allies sat perched with telescopes on eyries surveying every approach to the forest. The plans seemed perfect, but the dread of John Macnab, that dark conspirator, would not be exorcised. It was she who had devised the campaign, based on her reading of the enemy's mind; but had she fathomed it, she asked herself? Might he not even now be preparing some master-stroke which would crumble their crude defences? Horrible stories which she had read of impersonation and the shifts of desperate characters recurred to her mind. Was John Macnab perhaps old Mr Bandicott disguised as an archaeologist? Or was he one of the Strathlarrig workmen?

She walked over the moor to the Piper's Ring and was greeted by a mild detonation and a shower of earth. Old Mr Bandicott, very warm and stripped to his shirt, was desperately busy and most voluble about his task. There was no impersonation here, nor in the two fiery-faced labourers who were burrowing their way towards the resting-place of Harald Blacktooth. Nevertheless, her suspicion was not allayed, she felt herself in the antechamber of plotters, and looked any moment to see on the fringes of the wood or on the white ribbon of road a mysterious furtive figure which she would know for a minion of the enemy.

But the minion did not appear. As Janet stood on the rise before the bridge of Raden with her hat removed to let the

faint south-west wind cool her forehead, she looked upon a scene of utter loneliness and peace. The party at the Piper's Ring were hidden, and in all the green amphitheatre nothing stirred but the stream. Even Fish Benjie and his horse had been stricken into carven immobility. He had moved away from the road a few hundred yards into the moor, not far from the waterside, and his little figure, as he whittled at his brooms, appeared from where Janet stood to be as motionless as a boulder, while the old grey pony mused upon three legs as rapt and lifeless as an Elgin marble. The two seemed to have become one with nature, and to be as much part of the sleeping landscape as the clump of birches whose leaves did not even shimmer in that bright silent noontide.

The quiet did something to soothe Janet's restlessness, but after luncheon, which she partook of in solitary state, she found it returning. A kind of *folie de doute* assailed her, not unknown to generals in the bad hours which intervene between the inception and execution of a plan. She had a strong desire to ride up to Crask and have a talk with Sir Archie, and was only restrained by the memory of that young man's last letter, and the hint it contained of grave bodily maladies. She did not know whether to believe in these maladies or not, but clearly she could not thrust her company upon one who had shown a marked distaste for it...Yet she had her pony saddled and rode slowly in the direction of Strathlarrig, half hoping to see a limping figure on the highway. But not a soul was in sight on the long blinding stretch or at the bridge where the Crask road started up the hill. Janet turned homeward with a feeling that the world had suddenly become dispeopled. She did not turn her head once, and so failed to notice first one figure and then another, which darted across the high road, and disappeared in the thick coverts of the Crask hill-side.

At the Castle she found Agatha and Junius Bandicott having tea, and presently her father arrived in a state of heat and exhaustion. Stayed with a whisky-and-soda, Colonel Raden became communicative. He had been over the high tops of Carnmore, had visited the Carn Moss, and Corrie Gall, had penetrated the Grey Beallach, had heard the tales of the gillies and of the herd-boys in their eyries, and his report was "all clear." The deer were undisturbed, according to James Fraser, since the morning. Moreover, the peat-road from Inverlarrig had relapsed owing to recent rains into primeval bog which no wheeled vehicle and few ponies could traverse. The main fortress seemed not only unassailed but unassailable, and Colonel Raden viewed the morrow with equanimity.

The Carnbeg party had a different story to tell, or rather the main members of it had no story at all. Agatha and Junius Bandicott appeared to have sauntered idly into the pleasant wilderness of juniper and heather which lay between the mossy summits, to have lunched at leisure by the famous Cailleach's Well, and to have sauntered home again. They reported that it had been divine weather, for a hill breeze had tempered the heat, and that they had observed the Claybody's yacht far out at the entrance of Loch Larrig. Also Junius had seen his first blue hare, which he called a "jack rabbit." Of anything suspicious there had been neither sign nor sound.

But at this moment a maid appeared with the announcement that "Macpherson was wanting to see the Colonel," and presently the head stalker arrived in what John Bunyan calls a "pelting heat." Generally of a pale complexion which never tanned, he was now as red as a peony, and his grey beard made a startling contrast with his flamboyant face. Usually he was an embarrassed figure inside the Castle, having difficulties in disposing of his arms and legs, but now excitement made him bold.

"I've seen him, Cornel," he panted. "Seen him crawlin' like an adder and runnin' like a sta-ag!"

"Seen who? Get your breath, Macpherson!"

"Him—the man—Macnab. I beg your pardon for my pechin', sir, but I came down the hill like I was a rollin' stone...It was up on the backside of Craig Dhu near the old sheep-fauld. I seen a man hunkerin' among the muckle stones, and I got my glass on him, and he was a sma' man that I've never seen afore. I was wild to get a grip of him, and I started runnin' to drive him to the Cailleach's Well, where Miss Agatha and the gentleman was havin' their lunch. He seen me, and he took the road I ettled, and I thought I had him, for, thinks I, the young gentleman is soople and lang in the leg. But he seen the danger and turned off down the burn, and I couldna come near him. It would have been all right if I could have made the young gentleman hear, but though I was roarin' like a stot he was deafer than a tree. Och, it is the great peety."

"Agatha, what on earth were you doing?" Janet asked severely.

Junius Bandicott blushed hotly. "I never heard a sound," he said. "There must be something funny about the acoustics of that place."

Colonel Raden, who knew the power of his stalker's lungs, looked in a mystified way from one to the other.

"Didn't you see Macpherson, Agatha?" he asked. "He must have been in view coming over the shoulder of Craig Dhu."

It was Agatha's turn to blush, which she did with vigour, and, to Mr Bandicott's eyes, with remarkable grace.

"Ach' I was in view well enough," went on the tactless Macpherson, "and I was routin' like a wild beast. But the twa of them was that busy talking they never lifted their eyes, and the man, as I tell you, slippit off down the burn. It is a gre-at peety, whatever."

"What did you do then?" the Colonel demanded.

"I followed him till I lost him in that awful rough corrie...But I seen him again—aye, I seen him again, away over on the Maam above the big wud. Standin', as impident as ye please, on the sky-line."

"How long after you lost him in the corrie?" Janet asked.

"Maybe half an hour."

"Impossible," she said sharply. "No living man could cover three miles of that ground in half an hour."

"I was thinkin' the body was the Deevil."

"You saw a second man. John Macnab has an accomplice."

Macpherson scratched his shaggy head. "I wouldn't say but ye're right, Miss Janet. Now I think of it, it was a bigger man. He didn't bide a moment after I caught sight of him, but I got my glass on him, and he was a bigger man. Aye, a bigger man, and, maybe, a younger man."

"This is very disturbing," said Colonel Raden, walking to the window and twisting his moustache. "What do you make of it, Nettie?"

"I think the affair is proceeding, as generals say about their battles, 'according to plan.' We didn't know before that John Macnab had a confederate, but of course he was bound to have one. There was nothing against it in the terms of the wager."

"Of course not, of course not. But what the devil was he doing on Carnbeg? There was no shot, Macpherson?"

"There was no shot, and there will be no shot. There was no beasts the side they were on, and Alan is up there now with one of James's laddies."

"It's exactly what we expected," said Janet. "It proves that we were right in guessing that John Macnab would take Carnmore. He came here to-day to frighten us about Carnbeg—make us think that he was going to try there, and get us to mass our forces. To-morrow he'll be on Carnmore, and then he'll mean business. I hoped this would happen, and I was getting nervous when Agatha and Mr Bandicott came home looking as blank as the Babes in the Wood. But I wish I knew which was really John Macnab—the little one or the tall one."

"What does it matter?" her parent asked.

"Because I should be happier if he were tall. Little men are far more cunning."

Junius Bandicott, having recovered his composure, chose to be amused. "I take that as a personal compliment, Miss Janet. I'm pretty big, and I can't say I want to be thought cunning."

"Then John Macnab will get his salmon," said Janet with decision.

Junius laughed. "You bet he won't. I've gotten the place watched like the Rum Fleet at home. A bird can't hardly cough without its being reported to me. My fellows are on to the game, and John Macnab will have to be a mighty clever citizen to come within a mile of the Strathlarrig water. Nobody is allowed to fish it but myself till the 3rd of September is past. I reckon angling just now is the forbidden fruit in this neighbourhood. I've seen but the one fellow fishing in the last three days—on the bit of slack water five hundred yards below the bridge. It belongs to Crask, I think."

Janet nodded. "No good except with a worm after a spate. Crask has no fishing worth the name."

"I saw him from the automobile early this morning," Junius continued. "Strange sight he was, too—dressed in pyjamas and rubbers—flogging away at the most helpless stretch you can imagine—dead calm, not a ripple. He had out about fifty yards of line, and when I passed he made a cast which fell with a flop about his ears. Who do you suppose he was? Somebody from Crask?"

Janet, who was the family's authority on Crask, agreed. "Probably some English servant who came down before breakfast just to say he had fished for salmon."

After tea Janet went down into the haugh. She met old Mr Bandicott returning from the Piper's Ring, a very grubby old gentleman, and a little dashed in spirits, for he had as yet seen no sign of Harald Blacktooth's coffin. "Another day's work," he announced, "and then I win or lose. I thought I had struck it this afternoon, but it was the solid granite. If the fellow is there he's probably in a rift of the rock. That has been known to happen. The Vikings found a natural fissure, stuck their dead chief in it, and heaped earth above to make a barrow..."

Down near the stream she met Benjie, who appeared to have worked late at his besoms, bumping over the moor to the road. He and his old pony made a more idyllic picture than ever in the mellow light of evening, almost too conventionally artistic to be real, she thought, till Benjie's immobile figure woke to life at the sight of her and he pulled his lint-white forelock. "A grand nicht, lady," he crooned, and jogged on into the beeches' shade. She sat on the bridge and watched the Raden waters pass from gold to amethyst and from amethyst to purple, and then sauntered back through the sweet-smelling dusk. Visions of John Macnab filled her mind, now a tall bravo with a colonial accent, now a gnarled Caliban of infinite cunning and gnome-like agility. Where in this haunted land was he ensconced—in some hazel covert, or in some clachan but-and-ben, or miles distant in a populous hotel, ready to speed in a swift car to the scene of action?...Anyhow, in twenty-four hours she would know if she had defeated this insolent challenger. On the eve of battle she had forgotten all about the stakes and her new hunter; it was the honour of Glenraden that was concerned, that little stone castle against the world.

Night fell, cool and cloudless, and the gillies went on their patrols. Carnmore was their only beat, and they returned one at a time to snatch a few hours' rest. At dawn they went out again—with the Colonel, but without Alan, who was to follow

after he had had his ration of sleep. It was arranged that the two girls and Junius Bandicott should spend the day on Carnbeg by way of extra precaution, though if a desperate man made the assault there it was not likely that Junius, who knew nothing of deer and had no hill-craft, would be able to stop him.

Janet woke in low spirits, and her depression increased as the morning advanced. She was full of vague forebodings, and of an irritable unrest to which her steady nerves had hitherto been a stranger. She wished she were a man and could be now on Carnmore, for Carnbeg, she was convinced, was out of danger. Junius, splendid in buckskin breeches and a russet sweater, she regarded with disfavour; he was a striking figure, but out of keeping with the hills, the obvious amateur, and she longed for the halting and guileful Sir Archie. Nor was her temper improved by the conduct of her companions. Agatha and Junius seemed to have an inordinate amount to say to each other, and their conversation was idiotic to the ears of a third party. Their eyes were far more on each other than on the landscape, and their telescopes were never in use. But it mattered little, for Carnbeg slept in a primordial peace. Only pipits broke the silence, only a circling merlin made movement in a spell-bound world. There were some hinds on the west side of Craig Dhu, but no stag showed—as was natural, the girl reflected, for in this weather and this early in the season the stags would be on the highest tops. John Macnab had chosen rightly if he wanted a shot, but there were three gillies and her father to prevent him getting his beast away.

At luncheon, which was eaten by the Cailleach's Well, Julius took to quoting poetry and Agatha to telling, very charmingly, the fairy tales of the glens. To Janet it all seemed wrong; this was not an occasion for literary philandering, when the credit of Glenraden was at stake. But even she was forced to confess that nothing was astir in the mossy wilderness. She climbed to the top of Craig Dhu and had a long spy, but, except for more hinds and one small knobber, living thing there was none. As the afternoon drew on, she drifted away from the two, who, being engrossed with each other, did not notice her departure.

She wandered through the deep heather of the Maam to where the great woods began that dipped to the Raden glen. It was pleasant walking in the cool shade of the pines on turf which was half thyme and milkwort and eyebright, and presently her spirits rose. Now and then, on some knuckle of blaeberry-covered rock which rose above the trees, she would halt, and, stretched at full length, would spy the nooks of the Home beat. There was no lack of deer there. She picked up one group and then another in the aisles and clearings of the woods, and there were shootable stags among them.

A report like a rifle-shot suddenly startled her. Then she remembered old Mr Bandicott down in the haugh, and, turning her glance in that direction, saw a thin cloud of blue smoke floating away from the Piper's Ring.

Slowly she worked her way down-hill, aiming at the haugh about a mile upstream from the excavators. Once a startled hind and calf sprang up from her feet, and once an old fox slipped out of a pile of rocks and revived thoughts of Warwickshire and her problematic hunter. Soon she was not more than three hundred feet above the stream level, and found a bracken-clad hillock where she could lie and watch the scene. There was a roebuck feeding just below her, a roebuck with fine horns, and it amused her to see the beast come nearer and nearer, since the wind was behind him. He got within five yards of the girl, who lay mute as a stone; then some impulse made him look up and meet her eye, and in a second he had streaked into cover.

Amid that delicious weather and in that home of peace Janet began to recapture her usual mirthfulness. She had been right; Carnmore was the place John Macnab would select, unless his heart had failed him, and on Carnmore he would get a warm reception. There was no need to worry any longer about John Macnab...Her thoughts went back to Agatha. Clearly Junius Bandicott was in love with her, and probably she would soon be in love with Junius Bandicott. No one could call it anything but a most suitable match, but Janet was vaguely unhappy about it, for it meant a break in their tiny household and the end of a long and affectionate, if occasionally tempestuous, comradeship. She would be very lonely at Glenraden without Agatha, and what would Agatha do when transplanted to a foreign shore—Agatha, for whom the world was bounded by her native hills? She began to figure to herself what America was like, and, as her pictures had no basis of knowledge, they soon became fantastic, and merged into dreams. The drowsy afternoon world laid its spell upon the girl, and she fell asleep.

She awoke half an hour later with the sound of a shot in her ear. It set her scrambling to her feet till she remembered the excavators at the Piper's Ring, who were out of sight of the knoll on which she stood, somewhat on her right rear. Reassured, she lazily scanned the sleeping haugh, with the glittering Raden in the middle distance, and beyond the wooded slopes of the other side of the glen. She noticed a small troop of deer splashing through the shallows. Had they been scared by Mr Bandicott's explosion? That was odd, for the report had been faint and they were up-wind from it.

They were badly startled, for they raced through the river and disappeared in a few breathless seconds in the farther woods...Suddenly a thought made her heart beat wildly, and she raked the ground with her glass...

There was something tawny on a patch of turf in a little hollow near the stream. A moment of anxious spying showed her that it was a dead stag. The report had not been Mr Bandicott's dynamite, but a rifle.

Down the hill-side like a startled hind went Janet. She was choking with excitement, and had no clear idea in her head except a determination that John Macnab should not lay hand on the stricken beast. If he had pierced their defences, and got his shot, he would at any rate not get the carcass off the ground. No thought of the stakes and her hunter occurred to her—only of Glenraden and its inviolate honour.

Almost at once she lost sight of the place where the stag lay. She was now on the low ground of the haugh, in a

wilderness of bogs and hollows and overgrown boulders, with half a mile of rough country between her and her goal. Soon she was panting hard: presently she had a stitch in her side; her eyes dimmed with fatigue, and her hat flew off and was left behind. It was abominable ground for speed, for there were heather-roots to trip the foot, and mires to engulf it, and noxious stones over which a runner must go warily or break an ankle. On with bursting heart went Janet, slipping, floundering, more than once taking wild tosses. Her light shoes grew leaden, her thin skirts a vast entangling quilt; her side ached and her legs were fast numbing...Then, from a slight rise, she had a glimpse of the Raden water, now very near, and the sight of a moving head. Her speed redoubled, and miraculously her aches ceased—the fire of battle filled her, as it had burned in her progenitors when they descended on their foes through the moonlit passes.

Suddenly she was at the scene of the dark deed. There lay the dead stag, and beside it a tall man with his shirt-sleeves turned up and a knife in his hand. That the miscreant should be calmly proceeding to the gralloch was like a fiery stimulant to Janet's spirit. Gone was every vestige of fatigue, and she descended the last slope like a maenad.

"Stop!" she sobbed. "Stop, you villain!"

The man started at her voice, and drew himself up. He saw a slim dishevelled girl, hatless, her fair locks fast coming down, who, in the attitude of a tragedy queen, stood with uplifted and accusing hand. She saw a tall man, apparently young, with a very ruddy face, a thatch of sandy hair, and ancient, disreputable clothes.

"You are beaten, John Macnab," cried the panting voice. "I forbid you to touch that stag. I..."

The man seemed to have grasped the situation, for he shut the knife and slipped it back in his pocket. Also he smiled. Also he held both hands above his head.

"*Kamerad!*" he said. "I acknowledge defeat, Miss Raden."

Then he picked up his rifle and his discarded jacket, and turned and ran for it. She heard him splashing through the river, and in three minutes he was swallowed up in the farther woods.

The victorious Janet sank gasping on the turf. She wanted to cry, but changed her mind and began to laugh hysterically. After that she wanted to sing. She and she alone had defeated the marauder, while every man about the place was roosting idly on Carnmore. Now at last she remembered that hunter which would carry her in the winter over the Midland pastures. That was good, but to have beaten John Macnab was better...And then just a shade of compunction tempered her triumph. She had greatly liked the look of John Macnab. He was a gentleman—his voice bore witness to the fact, and the way he had behaved. *Kamerad!* He must have fought in the war and had no doubt done well. Also, he was beyond question a sportsman. The stag was just the kind of beast that a sportsman would kill—a switch-horn, going back in condition—and he had picked him out of a herd of better beasts. The shot was a workmanlike one—through the neck...

And the audacity of him! His wits had beaten them all, for he had chosen the Home beat which everyone had dismissed as inviolable. Truly a foeman worthy of her steel, whom like all good fighters after victory she was disposed to love.

Crouched beside the dead stag, she slowly recovered her breath. What was the next move to be? If she left the beast might not John Macnab return and make off with it? No, he wouldn't. He was a gentleman, and would not go back on his admission of defeat. But she was anxious to drain the last drops of her cup of triumph, to confront the idle garrison of Carnmore on its return with the tangible proof of her victory. The stag should be lying at the Castle door, and she herself waiting beside it to tell her tale. She might borrow Mr Bandicott's men to move it.

Hastily doing up her hair, she climbed out of the hollow to the little ridge which gave a prospect over the haugh. There before her, not a hundred yards distant, was the old cart and the white pony of Fish Benjie, looking as if it had been part of the landscape since the beginning of time.

Benjie had wormed his way far into the moss, for he was more than half a mile from the road. It appeared that he had finished his day's work on the besoms, for his pony was in the shafts, and he himself was busy loading the cart with the fruits of his toil. She called out to him, but got no reply, and it was not till she stood beside him that he looked up from his work.

"Benjie," she said, "come at once. I want you to help me. Have you been here long?"

"Since nine this mornin', lady." Benjie's face was as impassive as a stump of oak.

"Didn't you hear a shot?"

"I heard a gude wheen shots. The auld man up at the Piper's Ring has been blastin' awa."

"But close to you? Didn't you see a man—not five minutes ago?"

"Aye, I seen a man. I seen him crossin' the water. I thought he was a gentleman from the Castle. He had a gun wi' him."

"It was a poacher, Benjie," said Janet dramatically. "The poacher I wanted you to look out for. He has killed a stag, too, but I drove him away. You must help me to get the beast home. Can you get your cart over that knowe?"

"Fine, lady."

Without more words Benjie took the reins and started the old pony. The cart floundered a little in a wet patch, tittuped over the tussocks, and descended with many jolts to the neighbourhood of the stag—Janet dancing in front of it like an Israelitish priest before the Ark of the Covenant.

The late afternoon was very hot, for down in the haugh the wind had died away. The stag weighed not less than fifteen stone, and before they finished Janet would have called them tons. Yet the great task of transshipment was accomplished. The pony was taken out of the shafts and the cart tilted, and, after some strenuous minutes, the carcase was heaved and pushed and levered on to its floor. Janet, hanging on to the shafts, with incredible exertions pulled them down, while Benjie—a tiny Atlas—prevented the beast from slipping back by bearing its weight on his shoulders. The backboard was put in its place, the mass of brooms and heather piled on the stag, the pony restored to the shafts, and the cortège was ready for the road. Benjie had his face adorned with a new scratch and a quantity of deer's blood, Janet had nobly torn her jumper and one stocking; but these were trivial casualties for so great an action.

"Drive straight to the Castle and tell them to leave the beast before the door. You understand, Benjie? Before the door—not in the larder. I'm going to strike home through the woods, for I'm an awful sight."

"Ye look very bonny, lady," said the gallant Benjie as he took up the reins.

Janet watched the strange outfit lumber from the hollow and nearly upset over a hidden boulder. It had the appearance of a moving peat-stack, with a solitary horn jutting heavenwards like a withered branch. Once again the girl subsided on the heather and laughed till she ached.

* * * * *

The highway by the Larrig side slept in the golden afternoon. Not a conveyance had disturbed its peace save the baker's cart from Inverlarrig, which had passed about three o'clock. About half-past five a man crossed it—a man who had descended from the hill and used the stepping-stones where Sir Archibald Roylance had come to grief. He was a tall man with a rifle, hatless, untidy and very warm, and he seemed to desire to be unobserved, for he made certain that the road was clear before he ventured on it. Once across, he found shelter in a clump of broom, whence he could command a long stretch of the highway, almost from Glenraden gates to the Bridge of Larrig.

Mr Palliser-Yeates, having reached sanctuary—for behind him lay the broken hillsides of Crask—mopped his brow and lit a pipe. He did not seem to be greatly distressed at the result of the afternoon. Indeed, he laughed—not wildly like Janet, but quietly and with philosophy. "A very neat hold-up," he reflected. "Gad, she came on like a small destroying angel... That's the girl Archie's been talking about...a very good girl. She looked as if she'd have taken on an army corps...Jolly romantic ending—might have come out of a novel. Only it should have been Archie, and a prospect of wedding bells—what?...Anyway, we'd have won out all right but for the girl, and I don't mind being beaten by her..."

His meditations were interrupted by the sound of furious wheels on the lone highway, and he cautiously raised his head to see an old horse and an older cart being urged towards him at a canter. The charioteer was a small boy, and above the cart sides projected a stag's horn.

Forgetting all precautions, he stood up, and at the sight of him Benjie, not without difficulty, checked the ardour of his much-belaboured beast, and stopped before him.

"I've gotten it," he whispered hoarsely. "The stag's in the cairt. The lassie and me histed him in, and she tell't me to drive to the Castle. But when I was out o' sicht o' her, I took the auld road through the wud and here I am. We've gotten the stag off Glenraden ground and we can hide him up at Crask, and I'll slip down in the cairt afore mornin' and leave him ootbye the Castle wi' a letter from John Macnab. Fegs, it was a near thing!"

Benjie's voice rose into a shrill paeon, his disreputable face shone with unholy joy. And then something in Palliser-Yeates's eyes cut short his triumph.

"Benjie, you little fool, right about turn at once. I'm much obliged to you, but it can't be done. It isn't the game, you know. I chucked up the sponge when Miss Raden challenged me, and I can't go back on that. Back you go to Glenraden and hand over the stag. Quick, before you're missed...And look here—you're a first-class sportsman, and I'm enormously grateful to you. Here is something for your trouble."

Benjie's face grew very red as he swung his equipage round. "I see," he said. "If ye like to be beat by a lassie, dinna blame me. I'm no wantin' your money."

The next moment the fish-cart was clattering in the other direction.

To a mystified and anxious girl, pacing the gravel in front of the Castle, entered the fish-cart. The old horse seemed in the last stages of exhaustion, and the boy who drove it was a dejected and sparrow-like figure.

"Where in the world have you been?" Janet demanded.

"I was run awa' wi', lady," Benjie whined. "The auld powny didna like the smell o' the stag. He bolted in the wud, and I didna get him stoppit till verra near the Larrig Bridge."

"Poor little Benjie! Now you're going to Mrs Fraser to have the best tea you ever had in your life, and you shall also have ten shillings."

"Thank you very kindly, lady, but I canna stop for tea. I maun awa down to Inverlarrig for my fish." But his hand closed readily on the note, for he had no compunction in taking money from one who had made him to bear the bitterness of incomprehensible defeat.

CHAPTER 6

VI. — THE RETURN OF HARALD BLACKTOOTH

Miss Janet Raden had a taste for the dramatic, which that night was nobly gratified. The space in front of the great door of the Castle became a stage of which the sole furniture was a deceased stag, but on which event succeeded event with a speed which recalled the cinema rather than the legitimate drama.

First, about six o'clock, entered Agatha and Junius Bandicott from their casual wardenship of Carnbeg. The effect upon the young man was surprising. Hitherto he had only half believed in John Macnab, and had regarded the defence of Glenraden as more or less of a joke. It seemed to him inconceivable that, even with the slender staffing of the forest, one man could enter and slay and recover a deer. But when he heard Janet's tale he became visibly excited, and his careful and precise English, the bequest of his New England birth, broke down into college slang.

"The man's a crackerjack," he murmured reverentially. "He has us all rocketing around the mountain tops, and then takes advantage of my dad's blasting operations and raids the front yard. He can pull the slick stuff all right, and we at Strathlarrig had better get cold towels round our heads and do some thinking. Our time's getting short, too, for he starts at midnight the day after to-morrow...What did you say the fellow was like, Miss Janet? Young, and big, and behaved like a gentleman? It's a tougher proposition than I thought, and I'm going home right now to put old Angus through his paces."

With a deeply preoccupied face Junius, declining tea, fetched his car from the stableyard and took his leave.

At seven-fifteen Colonel Raden, bestriding a deer pony, emerged from the beech avenue, and waved a cheerful hand to his daughters.

"It's all right, my dears. Not a sign of the blackguard. The men will remain on Carnmore till midnight to be perfectly safe, but I'm inclined to think that the whole thing is a fiasco. He has been frightened away by our precautions. But it's been a jolly day on the high tops, and I have the thirst of all creation."

Then his eyes fell on the stag. "God bless my soul," he cried, "what is that?"

"That," said Janet, "is the stag which John Macnab killed this afternoon."

The Colonel promptly fell off his pony.

"Where—when?" he stammered.

"On the Home beat," said Janet calmly. The situation was going to be quite as dramatic as she had hoped. "I saw it fall, and ran hard and got up to it just when he was starting the gralloch. He was really quite nice about it."

"What did he do?" her parent demanded.

"He held up his hands and laughed and cried '*Kamerad!*' Then he ran away."

"The scoundrel showed a proper sense of shame."

"I don't think he was ashamed. Why should he be, for we accepted his challenge. You know, he's a gentleman, papa, and quite young and good looking."

Colonel Raden's mind was passing through swift stages from exasperation to unwilling respect. It was an infernal annoyance that John Macnab should have been suffered to intrude on the sacred soil of Glenraden, but the man had played the boldest kind of hand, and he had certainly not tailored his beast. Besides, he had been beaten—beaten by a girl, a daughter of the house. The honour of Glenraden might be considered sacrosanct after all.

A long drink restored the Colonel's equanimity, and the thought of their careful preparations expended in the void moved him to laughter.

"Pon my word, Nettie, I should like to ask the fellow to dinner. I wonder where on earth he is living. He can't be far off, for he is due at Strathlarrig very soon. What did young Bandicott say the day was?"

"Midnight, the day after to-morrow. Mr Junius feels very solemn after to-day, and has hurried home to put his house in order."

"Nettie," said the Colonel gravely, "I am prepared to make the modest bet that John Macnab gets his salmon. Hang it all, if he could outwit us— and he did it, confound him—he is bound to outwit the Bandicotts. I tell you what, John Macnab is a very remarkable man—a man in a million, and I'm very much inclined to wish him success."

"So am I," said Janet; but Agatha announced indignantly that she had never met a case of grosser selfishness. She announced, too, that she was prepared to join in the guarding of Strathlarrig.

"If you and Junius are no more use than you were on Carnbeg to-day, John Macnab needn't worry," said Janet sweetly.

Agatha was about to retort when there was a sudden diversion. The elder Bandicott appeared at a pace which was almost a run, breathing hard, and with all the appearance of strong excitement. Fifty yards behind him could be seen the two Strathlarrig labourers, making the best speed they could under the burden of heavy sacks. Mr Bandicott had no breath left to speak, but he motioned to his audience to give him time and permit his henchmen to arrive. These henchmen he directed to the lawn, where they dropped their sacks on the grass. Then, with an air which was almost sacramental, he

turned to Colonel Raden.

"Sir," he said, "you are privileged—WE are privileged—to assist in the greatest triumph of modern archaeology. I have found the coffin of Harald Blacktooth with the dust of Harald Blacktooth inside it."

"The devil you have!" said the Colonel. "I suppose I ought to congratulate you, but I'm bound to say I'm rather sorry. I feel as if I had violated the tomb of my ancestors."

"You need have no fear, sir. The dust has been reverently restored to its casket, and to-morrow the Piper's Ring will show no trace of the work. But within the stone casket there were articles which, in the name of science, I have taken the liberty to bring with me, and which will awaken an interest among the learned not less, I am convinced, than Schliemann's discoveries at Mycenae. I have found, sir, incredible treasures."

"Treasures!" cried all three of his auditors, for the word has not lost its ancient magic.

Mr Bandicott, with the air of one addressing the Smithsonian Institution, signalled to his henchmen, who thereupon emptied the sacks on the lawn. A curious jumble of objects lay scattered under the evening sun—two massive torques, several bowls and flagons, spear-heads from which the hafts had long since rotted, a sword-blade, and a quantity of brooches, armlets, and rings. A dingy enough collection they made to the eyes of the onlookers as Mr Bandicott arranged them in two heaps.

"These," he said, pointing to the torques, armlets, and flagons, "are, so far as I can judge, of solid gold."

The Colonel called upon his Maker to sanctify his soul. "Gold! These are great things! They must be prodigiously valuable. Are they mine, or yours, or whose?"

"I am not familiar with the law of Scotland on the matter of treasure trove, but I assume that the State can annex them, paying you a percentage of their value. For myself, I gladly waive all claims. I am a man of science, sir, not a treasure-hunter...But the merit of the discovery does not lie in those objects, which can be paralleled from many tombs in Scotland and Norway. No, sir, the tremendous, the epoch-making value is to be found in these." And he indicated some bracelets and a necklace which looked as if they were made of queerly-marked and very dirty shells.

Mr Bandicott lifted one and fingered it lovingly.

"I have found such objects in graves as far apart as the coast of Labrador and the coast of Rhode Island, and as far inland as the Ohio basin. These shells were the common funerary adjunct of the primitive inhabitants of my country, and they are peculiar to the North American Continent. Do you see what follows, sir?"

The Colonel did not, and Mr Bandicott, his voice thrilling with emotion, continued:

"It follows that Harald Blacktooth obtained them from the only place he could obtain them, the other side of the Atlantic. There is historical warrant for believing that he voyaged to Greenland; and now we know that he landed upon the main North American Continent. The legends of Eric the Red and Leif the Lucky are verified by archaeology. In you, sir, I salute, most reverently salute, the representative of a family to whom belongs the credit hitherto given to Columbus."

Colonel Raden plucked feebly at his moustache, and Janet, I regret to say, laughed. But her untimely merriment was checked by Mr Bandicott, who was pronouncing a sort of benediction.

"I rejoice that it has been given to me, an American, to solve this secular riddle. When I think that the dust which an hour ago I touched, and which has lain for centuries under that quiet mound, was once the man who, first of Europeans, trod our soil, my imagination staggers. Colonel Raden, I thank you for having given me the greatest moment of my not uneventful life."

He took off his hat, and the Colonel rather shame-facedly removed his. The two men stood looking solemnly at each other till practical considerations occurred to the descendant of the Viking.

"What are you going to do with the loot?" he asked.

"With your permission, I will take it to Strathlarrig, where I can examine and catalogue it at my leisure. I propose to announce the find at once to the world. To-morrow I will return with my men and remove the traces of our excavation."

Mr Bandicott departed in his car, sitting erect at the wheel in a strangely priest-like attitude, while the two men guarded the treasure behind. He had no eyes for the twilight landscape, or he would have seen in the canal-like stretch of the Larrig belonging to Crask, which lay below the rapids and was universally condemned as hopeless for fish, a solitary angler, who, as the car passed, made a most bungling amateurish cast, but who, when the coast was once more clear, flung a line of surprising delicacy. He could not see the curious way in which that angler placed his fly, laying it with a curl a yard above a moving fish, and then sinking it with a dexterous twist: nor did he see, a quarter of an hour later, the same angler land a fair salmon from water in which in the memory of man no salmon had ever been taken before.

Colonel Raden and his daughters stood watching the departing archaeologist, and as his car vanished among the beeches Janet seized her sister and whirled her into a dance. "Such a day," she cried, when the indignant Agatha had escaped and was patting her disordered hair. "Losses—one stag, which was better dead. Gains—defeat of John Macnab, fifty pounds sterling, a share of the unknown value in Harald Blacktooth's treasure, and the annexation of America by the Raden family."

"You'd better say that America has annexed us," said the still flustered Agatha. "They've dug up our barrow, and this afternoon Junius Bandicott asked me to marry him."

Janet stopped in her tracks. "What did you say?"

"I said 'No' of course. I've only known him a week." But her tone was such as to make her sister fear the worst.

Mr Bandicott was an archaeologist, but he was also a business man, and he was disposed to use the whole apparatus of civilisation to announce his discovery to the world. With a good deal of trouble he got the two chief Scottish newspapers on the telephone, and dictated to them a summary of his story.

He asked them to pass the matter on to the London press, and he gave them ample references to establish his good faith. Also he prepared a sheaf of telegrams and cables—to learned societies in Britain and America, to the great New York daily of which he was the principal owner, to the British Museum, to the Secretary for Scotland, and to friends in the same line of scholarship. Having left instructions that these messages should be despatched from Inverlarrig at dawn, he went to bed in a state of profound jubilation and utter fatigue.

Next morning, while his father was absorbed in the remains of Harald Blacktooth, Junius summoned a council of war. To it there came Angus, the head-keeper, a morose old man near six-foot-four in height, clean-shaven, with eyebrows like a penthouse; Lennox, his second-in-command, whom Leithen had met on his reconnaissance; and two youthful watchers, late of Lovat's Scouts, known as Jimsie and Davie. There were others about the place who could be mobilised if necessary, including the two chauffeurs, an under-footman and a valet; but, as Junius looked at this formidable quartet, and reflected on the narrow limits of the area of danger, he concluded that he had all the man-power he needed.

"Now, listen to me, Angus," he began. "This poacher Macnab proposes to start in to-morrow night at twelve o'clock, and according to his challenge he has forty-eight hours to get a fish in—up till midnight on the 3rd of September. I want your advice about the best way of checkmating him. You've attended to my orders, and let nobody near the river during the past week?"

"Aye, sir, and there's nobody socht to gang near it," said Angus. "The country-side has been as quiet as a grave."

"Well, it won't be after to-morrow night. You've probably heard that this Macnab killed a stag on Glenraden yesterday—killed it within half a mile of the house, and would have got away with it but for the younger Miss Raden."

They had heard of it, for the glen had talked of nothing else all night, but they thought it good manners to express amazement. "Heard ye ever the like?" said one. "Macnab maun be a fair deevil," said another. "If I had just a grip of him," sighed the blood-thirsty Angus.

"It's clear we're up against something quite out of the common," Junius went on, "and we daren't give him the faintest outside chance. Now, let's consider the river. You say you've seen nobody near it."

"There hasn't been a line cast in the watter forbye your own, sir," said Angus.

"I just seen the one man fishin' a' week," volunteered Jimsie. "It was on the Crask water below the brig. I jaloused that he was one of the servants from Crask, and maybe no very right in the heid. He had no notion of it at all, at all."

"Well, that's so far good. Now what about the river outside the park? Our beat runs from the Larrig Bridge—what's it like between the bridge and the lodge? You've never taken me fishing there."

"Ye wad need to be dementit before you went fishin' there," said Angus grimly. "There's the stretch above the brig that they ca' the Lang Whang. There was never man killed a saumon in it, for the fish dinna bide, but rin through to the Wood Pule. There's fish in the Wood Pule, but the trees are that thick that ye canna cast a flee. Though I'll no say," he added meditatively, "that ye couldna cleek a fish out of it. I'd better put a watcher at the Wood Pule."

"You may rule that out, for the bargain says 'legitimate means,' and from all I know of Macnab he's a sportsman and keeps his word. Well, then, we come to the park, where we've five pools—the Duke's, the Black Scour, Davie's Pot, Lady Maisie's, and the Minister's. We've got to keep our eyes skinned there...What about the upper water?"

"There's no a fish in it," said Lennox. "They canna get past the linn above the Minister's. There was aye talk o' makin' a salmon ladder, but naething was done, and there's nocht above the Minister's but small broon trout."

"That makes it a pretty simple proposition," said Junius. "We've just the five pools to guard. For the form of the thing we'll keep watchers on all night, but we may take it that the danger lies only in the thirty-four hours of daylight. Now, remember, we're taking no chances. Not a soul is to be allowed to fish on the Strathlarrig water till after midnight on the 3rd of September. Not even I or my father. Macnab's a foxy fellow and I wouldn't put it past him to disguise himself as Mr Bandicott or myself. Do you understand? If you see a man near the river, kick him out. If he has a rod in his hand, lock him up in the garage and send for me...No, better still. Nobody's to be allowed inside the gates—except Colonel Raden and his daughters. You'd better tell the lodge-keeper, Angus. If anybody comes to call, they must come back another day. These are my orders, you understand, and I fire anyone who disobeys them. If the 3rd of September passes without accident there's twenty dollars—I mean to say, five pounds—for each of you. That's all I've got to say."

"Will we watch below the park, sir?" Angus asked.

"Watch every damn foot of the water from the bridge to the linns."

Thus it came about that when Janet Raden took her afternoon ride past the Wood of Larrigmore she beheld a man patrolling the bog like a policeman on point duty, and when she entered the park for a gallop on the smooth turf she observed a picket at each pool. "Poor John Macnab!" she sighed. "He hasn't the ghost of a chance. I'm rather sorry my family discovered America."

Next day, the 1st of September, the Scottish Press published a short account of Mr Bandicott's discovery, and The Scotsman had a leader on it. About noon a spate of telegrams began, and the girl who carried them on a bicycle from Inverlarrig had a weary time of it. The following morning the Press of Britain spread themselves on the subject. The Times had a leader and an interview with a high authority at the British Museum; the Daily Mail had a portrait of Mr Bandicott and a sketch of his past career, a photograph of what purported to be a Viking's tomb in Norway, and a chatty article on the law of treasure-trove. The Morning Post congratulated the discoverer in the name of science, but lamented in the name of patriotism that the honour should have fallen to an alien—views which led to an interminable controversy in its pages with the secretary of the Pilgrim's Club and the president of the American Chamber of Commerce. The evening papers had brightly written articles on Strathlarrig, touching on the sport of deer-stalking, Celtic mysticism, the crofter question, and the law dealing with access to mountains. The previous evening, too, the special correspondents had begun to arrive from all points of the compass, so that the little inn of Inverlarrig had people sleeping in its one bathroom and under its dining-room table. By the morning of the 2nd of September the glen had almost doubled its male population.

The morning, after some rain in the night, broke in the thin fog which promised a day of blazing heat. Sir Edward Leithen, taking the air after breakfast, decided that his attempt should be made in the evening, for he wanted the Larrig waters well warmed by the sun for the type of fishing he proposed to follow. Benjie had faithfully reported to him the precautions which the Bandicotts had adopted, and his meditations were not cheerful. With luck he might get a fish, but only by a miracle could he escape unobserved. His plan depended upon the Lang Whang being neglected by the watchers as not worthy of their vigilance, but according to Benjie's account even the Lang Whang had become a promenade. He had now lost any half-heartedness in the business, and his obstinate soul was as set on victory as ever it had been the case in the Law Courts. For the past four days he had thought of nothing else,—his interest in Palliser-Yeates's attack on Glenraden had been notably fainter than that of the others; every energy he had of mind and body was centred upon killing a fish that night and carrying it off. With some amusement he reflected that he had dissipated the last atom of his ennui, and he almost regretted that apathy had been exchanged for this violent pre-occupation.

Presently he turned his steps to the arbour to the east of the garden, which forms at once a hiding-place and a watch-tower. There he found his host busied about the preparation of his speech, with the assistance of Lamancha, who was also engaged intermittently in the study of the ordnance map of Haripol.

"It's a black look-out for you, Ned," said Sir Archie. "I hear the Bandicotts have taped off every yard of their water, and have got a man to every three. Benjie says the place only wants a piper or two to be like the Muirtown Highland Gathering. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to have a try this evening. I can't chuck in my hand, but the thing's a stark impossibility. I hoped old Bandicott would be so excited at unearthing the Viking that he would forget about precautions, but he's as active as a beaver."

"That's the young 'un. He don't give a damn for Vikings, but he's out to protect his fish. You've struck the American business mind, my lad, and it's an awful thing for us casual Britons. I suppose you won't let me come down and watch you. I'd give a lot to see a scrap between you and that troglodyte Angus."

At that moment Benjie, wearing the waterproof cape of ceremony, presented himself at the arbour door. He bore a letter which he presented to Sir Archie. The young man read it with a face which was at once perplexed and pleased.

"It's from old Bandicott. He says he has got some antiquarian swell—Professor Babwater I think the name is—coming to stay, and he wants me to dine tonight—says the Radens are coming too...This is the devil. What had I better do, Charles?"

"Stay at home. You'll put your foot in it somehow if you go. The girl who held up old John will be there, and she's bound to talk about John Macnab, and you're equally bound to give the show away."

"But I haven't any sort of an excuse. Americans are noted for their politeness, and here I have been shutting the door in the face of the poor old chap when he toiled up the hill. He won't understand it, and people will begin to talk, and that's the quickest way to blow the gaff. Besides, I've got to give up this lie about my ill-health if I'm to appear at Muirtown the day after to-morrow. What do you say, Ned?"

"I think you'd better go," Leithen answered. "We can't have the neighbourhood thinking you are plague-stricken. You'll be drinking port, while I'm being carted by the gillies into the coal-hole. But for Heaven's sake, Archie, go canny. That Raden girl will turn you inside out, if you give her a chance. And don't you try and be clever, whatever happens. If there's a row and you see me being frog-marched into captivity, don't trouble to create a diversion. Behave as if you had never seen me in your life before...You hadn't heard of John Macnab except from Miss Raden, and you're desperately keen to hear more, you understand. Play the guileless innocent and rack your brains to think who he can be. Start any hare you like—that he's D'Annunzio looking for excitement...or the Poet Laureate...or an escaped lunatic. And keep it up that you are in delicate health. Oh, and talk politics—they're safe enough. Babble about the Rally, and how the great Lamancha's coming up for it all the way from the Borders."

Archie nodded, with a contented look in his eyes. "I'm goin' to take your advice. Where did you get this note, Benjie?"

From Mactavish at the lodge? All right, I'll give you a line to take back with you...By the way, Ned, what's your get-up to-night? I'd better know beforehand in case of accidents."

"I'm going to look the basest kind of poaching tramp. I've selected my costume from the combined wardrobes of this household, and I can tell you it's pretty dingy. Mrs Lithgow is at present engaged in clouting the oldest pair of Wattie's breeks for me...My only chance is to be a regular ragamuffin and the worst I need fear then is a rough handling from the gillies. Bandicott, I take it, is not the sort of fellow to want to prosecute. If I'm caught—which is fairly certain—I'll probably get a drubbing and spend the night in a cellar and be given my breakfast next morning and kicked out. It's a different matter for you, Charles, with the legally minded Claybody."

"What odds are you offerin'?" Sir Archie asked. "John backed himself and I took a tenner off him. What about an even fiver?"

"I'll give you three to one in five-pound notes that I win," said Leithen grimly. "But that's pride, not conviction."

"Done with you, my lad," said Sir Archie, and departed to write an acceptance of the invitation to dinner.

Fish Benjie remained behind, and it was clear that he had something to communicate. He caught Lamancha's eye, who gave him the opening he sought by asking what was the news from Strathlarrig. Benjie had the instinct of the ballad-maker, and would begin his longer discourses with an epic flourish of the "Late at e'en drinkin' the wine" style.

"It was at fower o'clock this mornin' they started," he announced, "and they're still comin'."

"Coming? Who?" Leithen asked.

"Jornalists. The place is crawlin' wi' them. I seen six on bicycles and five in cawrs and twa in the Inverlarrig dowg-cairt. They're a wantin' to see auld Bandicott, but auld Bandicott will no see them. Mactavish stops them at the lodge, and speirs what they want, and they gie him cairds wi' their names prentit, and he sends them up to the hoose, but he'll no let them enter. Syne the message comes back that the maister will see them the day after the morn, but till then naebody maun put a fit inside the gates."

"What happened then?" Leithen asked with acute interest.

"It hasna happened—it's still happenin'! I never in my life heard sic a lot o' sweer words. Says ane, 'Does the auld dotterel think he can defy the British Press? We'll mak his life no worth leevin'.' Says another, 'I've come a' the gait frae London and I'll no budge till I've seen the banes o' that Viking!' One or twa went back to Inverlarrig, but the feck o' them just scattered like pairicks. They clamb the wall, and they waded up the water, and they got in by the top o' the linns. In half an hour there was half a dizzen o' them inside the Strathlarrig policies. Man"—here he fixed his glowing eye on Leithen—"if ye had been on the Lang Whang this mornin' ye could have killed a fish and naebody the wiser."

"Good Lord! Are they there still?"

"Na. They were huntit oot. Every man aboot the place was huntin' them, and Angus was roarin' like a bull. The young Laird thocht they were Bolshies and cam down wi' a gun. Syne the auld man appeared and spoke them fair and telled them he was terribly sorry, but he couldna see them for twa days, and if they contentit themselves that lang he would hae them a' to their denner and show them everything. After that they gaed awa', but there's aye mair arrivin' and I'm expectin' mair riots. They're forritsome lads, thae jornalists, and a dour crop to shift. But they're kind folk, and gie'd me a shillin' a-piece for advisin' them."

"What did you advise?"

"I advised them to gang down to Glenraden," said Benjie with a goblin smile. "I said they should gang and howk in the Piper's Ring and they would maybe find mair treasure. Twa-three o' them got spades and picks and startit off. I'm thinkin' Macpherson will be after them wi' a whup."

Leithen's brows were puckered in thought. "It looks as if my bet with Archie wasn't so crazy after all. This invasion is bound to confuse Bandicott's plans. And you say it's still going on? The gillies will be weary men before night."

"They will that," Benjie assented. "And there's no a man o' them can rin worth a docken, except Jimsie. Thae jornalists was far soopler."

"More power the Press. Benjie, back you go and keep an eye on Strathlarrig, and stir up the journalists to a sense of their rights. Report here this afternoon at four, for we should be on the move by six, and I've a lot to say to you."

In the course of the morning Leithen went for a walk among the scaurs and dingles of Crask Hill. He followed a footpath which took him down the channel of a tiny burn and led to a little mantelpiece of a meadow from which Wattie Lithgow drew a modest supply of bog-hay. His mind was so filled with his coming adventure that he walked with his head bent and at a turn of the path nearly collided with a man.

Murmuring a gruff "Fine day," he would have passed on, when he became aware that the stranger had halted. Then, to his consternation, he heard his name uttered, and had perforce to turn. He saw a young man, in knickerbockers and heavy nailed boots, who smiled diffidently as if uncertain whether he would be recognized.

"Sir Edward Leithen, isn't it?" he said. "I once had the pleasure of meeting you, sir, when you lunched with the Lobby journalists. I was then on the Lobby staff of the Monitor. My name is Crossby."

"Of course, of course. I remember perfectly. Let's sit down, Mr Crossby, unless you're in a hurry. Where are you bound for?"

"Simply stretching my legs. I was climbing rocks at Sligachan when my paper wired me to come on here. The press seem to have gone mad about this Viking's tomb—think they've got hold of a second Tutankhamen. So I get a fisherman to take me and my bicycle over to the mainland and pedalled the rest of the road. I thought I had a graft with old Bandicott, for I used to write for his paper—The New York Bulletin, you know—but it appears there's nothing doing. Odd business, for you don't often find Americans shy of the Press. But I think I've found out the reason, and that makes a good enough story in itself. Perhaps you've heard it?"

"No," said Leithen, "but I'd like to, if you don't mind. I'm not a journalist, so I won't give you away. Let's have it."

He stole a glance at his companion, and saw a pleasant, shrewd, boyish face, with the hard sunburnt skin of one in the prime of physical condition. Like many others of his type, Leithen liked journalists as much as he disliked men of letters—the former had had their corners smoothed by a rough life, and lacked the vanity and spiritual pride of the latter. Also he had acquired from experience a profound belief in the honour of the profession, for at various times in his public career he had put his reputation into their hands and they had not failed him. It was his maxim that if you tried to bamboozle them they were out for your blood, but that if you trusted them they would see you through.

"Let's hear it, Mr Crossby," he repeated. "I'm deeply interested."

"Well, it's a preposterous tale, but the natives seem to believe it. They say that some fellow, who calls himself John Macnab, has dared the magnates in these parts to prevent his killing a stag or a salmon in their preserves. He had laid down pretty stiff conditions for himself, for he has to get his beast off their ground and hand it back to them. They say he has undertaken to pay 500 pounds to any charity the owner names if he succeeds and 1000 pounds if he fails—so he must have money to burn, and it appears that he has already paid the 500 pounds. He started on Glenraden, and the old Highland chief there had every man and boy for three days watching the forest. Then on the third day, when everybody was on the mountain-tops, in sails John Macnab and kills a stag under the house windows. He reckoned on the American's dynamite shots in his search for the Viking to hide his shot. And he would have got away with it too, if one of the young ladies hadn't appeared on the scene and cried "Desist!" So what does this bandit do but off with his hat, makes his best bow, and says 'Madame, your servant,' and vanishes, leaving the chief richer by a thousand pounds. It's Bandicott's turn to-day and to-morrow, and the Strathlarrig household is squatting along the river banks, and the hard-working correspondent is chivvied away till the danger is past. I'm for Macnab myself. It warms my heart to think that there's such a sportsman left alive. It's pure Robin Hood."

Leithen laughed, "I back him too. Are you going to publish that story?"

"Yes, why not? I've written most of it and it goes by the afternoon post." Mr Crossby pulled out a note-book and fluttered the leaves.

"I call it 'The Return of Harald Blacktooth.' Rather neat, I think. The idea is that when they started to dig up the old fellow his spirit reincarnated itself in John Macnab. I hope to have a second instalment, for something's bound to happen at Strathlarrig to-day or to-morrow. Are you holidaying here, Sir Edward? Crask's the name of this place, isn't it? They told me that that mad fellow Roylance owned it."

Leithen nodded. He was bracing himself for another decision of the same kind as he had taken when he met Fish Benjie. Providence seemed to be forcing him to preserve his incognito only by sharing the secret.

"But, of course," Mr Crossby went on, "my main business here is the Viking, and I'm keen to find some way to get over Bandicott's reticence. I don't want to wait till the day after to-morrow and then come in with the ruck. I wonder...would it be too much to ask you to give me a leg up? I expect you know the Bandicotts?"

"Curiously enough, I don't. I am not sure how far I can help you, Mr Crossby, but I rather think you can help me. Are you by any happy chance a long-distance runner?"

The journalist opened his eyes. "Well, I used to be. South London Harriers, you know. And I'm in fairly good condition at present after ten days on the Coolin rocks."

"Well, if I can't give you a story, I think I can put you in the way of an adventure. Will you come up to Crask to luncheon and we'll talk it over."

VII. — THE OLD ETONIAN TRAMP

SIR ARCHIE got himself into the somewhat ancient dress-coat which was the best he had at Crask, and about half-past seven started his Hispana (a car in which his friends would not venture with Archie as driver) down the long hill to the gates of Strathlarrig. He was aware that somewhere in the haugh above the bridge was Leithen, but the only figure visible was that of Jimsie, the Strathlarrig gillie, who was moodily prowling about the upper end. As he passed the Wood of Larrigmore Benjie's old pony was grazing at tether, and the old cart rested on its shafts; the embers of a fire still glowed among the pine-needles, but there was no sign of Benjie. He was admitted after a parley by Mactavish the lodge-keeper, and when he reached the door of the house he observed a large limousine being driven off to the back premises by a very smart chauffeur. Only Haripol was likely to own such a car, and Sir Archie reflected with amusement that the host of John

Macnab was about to attend a full conclave of the Enemy.

The huge, ugly drawing-room looked almost beautiful in the yellow light of evening. A fire burned on the hearth after the fashion of Highland houses even in summer, and before it stood Mr Acheson Bandicott, with a small clean-shaven man, who was obviously the distinguished Professor in whose honour the feast was given, and Colonel Raden, a picturesque figure in kilt and velvet doublet, who seemed hard put to it to follow what was clearly a technical colloquy. Agatha and Junius were admiring the sunset in the west window, and Janet was talking to a blond young man who seemed possessed of a singularly penetrating voice.

Sir Archie was unknown to most of the company, and when his name was announced everyone except the Professor turned towards him with a lively curiosity. Old Mr Bandicott was profuse in his welcome, Junius no less cordial, Colonel Raden approving, for indeed it was not in human nature to be cold towards so friendly a being as the Laird of Crask. Sir Archie was apologetic for his social misfeasances, congratulatory about Harald Blacktooth, eager to atone for the past by an exuberant neighbourliness. "Been havin' a rotten time with the toothache," he told his host. "I roost up alone in my little barrack and keep company with birds...Bit of a naturalist, you know...Yes, sir, quite fit again, but my leg will never be much to boast of."

Colonel Raden appraised the lean, athletic figure. "You've been our mystery man, Sir Archibald. I'm almost sorry to meet you, for we lose our chief topic of discussion. You're fond of stalking, they tell me. When are you coming to kill a stag at Glenraden?"

"When will you ask me?" Sir Archie laughed. "I'm still fairly good on the hill, but just now I'm sittin' indoors all day tuggin' at my hair and tryin' to compose a speech."

Colonel Raden's face asked for explanations.

"Day after to-morrow in Muirtown. Big Unionist meetin' and I've got to start the ball. It's jolly hard to know what to talk about, for I've a pretty high average of ignorance about everything. But I've decided to have a shot at foreign policy. You see, Charles—" Sir Archie stopped in a fright. He had been within an ace of giving the show away.

"Of course. 'Pon my soul I had forgotten that you were our candidate. It's an uphill fight I'm afraid. The people in these parts, sir, are the most obstinate reactionaries on the face of the globe; but they've been voting Liberal ever since the days of John Knox."

Mr Bandicott regarded Sir Archie with interest.

"So you're standing for Parliament," he said. "Few things impress me more in Great Britain than the way young men take up public life as if it were the natural coping-stone to their education. We have no such tradition, and we feel the absence of it. Junius would as soon think of running for Congress as of keeping a faro-saloon. Now I wonder, Sir Archibald, what induced you to take this step?"

But Sir Archie was gone, for he had seen the beckoning eyes of Janet Raden. That young woman, ever since she had heard that the Laird of Crask was coming to dinner, had looked forward to this occasion as her culminating triumph. He had been her confidant about the desperate John Macnab, and from her he must learn the tale of her victory. Her pleasure was increased by the consciousness that she was looking her best, for she knew that her black gown was a good French model and well set off her delicate colouring. She looked with eyes of friendship on him as he limped across the room, and noted his lean distinction. No other country, she thought, produced this kind of slim, graceful, yet weathered and hard-bitten youth.

"Do you know Mr Claybody?"

Mr Claybody said he was delighted to meet his neighbour again. "It's years," he said, "since we met at Ronham. I spend my life in the train now, and never get more than a few days at a time at Haripol. But I've managed to secure a month this year to entertain my friends. I was looking forward in any case to seeing you at Muirtown on the 4th. I've been helping to organise the show, and I consider it a great score to have got Lamancha. This place had never been properly worked, and with a little efficient organisation we ought to put you in right enough. There's no doubt Scotland is changing, and you'll have the tide to help you."

Mr Claybody was a very splendid person. He looked rather like a large edition of the great Napoleon, for he had the same full fleshy face, and his head was set on a thickish neck. His blond hair was beautifully sleek and his clothes were of a perfection uncommon in September north of the Forth. Not that Mr Claybody was either fat or dandified; he was only what the ballad calls "fair of flesh," and he employed a good tailor and an assiduous valet. His exact age was thirty-two, and he did not look older, once the observer had got over his curiously sophisticated eyes.

But Sir Archie was giving scant attention to Mr Claybody.

"Have you heard?" Janet broke out. "John Macnab came, saw, and didn't conquer."

"I've heard nothing else in the last two days."

"And I was right! He is a gentleman."

"No? Tell me all about the fellow." Sir Archie's interest was perhaps less in the subject than in the animation which it woke in Janet's eyes.

But the announcement that dinner was served cut short the tale, though not before Sir Archie had noticed a sudden set of Mr Claybody's jaw and a contraction of his eyebrows. "Wonder if he means to stick to his lawyer's letter," he communed with himself. "In that case it's quod for Charles."

The dining-room at Strathlarrig was a remnant of the old house which had been enveloped in the immense sheath of the new. It had eighteenth-century panelling unchanged since the days when Jacobite chiefs in lace and tartan had passed their claret glasses over the water, and the pictures were all of forbidding progenitors. But the ancient narrow windows had been widened, and Sir Archie, from where he sat, had a prospect of half a mile of the river, including Lady Maisie's Pool, bathed in the clear amber of twilight. He was on his host's left hand, opposite the Professor, with Agatha Raden next to him: then came Junius: while Janet was between Johnson Claybody and the guest of the occasion.

Mr Claybody still brooded over John Macnab.

"I call the whole thing infernal impertinence," he said in his loud, assured voice. "I confess I have ceased to admire undergraduate 'rags.' He threatens to visit us, and my father intends to put the matter into the hands of the police."

"That would be very kind," said Janet sweetly. "You see, John Macnab won't have the slightest trouble in beating the police."

"It's the principle of the thing, Miss Raden. Here is an impudent attack on private property, and if we treat it as a joke it will only encourage other scoundrels. If the man is a gentleman, as you say he is, it makes it more scandalous."

"Come, come, Mr Claybody, you're taking it too seriously." Colonel Raden could be emphatic enough on the rights of property, but no Highlander can ever grow excited about trespass. "The fellow has made a sporting offer and is willing to risk a pretty handsome stake. I rather admire what you call his impudence. I might have done the same thing as a young man, if I had had the wits to think of it."

Mr Claybody was quick to recognise an unsympathetic audience. "Oh, I don't meant that we're actually going to make a fuss. We'll give him a warm reception if he comes—that's all. But I don't like the spirit. It's too dangerous in these unsettled times. Once let the masses get into their heads that landed property is a thing to play tricks with, and you take the pin out of the whole system. You must agree with me, Roylance?"

Sir Archie, remembering his part, answered with guile. "Rather! Rotten game for a gentleman, I think. All the same, the chap seems rather a sportsman, so I'm in favour of letting the law alone and dealing with him ourselves. I expect he won't have much of a look in on Haripol."

"I can promise you he won't," said Mr Claybody shortly.

Professor Babwater observed that it would be difficult for a descendant of Harald Blacktooth to be too hard on one who followed in Harald's steps. "The Celt," he said, "has always sought his adventures in a fairy world. The Northman was a realist, and looked to tangible things like land and cattle. Therefore he was a conqueror and a discoverer on the terrestrial globe, while the Celt explored the mysteries of the spirit. Those who, like you, sir"—he bowed to Colonel Raden—"have both strains in their ancestry, should have successes in both worlds."

"They don't mix well," said the Colonel sadly. "There was my grandfather, who believed in Macpherson's *Ossian* and ruined the family fortunes in hunting for Gaelic manuscripts on the continent of Europe. And his father was in India with Clive, and thought about nothing except blackmailing native chiefs till he made the place too hot to hold him. Look at my daughters, too. Agatha is mad about pottery and such-like, and Janet is a bandit. She'd have made a dashed good soldier, though."

"Thank you, papa," said the lady. She might have objected to the description had she not seen that Sir Archie accepted it with admiring assent.

"I suppose," said old Mr Bandicott reflectively, "that the war was bound to leave a good deal of unsettlement. Junius missed it through being too young—never got out of a training camp—but I have noticed that those who fought in France find it difficult to discover a groove. They are energetic enough, but they won't 'stay put', as we say. Perhaps this Macnab is one of the unrooted. In your country, where everybody was soldiering, the case must be far more common."

Mr Claybody announced that he was sick of hearing the war blamed for the average man's deficiencies. "Every waster," he said, "makes an excuse of being shell-shocked. I'm very clear that the war twisted nothing in a man that wasn't twisted before."

Sir Archie demurred. "I don't know. I've seen some pretty bad cases of fellows who used to be as sane as a judge, and came home all shot to bits in their mind."

"There are exceptions, of course. I'm speaking of the general rule. I turn away unemployables every day—good soldiers, maybe, but unemployable—and I doubt if they were ever anything else."

Something in his tone annoyed Janet.

"You saw a lot of service, didn't you?" she asked meekly.

"No, worse luck! They made me stick at home and slave fourteen hours a day controlling cotton. It would have been a holiday for me to get into the trenches. But what I say is, a sane man usually remained sane. Look at Sir Archibald. We all know what a hectic time he had, and he hasn't turned a hair."

"I'd like you to give me that in writing," Sir Archie grinned. "I've known people who thought I was rather cracked."

"Anyhow, it made no difference to your nerves," said Colonel Raden.

"I hope not. I expect that was because I enjoyed the beastly thing. Perhaps I'm naturally a bit of a bandit—like Miss Janet."

"Perhaps you're John Macnab," said that lady.

"Well, you've seen him and can judge."

"No. I'll be a witness for the defence if you're ever accused. But you mustn't be offended at the idea. I suppose poor John Macnab is now crawling round Strathlarrig trying to find a gap between the gillies to cast a fly."

"That's about the size of it," Junius laughed. "And there's twenty special correspondents in the neighbourhood cursing his name. If they get hold of him, they'll be savager than old Angus."

Mr Bandicott, after calling his guests' attention to the merits of a hock which he had just acquired—it was a Johannisberg with the blue label—declared that in his belief the war would do good to English life, when the first ferment had died away.

"As a profound admirer of British institutions," he said, "I have sometimes thought that they needed a little shaking up and loosening. In America our classes are fluid. The rich man of to-day began life in a shack, and the next generation may return to it. It is the same with our professions. The man who starts in the law may pass to railway management, and end as the proprietor of a department store. Our belief is that it doesn't matter how often you change your trade before you're fifty. But an Englishman, once he settles in a profession, is fixed in it till the Day of Judgement, and in a few years he gets the mark of it so deep that he'd be a fish out of water in anything else. You can't imagine one of your big barristers doing anything else. No fresh fields and pastures new for them. It would be a crime against Magna Carta to break loose and try company-promoting or cornering the meat trade for a little change."

Professor Babwater observed that in England they sometimes—in his view to the country's detriment—became politicians.

"That's the narrowest groove of all," said Mr Bandicott with conviction. "In this country, once you start in on politics you're fixed in a class and members of a hierarchy, and you've got to go on, however unfitted you may be for the job, because it's sort of high treason to weaken. In America a man tries politics as he tries other things, and if he finds the air of Washington uncongenial he quits, or tries newspapers, or Wall Street, or oil."

"Or the penitentiary," said Junius.

"And why not?" asked his father. "I deplore criminal tendencies in any public man, but the possibility of such a downfall keeps the life human. It is very different in England. The respectability of your politicians is so awful that, when one of them backslides, every man of you combines to hush it up. There would be a revolution if the people got to suspect. Can you imagine a Cabinet Minister in the police court on a common vulgar charge?"

Professor Babwater said he could well imagine it—it was where most of them should be; but Colonel Raden agreed that the decencies had somehow to be preserved, even at the cost of a certain amount of humbug. "But, excuse me," he added, "if I fail to see what good an occasional sentence of six months hard would do to public life."

"I don't want it to happen," said his host, who was inspired by his own Johannisberg, "but I'd like to think it could happen. The permanent possibility of it would supple the minds of your legislators. It would do this old country a power of good if now and then a Cabinet Minister took to brawling and went to jail."

It was a topic which naturally interested Sir Archie, but the theories of Mr Bandicott passed by him unheeded. For his seat at the table gave him a view of the darkening glen, and he was aware that on that stage a stirring drama was being enacted. His host could see nothing, for it was behind him; he would have had to screw his head round; to Sir Archie alone was vouchsafed a clear prospect. Janet saw that he was gazing abstractedly out of the window, but she did not realise that his eyes were strained and every nerve in him excitedly alive...

For suddenly into his field of vision had darted a man. He was on the far side of the Larrig, running hard, and behind him, at a distance of some forty yards, followed another. At first he thought it was Leithen, but even in the dusk it was plain that it was a shorter man—younger, too, he looked, and of a notable activity. He was gaining on his pursuers, when the chase went out of sight...Then Sir Archie heard a far-away whistling, and would have given much to fling open the window and look out...

Five minutes passed and again the runner appeared—this time dripping wet and on the near side. Clearly not Leithen, for he wore a white sweater, which was a garment unknown to the Crask wardrobe. He must have been headed off upstream, and had doubled back. That way lay danger, and Sir Archie longed to warn him, for his route would bring him close to the peopled appendages of Strathlarrig House...Even as he stared he saw what must mean the end, for two figures appeared for one second on the extreme left of his range of vision, and in front of the fugitive. He was running into their arms!

Sir Archie seized his glass of the blue-labelled Johannisberg, swallowed the wine the wrong way, and promptly choked.

When the Hispana crossed the Bridge of Larrig His Majesty's late Attorney-General was modestly concealed in a bush of

broom on the Crask side, from which he could watch the sullen stretches of the Lang Whang. He was carefully dressed for the part in a pair of Wattie Lithgow's old trousers much too short for him, a waistcoat and jacket which belonged to Sime the butler and which had been made about the year 1890, and a vulgar flannel shirt borrowed from Shapp. He was innocent of a collar, he had not shaved for two days, and as he had forgotten to have his hair cut before leaving London his locks were of a disreputable length. Last, he had a shocking old hat of Sir Archie's from which the lining had long since gone. His hands were sun-burned and grubby, and he had removed his signet-ring. A light ten-foot greenheart rod lay beside him, already put up, and to the tapered line was fixed a tapered cast ending in a strange little cocked fly. As he waited he was busy oiling fly and line.

His glass showed him an empty haugh, save for the figure of Jimsie at the far end close to the Wood of Larrigmore. The sun-warmed waters of the river drowsed in the long dead stretches, curled at rare intervals by the faintest western breeze. The banks were crisp green turf, scarcely broken by a boulder, but five yards from them the moss began—a wilderness of hags and tussocks. Somewhere in its depths he knew that Benjie lay coiled like an adder, waiting on events.

Leithen's plan, like all great strategy, was simple. Everything depended on having Jimsie out of sight of the Lang Whang for half an hour. Given that, he believed he might kill a salmon. He had marked out a pool where in the evening fish were usually stirring, one of those irrational haunts which no piscatorial psychologist has ever explained. If he could fish fine and far, he might cover it from a spot below a high bank where only the top of his rod would be visible to watchers at a distance. Unfortunately, that spot was on the other side of the stream. With such tackle, landing a salmon would be a critical business, but there was one chance in ten that it might be accomplished; Benjie would be at hand to conceal the fish, and he himself would disappear silently into the Crask thickets. But every step bristled with horrid dangers. Jimsie might be faithful to his post—in which case it was hopeless; he might find the salmon dour, or a fish might break him in the landing, or Jimsie might return to find him brazenly tethered to forbidden game. It was no good thinking about it. On one thing he was decided: if he were caught, he would not try to escape. That would mean retreat in the direction of Crask, and an exploration of the Crask coverts would assuredly reveal what must at all costs be concealed. No. He would go quietly into captivity, and trust to his base appearance to be let off with a drubbing.

As he waited, watching the pools turn from gold to bronze, as the sun sank behind the Glenraden peaks, he suffered the inevitable reaction. The absurdities seemed huge as mountains, the difficulties innumerable as the waves of the sea. There remained less than an hour in which there would be sufficient light to fish—Jimsie was immovable (he had just lit his pipe and was sitting in meditation on a big stone)—every moment the Larrig waters were cooling with the chill of evening. Leithen consulted his watch, and found it half-past eight. He had lost his wrist-watch, and had brought his hunter, attached to a thin gold chain. That was foolish, so he slipped the chain from his button-hole and drew it through the arm-hole of his waistcoat.

Suddenly he rose to his feet, for things were happening at the far side of the haugh. Jimsie stood in an attitude of expectation—he seemed to be hearing something far upstream. Leithen heard it too, the cry of excited men...Jimsie stood on one foot for a moment in doubt; then he turned and doubled towards the Wood of Larrigmore...The gallant Crossby had got to business and was playing hare to the hounds inside the park wall. If human nature had not changed, Leithen thought, the whole force would presently join the chase—Angus and Lennox and Jimsie and Dave and doubtless many volunteers. Heaven send fleetness and wind to the South London Harrier, for it was his duty to occupy the interest of every male in Strathlarrig till such time as he subsided with angry expostulation into captivity.

The road was empty, the valley was deserted, when Leithen raced across the bridge and up the south side of the river. It was not two hundred yards to his chosen stand, a spit of gravel below a high bank at the tail of a long pool. Close to the other bank, nearly thirty yards off, was the shelf where fish lay of an evening. He tested the water with his hand, and its temperature was at least 60 degrees. His theory, which he had learned long ago from the aged Bostonian, was that under such conditions some subconscious memory revived in salmon of their early days as parr when they fed on surface insects, and that they could be made to take a dry fly.

He got out his line to the required length with half a dozen casts in the air, and then put his fly three feet above the spot where a salmon was wont to lie. It was a curious type of cast, which he had been practising lately in the early morning, for by an adroit check he made the fly alight in a curl, so that it floated for a second or two with the leader in a straight line away from it. In this way he believed that the most suspicious fish would see nothing to alarm him, nothing but a hapless insect derelict on the water.

Sir Archie had spoken truth in describing Leithen to Wattie Lithgow as an artist. His long, straight, delicate casts were art indeed. Like thistledown the fly dropped, like thistledown it floated over the head of the salmon, but like thistledown it was disregarded. There was indeed a faint stirring of curiosity. From where he stood Leithen could see that slight ruffling of the surface which means an observant fish...

Already ten minutes had been spent in this barren art. The crisis craved other measures.

His new policy meant a short line, so with infinite stealth and care Leithen waded up the side of the water, sometimes treading precarious ledges of peat, sometimes waist deep in mud and pond-weed, till he was within twenty feet of the fishing-ground. Here he had not the high bank for a shelter, and would have been sadly conspicuous to Jimsie, had that sentinel remained at his post. He crouched low and cast as before with the same curl just ahead of the chosen spot.

But now his tactics were different. So soon as the fly had floated past where he believed the fish to be, he sank it with a dexterous twist of the rod-point, possible only with a short line. The fly was no longer a winged thing; drawn away under

water, it roused in the salmon early memories of succulent nymphs...At the first cast there was a slight swirl, which meant that a fish near the surface had turned to follow the lure. The second cast the line straightened and moved swiftly upstream.

Leithen had killed in his day many hundreds of salmon—once in Norway a notable beast of fifty-five pounds. But no salmon he had ever hooked had stirred in his breast such excitement as this modest fellow of eight pounds. “‘Tis not so wide as a church-door,” he reflected with Mercutio, “‘but ‘twill suffice’—if I can only land him.” But a dry-fly cast and a ten-foot rod are a frail wherewithal for killing a fish against time. With his ordinary fifteen-footer and gut of moderate strength he could have brought the little salmon to grass in five minutes, but now there was immense risk of a break, and a break would mean that the whole enterprise had failed. He dared not exert pressure; on the other hand, he could not follow the fish except by making himself conspicuous on the greensward. Worst of all, he had at the best ten minutes for the job.

Thirty yards off an otter slid into the water. Leithen wished he was King of the Otters, as in the Highland tale, to summon the brute to his aid.

The ten minutes had lengthened to fifteen—nine hundred seconds of heart-disease—when, wet to the waist, he got his pocket-gaff into the salmon’s side and drew it on to the spit of gravel where he had started fishing. A dozen times he thought he had lost, and once when the fish ran straight up the pool his line was carried out to its last yard of backing. He gave thanks to high Heaven, when, as he landed it, he observed that the fly had all but lost its hold and in another minute would have been free. By such narrow margins are great deeds accomplished.

He snapped the cast from the line and buried it in mud. Then cautiously he raised his head above the bank. The gloaming was gathering fast, and so far as he could see the haugh was still empty. Pushing his rod along the ground, he scrambled on to the turf.

There he had a grievous shock. Jimsie had reappeared, and he was in full view of him. Moreover, there were two men on bicycles coming up the road, who, with the deplorable instinct of human nature, would be certain to join in any pursuit. He was on turf as short as a lawn, cumbered with a tell-tale rod and a poached salmon. The friendly hags were a dozen yards off, and before he could reach them his damning baggage would be noted.

At this supreme moment he had an inspiration, derived from the memory of the otter. To get out his knife, cut a ragged wedge from the fish, and roll it in his handkerchief was the work of five seconds. To tilt the rod over the bank so that it lay in the deep shadow was the work of three more...Jimsie had seen him, for a wild cry came down the stream, a cry which brought the cyclists off their machines and set them staring in his direction. Leithen dropped his gaff after the rod, and began running towards the Larrig bridge—slowly, limpingly, like a frightened man with no resolute purpose of escape. And as he ran he prayed that Benjie from the deeps of the moss had seen what had been done and drawn the proper inference.

It was a bold bluff, for he had decided to make the salmon evidence for, not against him. He hobbled down the bank, looking over his shoulder often as if in terror, and almost ran into the arms of the cyclists, who, warned by Jimsie’s yells, were waiting to intercept him. He dodged them, however, and cut across to the road, for he had seen that Jimsie had paused and had noted the salmon lying blatantly on the sward, a silver splash in the twilight. Leithen doubled up the road as if going towards Strathlarrig, and Jimsie, the fleet of foot, did not catch up with him till almost on the edge of the Wood of Larrigmore. The cyclists, who had remounted, arrived at the same moment to find a wretched muddy tramp in the grip of a stalwart but breathless gillie.

“I tell ye I was daein’ nae harm,” the tramp whined. “I was walkin’ up the water-side—there’s nae law to keep a body frae walkin’ up a water-side when there’s nae fence—and I seen an auld otter killin’ a saumon. The fish is there still to prove I’m no leein’.”

“There is a fush, but you wass thinkin’ to steal the fush, and you would have had it in your breeks if I hadna seen you. That is poachin’ ma man, and you will come up to Strathlarrig. The master said that anyone goin’ near the watter was to be lockit up, and you will be lockit up. You can tell all the lees you like in the mornin’.”

Then a thought struck Jimsie. He wanted the salmon, for the subject of otters in the Larrig had been a matter of dispute between him and Angus, and here was evidence for his own view.

“Would you two gentlemen oblige me by watchin’ this man while I rin back and get the fush? Bash him on the head if he offers to rin.”

The cyclists, who were journalists out to enjoy the evening air, willingly agreed, but Leithen showed no wish to escape. He begged a fag in a beggar’s whine, and, since he seemed peaceable, the two kept a good distance for fear of infection. He stood making damp streaks in the dusty road, a pitiable specimen of humanity, for his original get-up was not improved by the liquefaction of his clothes and a generous legacy of slimy peat. He seemed to be nervous, which indeed he was, for if Benjie had not seized his chance he was utterly done, and if Jimsie should light upon his rod he was gravely compromised.

But when Jimsie returned in a matter of ten minutes he was empty-handed.

“I never kenned the like,” he proclaimed. “That otter has come back and gotten the fush. Ach, the maleecious brute!”

The rest of Leithen’s progress was not triumphant. He was conducted to the Strathlarrig lodge, where Angus, whose temper and wind had alike been ruined by the pursuit of Crossby, laid savage hands upon him, and frog-marched him to the back premises. The head-keeper scarcely heeded Jimsie’s tale. “Ach, ye poachin’ va-aga-bond. It is the jyle ye’ll get,” he roared, for Angus was in a mood which could only be relieved by violence of speech and action. Rumbling Gaelic

imprecations, he hustled his prisoner into an outhouse, which had once been a larder and was now a supplementary garage, slammed and locked the door, and, as a final warning, kicked it viciously with his foot, as if to signify what awaited the culprit when the time came to sit on his case.

Sir Archie, if not a skeleton at the feast, was no better than a shadow. The fragment of drama which he had witnessed had rudely divorced his mind from the intelligent conversation of Mr Bandicott, he was no longer slightly irritated by Mr Claybody, he forgot even the attractions of Janet. What was going on in that twilit vale? Lady Maisie's Pool had still a shimmer of gold, but the woods were now purple and the waterside turf a dim amethyst, the colour of the darkening sky. All sound had ceased except the rare cry of a bird from the hill, and the hoot of a wandering owl...Crossby had beyond doubt been taken, but where was Leithen?

He was recalled to his surroundings by Janet's announcement that Mr Bandicott proposed to take them all in his car to the meeting at Muirtown.

"Oh, I say," he pleaded, "I'd much rather you didn't. I haven't a notion how to speak—no experience, you see—only about the third time I've opened my mouth in public. I'll make an awful ass of myself, and I'd much rather my friends didn't see it. If I know you're in the audience, Miss Janet, I won't be able to get a word out."

Mr Bandicott was sympathetic. "Take my advice, and do not attempt to write a speech and learn it by heart. Fill yourself with your subject, but do not prepare anything except the first sentence and the last. You'll find the words come easily when you once begin—if you have something you really want to say."

"That's the trouble—I haven't. I'm goin' to speak about foreign policy, and I'm dashed if I can remember which treaty is which, and what the French are making a fuss about, or why the old Boche can't pay. And I keep on mixing up Poincaré and Mussolini...I'm goin' to write it all down, and if I'm stuck I'll fish out the paper and read it. I'm told there are fellows in the Cabinet who do that when they're cornered."

"Don't stick too close to the paper," the Colonel advised. "The Highlander objects to sermons read to him, and he may not like a read speech."

"Whatever he does I'm sure Sir Archibald will be most enlightening," Mr Bandicott said politely. "Also I want to hear Lord Lamancha. We think rather well of that young man in America. How do you rate him here?"

Mr Claybody, as a habitant of the great world, replied, "Very high in his own line. He's the old-fashioned type of British statesman, and people trust him. The trouble about him and his kind is that they're a little too far removed from the ordinary man—they've been too cosseted and set on a pedestal all their lives. They don't know how to handle democracy. You can't imagine Lamancha rubbing shoulders with Tom, Dick and Harry."

"Oh, come!" Sir Archie broke in. "In the war he started as a captain in a yeomanry regiment, and he commanded a pretty rough Australian push in Palestine. His men fairly swore by him."

"I daresay," said the other coldly. "The war doesn't count for my argument, and Australians are not quite what I mean."

The butler, who was offering liqueurs, was seen to speak confidentially to Junius, who looked towards his father, made as if to speak, and thought better of it. The elder Mr Bandicott was once more holding the table.

"My archaeological studies," he said, "and my son's devotion to sport are apt to circumscribe the interest of my visits to this country. I do not spend more than a couple of days in London, and when I am there the place is empty. Sometimes I regret that I have not attempted to see more of English society in recent years, for there are many figures in it I would like to meet. There are some acquaintances, too, that I should be delighted to revive. Do you know Sir Edward Leithen, Mr Claybody? He was recently, I think the British Attorney General."

Mr Claybody nodded. "I know him very well. We have just briefed him in a big case."

"Sir Edward Leithen visited us two years ago as the guest of our Bar Association. His address was one of the most remarkable I have ever listened to. It was on John Marshall—the finest tribute ever paid to that great man, and one which I venture to say no American could have equalled. I had very little talk with him, but what I had impressed me profoundly with the breadth of his outlook and the powers of his mind. Yes, I should like to meet Sir Edward Leithen again."

The company had risen and were moving towards the drawing-room.

"Now I wonder," Mr Claybody was saying, "I heard that Leithen was somewhere in Scotland. I wonder if I could get him up for a few days to Haripol. Then I could bring him over here."

An awful joy fell upon Sir Archie's soul. He realised anew the unplumbed preposterousness of life.

Ere they reached the drawing-room Junius took Agatha aside.

"Look here, Miss Agatha, I want you to help me. The gillies have been a little too active. They've gathered in some wretched hobo they found looking at the river, and they've annexed a journalist who stuck his nose inside the gates. It's the journalist that's worrying me. From his card he seems to be rather a swell in his way—represents the Monitor and writes for my father's New York paper. He gave the gillies a fine race for their money, and now he's sitting cursing in the garage and vowing every kind of revenge. It won't do to antagonise the Press, so we'd better let him out and grovel to him, if he wants apologies...The fact is, we're not in a very strong position, fending off the newspapers from Harald Blacktooth because of this ridiculous John Macnab. If you could let the fellow out it would be casting oil upon troubled waters. You

could smooth him down far better than me.”

“But what about the other?” A hobo, you say! That’s a tramp, isn’t it?”

“Oh, tell Angus to let him out too. Here are the keys of both garages. I don’t want to turn this place into a lock-up. Angus won’t be pleased, but we have to keep a sharp watch for John Macnab to-morrow, and it’s bad tactics in a campaign to cumber yourself with prisoners.”

The two threaded mysterious passages and came out into a moonlit stable-yard. Junius handed the girl a great electric torch. “Tell the fellow we eat dirt for our servants’ officiousness. Offer him supper, and—I tell you what—ask him to lunch the day after to-morrow. No, that’s Muirtown day. Find out his address and we’ll write to him and give him first chop at the Viking. Blame it all on the gillies.”

Agatha unlocked the door of the big garage and to her surprise found it brilliantly lit with electric light. Mr Crossby was sitting in the driver’s seat of a large motor-car, smoking a pipe and composing a story for his paper. At the sight of Agatha he descended hastily.

“We’re so sorry,” said the girl. “It’s all been a stupid mistake. But, you know, you shouldn’t have run away. Mr Bandicott had to make rules to keep off poachers, and you ought to have stopped and explained who you were.”

To this charming lady in the grass-green gown Mr Crossby’s manner was debonair and reassuring.

“No apology is needed. It wasn’t in the least the gillies’ blame. I wanted some exercise, and I had my fun with them. One of the young ones has a very pretty turn of speed. But I oughtn’t to have done it—I quite see that—with everybody here on edge about this John Macnab. Have I your permission to go?”

“Indeed you have. Mr Bandicott asked me to apologise most humbly. You’re quite free unless—unless you’d like to have supper before you go.”

Mr Crossby excused himself, and did not stay upon the order of his going. He knew nothing of the fate of his colleague, and hoped that he might pick up news from Benjie in the neighbourhood of the Wood of Larrigmore.

The other garage stood retired in the lee of a clump of pines—a rude, old-fashioned place, which generally housed the station lorry. Agatha, rather than face the disappointed Angus, decided to complete the task of jail-delivery herself. She had trouble with the lock, and when the door opened she looked into a pit of darkness scarcely lightened by the outer glow of moonshine. She flashed the torch into the interior and saw, seated on a stack of petrol tins, the figure of the tramp.

Leithen, who had been wondering how he was to find a bed in that stony place, beheld the apparition with amazement. He guessed that it was one of the Miss Radens, for he knew that they were dining at Strathlarrig. As he stood sheepishly before her his wits suffered a dislocation which drove out of his head the remembrance of the part he had assumed.

“Mr Bandicott sent me to tell you that you can go away,” the girl said.

“Thank you very much,” said Leithen in his ordinary voice.

Now in the scramble up the river bank and in the rough handling of Angus his garments had become disarranged, and his watch had swung out of his pocket. In adjusting it in the garage he had put it back in its normal place, so that the chain showed on Sime’s ancient waistcoat. From it depended one of those squat little gold shields which are the badge of athletic prowess at a famous school. As he stood in the light of her torch Agatha noted this shield, and knew what it signified. Also his tone when he spoke had startled her.

“Oh,” she cried, “you were at Eton?”

Leithen was for a moment nonplussed. He thought of a dozen lies, and then decided on qualified truth.

“Yes,” he murmured shamefacedly. “Long ago I was at Eton.”

The girl flushed with embarrassed sympathy.

“What—what brought you to this?” she murmured.

“Folly,” said Leithen, recovering himself. “Drink and suchlike. I have had a lot of bad luck but I’ve mostly myself to blame.”

“You’re only a tramp now?” Angels might have envied the melting sadness of her voice.

“At present. Sometimes I get a job, but I can’t hold it down.” Leithen was warming to his work, and his tones were a subtle study in dilapidated gentility.

“Can’t anything be done?” Agatha asked, twining her pretty hands.

“Nothing,” was the dismal answer. “I’m past helping. Let me go, please, and forget you ever saw me.”

“But can’t papa...won’t you tell me your name or where we can find you?”

“My present name is not my own. Forget about me, my dear young lady. The life isn’t so bad...I’m as happy as I deserve to be. I want to be off, for I don’t like to stumble upon gentlefolks.”

She stood aside to let him pass, noting the ruin of his clothes, his dirty unshaven face, the shameless old hat that he raised to her. Then, melancholy and reflective, she returned to Junius. She could not give away one of her own class, so,

when Junius asked her about the tramp, she only shrugged her white shoulders. "A miserable creature. I hope Angus wasn't too rough with him. He looked as if a puff of wind would blow him to pieces."

Ten minutes later Leithen, having unobtrusively climbed the park wall and so escaped the attention of Mactavish at the lodge, was trotting at a remarkable pace for a tramp down the road to the Larrig Bridge. Once on the Crask side, he stopped to reconnoitre. Crossby called softly to him from the covert, and with Crossby was Benjie.

"I've gotten the saumon," said the latter, "and your rod and gaff too. Hae ye the bit you howkit out o' the fush?"

Leithen produced his bloody handkerchief.

"Now for supper, Benjie, my lad," he cried. "Come along Crossby, and we'll drink the health of John Macnab."

The journalist shook his head. "I'm off to finish my story. The triumphant return of Harald Blacktooth is going to convulse these islands to-morrow."

VIII. — SIR ARCHIE IS INSTRUCTED IN THE CONDUCT OF LIFE

EARLY next morning, when the great door of Strathlarrig House was opened, and the maids had begun their work, Oliphant, the butler—a stately man who had been trained in a ducal family—crossed the hall to reconnoitre the outer world. There he found an under-housemaid nursing a strange package which she averred she had found on the doorstep. It was some two feet long, swathed in brown paper, and attached to its string was a letter inscribed to Mr Junius Bandicott.

The parcel was clammy and Oliphant handled it gingerly. He cut the cord, disentangled the letter, and revealed an oblong of green rushes bound with string. The wrapping must have been insecure, for something forthwith slipped from the rushes and flopped on the marble floor, revealing to Oliphant's disgusted eyes a small salmon, blue and stiff in death.

At that moment Junius, always an early bird, came whistling downstairs. So completely was he convinced of the inviolability of the Strathlarrig waters that the spectacle caused him no foreboding.

"What are you flinging fish about for, Oliphant?" he asked cheerfully.

The butler presented him with the envelope. He opened it and extracted a dirty half sheet of notepaper, on which was printed in capitals:

<div class="letter">"WITH THE COMPLIMENTS OF JOHN MACNAB"

Amazement, chagrin, amusement followed each other on Junius's open countenance. Then he picked up the fish and marched out-of-doors shouting "Angus" at the top of a notably powerful voice. The sound brought the scared face of Professor Babwater to his bedroom window.

Angus, who had been up since four, appeared from Lady Maisie's Pool, where he had been contemplating the waters. His vigil had not improved his appearance or his temper, for his eye was red and choleric and his beard was wild as a mountain goat's. He cast one look at the salmon, surmised the truth, and held up imploring hands to Heaven.

"John Macnab!" said Junius sternly. "What have you got to say to that."

Angus had nothing audible to say. He was handling the fish with feverish hands and peering at its jaws, and presently under his fingers a segment fell out.

"That fush was cleekit," observed Lennox, who had come up. "It was never caught with a flee."

"Ye're a leear," Angus roared. "Just tak a look at the mouth of it. There's the mark of the huke, ye gommeril. The fush was took wi' a rod and line."

"You may reckon it was," observed Junius. "I trust John Macnab to abide by the rules of the game."

Suddenly light seemed to break in on Angus's soul. He bellowed for Jimsie, who was placidly making his way towards the group at the door, lighting his pipe as he went.

"Look at that, James Mackenzie. Aye, look at it. Feast your een on it. You wass tellin' me there wass otters in the Larrig and I said there wass not. You wass tellin' me there wass an otter had a fush last night at the Lang Whang. There's your otter and be damned to ye!"

Jimsie, slow of comprehension, rubbed his eyes.

"Where wass you findin' the fush? Aye, its the one I seen last night. That otter must be wrang in the heid."

"It is not wrang in the heid. It's you that are wrang in the heid, James Mackenzie. The otter is a ver-ra clever man, and its name will be John Macnab." Slowly enlightenment dawned on Jimsie's mind.

"He wass the tramp," he ingeminated. "He wass the tramp."

"And he's still lockit up," Angus cried joyfully. "Wait till I get my hands on him." He was striding off for the garage when a word from Junius held him back.

"You won't find him there. I gave orders last night to let him go. You know, Angus, you told me he was only a tramp that had been seen walking up the river."

"We will catch him yet," cried the vindictive head-keeper. "Get you on your bicycle, Jimsie, and away after him. He'll be on the Muirtown road... There's just the one road he can travel."

"No, you don't," said Junius. "I don't want him here. He has beaten us fairly in a match of wits, and the business is finished."

"But the thing's no possible," Jimsie moaned. "The skeeliest fisher would not take a saumon in the Lang Whang with a flee...And I wasna away many meenutes...And the tramp was a poor shilpit body—not like a fisher or any kind of gentleman at all—at all...And he hadna a rod...The thing's no possible."

"Well, who else could it be?"

"I think it was the Deevil."

Jimsie, cross-examined, went over the details of his evening's experience.

"The journalist may have been in league with him—or he may not," Junius reflected. "Anyway, I'll tackle Mr Crossby. I want to find out what I can about this remarkable sportsman."

"You will not find out anything at all, at all," said Angus morosely. "For I tell ye, sir, Jimsie is right in one thing—Macnab is not a man—he is the Deevil."

"Then we needn't be ashamed of being beat by him...Look here, you men. We've lost, but you've had an uncomfortable time these last twenty-four hours. And I'm going to give you what I promised you if we won out. I reckon the market price of salmon is not more than fifty cents a pound. Macnab has paid about thirty dollars a pound for this fish, so we've a fair margin on the deal."

Mr Acheson Bandicott received the news with composure, if not with relief. Now he need no longer hold the correspondents at arm's length but could summon them to his presence and enlarge on Harald Blacktooth. His father's equanimity cast whatever balm was needed upon Junius's wounded pride, and presently he saw nothing in the affair but comedy. His thoughts turned to Glenraden. It might be well for him to announce in person that the defences of Strathlarrig had failed.

On his way he called at the post-office where Agatha had told him that Crossby was lodging. He wanted a word with the journalist, who clearly must have been *particeps criminis*, and as he could offer as bribe the first full tale of Harald Blacktooth (to be unfolded before the other correspondents arrived for luncheon) he hoped to acquire a story in return. But, according to the post-mistress, Mr Crossby had gone. He had sat up most of the night writing, and, without waiting for breakfast, had paid his bill, strapped on his ruck-sack and departed on his bicycle.

Junius found the Raden family on the lawn, and with them Archie Roylance.

"Got up early to go over my speech for to-morrow," the young man explained. "I'm gettin' the dashed thing by heart—only way to avoid regrettable incidents. I started off down the hill repeatin' my eloquence, and before I knew I was at Glenraden gates, so I thought I'd come in and pass the time of day...Jolly interestin' dinner last night, Bandicott. I liked your old Professor...Any news of John Macnab?"

"There certainly is. He has us beat to a frazzle. This morning there was a salmon on the doorstep presented with his compliments."

The effect of this announcement was instant and stupendous. The Colonel called upon his gods. "Not killed fair? It's a stark impossibility, sir. You had the water guarded like the Bank of England." Archie expressed like suspicions; Agatha was sad and sympathetic, Janet amused and covertly joyful.

"I reckon it was fair enough fishing," Junius went on. "I've been trying to puzzle the thing out, and this is what I made of it. Macnab was in league with one of those pressmen, who started out to trespass inside the park and draw off all the watchers in pursuit, including the man at the Lang Whang. He had them hunting for about half an hour, and in that time Macnab killed his fish...He must be a dandy at the game, too, to get a salmon in that dead water...Jimsie—that's the man who was supposed to watch the Lang Whang—returned before he could get away with the beast, so what does the fellow do but dig a bit out of the fish and leave it on the bank, while he lures Jimsie to chase him. Jimsie saw the fish and put it down to an otter, and by and by caught the man up the road. There must have been an accomplice in hiding, for when Jimsie went back to pick up the salmon it had disappeared. The fellow, who looked like a hobo, was shut up in a garage, and after dinner we let him go, for we had nothing against him, and now he is rejoicing somewhere at our simplicity...It was a mighty clever bit of work, and I'm not ashamed to be beaten by that class of artist. I hoped to get hold of the pressman and find out something, but the pressman seems to have leaked out of the landscape."

"Was that tramp John Macnab?" Agatha asked in an agitated voice.

"None other. You let him out, Miss Agatha. What was he like? I can't get proper hold of Jimsie's talk."

"Oh, I should have guessed," the girl lamented. "For, of course, I saw he was a gentleman. He was in horrible old clothes, but he had an Eton shield on his watch-chain. He seemed to be ashamed to remember it. He said he had come down in the world—through drink!"

Archie struggled hard with the emotions evoked by this description of an abstemious personage currently believed to be making an income of forty thousand pounds.

"Then we've both seen him," Janet cried. "Describe him, Agatha. Was he youngish and big, and fair-haired, and sunburnt? Had he blue eyes?"

"No-o. He wasn't like that. He was about papa's height, and rather slim, I think. He was very dirty and hadn't shaved, but I should say he was sallow, and his eyes—well, they were certainly not blue."

"Are you certain? You only saw him in the dark."

"Yes, quite certain. I had a big torch which lit up his whole figure. Now I come to think of it, he had a striking face—he looked like somebody very clever—a judge perhaps. That should have made me suspicious, but I was so shocked to see such a downfall that I didn't think about it"

Janet looked wildly around her. "Then there are two John Macnabs."

"Angus thinks he is the Devil," said Junius.

"It looks as if he were a syndicate," said Archie, who felt that some remark was expected of him.

"Well, I'm not complaining," said Junius. "And now we're off the stage, and can watch the play from the boxes. I hope you won't be shocked, sir, but I wouldn't break my heart if John Macnab got the goods from Haripol."

"By Gad, no!" cried the Colonel. "Pon my soul, if I could get in touch with the fellow I'd offer to help him—though he'd probably be too much of a sportsman to let me. That young Claybody wants taking down a peg or two. He's the most insufferably assured young prig I ever met in my life."

"He looked the kind of chap who might turn nasty," Sir Archie observed.

"How do you mean?" Junius asked. "Get busy with a gun—that sort of thing?"

"Lord, no. The Claybodys are not likely to start shootin'. But they're as rich as Jews, and they're capable of hirin' prize-fighters or puttin' a live wire round the forest. Or I'll tell you what they might do—they might drive every beast on Haripol over the marches and keep 'em out for three days. It would wreck the ground for the season, but they wouldn't mind that—the old man can't get up the hills and the young 'un don't want to."

"Agatha, my dear," said her father, "we ought to return the Claybody's call. Perhaps Mr Junius would drive us over there in his car this afternoon. For, of course, you'll stay to luncheon, Bandicott—and you, too, Roylance."

Sir Archie stayed to luncheon; he also stayed to tea; and between these meals he went through a surprising experience. For, after the others had started for Haripol, Janet and he drifted aimlessly towards the Raden bridge and then upward through the pinewoods on the road to Carnmore. The strong sun was tempered by the flickering shade of the trees, and, as the road wound itself out of the crannies of the woods to the bare ridges, light wandering winds cooled the cheek, and, mingled with the fragrance of heather and the rooty smell of bogs, came a salty freshness from the sea. The wide landscape was as luminous as April—a bad presage for the weather, since the Haripol peaks, which in September should have been dim in a mulberry haze, stood out sharp like cameos. The two did not talk much, for they were getting beyond the stage where formal conversation is felt to be necessary. Sir Archie limped along at a round pace, which was easily matched by the girl at his side. Both would instinctively halt now and then, and survey the prospect without speaking, and both felt that these pregnant silences were bringing them very near to one another.

At last the track ran out in screes, and from a bald summit they were looking down on the first of the Carnmore corries. Janet seated herself on a mossy ledge of rock and looked back into the Raden glen, which from that altitude had the appearance of an enclosed garden. The meadows of the lower haugh lay green in the sun, the setting of pines by some freak of light was a dark and cloudy blue, and the little castle rose in the midst of the trees with a startling brightness like carven marble. The picture was as exquisite and strange as an illumination in a missal.

"Gad, what a place to live in!" Sir Archie exclaimed.

The girl, who had been gazing at the scene with her chin in her hands, turned on him eyes which were suddenly wistful and rather sad. As contrasted with her sister's, Janet's face had a fine hard finish which gave it a brilliance like an eager boy's. But now a cloud-wrack had been drawn over the sun.

"We've lived there," she said, "since Harald Blacktooth—at least papa says so. But the end is very near now. We are the last of the Radens. And that is as it should be, you know."

"I'm hanged if I see that," Sir Archie began, but the girl interrupted.

"Yes, it is as it should be. The old life of the Highlands is going, and people like ourselves must go with it. There's no reason why we should continue to exist. We've long ago lost our justification."

"D'you mean to say that fellows like Claybody have more right to be here?"

"Yes. I think they have, because they're fighters and we're only survivals. They will disappear, too, unless they learn their lesson...You see, for a thousand years we have been going on here, and other people like us, but we only endured because we were alive. We have the usual conventional motto on our coat of arms—*Pro Deo et Rege*—a Herald's College invention. But our Gaelic motto was very different—it was 'Sons of Dogs, come and I will give you flesh.' As long as we lived up to that we flourished, but as soon as we settled down and went to sleep and became rentiers we were bound to decay...My cousins at Glenaicill were just the same. Their motto was 'What I have I hold,' and while they remembered it they were great

people. But when they stopped holding they went out like a candle, and the last of them is now living in St Malo and a Lancashire cotton-spinner owns the place...When we had to fight hard for our possessions all the time, and give flesh to the sons of dogs who were our clan, we were strong men and women. There was a Raden with Robert Bruce—he fell with Douglas in the pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre—and a Raden died beside the King at Flodden—and Radens were in everything that happened in the old days in Scotland and France. But civilisation killed them—they couldn't adapt themselves to it. Somehow the fire went out of the blood, and they became vegetables. Their only claim was the right of property, which is no right at all."

"That's what the Bolsheviks say," said the puzzled Sir Archie."

"Then I'm a Bolshevik. Nobody in the world to-day has a right to anything which he can't justify. That's not politics, it's the way nature works. Whatever you've got—rank or power or fame or money—you've got to justify it, and keep on justifying it, or go under. No law on earth can buttress up a thing which nature means to decay."

"D'you know that sounds to me pretty steep doctrine?"

"No, it isn't. It isn't doctrine, and it isn't politics, it's common sense. I don't mean that we want some silly government redistributing everybody's property. I mean that people should realise that whatever they've got they hold under a perpetual challenge, and they are bound to meet that challenge. Then we'll have living creatures instead of mummies."

Sir Archie stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I daresay there's a lot in that. But what would Colonel Raden say to it?"

"He would say I was a bandit. And yet he would probably agree with me in the end. Agatha wouldn't, of course. She adores decay—sad old memories and lost causes and all the rest of it. She's a sentimentalist, and she'll marry Junius and go to America, where everybody is sentimental, and be the sweetest thing in the Western Hemisphere, and live happy ever after. I'm quite different. I believe I'm kind, but I'm certainly hard-hearted. I suppose it's Harald Blacktooth coming out."

Janet had got off her perch, and was standing a yard from Sir Archie, her hat in her hand and the light wind ruffling her hair. The young man, who had no skill in analysing his feelings, felt obscurely that she fitted most exquisitely into the picture of rock and wood and water, that she was, in very truth, a part of his clean elemental world of the hill-tops.

"What about yourself?" she asked. "In the words of Mr Bandicott, are you going to make good?"

She asked the question with such an air of frank comradeship that Sir Archie was in no way embarrassed. Indeed he was immensely delighted.

"I hope so," he said. "But I don't know...I'm a bit of a slacker. There doesn't seem much worth doing since the war."

"What nonsense! You find a thousand things worth doing, but they're not enough—and they're not big enough. Do you mean to say you want to hang up your hat at your age and go to sleep? You need to be challenged."

"I expect I do," he murmured.

"Well, I challenge you. You're fit and you're young, and you did extraordinarily well in the war, and you've hosts of friends, and—and—you're well off, aren't you?"

"There you are. I challenge you. You're bound to justify what you've got. I won't have you idling away your life till you end as the kind of lean brown old gentleman in a bowler hat that one sees at Newmarket. It's a very nice type, but it's not good enough for you, and I won't have it. You must not be a dilettante pottering about with birds and a little sport and a little politics."

Sir Archie had been preached at occasionally in his life, but never quite in this way. He was preposterously pleased and also a little solemnised.

"I'm quite serious about politics."

"I wonder," said Janet, smiling. "I don't mean scraping into Parliament, but real politics—putting the broken pieces together, you know. Papa and the rest of our class want to treat politics like another kind of property in which they have a vested interest. But it won't do—not in the world we live in to-day. If you're going to do any good you must feel the challenge and be ready to meet it. And then you must become yourself a challenger. You must be like John Macnab."

Sir Archie stared.

"I don't mean that I want you to make poaching wagers like John. You can't live in a place and play those tricks with your neighbours. But I want you to follow what Mr Bandicott would call the 'John Macnab proposition.' It's so good for everybody concerned. Papa has never had so much fun out of his forest as in the days he was repelling invasion, and even Mr Junius found a new interest in the Larrig...I'm all for property, if you can defend it; but there are too many fatted calves in the world."

Sir Archie suddenly broke into loud laughter.

"Most people tell me I'm too mad to do much good in anything. But you say I'm not mad enough. Well, I'm all for challengin' the fatted calves, but I don't fancy that's the road that leads to the Cabinet. More like the jail, with a red flag firmly clenched in my manly hand."

The girl laughed too. "Papa says that the man who doesn't give a damn for anybody can do anything he likes in the world. Most people give many damns for all kinds of foolish things. Mr Claybody, for example—his smart friends, like Lord

Lamancha and the Attorney-General—what is his name?—Leithen?—and his silly little position, and his father's new peerage. But you're not like that. I believe that all wisdom consists in caring immensely for the few right things and not caring a straw about the rest."

Had anyone hinted to Sir Archie that a young woman on a Scots mountain could lecture him gravely on his future and still remain a ravishing and adorable thing he would have dismissed the suggestion with incredulity. At the back of his head he had that fear of women as something mysterious and unintelligible which belongs to a motherless and sisterless childhood, and a youth spent almost wholly in the company of men. He had immense compassion for a sex which seemed to him to have a hard patch to hoe in the world, and this pitifulness had always kept him from any conduct which might harm a woman. His numerous fancies had been light and transient like thistledown, and his heart had been wholly unscathed. Fear that he might stumble into marriage had made him as shy as a woodcock—a fear not without grounds, for a friend had once proposed to write a book called 'Lives of the Hunted' with a chapter on Archie. Wherefore, his hour having come, he had cascaded into love with desperate completeness, and with the freshness of a mind unstaled by disillusion...All he knew was that a miraculous being had suddenly flooded his world with a new radiance, and was now opening doors and inviting him to dazzling prospects. He felt at once marvellously confident, and supremely humble. Never had mistress a more docile pupil.

They wandered back to the house, and Janet gave him tea in a room full of faded chintzes and Chinese-Chippendale mirrors. Then, when the sun was declining behind the Carnmore peaks, Sir Archie at last took his leave. His head was in a happy confusion, but two ideas rose above the surge—he would seize the earliest chance of asking Janet to marry him, and by all his gods he must not make a fool of himself at Muirtown. She had challenged him, and he had accepted the challenge; he must make it good before he could become in turn a challenger. It may be doubtful if Sir Archie had any very clear notions on the matter, but he was aware that he had received an inspiration, and that somehow or other everything was now to be different... First for that confounded speech. He strove to recollect the sentences which had followed each other so trippingly during his morning's walk. But he could not concentrate his mind. Peace treaties and German reparations and the recognition of Russia flitted from him like a rapid film, to be replaced by a "close-up" of a girl's face. Besides, he wanted to sing, and when song flows to the lips consecutive thought is washed out of the brain...

In this happy and exalted mood, dedicated to great enterprises of love and service, Sir Archie entered the Crask smoking-room, to be brought heavily to earth by the sordid business of John Macnab.

Leithen was there, reading a volume of Sir Walter Scott with an air of divine detachment. Lamancha, very warm and dishevelled, was endeavouring to quench his thirst with a large whisky-and-soda; Palliser-Yeates, also the worse for wear, lay in an attitude of extreme fatigue on a sofa; Crossby, who had sought sanctuary at Crask, was busy with the newspapers which had just arrived, while Wattie Lithgow stood leaning on his crook staring into vacancy, like a clown from some stage Arcadia.

"Where on earth have you been all day, Archie?" Lamancha asked sternly.

"I walked over to Glenraden and stayed to luncheon. They're all hot on your side there—Bandicott too. There's a general feelin' that young Claybody wants takin' down a peg."

"Much good that will do us. John and Wattie and I have been crawling all day round the Haripol marches. It's pretty clear what they'll do—you think so, Wattie?"

"Alan Macnicol is not altogether a fule. Aye, I ken fine what they'll dae."

"Clear the beasts off the ground?" Archie suggested.

"No," said Lamancha. "Move them into the Sanctuary, and the Sanctuary is in the very heart of the forest—between Sgurr Mor and Sgurr Dearg at the head of the Reascuill. It won't take many men to watch it. And the mischief is that Haripol is the one forest where it can be done quite simply. It's so infernally rough that if the deer were all over it I would back myself to get a shot with a fair chance of removing the beast, but if every stag is inside an inner corral it will be the devil's own business to get within a thousand yards of them—let alone shift the carcass."

"If the wind keeps in the west," said Wattie, "It is a manifest impossibeeility. If it was in the north there would be a verra wee sma' chance. All other airts are hopeless. We maun just possess our souls in patience, and see what the day brings forth...I'll awa and mak arrangements for the morn."

Lamancha nodded after the retreating figure.

"He is determined to go to Muirtown to-morrow. Says you promised that he should be present when you made your first bow in public, and that he has arranged with Shapp to drive him in the Ford...But about Haripol. This idea of Wattie's—and I expect it's right—makes the job look pretty desperate. I had worked out a very sound scheme to set my Lord Claybody guessing—similar to John's Glenraden plan but more ingenious; but what's the use of bluff if every beast is snug in an upper corrie with a cordon of Claybody's men round it? Wattie says that Haripol is fairly crawling with gillies."

Crossby raised his head from his journalistic researches. "The papers have got my story all right, I see. The first one, I mean—the 'Return of Harald Blacktooth.' They've featured it well, too, and I expect the evening papers are now going large on it. But it's nothing to what the second will be to-morrow morning. I'm prepared to bet that our Scottish Tutankhamen drops out of the running, and that the Press of this land thinks of nothing for a week except the salmon Sir Edward got last night. It's the silly season, remember!"

Lamancha's jaw dropped. "Crossby, I don't want to dash your natural satisfaction, but I'm afraid you've put me finally in the cart. If the public wakes up and takes an interest in Haripol, I may as well chuck in my hand."

"I wasn't such an ass as to mention Haripol," said the correspondent.

"No, but of course it will get out. Some of your journalistic colleagues will hear of it at Strathlarrig, and, finding that the interest has departed from Harald Blacktooth, will make a bee-line for Haripol. Your success, which I don't grudge you, will be my ruin. In any case the Claybodys will be put on their mettle, for, if they are beaten by John Macnab, they know they'll be a public laughing-stock...What sort of fellow is young Claybody, Archie?"

"Bit shaggy about the heels. Great admirer of yours. Ask Ned—he said he knew Ned very well."

Leithen raised his eyes from Redgauntlet. "Never heard of the fellow in my life."

"Oh, yes you have. He said he had briefed you in a big case."

"Well, you can't expect me to know all my clients any more than John knows the customers of his little bank." Leithen relapsed into Sir Walter.

"I'm going to have a bath." Lamancha rose and cautiously relaxed his weary limbs. "I seem to be in for the most imbecile escapade in history with about one chance in a billion. That's Wattie's estimate, and he knows what a billion is, which I don't."

"What about dropping it?" Archie suggested; for, though he was sworn to the "John Macnab proposition," he was growing very nervous about this particular manifestation. "Young Claybody is an ugly customer, and we don't want the thing to end in bad blood. Besides, you're cured already—you told me so yesterday."

"That's true," said Lamancha, who was engaged in tossing with Palliser-Yeates for the big bath. "I'm cured. I never felt keener in my life. I'm so keen that there's nothing on earth you could offer me which would keep me away from Haripol... You win, John. Gentlemen of the Guard, fire first, and don't be long about it. I can't stretch myself in that drain-pipe that Archie calls his second bathroom."

Dinner was a cheerful meal, for Mr Crossby had much to say, Lamancha was in high spirits, and Leithen had the benignity of the successful warrior. But the host was silent and abstracted. He managed to banish Haripol from his mind, but he thought of Janet, he thought of Janet's sermon, and in feverish intervals he tried to think of his speech for the morrow. A sense of a vast insecurity had come upon him, of a shining goal which grew brighter the more he reflected upon it, but of some awkward hurdles to get over first.

Afterwards, when the talk was of Haripol, he turned to the newspapers to restore him to the world of stern realities. He did not read that masterpiece of journalism, Crossby's story, but he found a sober comfort in The Times' leading articles and in the political notes. He felt himself a worker among flaneurs.

"Here's something about you, Charles," he said. This paper says that political circles are looking forward with great interest to your speech at Muirtown. Says it will be the first important utterance since Parliament rose, and that you are expected to deal with Poincare's speech at Rheims and a letter by a Boche whose name I can't pronounce."

"Political circles will be disappointed," said Lamancha, "for I haven't read them. Montgomery is taking all the boxes and I haven't heard from the office for three weeks. I can't be troubled with newspapers in the Highlands."

"Then what are you goin' to say to-morrow?" Archie demanded anxiously.

"I'll think of some rot. Don't worry, old fellow. Muirtown is a second-class show compared to Haripol."

Archie was really shocked. He was envious of a man who could treat thus cavalierly a task which affected him with horrid forebodings, and also scandalised at the levity of his leaders. It seemed to him that Lamancha needed some challenging. Finding no comfort in his company, he repaired to bed, where healthful sleep was slow in visiting him. He repeated his speech to himself, but it would persist in getting tangled up with Janet's sermon and his own subsequent reflections, so that, when at last he dropped off, it was into a world of ridiculous dreams where a dreadful composite figure—Poincarini or Mussolinaré—sat heavily on his chest.

IX. — SIR ARCHIE INSTRUCTS HIS COUNTRYMEN

CROSSBY was right in his forecast. The sudden interest in the Scottish Tutankhamen did not survive the revelation of Harald Blacktooth's reincarnation as John Macnab. The twenty correspondents, after lunching heavily with Mr Bandicott, had been shown the relics of the Viking and had heard their significance expounded by their host and Professor Babwater; each had duly despatched his story, but before night-fall each was receiving urgent telegrams from his paper clamouring for news, not of Harald, but of Harald's successor. Crossby's tale of the frustrated attempt on the Glenraden deer had intrigued several million readers—it was the silly season, remember—and his hint of the impending raid on the Strathlarrig salmon had stirred a popular interest vowed to any lawless mystery and any competitive sport. In the doings of John Macnab were blended the splendid uncertainty of a well-matched prize fight and the delicious obscurity of crime. Next morning the news of John's victory at Strathlarrig was received by the several million readers with an enthusiasm denied to the greater matters of public conduct. John Macnab became a slogan for the newsboy, a flaming legend for bills and headlines, a subject of delighted talk at every breakfast-table. Never had there been a more famous eight-pound salmon

since fish first swam in the sea.

It was a cold grey morning when Lamancha and Archie left Crask in the Hispana, bound for the station of Bridge of Gair, fifty miles distant by indifferent hill-roads. Lamancha, who had written for clothes, was magnificently respectable below his heavy ulster—a respectability which was not his usual habit but a concession to the urgent demand for camouflage. He was also in a bad temper, for his legs were still abominably stiff, and, though in need of at least ten hours' sleep, he had been allowed precisely six. At long last, his speech had begun to weigh upon him. "Shut up, Archie," he had told his host. "I must collect what's left of my wits, or I'll make an exhibition of myself. You say we get the morning's papers at Bridge of Gair? They may give me a point or two. Lord, it's like one of those beastly mornings in Switzerland when they rake you up at two to climb Mount Blanc and you wish you had never been born."

Sir Archie had no inclination to garrulity, for black fear had settled on his soul. In a few hours' time he would be doing what he had never done before, standing before a gaping audience which was there to be amused and possibly instructed. He had a speech in his pocket, carefully fashioned in consultation with Lamancha, but he was miserably conscious that it had no relation to his native wood-notes. What was Poincaré to him, or he to Poincaré? Why on earth had he not chosen to speak about something which touched his interests—farming, for example, on which he held views, or the future of the Air Force—instead of venturing in the unknown deserts of foreign affairs? Well, he had burned his boats and must make the best of it. The great thing was to be sure that the confounded speech had been transferred from paper to his memory.

But as the miles slipped behind him he realised with horror that his memory was playing him false. He could not get the bits to fit in; what he had reeled off so smoothly twenty-four hours ago now came out in idiotic shreds and patches. He felt himself slipping into a worse funk than he had ever known in all his tempestuous days...For a moment he thought of throwing up the sponge. He might engineer a breakdown—it would have to be a bad spill, for the day was yet young—and so deprive Muirtown of the presence of both Lamancha and himself. It was not the thought of the Conservative cause or his own political chances that made him reject this cowardly expedient. Two reasons dissuaded him: one, that though his friends continually prophesied disaster, he had never yet had a smash with his car, and his pride was involved; the other, that such a course would reveal Lamancha's presence in his company too near the suspect neighbourhood and might expose the secret of John Macnab...No, he had to go through with it, and, conning such wretched fragments of his oratory as he could dig out of his recollection, Sir Archie drove the Hispana over the bleak moorlands till he was looking down on the wide strath of the Gair, with the railway line scarring the heather and the hotel chimneys smoking beside a cold blue-grey river. He had glanced now and then at his fellow orator, whose professional apathy he profoundly envied, since for the last dozen miles Lamancha had been peacefully asleep.

They breakfasted at the hotel, and presently sought the station platform in the quest for papers. They were informed that papers came with the train for which they were waiting, and when the said train arrived, half an hour late, and Lamancha, according to arrangement, had sought a seat in the front while Archie favoured the rear, the latter secured a London evening paper of the previous day and that morning's Scotsman. The compartment in which he found himself was crowded with sleepy and short-tempered people who had made the night journey from the south. So on a pile of three gun-cases in the corridor Archie sat himself and gave his attention to the enlightened Press of his country.

He rubbed his eyes to make certain that he was not dreaming. For there, in conspicuous print on a prominent page of a respected newspaper, was the name of John Macnab. There was other news: of outrages in Mexico and earthquakes in the Pacific, of the disappearance of a solicitor and the arrival in London of a cinema star, but all seemed dwarfed and paled by Crosby's story. There was news of Harald Blacktooth, too, and authentic descriptions of the treasure-trove, but this was in an unconsidered corner. Cheek by jowl with the leading article was what clearly most interested the editor out of all the events on the surface of the globe—the renaissance of Harald Blacktooth phoenix-like from his ashes, and the capture of the Strathlarrig salmon.

Archie read the thing confusedly without taking much of it in. Then he turned to the London evening paper. It was a journal which never objected to breaking up its front page for spicy news, and there on the front page was a summary of the Strathlarrig exploit. Moreover, there was a short hastily compiled article on the subject and a number of stimulating notes. John Macnab was becoming a household name, and the gaze of Britain was being centred on his shy personality. The third act in the drama would be played under bright light to a full gallery...Archie's eyes caught the end of the first Scotsman leader, which contained a reference to the Muirtown meeting, and a speculation as to what the Secretary of State for the Dominions would say. Archie, too, speculated as to what Lamancha was saying at that moment at the other end of the train.

This new complexity did something to quiet his nerves and take his mind off his approaching ordeal. There was no word in the papers of the coming raid on Haripol—Crosby had had that much sense—but, or course, whatever happened at Haripol would be broadcast through the land. The Claybodies, if they defeated John Macnab, would be famous; ridiculous, if they were beaten; and, while the latter fate might be taken with good humour by the Bandicotts, it would be gall and wormwood to a young gentleman with strong notions on the rights and dignities of landed property. It was mathematically certain that Johnson Claybody, as soon as he saw the newspapers, would devote all the powers of a stubborn temper to the defence of Haripol. That was bad enough, but the correspondents at Strathlarrig were likely to have heard by this time of the third of John Macnab's wagers, and the attempt might have to be made under their argus-eyed espionage. Altogether, things were beginning to look rather dark for John, and incidentally for Sir Archie.

These morose reflections occupied him till the train stopped at Frew, the ticket-station for Muirtown. Here, according to

plan, Sir Archie descended, for he could not arrive at the terminus in Lamancha's company. There was a cold gusty wind from the north-west which promised rain, the sky was overcast, and the sea, half a mile distant across the sand-dunes, was grey and sullen. Sir Archie, having two hours to fill before the official luncheon, resolved to reject the ancient station fly and walk...Once again the shadow of his speech descended on him. He limped along the shore road, trying to see the words as he had written them down, trying especially to get the initial sentence clear for each paragraph, for he believed that if he remembered these the rest would follow. The thing went rather better now. Parts came in a cascade of glibness, and he remembered Lamancha's injunction not to be too dapper or too rapid. The peroration was all right, and so was the exordium; only one passage near the middle seemed to offer a snag. He devoted the rest of his walk exclusively to this passage, till he was assured that he had it by heart.

He reached Muirtown within an hour, and decided to kill time by visiting some of his friends among the shopkeepers. The gunmaker welcomed him cordially, and announced his intention of coming to hear him that afternoon. But politics had clearly been ousted from that worthy's head by the newspaper which lay on his counter. "What about this John Macnab, Sir Erchibald?" he asked.

"What about him? I'm hanged if I know what to think."

"If Mr Tarras wasn't deid in Africa I would ken fine what to think. The man will likely be a gentleman, and he must be a grand fisher. I ken that bit o' the Larrig, and to get a salmon in it wants a fair demon at the job. Crask is no three miles away. D'ye hear nothing at Crask?"

It was the same wherever he went. The fishmonger pointed to a fish on his slabs, and observed that it would be about the size of the one taken at Strathlarrig. The bookseller, who knew his customer's simple tastes in letters, regretted that no contemporary novel of his acquaintance promised such entertainment as the drama now being enacted in Wester Ross. Tired of needless lying, Sir Archie forsook the shops and went for a stroll beside the harbour. But even there John Macnab seemed to pursue him. Wherever he saw a man with a paper he knew what he was reading, the people at the street corners were no doubt discussing the same subject—nay, he was sure he heard the very words spoken as he passed...The sight of a blue poster with his name in large letters reminded him of his duties, and he turned his steps towards the Northern Club.

He was greeted by his host, a Baillie of the town (the Provost belonged to the enemy camp), and was presented to the other guests. "This is our candidate for Wester Ross, my lord," and Archie was introduced to Lamancha, who smiled urbanely and remarked that he had had the pleasure of meeting Sir Archibald Roylance before. The Duke of Angus would not arrive till the hour of meeting, but Colonel Wavertree was there, a dapper red-faced gentleman who had an interest in breweries, and Mr Murdoch of New Caledonia—immense, grizzled and bearded, who had left the Lews as a child of three for the climes which had given him fortune. Also there was Lord Claybody, who came forward at once to renew his acquaintance.

"Very glad to see you, Sir Archibald. This is your first big meeting, isn't it? Good luck to you. A straight-forward declaration of principles is what we want from our future member, and I've no doubt we'll get it from you. Johnson sent his humblest apologies. He drove me in this morning, but unfortunately a troublesome bit of business took him back at once."

Sir Archie thought he knew what that business was. He had always rather liked old Claybody, and now that he had leisure to study him the liking was confirmed. There was much of the son's arrogance about the eyes and mouth, but there was humour, too, which was lacking in Johnson, and his voice had a pleasant Midland burr. But he looked horribly competent and wide-awake. One would, thought Sir Archie, if one had made a great fortune oneself, and he concluded that the owner of Haripol was probably a bad man to get up against.

At luncheon they should have talked of the state of the nation and the future of their party; instead they talked of John Macnab. It was to be noted that Lord Claybody did not contribute much to the talk; he pursed his lips when the name was mentioned, and he did not reveal the challenge to Haripol. Patently he shared his son's views on the matter. But the others made no secret of their interest. Colonel Wavertree, who had come in from a neighbouring grouse-moor, was positive that the ruffian's escapades were not over. "He'll go round the lot of us," he said, "and though it costs him fifty pound a time, I daresay he gets his money's worth. I believe he is paid by the agents to put up the price of Highland places, for if he keeps on it will mean money in the pocket of every sporting tenant, besides the devil of a lot of fun." Mr Murdoch said it reminded him of the doings of one Pink Jones in New Caledonia forty years ago, and told a long and pointless tale of that hero. As for Lamancha, he requested to be given the whole story, and made very good show of merriment. "A parcel of under-graduates, I suppose," he said.

But the Baillie, who gave him the information, was a serious man and disapproved. "It will get the country-side a bad name, my lord. It is a challenge to law and order. There's too many Bolsheviks about as it is, without this John Macnab aidin' and abettin' them."

"Most likely the fellow is a sound Tory," said Lamancha; but the Baillie ventured respectfully to differ. "If your Lordship will forgive me, there's some things too serious for jokin'," he concluded sententiously.

It was a dull luncheon, but to Archie the hours passed like fevered seconds. Agoraphobia had seized him once more, and he felt his tongue dry and his stomach hollow with trepidation. Food did not permit itself to be swallowed, so he contented himself with drinking two whisky-and-sodas. Towards the close of the meal that wild form of valour which we call desperation was growing in him. He could do nothing more about his infernal speech, and must fling himself on fortune. As they left the table the Baillie claimed him. "Your agent is here, Sir Archibald. He wanted a word with you before the

meeting.”

A lean, red-haired man awaited them in the hall.

“Hullo, Mr Brodie. How are you? Glad to see you. Well, what’s the drill for this afternoon?”

“It’s that I was wantin’ to see ye about, sir. The arrangement was that you should speak first, then Lord Lamancha, then Colonel Wavertree, and Mr Murdoch to finish off. But Baillie Dorrit thinks Lord Lamancha should open, him bein’ a Cabinet Minister, and that you should follow.”

“Right-o, Brodie! I’m game for anything you like. I’ve been a slack candidate up to now, and I don’t profess to know the job like you.” Sir Archie spoke with a jauntiness which made his heart sink, but the agent was impressed.

“Fine, sir. I can see ye’re in grand fettle. Ye’ll have a remarkable audience. There’s been a demand for tickets far beyond the capacity o’ the hall, and I hear of folk comin’ from fifty mile round.”

Every word was like a death knell to the wretched Archie, but with his spirits in the depths his manner took on a ghastly exhilaration. He lit a cigar with shaking fingers, patted Brodie on the back, linked his arm with the Baillie’s, and in the short walk to the hall chattered like a magpie. So fevered was his behaviour that, as they entered the building by a side-door, Lamancha whispered in his ear, “Steady, old man. For God’s sake, keep your head,” and Archie turned on him a face like a lost soul’s.

“I’m goin’ over the top,” he said.

The Town Hall of Muirtown, having been built originally for the purpose of a drill-hall, was capable of holding inside its bare walls the better part of two thousand people. This afternoon it was packed to the door, presumably with voters, for the attendants had ruthlessly turned away all juvenile politicians. As Sir Archie took his seat on the platform, while a selection from the Muirtown Brass Band rendered “Annie Laurie,” he seemed to be looking down as from an aeroplane on a strange, unfeatured country. The faces might have been tomb-stones for all the personality they represented. Some of his friends were there, no doubt, but he could no more have recognised them than he could have picked out the starling which haunted the Crask lawn from a flock seen next day on the hill. The place swam in a mist, like a corrie viewed in the morning from the hill-tops, and he knew that the mist came out of his own quaking soul. He had heard of stage-fright, but had never dreamed that it could be such a blackness of darkness.

The Duke of Angus was very old, highly respected, and almost wholly witless. He had never been very clever—Disraeli, it was said, had refused him the Thistle on the ground that he would eat it—and of late years his mind had retired into a happy vacuity. As a chairman he was mercifully brief. He told a Scots story, at which he shook with laughter, but the point of which he unfortunately left out; he repeated very loudly the names of the speakers—Sir Archie started at the sound of his own like a scared fawn; in a tone which was almost a bellow he uttered the words “Lord Lamancha,” and then he sat down.

Lamancha had the reputation which is always accorded to a man whose name is often in the newspapers. Most of the audience had never seen him in the flesh, and human nature is grateful for satisfied curiosity. Presently he had them docile under the spell of his charming voice. He never attempted oratory in the grand style, but he possessed all the lesser accomplishments. He had nothing new to say, but he said the old things with a pleasant sincerity and that simplicity which is the result only of a long-practised art. It was the kind of speech of which he had made hundreds and would make hundreds more; there was nothing in it to lay hold of, but it produced an impression of being at once weighty and spontaneous, flattering to the audience and a proof of the speaker’s easy mastery of his trade. There was a compliment to the Duke, a warm tribute to Sir Archie, a bantering profession of shyness on the part of a Borderer speaking north of the Forth. Then, by an easy transition, he passed to Highland problems—land, emigration, the ex-service men—and thence to the prime economic needs of Britain since 1918, the relation of these needs to world demands, the necessity of meeting them by using the full assets of an Empire which had been a unit in war and should be a unit in peace. There was little to inspire, but little to question; platitudes were so artfully linked together as to give the impression of a rounded and stable creed. Here was one who spoke seriously, responsibly, and yet with optimism; there was character here, said the ordinary man, and yet obviously a mind as well. Even the stern critics on the back benches had no fault to find with a statement from which they could only dissent with respect. None recognised that it was the manner that bewitched them. Lamancha, who on occasion could be profound, was now only improvising. The matter was a mosaic of bits of old speeches and answers to deputations, which he put together cynically with his left hand. But the manner was superb—the perfect production of a fine voice, the cunning emphasis, the sudden halts, the rounded cadences, the calculated hesitations. He sat down after forty minutes amid a tempest of that applause which is the tribute to professional skill and has nothing to do with conviction.

Sir Archie had listened with awe. Knowing now from bitter experience the thorny path of oratory, he was dumbfounded by this spectacle of a perfection of which he had never dreamed. What a fiasco would his halting utterance be in such company! He glanced at the notes in his hand, but could not read them; he strove to remember his opening sentences, and discovered them elusive. Then suddenly he heard his name spoken, and found himself on his feet.

He was scarcely aware of the applause with which he was greeted. All he knew was that every word of his speech had fled from his memory and would never return. The faces below him were a horrid white blur at which he knew he was foolishly grinning...In his pocket was an oration carefully written out. If he were to pluck it forth, and try to read it, he knew that he could not make sense of a word, for his eyes had lost the power of sight... Profound inertia seized him; he must do something, but there was a dreadful temptation to do nothing, just to go on grinning, like a man in a nightmare who finds

himself in the track of an express train.

Nevertheless, such automata are we, he was speaking. He did not know what he was saying, but as a matter of fact he was repeating the words with which the chairman had introduced him. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are fortunate in the privilege of having heard so stirring and statesmanlike an address as that which His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Dominions has just delivered. Now we are to hear what our gallant and enterprising friend, the prospective candidate for Wester Ross, has to say to us about the problems which confront the nation."

He repeated this exordium like a parrot. The audience scented a mild joke, and laughed...Then in a twittering falsetto he repeated it again— this time in silence. There was a vague sense that something had gone wrong. He was about to repeat it a third time, and then the crash would have come, and he would have retired gibbering from the field.

The situation was saved by Wattie Lithgow. Seated at the back of the hall, Wattie saw that his master was in deadly peril, and took the only way to save him. He had a voice of immense compass, and he used it to the full.

"Speak up, man," he roared. "I canna hear a word ye're sayin'."

There were shouts of "Order," and the stewards glared angrily at Wattie, but the trick had been done. Sir Archie's eyes opened, and he saw the audience no longer like turnips in a field, but as living and probably friendly human beings. Above all, he saw Wattie's gnarled face and anxious eyes. Suddenly his brain cleared, and, had he desired it, he could have reeled off the speech in his pocket as glibly as he had repeated it in the solitude of Crask. But he felt that that was no longer possible. The situation required a different kind of speech, and he believed he could make it. He would speak direct to Wattie, as he had often lectured him in the Crask smoking-room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said—and his voice had become full and confident—"your 'gallant and enterprising friend' is not much of a hand in public speaking. I have still my job to learn, and with your help I hope soon to learn it. What I have to say to you this afternoon is the outcome of my first amateurish study of public questions. You may take it that my views are honest and my own. I am not a gramophone."

In this last sentence he lied, for what he said was for the most part not his own; it was the sermon which Janet Raden had preached him the day before in the clear air of the Carnmore tops. Mixed up with it were fragments of old discourses of his own to Wattie, and reflections which had come to him in the last ten years of a variegated life. The manner was staccato, the style was slangy and inelegant, but it was not a lesson learned and recited, but words spoken direct to those into whose eyes he was looking. He had found touch with his audience, and he held their attention in a vice.

It was a strange, inconsequent speech, but it had a curious appeal in it—the appeal of youth and candour and courage. It was philosophy rather than politics, and ragged but arresting philosophy. He began by confessing that the war had left the world in a muddle, a muddle which affected his own mind. The only cure was to be honest with oneself, and to refuse to accept specious nonsense and conventional jargon. He told the story from Andersen of the Emperor's New Suit. "Our opponents call us Tories," he said; "they can call us anything they jolly well please. I am proud to be called a Tory. I understand that the name was first given by Titus Oates to those who disbelieved in his Popish Plot. What we want to-day is Toryism—the courage to give the lie to impudent rogues."

That was a memory of Leithen's table talk. The rest was all from Janet Raden. He preached the doctrine of Challenge; of no privilege without responsibility, of only one right of man—the right to do his duty; of all power and property held on sufferance. These were the thoughts which had been growing in his head since yesterday afternoon. He spoke of the changing face of the land—the Highlands ceasing to be the home of men and becoming the mere raw material of picture post-cards, the old gentry elbowed out and retiring with a few trinkets and pictures and the war medals of their dead to suburban lodgings. It all came of not meeting the challenge...What was Bolshevism but a challenge, perhaps a much-needed challenge, to make certain of the faith that was in a man? He had no patience with the timorous and whining rich. No law could protect them unless they made themselves worth protecting. As a Tory, he believed that the old buildings were still sound, but they must be swept and garnished, that the ancient weapons were the best, but they must be kept bright and shining and ready for use. So soon as a cause feared inquiry and the light of day that cause was doomed. The ostrich, hiding its head in the sand, left its rump a fatal temptation to the boot of the passer-by.

Sir Archie was not always clear, he was often ungrammatical, and he nobly mixed his metaphors, but he held his audience tight. He did more, when at the close of his speech he put his case in the form of an apologue—the apologue of John Macnab. The mention of the name brought laughter and loud cheering. John Macnab, he said, was abroad in the world to-day, like a catfish among a shoal of herrings. He had his defects, no doubt, but he was badly wanted, for he was at bottom a sportsman and his challenge had to be met. Even if the game went against them the challenged did not wholly lose, for they were stirred out of apathy into life.

No queerer speech was ever made by a candidate on his first public appearance. It had no kind of success with the Baillie, nor, it may be presumed, with Lord Claybody; indeed, I doubt if any of the distinguished folk on the platform quite approved of it, except Lamancha. But there was no question of its appeal to the audience, and the applause which had followed Lamancha's peroration was as nothing to that amid which Sir Archie resumed his seat.

At the back of the hall a wild-eyed man sitting near Wattie Lithgow had been vociferous in his plaudits. "He ca's himsel' a Tory. By God, it's the red flag that he'll be wavin' soon."

"If you say that again," said Wattie fiercely, "I'll smash your heid."

"Keep your hair on," was the reply. "I'm for the young ane, whatever he ca's himsel'."

Archie sat down with his brain in a whirl, for he had tasted the most delicious of joys—the sense of having moved a multitude. He had never felt happier in his life—or, let it be added, more truly amazed. A fiery trial was over, and brilliantly over. He had spoken straightforwardly to his fellow mortals with ease and acceptance. The faces below him were no longer featureless, but human and friendly and interesting. He did not listen closely to Colonel Wavertree's remarks, which seemed to be mostly about taxation, or to the Ex-Premier of New Caledonia, who was heavily rhetorical and passionately imperial. Modest as he was, he had a pleased consciousness that, though he might have talked a good deal of rot, he had gripped his hearers as not even Lamancha had gripped them. He searched through the hall for faces to recognise. Wattie he saw, savagely content; the Colonel, too, who looked flushed and happy, and Junius, and Agatha. But there was no sign of Janet, and his failure to find her threw a dash of cold water on his triumph.

The next step was to compass an inconspicuous departure. Lamancha would be escorted in state to the four-forty-five train, and he must join it at Frew. While "God save the King" was being sung, Sir Archie escaped by a side-door, followed by an excited agent. "Man, ye went down tremendous," Brodie gasped. "Ye changed your mind—ye told me ye were goin' to deal wi' foreign policy. Anyway, ye've started fine, and there'll be no gettin' inside the hall the next time ye speak in Muirtown."

Archie shook him off, picked up a taxi-cab at the station, and drove to Frew. There, after lurking in the waiting-room, he duly entered a third-class carriage in the rear of the south-going train. At six o'clock he emerged on to the platform at Bridge of Gair, and waited till the train had gone before he followed Lamancha to the hotel. He found his friend thinking only of Haripol. "I had a difficult job to get rid of Claybody, and had to tell a lot of lies. Said I was going to stay with Lanerick and that my man had gone on there with my luggage. We'd better be off, for we've a big day before us to-morrow."

But, as the Hispana started up the road to the pass, Lamancha smiled affectionately on the driver and patted his shoulder. "I've often called you an idiot, Archie, but I'm bound to say to-day you were an inspired idiot. You may win this seat or not—it doesn't matter—but sooner or later you're going to make a howling success in that silly game."

Beyond the pass the skies darkened for rain, and it was in a deluge that the car, a little after eight o'clock, crossed the Bridge of Larrig. Archie had intended to go round by one of the peat-roads, but the wild weather had driven everyone to shelter, and it seemed safe to take the straight road up the hill. Shapp, who had just arrived in the Ford, took charge of the car, and Archie and Lamancha sprinted through the drizzle to the back-door.

To their surprise it was locked, and when, in reply to their hammering, Mrs Lithgow appeared, it was only after repeated questions through the scullery-window that she was convinced of their identity and permitted them to enter.

"We've been fair fashed wi' folk," was her laconic comment, as she retired hastily to the kitchen after locking the door behind them.

In the smoking-room they found the lamps lit, the windows shuttered, Crossby busy with the newspapers, Palliser-Yeates playing patience, and Leithen as usual deep in the works of Sir Walter Scott. "Well," was the unanimous question, "how did it go off?"

"Not so bad," said Archie. "Charles was in great form. But what on earth has scared Mrs Lithgow?"

Leithen laid down his book. "We've had the devil of a time. Our base has been attacked. It looks as if we may have a rearguard action to add to our troubles. We're practically besieged. Two hours ago I was all for burning our ciphers and retiring."

"Besieged? By whom?"

"By the correspondents. Ever since the early afternoon. I fancy their editors have been prodding them with telegrams. Anyhow, they've forgotten all about Harald Blacktooth and are hot on the scent of John Macnab."

"But what brought them here?"

"Method of elimination, I suppose. Your journalist is a sharp fellow. They argued that John Macnab must have a base near by, and, as it wasn't Strathlarrig or Glenraden, it was most likely here. Also they caught sight of Crossby taking the air, and gave chase. Crossby flung them off—happily they can't have recognised him—but they had him treed in the stable loft for three hours."

"Did they see you?"

"No. Some got into the hall and some glued their faces to this window, but John was under the table and I was making myself very small at the back of the sofa...Mrs Lithgow handled them like Napoleon. Said the Laird was away and wouldn't be back till midnight, but he'd see them at ten o'clock to-morrow. She had to promise that, for they are determined ruffians. They'd probably still be hanging about the place if it hadn't been for this blessed rain."

"That's not all," said Palliser-Yeates. "We had a visit from a lunatic. We didn't see him, for Mrs Lithgow lured him indoors and has him shut up in the wine-cellar."

"Good God! What kind of lunatic?" Sir Archie exclaimed.

"Don't know. Mrs Lithgow was not communicative. She said something about smallpox. Maybe he's a fellow-sufferer looking for Archie's company. Anyhow, he's in the wine-cellar for Wattie to deal with."

Sir Archie rose and marched from the room, and did not return till the party were seated at a late supper. His air was harassed, and his eyes were wild.

"It wasn't the wine-cellar," he groaned, "it was the coal-hole. He's upstairs now having a bath and changing into a suit of my clothes. Pretty short in the temper, too, and no wonder. For Heaven's sake, you fellows, stroke him down when he appears. We've got to bank on his being a good chap and tell him everything. It's deuced hard luck. Here am I just making a promising start in my public career, and you've gone and locked up the local Medical Officer of Health who came to inquire into a reputed case of smallpox."

X. — IN WHICH CRIME IS ADDED TO CRIME

BY the mercy of Providence Doctor Kello fulfilled Archie's definition of a "good chap." He was a sandy-haired young man from Dundee, who had been in the Air Force, and on his native dialect had grafted the intricate slang of that service. Archie had found him half-choked with coal-dust and wrath, and abject apologies had scarcely mollified him. But a hot bath and his host's insistence that he should spend the night at Crask—Dr Kello knew very well that at the inn he would get no more than a sofa—had worked a miracle, and he appeared at the supper-table prepared to forgive and forget. He was a little awed by the company in which he found himself, and nervously murmured, "Pleased to meet ye" in response to the various introductions. A good meal and Archie's Veuve Clicquot put him into humour with himself and at ease with his surroundings. He exchanged war reminiscences, and told stories of his professional life—"Ye wouldn't believe, I tell ye, what queer folk the Highlanders are" and when later in the evening Archie, speaking as to a brother airman, made a clean breast of the John Macnab affair, he received the confession with obstreperous hilarity. "It's the best stunt I ever heard tell of," he roared, slapping his knee. "Ye may depend on me to back ye up, too. Is it the journalists that's worrying ye? You leave the merchants to me. I'll shut their mouths for them. Ten o'clock to-morrow, is it? Well, I'll be there with a face as long as my arm, and I'll guarantee to send them down the hill like a kirk emptying."

All night it rained in bucketfuls, and the Friday morning broke with the same pitiless deluge. Lamancha came down to breakfast in a suit of clothes which would have been refused by a self-respecting tramp, but which, as a matter of fact, had been his stalking outfit for a dozen years. The Merklands were not a dressy family. He studied the barograph, where the needle was moving ominously downward, and considered the dissolving skies and the mist which rose like a wall beyond the terrace.

"It's no good," he told his host. "You might as well try to stalk Haripol in a snow blizzard. To-day must be washed out, and that leaves us only to-morrow. We'll have to roost indoors, and we're terribly at the mercy of that hive of correspondents."

The hive came at ten, a waterproofed army defying the weather in the cause of duty. But in front of the door they were met by Dr Kello, with a portentous face.

"Good morning, boys," he said. "Sir Archibald Roylance asked me to see ye on his behalf. My name's Kello—I'm Medical Officer of Health for this part of the world. I'm very sorry, but ye can't see Sir Archibald this morning. In fact, I want ye to go away and not come near the place at all."

He was promptly asked for his reason.

"The fact is that a suspected case of smallpox has been reported from Crask. That's why I'm here. I say 'suspected,' for, in my opinion, it's nothing of the sort. But I'm bound to take every precaution, and, for your own sakes, I can't let a man-jack of ye a step nearer."

The news was received in silence, and added to the depression of the dripping weather. A question was asked.

"No, it's not Sir Archibald. He's as disappointed as you are at not being able to welcome ye. He says if ye come back in forty-eight hours—that's the time when I hope to give the place a clean bill of health—he would like to stand ye drinks and have a crack with ye."

Five minutes later the doctor returned to the smoking-room. "They're off like good laddies, and I don't think they'll trouble ye for the next two days. Gosh! They're as feared of infectious diseases as a Highlander. I'll give them a wee while to go down the hill, and then I'll start off home on my motor-bike. I'm very much obliged to you gentlemen for your good entertainment...Ye may be sure I'll hold my tongue about the confidence ye've honoured me with. Not a cheep from me! But I can tell ye, I'll be keeping my ears open for word of John Macnab. Good luck to ye, gentlemen!"

The departure of Doctor Kello was followed by the appearance of Wattie Lithgow, accompanied by Benjie, whose waterproof cape of ceremony had now its uses.

"I've got bad news from this laddie," said the former, lugging Benjie forward by the ear. "He was at Haripol early this morning and a' the folk there was speakin', about it. Macnicol tell't him—"

"No, he didna," put in Benjie. "Macnicol's ower prood to speak to me. I heard it frae the men in the bothy and frae ane o' the lassies up at the big hoose."

"Weel, what a'boddy kens is maistly true. Ye'll no guess what yon auld Claybody is daein'. Ye ken he's a contractor, forbye ither things, and he's got the contrack for makin' the big dam at Kinlochbuie. There's maybe a thousand navvies workin' there, and he's bringin' ower a squad o' them—Benjie says mair nor a hundred—to guaird the forest."

“Ass!” exclaimed Palliser-Yeates. “He’ll drive every beast into Caithness.”

“Na, na. Macnicol is not entirely wantin’ in sense. The navvies will no be allowed inside the forest. They’ll be a guaird outside—what’s that they ca’ it?—an outer barrage. Macnicol will see that a’ the deer are in the Sanctuary, and in this kind o’ weather it will no be that deeficult. But it will be verra deeficult for his Lordship to get inside the forest, and it will be verra near an impossibeelity to get a beast out.”

Archie looked round the room. “Dashed unsportin’ I call it. I bet it’s the young ‘un’s idea.”

“Look here, Charles,” said Leithen. “Isn’t it about time to consider whether you shouldn’t cry off this Haripol affair? It was different at the start. John and I had a fair sporting chance. Our jobs were steep enough, but yours is absolutely perpendicular...The Claybodys are not taking any chances, and a hundred able-bodied navvies is a different-sized proposition to a few gillies. The confounded Press has blazoned the thing so wide that if you’re caught you’ll be a laughing-stock to the whole civilised world. Don’t you see that you simply can’t afford to lose, any more than the Claybodys? Then, to put the lid on it, our base is under a perpetual threat from those newspaper fellows. I’d rather have all Scotland Yard after me than the Press—you agree, Crossby? I’m inclined to think that John Macnab has done enough *‘pour chauffer la gloire’*. It’s insanity to go on.”

Lamancha shook his head. “It’s all very well for you—you won. I tell you frankly that nothing on earth will prevent me having a try at Haripol. All you say is perfectly true, but I don’t choose to listen to it. This news of Wattie’s only makes me more determined.”

Leithen subsided into his book, observing—“I suppose that is because you’re a great man. You’re a sober enough fellow at most times, but you’re able now and then to fling your hat over the moon. You can damn the consequences, which I suppose is one of the tests of greatness. John and I can’t, but we admire you, and we’ll bail you out.”

It was Sir Archie, strangely enough, who now abetted Lamancha’s obstinacy. “I grant you the odds are stiff,” he declared, “but that only means that we must find some way to shorten them. Nothing’s impossible after yesterday. There was I gibbering with terror and not a notion in my head, and yet I got on fairly well, didn’t I, Wattie?”

“Ye made a grand speech, sir. There was some said it was the best speech they ever heard in a’ their days. There was one man said ye was haverin’, but”—fiercely—“he didna say it twice.”

“We’ve the whole day to make a plan,” Archie went on. “Hang it all, there must be some way to diddle the Claybodys. We’ve got a pretty good notion of the lie of the land, and Wattie’s a perfect Red Indian at getting up to deer. We muster four and a half able-bodied men, counting me as half. And there’s Benjie. Benjie, you’re a demon at strategy. Have you anything to say?”

“Aye,” said Benjie, “I’ve a plan. But ye’re ower particular here, and maybe ye wadna like it.” This with a dark glance at Palliser-Yeates, who was leaving the room to get more tobacco.

“We’ll have it, all the same. Let’s sit down to business. Stick the ordnance map on that table, Charles, and you, Ned, shut that book and give us the benefit of your powerful mind.”

Leithen rose, yawning. “I’ve left my pipe in the dining-room. Wait a moment till I fetch it.”

Now Dr Kello, on his departure, had left the front-door of the house open, and the steady downpour of rain blanketed all other sounds from outside. So it came to pass that when Archie’s quick ear caught the noise of footsteps on the gravel and he bounded into the hall, he was confronted with the spectacle of Colonel Raden and his daughters already across the doorstep. Moreover, as luck would have it, at that moment Leithen from the dining-room and Palliser-Yeates from his bedroom converged on the same point.

“Hullo, Roylance,” the Colonel cried. “This is a heathenish hour for a visit, but we had to have some exercise, and my daughters wanted to come up and congratulate you on your performance yesterday. A magnificent speech, sir! Uncommon good sense! What I—”

But the Colonel stopped short in mystification at the behaviour of his daughters, who were staring with wide eyes at two unknown figures who stood shamefacedly behind Sir Archie. This last, having no alternative, was trying to carry off things with a high hand.

“Let me introduce,” he was proclaiming, “Sir Edward Leithen—Mr Palliser-Yeates—Miss Raden, Miss Janet Raden, Colonel—”

But he was unheeded. Agatha was looking at Leithen and Janet at Palliser-Yeates, and simultaneously the two ejaculated, “John Macnab!”

Archie saw that it was all up. Shouting for Mrs Lithgow, he helped his visitors to get out of their mackintoshes, and ordered his housekeeper to have these garments dried. Then he ushered them into the smoking-room where were Lamancha and Crossby and Benjie and a good peat-fire. Wattie, at the first sound of voices, had discreetly retired.

“Come along, Colonel, I’ll explain. Very glad to see you—have that chair...what about dry stockings?...”

But his hospitable bustle was unheeded. The Colonel, hopelessly at sea, was bowing to a tall man who in profound embarrassment was clearing books and papers out of chairs.

"Yes, that's Lord Lamancha. You heard him yesterday. Charles, this is Colonel Raden, and Miss Agatha and Miss Janet. That is Mr Crossby, the eminent journalist. That little scallywag is Fish Benjie, whom I believe you know...Sit down, please, all of you. We're caught out and are going to confess. Behold the lair of John Macnab."

Colonel Raden was recovering himself.

"I read in the papers," he said, "that John Macnab is the reincarnation of Harald Blacktooth. In that case we are related. With which of these gentlemen have I the honour to claim kin?"

The words, the tone, convinced Sir Archie that the danger was past, and his nervousness fled.

"Properly speakin', you've found three new relatives. There they are. Not bad follows, though they've been givin' me a hectic time. Now I retire—shoes off, feet fired, and turned out to grass. Ned, you've a professional gift of exposition. Fire away, and tell the whole story."

Sir Edward Leithen obeyed, and it may be said that the tale lost nothing in his telling. He described the case of three gentlemen, not wholly useless to their country, who had suddenly fallen into ennui. He told of a cure, now perfected, but of a challenge not yet complete. "I've been trying to persuade Lord Lamancha to drop the thing," he said, "but the Claybodys have put his back up, and I'm not sure that I blame him. It didn't matter about you or Bandicott, for you took it like sportsmen, and we should have felt no disgrace in being beaten by you. But Claybody is different."

"By Gad, sir, you are right," the Colonel shouted, rising to his feet and striding about the room. "He and his damned navvies are an insult to every gentleman in the Highlands. They're enough to make Harald Blacktooth rise from the dead. I should never think anything of Lord Lamancha again— and I've thought a devilish lot of him up to now—if he took this lying down. Do you know, sir"—turning to Lamancha—"that I served in the Scots Guards with your father—we called them the Scots Fusilier Guards in those days—and I am not going to fail his son."

Sir Edward Leithen was a philosopher, with an acute sense of the ironies of life, and as he reflected that here was a laird, a Tory, and a strict preserver of game working himself into a passion over the moral rights of the poacher, he suddenly relapsed into helpless mirth. Colonel Raden regarded him sternly and uncomprehendingly, but Janet smiled, for she too had an eye for comedy.

"I'm tremendously grateful to you," Lamancha said. "You know more about stalking than all of us put together, and we want your advice."

"Janet," commanded her parent, "you have the best brain in the family. I'll be obliged if you'll apply it to this problem."

For an hour the anxious conclave surrounded the spread-out ordnance map. Wattie was summoned, and with a horny finger expounded the probable tactics of Macnicol and the presumable disposition of the navy guard. At the end of the consultation Lamancha straightened his back.

"The odds are terribly steep. I can see myself dodging the navvies, and with Wattie's help getting up to a stag. But if Macnicol and the gillies are perched round the Sanctuary they are morally certain to spot us, and, if we have to bolt, there's no chance of getting the beast over the march. That's a hole I see no way out of."

"Janet," said the Colonel, "do you?"

Janet was looking abstractedly out of the window. "I think it is going to clear up," she observed, disregarding her father's question. "It will be a fine afternoon, and then, if I am any judge of the weather, it will rain cats and dogs in the evening."

"We had better scatter after luncheon," said Lamancha, "and each of us go for a long stride. We want to be in training for to-morrow."

After the Colonel had suggested half a dozen schemes, the boldness of which was only matched by their futility, the Radens rose to go. Janet signalled to Benjie, who slipped out after her, and the two spoke in whispers in the hall, while Archie was collecting the mackintoshes from the kitchen.

"I want you to be at Haripol this afternoon. Wait for me a little on this side of the lodge about half-past three."

Benjie grinned and nodded. "Aye, lady, I'll be there." He, too, had a plan for shortening the odds, and he had so great a respect for Janet's sagacity that he thought it probable that she might have reached his own conclusion.

As Janet had foretold, it was a hot afternoon. The land steamed in the sun, but every hill-top was ominously clouded. While the inhabitants of Crask were engaged in taking stealthy but violent exercise among the sinuosities of Sir Archie's estate, Janet Raden mounted her yellow pony and rode thoughtfully towards Haripol by way of Inverlarrig and the high road. There were various short-cuts, suitable for a wild-cat like Benjie, but after the morning's torrential rains she had no fancy for swollen bogs and streams. She found Benjie lurking behind a boulder near the lodge, and in the shelter of a clump of birches engaged him in earnest conversation. Then she rode decorously through the gates and presented herself at the castle door.

Haripol was immense, new, and, since it had been built by a good architect out of good stone, not without its raw dignity. Janet found Lady Claybody in a Tudor hall which had as much connection with a Scots castle as with a Kaffir kraal. There was a wonderful jumble of possessions—tapestries which included priceless sixteenth-century Flemish pieces, and French fakes of last year; Ming treasures and Munich atrocities; armour of which about a third was genuine; furniture indiscriminately Queen Anne, Sheraton, Jacobean, and Tottenham Court Road; and pictures which ranged from a Sir

Joshua (an indifferent specimen) to a recent Royal Academy portrait of Lord Claybody. A feature was the number of electric lamps to illumine the hours of darkness, the supports of which varied from Spanish altar-candlesticks to two stuffed polar bears and a turbaned Ethiopian in coloured porcelain.

Lady Claybody was a heavily handsome woman still in her early fifties. The purchase of Haripol had been her doing, for romance lurked in her ample breast, and she dreamed of a new life in which she should be an unquestioned great lady far from the compromising environment where the Claybody millions had been won. Her manner corresponded to her ambition, for it was stately and aloof, her speech was careful English seasoned with a few laboriously acquired Scots words, and in her household her wish was law. A merciful tyrant, she rarely resorted to ultimata, but when she issued a decree it was obeyed.

She was unaffectedly glad to see Janet, for the Radens were the sort of people she desired as friends. Two days before she had been at her most urbane to Agatha and the Colonel, and now she welcomed the younger daughter as an ambassador from that older world which she sought to make her own. A small terrier drowned her greetings with epileptic yelps.

"Silence, Roguie," she enjoined. "You must not bark at a fellow-countrywoman. Roguie, you know, is so high-strung that he reacts to any new face. You find me quite alone, my dear. Our daughters do not join us till next week, when we shall have a houseful for the stalking. Now I am having a very quiet, delicious time drinking in the peace of this enchanted glen."

She said no word of John Macnab, who was doubtless the primary cause of this solitude. Lord Claybody and Johnson, it appeared, were out on the hill. Janet chattered on the kind of topics which she felt suitable—hunting in the Midlands, the coming Muirtown Gathering, the political meeting of yesterday. "Claybody thought Sir Archie Roylance rather extravagant," said the lady, "but he was greatly impressed with Lord Lamancha's speech. Surely it is absurd that this part of the Highlands, which your sister says was so loyal to Prince Charlie, should be a hot-bed of radicalism. Claybody thinks that that can all be changed, but not with a candidate who truckles to socialist nonsense."

Janet was demure and acquiescent, sighing when her hostess sighed, condemning when she condemned. Presently the hot sun shining through the windows suggested the open air to Lady Claybody, who was dressed for walking.

"Shall we stroll a little before tea?" she asked. "Wee Roguie has been cooped indoors all morning, and he loves a run, for he comes of a very sporting breed."

They set forth accordingly, into gardens bathed in sunshine, and thence to the coolness of beechwoods. The Reascuill, after leaving its precipitous glen, flows, like the Raden, for a mile or two in haughlands, which are split by the entry of a tributary, the Doran, which in its upper course is the boundary between Haripol and Crask. Between the two streams stands a wooded knoll which is a chief pleasure of the estate. It is a tangle of dwarf birches, bracken and blaeberry, with ancient Scots firs on the summit, and from its winding walks there is a prospect of the high peaks of the forest rising black and jagged above the purple ridges.

At its foot they crossed the road which followed the river into the forest, and Janet caught sight of a group of men lounging by the bridge.

"Have you workmen on the place just now?" she asked.

"Only wood-cutters, I think," said Lady Claybody.

Wee Roguie plunged madly into the undergrowth, and presently could be heard giving tongue, as if in pursuit of a rabbit. "Dear little fellow!" said his mistress. "Hear how he loves freedom!"

The ladies walked slowly to the crest of the knoll, where they halted to admire the view. Janet named the different summits, which looked ominously near, and then turned to gaze on the demesne of Haripol lying green and secure in its cincture of wood and water. "I think you have the most beautiful place in the Highlands," she told her hostess. "It beats Glenraden, for you have the sea."

"It is very lovely," was the answer. "I always think of it as a fortress, where we are defended against the troubles of the world. At Ronham one might as well be living in London, but here there are miles of battlements between us and dull everyday things...Listen to Roguie! How happy he is!"

Roguie's yelps sounded now close at hand, and now far off, as the scent led him. Presently, as the ladies moved back to the house, the sound grew fainter. "He will probably come out on the main avenue," his mistress said. "I like him to feel really free, but he always returns in good time for his little supper."

They had tea in the tapestried hall, and then Janet took her leave. "I want to escape the storm," she explained, "for it is certain to rain hard again before night." As it chanced she did not escape it, but after a wayside colloquy with a small boy, arrived at Glenraden as wet as if she had swum the Larrig. She had sent by Benjie a message to Crask, concerning her share in the plans of the morrow.

That night after dinner, while the rain beat on the windows, John Macnab was hard at work. The map was spread out on the table, and Lamancha prepared the orders for the coming action. If we would understand his plan, it is necessary to consider the nature of the terrain. The hill behind Crask rises to a line of small cliffs not unlike a South African Kranz, and through a gap in the line runs a moorland track which descends by the valley of the Doran till it joins the main road from Inverlarrig almost at Haripol gates. The Doran glen—the Crask march is the stream—is a wide hollow of which the north side is the glacis of the great Haripol peaks. These are, in order from west to east, Stob Ban, Stob Coire Easain, Sgurr Mor,

and the superb tower of Sgurr Dearg. Seen from the Crask ridge the summits rise in cones of rock from a glacis which at the foot is heather and scrub and farther up steep slopes of scree and boulders. Between each peak there is a pass leading over to the deep-cut glen of the Reascuill, which glen is contained on the north by the hills of Machray forest.

It was certain that the navy cordon would be an outer line of defence, outside the wilder ground of the forest. Wattie expounded it with an insight which the facts were to justify. "The men will be posted along the north side o' the Doran, maybe halfway up the hill—syne round the west side o' Stob Ban and across the Reascuill at the new fir plantin'—syne up the Machray march along the taps o' Clonlet and Bheinn Fhada. They can leave out Sgurr Dearg, for ye'd hae to be a crow to get ower that side o't. By my way o' thinkin', they'll want maybe three hundred to mak a proper ring, and they'll want them thickest on the Machray side where the ground is roughest. North o' the Doran it's that bare that twa-three men could see the whole hill-side, and Macnicol's no the ane to waste his folk. The easy road until the Sanctuary is frae Machray up the Reascuill, and the easy way to get a beast out wad be by the way o' the Red Burn. But the navvies will be as thick as starlin's there, so it's no place for you and me, my lord."

The Haripol Sanctuary lay at the headwater of the Reascuill, between what was called the Pinnacle Ridge of Sgurr Dearg and the cliff of Sgurr Mor. As luck would have it, a fairly easy path, known generally as the Beallach, led from it to the glen of the Doran. It was clear that Lamancha must enter from the south, and, if he got a stag, remove it by the same road.

"I'll get ye into the Sanctuary, never fear," said Wattie grimly, "There's no a navy ever whelpit wad keep you and me out. But when we're there, God help us, for we'll hae Macnicol to face. And if Providence is mercifu' and we get a beast, we've the navvies to get it through, and that's about the end o't. Ye canna mak yoursel' inconspicuous when ye're pu'in at a muckle stag."

"True," said Lamancha, "and that's just where Mr Palliser-Yeates comes in...John, my lad, your job is to be waiting on the Doran side of the Beallach, and if you see Wattie and me with a beast, to draw off the navvies in that quarter. You had better move west towards Haripol, for there's better cover on that side. D'you think you can do it? You used to have a pretty gift of speed, and you've always had an uncommon eye for ground."

Palliser-Yeates said modestly that he thought he was up to the job, provided Lamancha did not attract the prior notice of the watchers. Once the pack got on his trail, he fancied he could occupy their attention for an hour or two. The difficulty lay in keeping Lamancha in view, and for that purpose it would be necessary to ensconce himself at the very top of the Beallach, where he could have sight of the upper Sanctuary.

To Leithen fell the onerous task of creating a diversion on the other side of the forest. He must start in the small hours and be somewhere on the Machray boundary when Lamancha was beginning operations. There lay the most obvious danger-point, and there the navvies would probably be thickest on the ground. At all costs their attention—and that of any Haripol gillies in the same quarter—must be diverted from what might be happening in the Sanctuary. This was admittedly a hard duty, but Leithen was willing to undertake it. He was not greatly afraid of the navvies, who are a stiff-jointed race, but the Haripol gillies were another matter. "You simply must not get caught," Lamancha told him. "If you're hunted, make a bee-line north to Machray and Glenaicill—the gillies won't be keen to be drawn too far away from Haripol. You won the school mile in your youth, and you're always in training. Hang it all, you ought to be able to keep Claybody's fellows on the run. I never yet knew a gillie quick on his feet."

"That's a pre-war notion," said Palliser-Yeates. "Some of the young fellows are uncommon spry. Ned may win all right, but it won't be by much of a margin."

The last point for decision was the transport of the stag. The moor-road from Crask was possible for a light car with a high clearance, and it was arranged that Archie should take the Ford by that route and wait in cover on the Crask side of the Doran. It was a long pull from the Beallach to the stream, but there were tributary ravines where the cover was good—always presuming that Palliser-Yeates had decoyed away the navy guard.

"Here's the lay-out, then," said Lamancha at last. "Wattie and I get into the Sanctuary as best we can and try for a stag. If we get him, we bring him through the Beallach; John views us and shows himself, and draws off the navvies, whom we assume to be few at that point. Then we drag the beast down to the Doran and sling it into Archie's car. Meanwhile Ned is on the other side of the forest, doing his damndest to keep Macnicol busy...That's about the best we can do, but I needn't point out to you that every minute we're taking the most almighty chances. We may never get a shot. Macnicol may be in full cry after us long before we reach the Beallach. The navvies may refuse to be diverted by John, or may come back before we get near Archie's car...Ned may pipe to heedless ears, or, worse still, he may be nobbled and lugged off to the Haripol dungeons...It's no good looking for trouble before it comes, but I can see that there's a big bank of it waiting for us. What really frightens me is Macnicol and the gillies at the Sanctuary itself. This weather is in our favour, but even then I don't see how they can miss hearing our shot, and that of course puts the lid on it."

A time-table was drawn up after much discussion. Leithen was to start for Machray at 3 a.m., and be in position about 8. Lamancha and Wattie, about the latter hour, would be attempting to enter the Sanctuary by the Beallach. Palliser-Yeates must be at his post not later than 9, and Archie with the car should reach the Doran by 10. The hour of subsequent happenings depended upon fate; the thing might be over for good or ill by noon, or it might drag on till midnight.

When the last arrangements had been settled Lamancha squared his back against the mantelpiece and looked round on the company.

"Of course we're all blazing idiots—the whole thing is insanity—but we've done the best we can in the way of preparation."

The great thing is for each of us to keep his wits about him and use them, for everything may go the opposite way to what we think. There's no 'according to Cocker' in this game."

Archie was wrinkling his brows.

"It's all dashed ingenious, Charles, but do you think you have any real chance?"

"Frankly, I don't," was the answer. "The best we can hope for is to fail without being detected. I think there would be a far-away sporting chance if Macnicol could be tied up. That's what sticks in my gizzard. I don't see how it's possible to get a shot in the Sanctuary without Macnicol spotting it."

Wattie Lithgow had returned, and caught the last words. He was grinning broadly.

"I'm no positeeve but that Macnicol wull be tied up," he observed. "Benjie's here, and he's brocht something wi' him."

He paused for effect.

"It's a dog—a wee yelpin' dog."

"Whose dog?"

"Leddy Claybody's. It seems that at Haripol her leddyship wears the breeks—that the grey mear is the better horse there—and it seems that she's fair besottit on that dog. Benjie was sayin' that if it were lost Macnicol and a'body about the place wad be set lookin' for't, and naething wad be thought of at Haripol till it was fund."

Archie rose in consternation.

"D'you mean to say—How on earth did the beast come here?"

"It cam here wi' Benjie. It's fine and comfortable in a box in the stable...I'm no just clear about what happened afore that, but I think Miss Janet Raden and Benjie gae'd ower to Haripol this afternoon and fund the puir wee beast lost in the wuds."

Archie did not join in the laughter. His mind held no other emotion than a vast and delighted amazement. The lady who two days before had striven to lift his life to a higher plane, who had been the sole inspiration of his successful speech of yesterday, was now discovered conspiring with Fish Benjie, to steal a pup.



XI. — HARIPOL—THE MAIN ATTACK

SOME men begin the day with loose sinews and a sluggish mind, and only acquire impetus as the hours proceed; others show a declining scale from the vigour of the dawn to the laxity of evening. It was fortunate for Lamancha that he belonged to the latter school. At daybreak he was obstinate, energetic, and frequently ill-tempered, as sundry colleagues in France and Palestine had learned to their cost; and it needed an obstinate man to leave Crask between the hours of five and six in the morning on an enterprise so wild and in weather so lamentable. For the rain came down in sheets, and a wind from the north-east put ice into it. He stopped for a moment on the summit of the Crask ridge, to contemplate a wall of driving mist where should have been a vista of the Haripol peaks. "This wund will draw beasts intil the Sanctuary without any help from Macnicol," said Wattie morosely. "It's ower fierce to last. I wager it will be clear long afore night."

"It's the weather we want," said Lamancha, cowering from the violence of the blast.

"For the Sanctuary—maybe. Up till then I'm no sae sure. It's that thick we micht maybe walk intil a navvy's airms."

The gods of the sky were in a capricious mood. All down the Crask hill-side to the edge of the Doran the wet table-cloth of the fog clung to every ridge and hollow. The stream was in roaring spate, and Lamancha and Wattie, already soaked to the skin, forded it knee-high. They had by this time crossed the moor-road from Crask to Haripol, and marked the nook where in the lee of rocks and birches Archie was to be waiting with the Ford car. Beyond lay the long lift of land to the Haripol peaks. It was rough with boulders and heather, and broken with small gullies, and on its tangled face a man might readily lose himself. Wattie disliked the mist solely because it prevented him from locating the watchers, since his experience of life made him disinclined to leave anything to chance; but he had no trouble in finding his way in it. The consequence was that he took Lamancha over the glacis at the pace of a Gurkha, and in half an hour from the Doran's edge had him panting among the screes just under the Beallach which led to the Sanctuary. Somewhere behind them were the vain navvy pickets, happily evaded in the fog.

Then suddenly the weather changed. The wind shifted a point to the east, the mist furled up, the rain ceased, and a world was revealed from which all colour had been washed, a world as bleak and raw as at its first creation. The grey screes sweated grey water, the sodden herbage was bleached like winter, the crags towering above them might have been of coal. A small fine rain still fell, but the visibility was now good enough to show them the ground behind them in the style of a muddy etching.

The consequence of this revelation was that Wattie shuffled into cover. He studied the hill-side behind him long and patiently with his glass. Then he grunted: "There's four navvies, as I mak out, but no verra well posted. We cam gei near ane o' them on the road up. Na, they canna see us here, and besides they're no lookin' this airt." Lamancha tried to find them with his telescope, but could see nothing human in the wide sopping wilderness.

Wattie grumbled as he led the way up a kind of nullah, usually as dry as Arabia but now spouting a thousand rivulets, right into the throat of the Beallach. "It's clearin' just when we wanted it thick. The ways o' Providence is mysterious...Na, na, there's nae road there. That's a fox's track, and it's the deer's road we maun gang. Stags will no climb rocks, sensible beasts...The wind's gone, but I wish the mist wad come down again."

At the top of the pass was a pad of flat ground, covered thick with the leaves of cloudberry. On the right rose the Pinnacle Ridge of Sgurr Dearg, in its beginning an easy scramble which gave no hint of the awesome towers which later awaited the traveller; on the left Sgurr Mor ran up in a steep face of screes. "Keep down," Wattie enjoined, and crawled forward to where two boulders made a kind of window for a view to the north.

The two looked down into three little corries which, like the fingers of a hand, united in the palm of a larger corrie, which was the upper glen of the Reascuill. It was a sanctuary perfectly fashioned by nature, for the big corrie was cut off from the lower glen by a line of boiler-plates like the wall of a great dam, down which the stream plunged in cascades. The whole place was loud with water—the distant roar of the main river, the ceaseless dripping of the cliffs, the chatter and babble of a myriad hidden rivulets. But the noise seemed only to deepen the secrecy. It was a world in monochrome, every detail clear as a wet pebble, but nowhere brightness or colour. Even the coats of the deer had taken on the dead grey of the slaty crags.

Never in his life had Lamancha seen so many beasts together. Each corrie was full of them, feeding on the rough pastures or among the boulders, drifting aimlessly across the spouts of screes below the high cliffs, sheltering in the rushy gullies. There were groups of hinds and calves, and knots of stags, and lone beasts on knolls or in mud-baths, and, since all were restless, the numbers in each corrie were constantly changing.

"Ye gods, what a sight!" Lamancha murmured, his head at Wattie's elbow. "We won't fail for lack of beasts."

"The trouble is," said Wattie, "that there's ower mony." Then he added obscurely that "it might be the day o' Pentecost."

Lamancha was busy with his glass. Just below him, not three hundred yards off, where the ravine which ran from the Beallach opened out into the nearest corrie, there was a group of deer—three hinds, a little stag, and farther on a second stag of which only the head could be seen.

"Wattie," he whispered excitedly, "there's a beast down there—a shootable beast. It's just what we're looking for...close to the Beallach."

"Aye, I see it," was the answer. "And I see something mair. There's a man ayont the big corrie—d'ye see yon rock shapit like a puddock-stool?... Na, the south side o' the waterfall...Well, follow on frae there towards Bheinn Fhada—have ye got

him?"

"Is that a man?" asked the surprised Lamancha.

"Where's your een, my lord? It's a man wi' grey breeks and a brown jaicket—an' he's smokin' a pipe. Aye, it's Macqueen. I ken by the lang legs o' him."

"Is he a Haripol gillie?"

"He's the second stalker. He's under notice, for him and young Mr Claybody doesna agree. Macqueen comes frae the Lowlands, and has a verra shairp tongue. They was oot on the hill last week, and Mr Johnson was pechin' sair gaun up the braes, an' no wonder, puir man. He cries on Macqueen to gang slow, and says, apologetic-like, 'Ye see, Macqueen, I've been workin' terrible hard the past year, and it's damaged my wund.' Macqueen, who canna bide the sight of him, says, 'I'm glad to hear it, sir. I was feared it was maybe the drink.' Gey impident!"

"Shocking."

"Weel, he's workin' off his notice...I'm pleased to see him yonder, for it means that Macnicol will no be there. Macnicol"—Wattie chuckled like a dropsical cornrake—"Is maist likely beatin' the roddydendums for the wee dog. Macqueen is set there so as he can watch this Beallach and likewise the top of the Red Burn on the Machray side, which I was tellin' ye was the easiest road. If ye were to kill that stag doun below he could baith see ye and hear ye, and ye'd never be allowed to shift it a yaird...Na, na. Seein' Macqueen's where he is, we maun try the wee corrie right under Sgurr Dearg. He canna see into that."

"But we'll never get there through all those deer."

"It will not be easy."

"And if we get a stag we'll never be able to get it over this Beallach."

"Indeed it will tak a great deal of time. Maybe a' nicht. But I'll no say it's not possible...Onyway, it is the best plan. We will have to tak a lang cast roond, and we maunna forget Macqueen. I'd give a five-pun-note for anither blatter o' rain."

The next hour was one of the severest bodily trials which Lamancha had ever known. Wattie led him up a chimney of Sgurr Mor, the depth of which made it safe from observation, and down another on the north face, also deep, and horribly loose and wet. This brought them to the floor of the first corrie at a point below where the deer had been observed. The next step was to cross the corrie eastwards towards Sgurr Dearg. This was a matter of high delicacy—first because of the number of deer, second because it was all within view of Macqueen's watch-tower.

Lamancha had followed in his time many stalkers, but he had never seen an artist who approached Wattie in skill. The place was littered with hinds and calves and stags, the cover was patchy at the best, and the beasts were restless. Wherever a route seemed plain the large ears and spindle shanks of a hind appeared to block it. Had he been alone Lamancha would either have sent every beast streaming before him in full sight of Macqueen, or he would have advanced at the rate of one yard an hour. But Wattie managed to move both circumspectly and swiftly. He seemed to know by instinct when a hind could be bluffed and when her suspicions must be laboriously quieted. The two went for the most part on their bellies like serpents, but their lowliness of movement would have been of no avail had not Wattie, by his sense of the subtle eddies of air, been able to shape a course which prevented their wind from shifting deer behind them. He well knew that any movement of beasts in any quarter would bring Macqueen's vigilant glasses into use.

Their task was not so hard so long as they were in hollows on the corrie floor. The danger came in crossing the low ridge to that farther corrie which was beyond Macqueen's ken, for, as they ascended, the wind was almost bound to carry their scent to the deer through which they had passed. Wattie lay long with his chin in the mire and his eyes scanning the ridge till he made up his mind on his route. Obviously it was the choice of the least among several evils, for he shook his head and frowned.

The ascent of the ridge was a slow business, and toilful. Wattie was clearly following an elaborate plan, for he zigzagged preposterously, and would wait long for no apparent reason in places where Lamancha was held precariously by half a foothold and the pressure of his nails. Anxious glances were cast over his shoulder at the post where Macqueen was presumably on duty. The stalker's ears seemed of an uncanny keenness, for he would listen hard, hear something, and then utterly change his course. To Lamancha it was all inexplicable, for there appeared to be no deer on the ridge, and the place was so much in the lee that not a breath of wind seemed to be abroad to carry their scent. Hard as his condition was, he grew furiously warm and thirsty, and perhaps a little careless, for once or twice he let earth and stones slip under his feet. Wattie turned on him fiercely. "Gang as if ye was growin'," he whispered. "There's beasts on a' sides."

Sobered thereby, Lamancha mended his ways, and kept his thoughts rigidly on the job before him. He crept docilely in Wattie's prints, wondering why on a little ridge they should go through exertions that must be equivalent to the ascent of the Matterhorn. At last his guide stopped. "Put your head between thae rushes," he enjoined. "Ye'll see her."

"See what?" Lamancha gasped.

"That sour devil o' a hind."

There she was, a grey elderly beldame, with her wicked puck-like ears, aware and suspicious, not five yards off.

"We canna wait," Wattie hissed. "It's ower dangerous. Bide you here like a stone."

He wriggled away to his right, while Lamancha, hanging on a heather root, watched the twitching ears and wrinkled nozzle...Presently from farther up the hill came a sharp bark, which was almost a bleat. The hind flung up her head and gazed intently...Five minutes later the sound was repeated, this time from a lower altitude. The beast sniffed, shook herself, and stamped with her foot. Then she laid back her ears, and trotted quietly over the crest.

Wattie was back again by Lamancha's side. "That puzzled the auld bitch," was his only comment. "We can gang faster now, and God kens we've nae time to lose."

As Lamancha lay panting at last on the top of the ridge he looked down into the highest of the lesser corries, tucked right under the black cliffs of Sgurr Dearg. It was a little corrie, very steep, and threaded by a burn which after the rain was white like a snow-drift. Vast tumbled masses of stone, ancient rockfalls from the mountain, lay thick as the cottages in a hamlet. At first sight the place seemed to be without deer. Lamancha, scanning it with his glass, could detect no living thing among the debris.

Wattie was calling fiercely on his Maker.

"God, it's the auld hero," he muttered, his eyes glued to his telescope.

At last Lamancha got his glasses adjusted, and saw what his companion saw. Far up the corrie, on a patch of herbage—the last before the desert of the rocks began—stood three stags. Two were ordinary beasts, shootable, for they must have weighed sixteen or seventeen stone, but with inconsiderable heads. The third was no heavier, but he had a head like a blasted pine—going back fast, for the beast was old, but still with thirteen clearly marked points and a most noble spread of horn.

"It's him," Wattie crooned. "It's the auld hero. Fine I ken him, for I seen him on Crask last back-end rivin' at the stacks. There's no a forest hereaways but they've had a try for him, but the deil's in him, for the grandest shots aye miss. What's your will, my lord? Dod, if John Macnab gets yon lad, he can cock his bonnet."

"I don't know, Wattie. Is it fair to kill the best beast in the forest?"

"Keep your mind easy about that. Yon's no a Haripol beast. He's oftener on Crask than on Haripol. He's a traiveller, and in one season will cover the feck o' the Hielands. I've heard that oreeginally he cam oot o' Kintail. He's terrible auld—some says a hundred year—and if ye dinna kill him he'll perish next winter, belike, in a snaw-wreath, and that's a puir death to dee."

"It's a terrible pull to the Beallach."

"It will be that, but there's the nicht afore us. If we don't take that beast—or one o' the three—I doubt we'll no get anither chance."

"Push on, then, Wattie. It looks like a clear coast."

"I'm no so sure. There's that deevil o' a hind somewhere afore us."

Down through the gaps of the Pinnacle Ridge blew fine streams of mist. They were the precursors of a new storm, for long before the two men had wormed their way into the corrie the mountain before them was blotted out with a curtain of rain, and the wind, which seemed for a time to have died away, was sounding a thousand notes in the Pan's-pipes of the crags.

"Good," said Lamancha. "This will blanket the shot."

"Ba-ad too," growled Wattie, "for we'll be duntin' against the auld bitch."

Lamancha believed he had located the stags well enough to go to them in black darkness. You had only to follow the stream to its head, and they were on the left bank a hundred yards or so from the rocks. But when he reached the burn he found that his memory was useless. There was not one stream but dozens, and it was hard to say which was the main channel. It was a loud world again, very different from the first corrie, but, when he would have hastened, Wattie insisted on circumspection. "There's the hind," he said, "and maybe since we're out o' Macqueen's sight there's nae need to hurry."

His caution was justified. As they drew themselves up the side of a small cascade the tops of a pair of antlers were seen over the next rise. Lamancha thought they were those of one of the three stags, but Wattie disillusioned him. "We're no within six hundred yards o' yon beasts," he said.

A long circuit was necessary, happily in good cover, and the stream was not rejoined till at a point where its channel bore to the south, so that their wind would not be carried to the beasts below the knoll. After that it seemed advisable to Wattie to keep to the water, which was flowing in a deep-cut bed. It was a job for a merman rather than for breeched human beings, for Wattie would permit of no rising to a horizontal or even to a kneeling position. The burn entered at their collars and flowed steadily through their shirts to an exit at their knees. Never had men been so comprehensively and continuously wet. Lamancha's right arm ached with pulling the rifle along the bank—he always insisted on carrying his weapon himself—while his body was submerged in the icy outflow of Sgurr Dearg's springs.

The pressure of Wattie's foot in his face halted him. Blinking through the spray, he saw his leader's head raised stiffly to the alert in the direction of a little knoll. Even in the thick weather he could detect a pair of bat-like ears, and he realised that these ears were twitching. It did no need Wattie's whisper of "the auld bitch" to reveal the enemy.

The two lay in the current for what seemed to Lamancha at least half an hour. He had enough hill-craft to recognise that their one hope was to stick to the channel, for only thus was there a chance of their presence being unrevealed by the wind. But the channel led them very close to the hind. If the brute chose to turn her foolish head they would be within view.

With desperate slowness, an inch at a time, Wattie moved upwards. He signed to Lamancha to wait while he traversed a pool where only his cap and nose showed above the water. Then came a peat wallow, when his face seemed to be ground into the moss, and his limbs to be splayed like a frog's and to move with frog-like jerks. After that was a little cascade, and, beyond, the shelter of a big boulder which would get him out of the hind's orbit. Lamancha watched this strange progress with one eye; the other was on the twitching ears. Mercifully all went well, and Wattie's stern disappeared round a corner of rock.

He laboured to follow with the same precision. The pool was easy enough except for the trailing of the rifle. The peat was straightforward going, though in his desire to follow his leader's example he dipped his face so deep in the black slime that his nostrils were plugged with it, and some got into his eyes which he dared not try to remove. But the waterfall was a snag. It was no light task to draw himself up against the weight of descending water, and at the top he lay panting for a second, damming up the flow with his body...Then he moved on; but the mischief had been done.

For the sound of the release of the pent-up stream had struck a foreign note on the hind's ear. It was an unfamiliar noise among the many familiar ones which at the moment filled the corrie. She turned her head sharply, and saw something in the burn which she did not quite understand. Lamancha, aware of her scrutiny, lay choking, with the water running into his nose; but the alarm had been given. The hind turned her head, and trotted off up-wind.

The next he knew was Wattie at his elbow making wild signals to him to rise and follow. Cramped and staggering, he lumbered after him away from the stream into a moraine of great granite blocks. "We're no twa hundred yards from the stags," the guide whispered. "The auld bitch will move them, but please God we'll get a shot." As Lamancha ran he marvelled at Wattie's skill, for he himself had not a notion where in the wide world the beasts might be.

They raced to a knoll, and Wattie flung himself flat on the top.

"There," he cried. "Steady, man. Tak the nearest. A hundred yards. Nae mair."

Lamancha saw through the drizzle three stags moving at a gentle trot to the south—up-wind, for in the corrie the eddies were coming oddly. They were not really startled, but the hind had stirred them. The big stag was in the centre of the three, and the proper shot was the last—a reasonable broadside.

Wattie's advice had been due to his loyalty to John Macnab, and not to his own choice, and this Lamancha knew. The desire of the great stag was on him, as it was on the hunter in Homer, and he refused to be content with the second-best. It was not an easy shot in that bad light, and it is probable that he would have missed; but suddenly Wattie gave an unearthly bark, and for a second the three beasts slowed down and turned their heads towards the sound.

In that second Lamancha fired. The great head seemed to bow itself, and then fling upwards, and all three disappeared at a gallop into the mist.

"A damned poor tailoring shot!" Lamancha groaned.

"He's deid for all that, but God kens how far he'll run afore he drops. He's hit in the neck, but a wee thing ower low...We can bide here a while and eat our piece. If ye wasna John Macnab I could be wishin' we had brought a dog."

Lamancha, cold, wet, and disgusted, wolfed his sandwiches, had a stiff dram from his flask, and smoked a pipe before he started again. He cursed his marksmanship, and Wattie forbore to contradict him; doubtless Jim Tarras had accustomed him to a standard of skill from which this was a woeful declension. Nor would he hold out much hope. "He'll gang into the first corrie and when he finds the wund different there he'll turn back for the Reascuill. If this was our ain forest and the weather wasna that thick, we might get another chance at him there...Oh, aye, he might gang for ten mile. The mist is a good thing, for Macqueen will no see what's happenin', but if it was to lift, and he saw a' the stags in the corrie movin', you and me wad hae to find a hidy-hole till the dark...Are ye ready, my lord?"

They crossed the ridge which separated them from the first corrie, close to the point where it took off from the massif of Sgurr Dearg. It was a shorter road than the one they had come by, and they could take it safely, for they were now moving up-wind, owing to the curious eddy from the south. Over the ridge it would be a different matter, for there the wind would be easterly as before. But it was a stiff climb and a slow business, for they had to make sure that they were on the track of the stag.

Wattie trailed the blood-marks like an Indian, noticing splashes on stones and rushes which Lamancha would have missed. "He's sair hit," he observed at one point. "See! He tried that steep bit and couldna manage it. There's the mark o' his feet turnin'...He's stoppit here...Aye, here's his trail, and it'll be the best for you and me. There's nothing like a wounded beast for pickin' the easiest road."

At the crest the air stirred freely, and, as it seemed to Lamancha, with a wet chill. Wattie gave a grunt of satisfaction, and sniffed it like a pointer dog. He moistened his finger and held it up; then he plucked some light grasses and tossed them into the air.

"That's a mercifu' dispensation! Maybe that shot that ye think ye bauchled was the most providential shot ye ever fired...The wund is shiftin'. I looked for it afore night, but no that early in the day. It's wearin' round to the south. D'ye see what

that means?"

Lamancha shook his head. Disgust had made his wits dull.

"Yon beast, as I telled ye, was a traiveller. There's nothing to keep him in Haripol forest. But he'll no leave it unless the wund will let him. Now it looks as if Providence was kind to us. The wund's blawin' from the Beallach, and he's bound to gang up-wund."

The next half-hour was a period of swift drama. Sure enough, the blood-marks turned up the first corrie in the direction from which the two had come in the morning. As the ravine narrowed the stag had evidently taken to the burn, for there were splashes on the rocks and a tinge of red in the pools.

"He's no far off," Wattie croaked. "See, man, he's verra near done. He's slippin' sair."

And then, as they mounted, they came on a little pool where the water was dammed as if by a landslip. There, his body half under the cascade, lay the stag, stone dead, his great horns parting the fall like a pine swept down by a winter spate.

The two regarded him in silence, till Wattie was moved to pronounce his epitaph.

"It's yersel, ye auld hero, and ye've come by a grand end. Ye've had a braw life traivellin' the hills, and ye've been a braw beast, and the fame o' ye gaed through a' the country-side. Ye might have dwined awa in the cauld winter and dee'd in the wame o' a snaw-drift. Or ye might have been massacred by ane o' the Haripol sumphs wi' ten bullets in the big bag. But ye've been killed clean and straucht by John Macnab, and that is a gentleman's death, whatever."

"That's all very well," said Lamancha, "but you know I tailored the shot."

"Ye're a fule," cried the rapt Wattie. "Ye did no siccan thing. It was a verra deeficult shot, and ye put it deid in the only place ye could see. I will not have seen many better shots at all, at all."

"What about the gralloch?" Lamancha asked.

"No here. If the mist lifted Macqueen might see us. It's no fifty yards to the top o' the Beallach, and we'll find a place there for the job."

Wattie produced two ropes and bound the fore-feet and the hind-feet together. Then he rapidly climbed to the summit, and reported on his return that the mist was thick there, and that there were no tracks except their own of the morning. It was a weary business dragging the carcass up a nearly perpendicular slope. First with difficulty they raised it out of the burn channel, and then drew it along the steep hill-side. They had to go a long way up the hill-side to avoid the rock curtain on the edge of the Beallach, but eventually the top was reached, and the stag was deposited behind some boulders on the left of the flat ground. Here, even if the mist lifted, they would be hid from the sight of Macqueen, and from any sentries there might be on the Crask side.

Wattie flung off his coat and proceeded with gusto to his gory task. The ravens, which had been following them for the past hour, came nearer and croaked encouragement from the ledges of Sgurr Dearg and Sgurr Mor. Wattie was in high spirits, for he whistled softly at his work; but Lamancha, after his first moment of satisfaction, was restless with anxiety. He had still to get his trophy out of the forest, and there seemed many chances of a slip between his lips and that cup. He was impatient for Wattie to finish, for the air seemed to him lightening. An ominous brightness was flushing the mist towards the south, and the rain had declined to the thinnest of drizzles. He told Wattie of his fears.

"Aye, it'll be a fine afternoon. I foresaw that, but that's maybe not a bad thing, now that we're out o' Macqueen's sight."

Wattie completed his job, and hid the horrid signs below a pile of sods and stones. "Nae poch-a-bhuie for me the day," he grinned. "I've other things to think of besides my supper." He wiped his arms and hands in the wet heather and put on his coat. Then he produced a short pipe, and, as he turned away to light it, a figure suddenly stood beside Lamancha and made his heart jump.

"My hat!" said Palliser-Yeates, "what a head! That must be about a record for Wester Ross. I never got anything as good myself. You're a lucky devil, Charles."

"Call me lucky when the beast is safe at Crask. What about your side of the hill?"

"Pretty quiet. I've been here for hours and hours, wondering where on earth you two had got to...There's four fellows stuck at intervals along the hill-side, and I shouldn't take them to be very active citizens. But there's a fifth who does sentry-go, and I don't fancy the look of him so much. Looks a keen chap, and spry on his legs. What's the orders for me? The place has been playing hide-and-seek, and half the time I've been sitting coughing in a wet blanket. If it stays thick I suppose my part is off."

Wattie, stirred again into fierce life, peered into the thinning fog.

"Damn! The mist's liftin'. I'll get the beast ower the first screes afore it's clear, and once I'm in the burn I'll wait for ye. I can manage the first bit fine mysel'—I could manage it a', if there was nae hurry...Bide you here till I'm weel startit, for I don't like the news o' that wandering navvy. And you sir"—this to Palliser-Yeates—"be ready to show yourself down the hill-side as soon as it's clear enough for the folk to see ye. Keep well to the west, and draw them off towards Haripol. There's a man posted near the burn, but he's the farthest east o' them, and for God's sake keep them to the west o' me and the stag. Ye're an auld hand at the job, and should hae nae deeficulty in ficklin' a wheen heavy-fitted navvies. Is Sir

Erchibald there wi' the cawr?"

"I suppose so. The time he was due the fog was thick. I couldn't pick him up from here with the glass when the weather cleared, but that's as it should be, for the place he selected was absolutely hidden from this side."

"Well, good luck to us a'." Wattie tossed off a dram from the socket of Lamancha's flask, and, dragging the stag by the horns, disappeared in two seconds from sight.

"I'll be off, Charles," said Palliser-Yeates, "for I'd better get down-hill and down the glen before I start." He paused to stare at his friend. "By Gad, you do look a proper blackguard. Do you realise that you've a face like a nigger and a two-foot rent in your bags? It would be good for Johnson Claybody's soul to see you!"

XII. — HARIPOL—TRANSPORT

IT may be doubted whether in clear weather Sir Archie could ever have reached his station unobserved by the watchers on the hill. The place was cunningly chosen, for the road, as it approached the Doran, ran in the lee of a long covert of birch and hazel, so that for the better part of a mile no car on it could be seen from beyond the stream, even from the highest ground. But as the car descended from the Crask ridge it would have been apparent to the sentinels, and its non-appearance beyond the covert would have bred suspicion. As it was the clear spell had gone before it topped the hill, for Sir Archie was more than an hour behind the scheduled time.

This was Janet's doing. She had started off betimes on the yellow pony for Crask, intending to take the by-way from the Larrig side, but before she reached the Bridge of Larrig she had scented danger. One of the correspondents, halted by the roadside with a motor bicycle, accosted her with great politeness and begged a word. She was Miss Raden, wasn't she? and therefore knew all about John Macnab. He had heard gossip in the glen of the coming raid on Haripol, and understood that this was the day. Would Miss Raden advise him from her knowledge of the country-side? Was it possible to find some coign of vantage from which he might see the fun?

Janet stuck to the simple truth. She had heard the some story, she admitted, but Haripol was a gigantic and precipitous forest, and it was preserved with a nicety unparalleled in her experience. To go to Haripol in the hope of finding John Macnab would be like a casual visit to England on the chance of meeting the King. She advised him to go to Haripol in the evening. "If anything has happened there," she said, "you will hear about from the gillies. They'll either be triumphant or savage, and in either case they'll talk."

"We've got to get a story, Miss Raden," the correspondent observed dismally, "and in this roomy place it's like looking for a needle in a hayfield. What sort of people are the Claybodies?"

"You won't get anything from them," Janet laughed. "Take my advice and wait till the evening."

When he was out of sight she turned her pony up the hill and arrived at Crask with an anxious face. "If these people are on the loose all day," she told Sir Archie, "they're bound to spoil sport. They may stumble on our car, or they may see more of Mr Palliser-Yeates's doings than we want. Can nothing be done? What about Mr Crossby?"

Crossby was called into consultation and admitted the gravity of the danger. When his help was demanded, he hesitated. "Of course I know most of them, and they know me, and they're a very decent lot of fellows. But they're professional men, and I don't see myself taking on the job of gulling them. Esprit de Corps, you know...No, they don't suspect me. They probably think I left the place after I got off the Strathlarrig fish scoop, and that I don't know anything about the Haripol business. I daresay they'd be glad enough to see me if I turned up...I might link on to them and go with them to Haripol and keep them in a safe place."

"That's the plan," said Sir Archie. "You march them off to Haripol—say you know the ground—which you do a long sight better than they. Some of the gillies will be hunting the home woods for Lady Claybody's pup. Get them mixed up in that show. It will all help to damage Macnicol's temper, and he's the chap we're most afraid of...Besides, you might turn up handy in a crisis. Supposin' Ned Leithen—or old John—has a hard run at the finish you might confuse the pursuit...That's the game, Crossby my lad, and you're the man to play it."

It was after eleven o'clock before the Ford car, having slipped over the pass from Crask in driving sleet, came to a stand in the screen of birches with the mist wrapping the world so close that the foaming Doran six yards away was only to be recognised by its voice. All the way there Sir Archie had been full of forebodings.

"We're givin' too much weight away, Miss Janet," he croaked. "All we've got on our side is this putrid weather. That's a bit of luck, I admit. Also we've two of the most compromisin' objects on earth, Fish Benjie and that little brute Roguie... Claybody has a hundred navvies, and a pack of gillies, and every beast will be in the Sanctuary, which is as good as inside a barb-wire fence...The thing's too ridiculous. We've got to sit in this car and watch an eminent British statesman bein' hoofed off the hill, while old John tries to play the decoy-duck, and Ned Leithen, miles off, is hoppin' like a he-goat on the mountains...It's pretty well bound to end in disaster. One of them will be nobbled—probably all three—and when young Claybody asks, 'Wherefore this outrage?' I don't see what the cowerin' culprit is goin' to answer and say unto him."

But when the car stopped in the drip of the birches, and Archie had leisure to look at the girl by his side, he began to think less of impending perils. The place was loud with wind and water, and yet curiously silent. The mist had drawn so close that the two seemed to be shut into a fantastic, secret world of their own. Janet was wearing breeches and a long

riding-coat covered by a grey oilskin, the buttoned collar of which framed her small face. Her bright hair, dabbled with raindrops, was batted down under an ancient felt hat. She looked, thought Sir Archie, like an adorable boy. Also for the last half-hour she had been silent.

"You have never spoken to me about your speech," she said at last, looking away from him.

"Yours, you mean," he said. "I only repeated what you said that afternoon on Carnmore. But you didn't hear it. I looked for you everywhere in the hall, and I saw your father and your sister and Bandicott, but I couldn't see you."

"I was there. Did you think I could have missed it? But I was too nervous to sit with the others, so I found a corner at the back below the gallery. I was quite near Wattie Lithgow."

Archie's heart fluttered. "That was uncommon kind. I don't see why you should have worried about that—I mean I'm jolly grateful. I was just going to play the ass of all creation when I remembered what you had said—and—well, I made a speech instead of repeating the rigmarole I had written. I owe everything to you, for, you see, you started me out—I can never feel just that kind of funk again...Charles thinks I might be some use in politics...But I can tell you when I sat down and hunted through the hall and couldn't see you it took all the gilt off the gingerbread."

"I was gibbering with fright," said the girl, "when I thought you were going to stick. If Wattie hadn't shouted out, I think I would have done it myself."

After that silence fell. The rain poured from the trees on to the cover of the Ford, and from the cover sheets of water cascaded to the drenched heather. Wet blasts scourged the occupants and whipped a high colour into their faces. Janet arose and got out.

"We may as well be properly wet," she said. "If they get the stag as far as the Doran, they must find some way across. There's none at present. Hadn't we better build a bridge?"

The stream, in ordinary weather a wide channel of stones where a slender current falls in amber pools, was now a torrent four yards wide. But it was a deceptive torrent with more noise than strength, and save in the pools was only a foot or two deep. There were many places where a stag could have been easily lugged through by an able-bodied man. But the bridge-building proposal was welcomed, since it provided relief for both from an atmosphere which had suddenly become heavily charged. At a point where the channel narrowed between two blaeberry-thatched rocks it was possible to make an inclined bridge from one bank to the other. The materials were there in the shape of sundry larch-poles brought from the lower woods for the repair of a bridge on the Crask road. Archie dragged half a dozen to the edge and pushed them across. Then Janet marched through the water, which ran close to the top of her riding-boots, and prepared the abutment on the farther shore, weighting the poles down with sods broken from an adjacent bank.

"I'm coming over," she cried. "If it will bear a stag, it will bear me."

"No, you're not," Archie commanded. "I'll come to you."

"The last time I saw you cross a stream you fell in," she reminded him.

Archie tested the contrivance, but it showed an ugly inclination to behave like a see-saw, being insufficiently weighted on Janet's side.

"Wait a moment. We need more turf," and she disappeared from sight beyond a knoll. When she returned she was excessively muddy as to hands and garments.

"I slipped in that beastly peat-moss," she explained. "I never saw such hags, and there's no turf to be got except with a spade...No, you don't! Keep off that bridge, please. It isn't nearly safe yet. I'm going to roll down stones."

Roll down stones she did till she had erected something very much like a cairn at her end, which would have opposed a considerable barrier to the passage of any stag. Then she announced that she must get clean, and went a few yards downstream to one of the open shallows, where she proceeded to make a toilet. She stood with the current flowing almost to her knees, suffering it to wash the peat from her boots and the skirts of her oilskin and at the same time scrubbing her grimy hands. In the process her hat became loose, dropped into the stream, and was clutched with one hand, while with the other she restrained the efforts of the wind to uncoil her shining curls.

It was while watching the moving waters at their priest-like task that crisis came upon Sir Archie. In a blinding second he realised with the uttermost certainty that he had found his mate. He had known it before, but now came the flash of supreme conviction...For swelling bosoms and pouting lips and soft curves and languishing eyes Archie had only the most distant regard. He saluted them respectfully and passed by the other side of the road—they did not belong to his world. But that slender figure splashing in the tawny eddies made a different appeal. Most women in such a posture would have looked tousled and flimsy, creatures ill at ease, with their careful allure beaten out of them by weather. But this girl was an authentic creature of the hills and winds—her young slimness bent tensely against the current, her exquisite head and figure made more fine and delicate by the conflict. It is a sad commentary on the young man's education, but, while his soul was bubbling with poetry, the epithet which kept recurring to his mind was "clean-run."...More, far more. He saw in that moment of revelation a comrade who would never fail him, with whom he could keep on all the roads of life. It was that which all his days he had been confusedly seeking."

"Janet," he shouted against the wind, "will you marry me?"

She made a trumpet of one hand.

"What do you say?" she cried.

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she turned a laughing face, "of course I will."

"I'm coming across," he shouted.

"No. Stay where you are. I'll come to you."

She climbed the other bank and made for the bridge of larch-poles, and before he could prevent her she had embarked on that crazy structure. Then that happened which might have been foreseen, since the poles on Archie's side of the stream had no fixed foundation. They splayed out, and he was just in time to catch her in his arms as she sprang.

"You darling girl," he said, and she turned up to him a face smiling no more, but very grave.

Archie, his arms full of dripping maiden, stood in a happy trance.

"Please put me down," she said. "See, the mist is clearing. We must get into cover."

Sure enough the haze was lifting from the hill-side before them and long tongues of black moorland were revealed stretching up to the crags. They found a place among the birches which gave them a safe prospect and fetched luncheon from the car. Hot coffee from a thermos was the staple of the meal, which they consumed like two preoccupied children. Archie looked at his watch and found it after two-o'clock. "Something must begin to happen soon," he said, and they took up position side by side on a sloping rock, Janet with her Zeiss glasses and Archie with his telescope.

His head was a delicious merry-go-round of hopes and dreams. It was full of noble thoughts—about Janet, and himself, and life. And the thoughts were mirthful too—a great, mellow, philosophic mirthfulness. John Macnab was no longer an embarrassing hazard, but a glorious adventure. It did not matter what happened—nothing could happen wrong in this spacious and rosy world. If Lamancha succeeded, it was a tremendous joke, if he failed a more tremendous, and, as for Leithen and Palliser-Yeates, comedy had marked them for its own...He wondered what he had done to be blessed with such happiness.

Already the mist had gone from the foreground, and the hills were clear to half-way up the rocks of Sgurr Mor and Sgurr Dearg. He had his glass on the Beallach, on the throat of which a stray sun-gleam made a sudden patch of amethyst.

"I see someone," Janet cried. "On the edge of the pass. Have you got it?—on the left-hand side of that spout of stones."

Archie found the place. "Got him...By Jove, it's Wattie...And— and—yes, by all the gods, I believe he's pullin' a stag down...Wait a second...Yes, he's haulin' it into the burn...Well done, our side! But where on earth is Charles?"

The two lay with their eyes glued on the patch of hill, now lit everywhere by the emerging sun. They saw the little figure dip into a hollow, appear again and then go out of sight in the upper part of a long narrow scaur which held the headwaters of a stream—they could see the foam of the little falls farther down. Before it disappeared Archie had made out a stag's head against a background of green moss. "That's that," he cried. "Charles must be somewhere behind protectin' the rear. I suppose Wattie knows what he's doin' and is certain he can't be seen by the navvies. Anyhow, he's well hidden at present in the burn, but he'll come into view lower down when the ravine opens out. He's a tough old bird to move a beast at that pace...The question now is, where is old John? It's time he was gettin' busy."

Janet, whose glass made up in width of range what it lacked in power, suddenly cried out: "I see him. Look! up at the edge of the rocks— three hundred yards west of the Beallach. He's moving down-hill. I think it's Palliser-Yeates—he's the part of John Macnab I know best."

Archie found the spot. "It's old John right enough, and he's doin' his best to make himself conspicuous. Those yellow breeks of his are like a flag. We've got a seat in the stalls and the curtain is goin' up. Now for the fun."

Then followed for the better part of an hour a drama of almost indecent sensation. Wattie and his stag were forgotten in watching the efforts of an eminent banker to play hare to the hounds of four gentlemen accustomed to labour rather with their hands than with their feet. It was the navy whose post was almost directly opposite Janet and Archie who first caught sight of the figure on the hill-side. He blew a whistle and began to move uphill, evidently with the intention of cutting off the intruder's retreat to the east and driving him towards Haripol. But the quarry showed no wish to go east, for it was towards Haripol that he seemed to be making, by a long slant down the slopes.

"I've got Number Two," Janet whispered. "There—above the patch of scrub—close to the three boulders...Oh, and there's Number Three. Mr Palliser-Yeates is walking straight towards him. Do you think he sees him?"

"Trust old John. He's the wiliest of God's creatures, and he hasn't lost much pace since he played outside three-quarters for England. Wait till he starts to run."

But Mr Palliser-Yeates continued at a brisk walk apparently oblivious of his foes, who were whistling like curlews, till he was very near the embraces of Number Three. Then he went through a very creditable piece of acting. Suddenly he seemed to be stricken with terror, looked wildly around to all the points of the compass, noted his pursuer, and, as if in a panic, ran blindly for the gap between Numbers Two and Three. Number Four had appeared by this time, and Number Four was a strategist. He did not join in the pursuit, but moved rapidly down the glen towards Haripol to cut off the fugitive, should he

outstrip the hunters.

Palliser-Yeates managed to get through the gap, and now appeared running strongly for the Doran, which at that point of its course—about half a mile down-stream from Janet and Archie—flowed in a deep-cut but not precipitous channel, much choked with birch and rowan. Numbers Two and three followed, and also Number One, who had by now seen that there was no need of a rearguard. For a little all four disappeared from sight, and Janet and Archie looked anxiously at each other. Cries, excited cries, were coming up-stream, but there was no sign of human beings.

“John can’t have been such a fool as to get caught,” Archie grumbled. “He has easily the pace of those heavy-footed chaps. Wish he’d show himself.”

Presently first one, then a second, then a third navvy appeared on the high bank of the Doran, moving aimlessly, like hounds at fault.

“They’ve lost him,” Archie cried. “Where d’you suppose the leery old bird has got to? He can’t have gone to earth.”

That was not revealed for about twenty minutes. Then a cry from one of the navvies called the attention of the others to something moving high up on the hill-side.

“It’s John,” Archie muttered. “He must have crawled up one of the side-burns. Lord, that’s pretty work.”

The navvies began heavily to follow, though they had a thousand feet of lee-way to make up. But it was no part of Palliser-Yeates’s plan to discourage them, since he had to draw them clean away from the danger zone. Already this was almost achieved, for Wattie and his stag, even if he had left the ravine, were completely hidden from their view by a shoulder of hill. He pretended to be labouring hard, stumbling often, and now and then throwing himself on the heather in an attitude of utter fatigue, which was visible to the pursuit below.

“It’s a dashed shame,” murmured Archie. “Those poor fellows haven’t a chance with John. I only hope Claybody is payin’ them well for this job.”

The hare let the hounds get within a hundred yards of him. Then he appeared to realise their presence and to struggle to increase his pace, but, instead of ascending, he moved horizontally along the slope, slipping and sprawling in what looked like a desperate final effort. Hopes revived in the navvies’ hearts. Their voices could be heard—“You bet they’re usin’ shockin’ language,” said Archie—and Number One, who seemed the freshest, put on a creditable spurt. Palliser-Yeates waited till the man was almost upon him, and then suddenly turned downhill. He ran straight for Number Two, dodged him with that famous swerve which long ago on the football field had set forty thousand people shouting, and went down the hill like a rolling stone. Once past the navy line, he seemed to slide a dozen yards and roll over, and when he got up he limped.

“Oh, he has hurt himself,” Janet cried.

“Not a bit of it,” said Archie. “It’s the old fox’s cunning. He’s simply playin’ with the poor fellows. Oh, it’s wicked!”

The navvies followed with difficulty, for they had no gift of speed on a steep hill-face. Palliser-Yeates waited again till they were very near him, and then, like a hen partridge dragging its wing, trotted down the more level ground by the stream side. The pursuit was badly cooked, but it lumbered gallantly along, Number Four now making the running. A quarter of a mile ahead was the beginning of the big Haripol woods which clothed the western skirts of Stob Ban, and stretched to the demesne itself.

Suddenly Palliser-Yeates increased his pace, with no sign of a limp, and, when he passed out of sight of the two on the rock, was going strongly.

Archie shut up his glass. “That’s a workmanlike show, if you like. He’ll tangle them up in the woods, and slip out at his leisure and come home. I knew old John was abso-lute-ly safe. If he doesn’t run slap into Macnicol—”

He broke off and stared in front of him. A figure like some ancient earth-dweller had appeared on the opposite bank. Hair, face, and beard were grimed with peat, sweat made furrows in the grime, and two fierce eyes glowered under shaggy eyebrows. Bumping against its knees were the antlers of a noble stag.

“Wattie,” the two exclaimed with one voice.

“You old sportsman,” cried Archie. “Did you pull that great brute all the way yourself? Where is Lord Lamancha?”

The stalker strode into the water dragging the stag behind him, and did not halt till he had it high on the bank and close to the car. Then he turned his eyes on the two, and wrung the moisture from his beard.

“You needn’t worry,” Archie told him. “Mr Palliser-Yeates has all the navvies in the Haripol woods.”

“So I was thinkin’. I got a glisk of him up the burn. Yon’s the soople one. But we’ve no time to loss. Help me to sling the beast into the cawr. This is a fine hidy-hole.”

“Gad, what a stag!”

“It’s the auld beast we’ve seen for the last five years. Ye mind me tellin’ ye that he was at our stacks last winter. Come on quick, for I’ll no be easy till he’s in the Crask larder.”

“But Lord Lamancha?”

"Never heed him. He's somewhere up the hill. It maitters little if he waits till the darkenin' afore he comes hame. The thing is we've got the stag. Are ye ready?"

Archie started the car, which had already been turned in the right direction. Coats and wraps and heather were piled on the freight, and Wattie seated himself on it like an ancient raven.

"Now, tak a spy afore ye start. Is the place clear?"

Archie, from the rock, reported that the hill-side was empty.

"What about the Beallach?"

Archie spied long and carefully. "I see nothing there, but of course I only see the south end. There's a rock which hides the top."

"No sign o' his lordship?"

"Not a sign."

"Never heed. He can look after himsel' braw and weel. Push on wi' the cawr, sir, for it's time we were ower the hill."

Archie obeyed, and presently they were climbing the long zigzag to the Crask pass. Wattie on the back seat kept an anxious look-out, issuing frequent bulletins, and Janet swept the glen with her glasses. But no sign of life appeared in the wide sunlit place except a buzzard high in the heavens and a weasel slipping into a cairn. Once the watershed had been crossed Wattie's heart lightened.

"Weel done, John Macnab," he cried. "Dod, ye're the great lad. Ye've beaten a hundred navvies and Macnicol and a', and ye've gotten the best heid in the country-side...Hae ye a match for my pipe, Sir Erchie? Mine's been in ower mony bogholes to kindle."

It was a clear, rain-washed world on which they looked, and the sky to the south was all an unbroken blue. The air was not sticky and oppressive like yesterday, but pure and balmy and crystalline. When Crask was reached the stag was decanted with expedition, and Archie addressed Janet with a new authority.

"I'm goin' to take you straight home in the Hispana. You're drippin' wet and ought to change at once."

"Might I change here?" the girl asked. "I told them to send over dry things, for I was sure it would be a fine afternoon. You see, I think we ought to go to Haripol."

"Whatever for?"

"To be in at the finish—and also to give Lady Claybody her dog back. Wee Roguie is rather on my conscience."

"That's a good notion," Archie assented. So Janet was handed over to Mrs Lithgow, who admitted that a suitcase had indeed arrived from Glenraden. Archie repaired to the upper bathroom, which Lamancha had aforetime likened to a drain-pipe, and, having bathed rapidly, habited himself in a suit of a reasonable newness and took special pains with his toilet. And all the while he whistled and sang, and generally comported himself like a madman. Janet was under his roof—Janet would soon always be there—the most miraculous of fates was his! Somebody must be told, so when he was ready he went out to seek the Bluidy Mackenzie and made that serious-minded beast the receptacle of his confidences.

He returned to find a neat and smiling young woman conversing with Fish Benjie, whose task had been that of comforter and friend to Roguie. It appeared that the small dog had been having the morning of his life with the Crask rats and rabbits. "He's no a bad wee dog," Benjie reported, "if they'd let him alane. They break his temper keepin' him indoors and feedin' him ower high."

"Benjie must come too," Janet announced. "It would be a shame to keep him back. You understand—Benjie found Roguie in the woods—which is true, and handed him over to me—which is also true. I don't like unnecessary fibbing."

"Right-o! Let's have the whole bag of tricks. But, I say, you've got to stage-manage this show. Benjie and I put ourselves in your hands, for I'm hanged if I know what to say to Lady Claybody."

"It's quite simple. We're just three nice clean people—well, two clean people—who go to Haripol on an errand of mercy. Get out the Hispana, Archie dear, for I feel that something tremendous may be happening there."

As they started—Benjie and Roguie on the back seat—Bluidy Mackenzie came into view, hungrily eyeing an expedition from which he seemed to be barred.

"D'you mind if we take Mackenzie," Archie begged. "We'll go very slow, and he can trollop behind. The poor old fellow has been havin' a lonely time of it, and there's likely to be such a mix-up at Haripol that an extra hound won't signify."

Janet approved, and they swung down the hill and on to the highway, as respectable an outfit as the heart could wish, except for the waterproof-caped urchin on the back seat. The casual wayfarer would have noted only a very pretty girl and a well-appointed young man driving an expensive car at a most blameless pace. He could not guess what a cargo of dog-thieves and deer-thieves was behind the shining metal and spruce enamel...Benjie talked to Wee Roguie in his own tongue, and what Janet and Archie said in whispers to each other is no concern of this chronicle. The sea at Inverlarrig was molten silver running to the translucent blue of the horizon, the shore woods gleamed with a thousand jewels, the abundant waters splashing in every hollow were channels of living light. The world sang in streams and soft winds, the cries of plover

and the pipe of shore-birds, and Archie's heart sang above them all.

Close to Haripol gates a tall figure rose from the milestone as the car slowed down.

"Well, John, my aged sportsman, you did your part like a man. We saw it all."

"How are things going?"

"Famously."

"The stag?"

"In the Crask larder."

"And Charles?"

"Lost. Believed to be still lurkin' in the hills. Look here, John, get in beside Benjie. We are goin' to Haripol and restore the pup. You'll be a tower of strength to us, and old Claybody will be tremendously bucked to meet a brother magnate... Really, I mean it."

"I'm scarcely presentable," said Palliser-Yeates, taking off an old cap and looking at it meditatively.

"Rot! You're as tidy as you'll ever be. Rather dandified for you. In you get, and don't tread on the hound...Bloody, you brute, don't you know a pal when you see him?"

XIII. — HARIPOL—AUXILIARY TROOPS

HALF-WAY down the avenue, Archie drew up sharply.

"I forgot about Mackenzie. We can't have him here—he'll play the fool somehow. Benjie, out you go. You're one of the few that can manage him. Here's his lead—you tie him up somewhere and watch for us, and we'll pick you up outside the gates when we start home...Don't get into trouble on your own account. I advise you to cut round to the bothies, and try to find out what is happenin'."

On the massive doorstep of Haripol stood Lady Claybody, parasol in one hand and the now useless dog-whip in the other.

She made a motion as if to retreat, but thought better of it. Her face was flushed, and her air had abated something of its serenity. The sight of Janet—for she looked at Archie without recognition—seemed to awake her to the duties of hospitality, and she advanced with outstretched hand. Then a yelp from the side of Palliser-Yeates wrung from her an answering cry. In a trice Wee Roguie was in her arms.

"Yes," Janet explained sweetly, "it's Roguie quite safe and well. There's a boy who sells fish at Strathlarrig—Benjie they call him—he found him in the woods and brought him to me. I hope you haven't been worried."

But Lady Claybody was not listening. She had set the dog on his feet and was wagging her forefinger at him, a procedure which seemed to rouse all the latent epilepsy of his nature. "Oh, you naughty, naughty Roguie! Cruel, cruel doggie! He loved freedom better than his happy home. Master and mistress have been so anxious about Wee Roguie."

It was an invocation which lasted for two and a half minutes, till the invoker realised the presence of the men. She gracefully shook hands with Sir Archie.

"I drove Miss Janet over," said the young man, explaining the obvious. "And I took the liberty of bringin' a friend who is stayin' with me—Mr Palliser-Yeates. I thought Lord Claybody might like to meet him, for I expect he knows all about him."

The lady beamed on both. "This is a very great pleasure, Mr Palliser-Yeates, and I'm sure Claybody will be delighted. He ought to be in for tea very soon." As it chanced, Lady Claybody had an excellent memory and a receptive ear for talk, and she was aware that in her husband's conversation the name of Palliser-Yeates occurred often, and always in dignified connections. She led the way through the hall to a vast new drawing-room which commanded a wide stretch of lawns and flower-beds as far as the woods which muffled the mouth of the Reascuill glen. When the party were seated and butler and footman had brought the materials for tea, Lady Claybody—Roguie on a cushion by her side—became confidential.

"We've had such a wearing day, my dear." She turned to Janet. "First, the ruffian who calls himself John Macnab is probably trying to poach our forest. The rain yesterday kept him off, but we have good reason to believe that he will come to-day. Poor Johnson has been on the hill since breakfast. Then, there was the anxiety about Roguie. I've had our people searching the woods and shrubberies, for the little darling might have been caught in a trap... Macnicol says there are no traps, but you never can tell. And then, on the top of it all, we've been besieged since quite early in the morning by insolent journalists. No. They hadn't the good manners to come to the house—I should have sent them packing—but they have been over the grounds and buttonholing our servants. They want to hear about John Macnab, but we can't tell them anything, for as yet we know nothing ourselves. I gave orders that they should be turned out of the place—no violence, of course, for it doesn't do to offend the Press—but quite firmly, for they were trespassing. Would you believe it, my dear? they wouldn't go. So our people had simply to drive them out, and it has taken nearly all day, and they may be coming back any moment...Something should really be done, Mr Palliser-Yeates, to restrain the license of the modern Press, with its horrid, vulgar sensationalism and its invasion of all the sanctities of private life."

Palliser-Yeates cordially agreed. The lady had not looked to Archie for assent, and her manner towards him was a trifle cold. Perhaps it was the memory of her visit a fortnight before when he was sickening for smallpox; perhaps it was her husband's emphatic condemnation of his Muirtown speech.

At this point Lord Claybody entered, magnificent in a kilt of fawn-coloured tweed and a ferocious sporran made of the mask of a dog-otter. The garments, which were aggressively new, did not become his short, square figure.

"I don't think you have met my husband, Miss Raden," said his wife. Then to Lord Claybody: "You know Sir Archibald Roylance. And this is Mr Palliser-Yeates, who has been so kind as to come over to see us."

Palliser-Yeates was greeted with enthusiasm. "Delighted to meet you, sir. I heard you were in the North. Funny that we've had so much to do with each other indirectly and have never met...You've been having a long walk? Well, I know what you need. Cold tea for you. We'll leave the ladies to their gossip and have a whisky-and-soda in the library. I've just had a letter from Dickinson on which I'd like your views. Busy folk like you and me can never make a clean cut of their holiday. There's always something clawing us back to the mill."

The two men were led off to the library, and Janet was left to entertain her hostess. That lady was in an expansive mood, which may have been due to the restoration of Roguie, but also owed something to the visit of Palliser-Yeates. "My heart is buried here," she told the girl. "Every day I love Haripol more—its beauty and poetry and its—its wonderful traditions. My dream is to make it a centre for all the nicest people to come and rest. Everybody comes to the Highlands now, and we have so much to offer them here...Claybody, I may as well admit, is apt to be restless when we are alone. He is not enough of a sportsman to be happy shooting and fishing all day and every day. He has a wonderful mind, my dear, and he wants a chance of exercising it. He needs to be stimulated. Look how his eye brightened when he saw Mr Palliser-Yeates...And then, there are the girls...I'm sure you see what I mean."

Janet saw, and set herself to cherish the innocent ambition of her hostess. In view of what might befall at any moment, it was most needful to have the Claybodys in a good humour. Then Lady Claybody, one of whose virtues was a love of fresh air, proposed that they should walk in the gardens. Janet would have preferred to remain in the house, had she been able to think of any kind of excuse, for the out-of-doors at the moment was filled with the most explosive material—Benjie, Mackenzie, an assortment of fugitive journalists, and Leithen and Lamancha somewhere in the hinterland. But she assented with a good grace, and, accompanied by Roguie, who after a morning of liberty had cast the part of lap-dog contemptuously behind him, they sauntered into the trim parterres.

The head-gardener at Haripol was a man of the old school. He loved fantastically shaped beds and geometrical patterns, and geraniums and lobelias and calceolarias were still dear to his antiquated soul. On the lawns he had been given his head, but Lady Claybody, who had accepted new fashions in horticulture as in other things, had constructed a pleasure of her own, which with crazy-paving and sundials and broad borders was a very fair imitation of an old English garden. She had a lily-pond and a rosery and many pergolas, and what promised in twenty years to be a fine yew-walk. The primitive walled garden, planted in the Scots fashion a long way from the house, was now relegated to fruit and vegetables.

Lady Claybody was an inaccurate enthusiast. She poured into Janet's ear a flow of botanical information and mispronounced Latin names. Each innovation was modelled on what she had seen or heard of in some famous country house. The girl approved, for in that glen the environment of hill and wood was so masterful that the artifices of man were instantly absorbed. The gardens exhausted, they wandered through the rhododendron thickets, which in early summer were towers of flame, crossed the turbid Reascuill by a rustic bridge, and found themselves in a walk which skirted the stream through a pleasant wilderness. Here an expert from Kew had been turned loose, and had made a wonderful wild garden, in which patches of red-hot poker and godetia and Hyacinthus candicans shone against the darker carpet of the heather. Roguie led the way, and where Roguie's yelps beckoned his mistress followed. Soon the two were nearly a mile from the house, approaching the portals of the Reascuill glen.

Sir Edward Leithen left Crask just as the wet dawn was breaking. He had a very long walk before him, but at that he was not dismayed; what perplexed him was how it was going to end. To the first part, a struggle with wind and rain and many moorland miles, he looked forward with enthusiasm. Long, lonely expeditions had always been his habit, for he was the kind of man who could be happy with his own thoughts. Before it became the fashion he had been a pioneer in guideless climbing in the Alps, and the red-letter days in his memory were for the most part solitary days. He was always in hard condition, and his lean figure rarely knew fatigue; weather he minded little, and he had long ago taught himself how to find his road, even in mist, with map and compass.

So it was with sincere enjoyment that his legs covered the rough miles—along the Crask ridge till it curved round at the head of the Doran and led him to the eastern skirts of Sgurr Dearg. He knew from the map that the great eastern precipice of that mountain was towering above him, but he saw only the white wall of fog a dozen yards off. His aim was to make a circuit of the massif and bear round to the pass of the Red Burn, which made a road between Haripol and Machray. He would then be nearly north of the Sanctuary and exactly opposite where Lamancha proposed to make his entrance...A fortnight earlier, when he first came to Crask, he had gone for a walk in far pleasanter weather, and had been acutely bored. Now, with no prospect but a wet blanket of mist, and with no chance of observing bird or plant, he was enjoying every moment of it. More, his thoughts were beginning to turn pleasantly towards the other side of his life—his books and hobbies, the intricacies of politics, the legal practice of which he was a master. He reflected almost with exhilaration on a difficult appeal which would come on in the autumn, when he hoped to induce the House of Lords to upset a famous judgement. He had begun to relish his competence again, even to take a modest pride in his fame; what had been dust and

ashes in his mouth a few weeks ago had now an agreeable flavour. Palliser-Yeates was of the same way of thinking. Had he not declared last night that he wanted to give orders again and be addressed as "sir," instead of being chivvied about the countryside? And Lamancha? Leithen seriously doubted if Lamancha had ever suffered from quite the same malady. The trouble with him was that he had always a large streak of bandit in his composition, and must now and then give it play. That was what made him the bigger man, perhaps. Charles might take an almighty toss some day, but if he did not he would be first at the post, for he rode more gallantly to win.

"I suppose I may regard myself as cured," Leithen reflected, as he munched a second breakfast of cheese-sandwiches and raisins somewhere under the north-eastern spur of Sgurr Dearg. But he reflected, too, that he had a horribly difficult day ahead of him, for which he felt a strong distaste. He realised the shrewdness of Acton Croke's diagnosis; he was longing once more for the flesh-pots of the conventional.

His orders had been to get somewhere on the Machray side by eight o'clock, and he saw by his watch that he was ahead of his time. Once he had turned the corner of Sgurr Dearg the wind was shut off and the mist wrapped him closer. He had acquired long ago a fast but regular pace on the hills, and, judging from the time and the known distance, he knew that he must now be very near the Machray march. Presently he had topped a ridge which was clearly a watershed, for the plentiful waters now ran west. Then he began to descend, and soon was brought up by a raging torrent which seemed to be flowing north-west. This must be the Red Burn, coming down from the gullies of Sgurr Dearg, and it was his business to cross it and work his way westward along the edge of the great trough of the Reascuill. But he must go warily, for he was very near the pass, by which, according to the map, a road could be found from Corrie Easain in the Machray forest to the Haripol Sanctuary—the road which according to Wattie Lithgow, gave the easiest access and would most assuredly be well watched. He crossed the stream, not without difficulty, and climbed another ridge, beyond which the ground fell steeply. These must be the screes on the Reascuill side, he concluded, so he bore to the right and found, as he expected, that here there was a re-entrant corrie, and that he was on the very edge of the great trough. It was for him to keep this edge, but to go circumspectly, for at any moment he might stumble upon some of Claybody's sentries. His business was to occupy their attention, but he did not see what good he could do. The mist was distraction enough, for in it no man could see twenty yards ahead of him. But it might clear, and in that case he would have his work cut out for him. Meanwhile he must avoid a premature collision.

He avoided it only by a hairsbreadth. Suddenly that happened which at the moment was perplexing Wattie Lithgow and Lamancha a mile off. Corridors opened in the air—dark corridors of dizzy space and black rock seamed with torrents. Leithen found himself looking into a cauldron of which only the bottom was still hid, and at the savage splinters of the Pinnacle Ridge. He was looking at something less welcome, for thirty yards off, on the edge of the scarp, was a group of five men.

They had been boiling tea in billies in the lee of a rock and had been stirred to attention by the sudden clearing of the air. They saw him as soon as he saw them, and in a moment were on their feet and spreading out in his direction. He heard a cry, and then a babble of tongues. Leithen did the only thing possible. He strode towards them with a magisterial air. They were the real navy, the hardest race in the land, sleeping in drainpipes, always dirty and wet, forgetting their sodden labours now and then in sordid drink, but tough, formidable, and resourceful.

"What the devil are you fellows doing here?" he shouted angrily.

At first they took him for a gillie.

"What the hell's your business?" one of them replied, but the advance had halted. As he came nearer, they changed their minds, for Leithen had not the air of a gillie.

"My business is to know what you're doing here—on my land?"

Now Machray forest was not let that season, and this Leithen knew. If any arrangement had been come to with Haripol it could only have been made between the stalkers. It was for him to play the part of the owner.

The men looked nonplussed, for the navy, working under heavy-handed foremen, is susceptible to the voice of authority.

"We were sent up here to keep a look out," one answered.

"Look out for what? Who sent you?"

"It was Lord Claybody—we took our orders from Mr Macnicol."

Leithen sat down on a stone and lit his pipe.

"Well, you're trespassing on Machray—my ground. I don't know what on earth Lord Claybody means. I have heard nothing of it."

"There's a man trying to poach, sir. We were told to wait here and keep a look-out for him."

Leithen smiled grimly. "A pretty look-out you can keep in this weather. But that doesn't touch the point that you're in a place where you've no right to be...You poor devils must have been having a rotten time roosting up here."

He took out his flask.

"Here's something to warm you. There's just enough for a tot apiece."

The flask was passed round amid murmurs of satisfaction, while Leithen smoked his pipe and surveyed the queer party. "I call it cruelty to animals," he said, "to plant you fellows in a place like this. I hope you're well paid for it."

"We're gettin' a pound a day, and the man that grips the poacher gets a five-pund note. The name o' the poacher is Macnab."

"Well, I hope one of you will earn the fiver. Now, look here. I can't have you moving a yard north of this. You're on Machray ground as it is, for my march is the edge of the hill. I don't mind you squatting here, and of course it's no business of mine what you do on Haripol, but you don't stir a foot into Machray. With this wind you'll put all the beasts out of the upper corries."

He rose and strolled away. "I must be off. See that you mind what I've said. If you move, it must be into Haripol. A poacher! I never heard such rubbish. Better my job than yours, anyway. Still, I hope you get that fiver!"

Leithen departed in an atmosphere of general good will, and as soon as possible put a ridge between himself and the navvies. It had been a narrow escape, but mercifully no harm was done. He must keep well below the skyline on the Machray side, for there would be watchers elsewhere on the Haripol ground and he was not ready as yet to play the decoy-duck. For it had occurred to him that he was still too far east for his purpose. Those navvies were watching the pass from the Red Burn, and had no concern with what might be happening in the Sanctuary. Indeed, they could not see into it because of the spur which Sgurr Dearg flung out toward the Reascuill. He must be further down the stream before he tried to interest those who might interfere with Lamancha; so he mended his pace, and, keeping well on the Machray side, made for the hill called Bheinn Fhada, which faced Sgurr Mor across the Reascuill.

Then the mist came down again, and in driving sleet Leithen scrambled among the matted boulders and scree of Bheinn Fhada's slopes. Here he knew he was safe enough, for he was inside the Machray march and out of any possible prospect from the Reascuill. But it was a useless labour, and the return of the thick weather began to try his temper. The good humour of the morning had gone, when it was a delight to be abroad in the wilds alone and to pit his strength against storm and distance. He was growing bored with the whole business and at the same time anxious to play the part which had been set him. As it was, wandering on the skirts of Bheinn Fhada, he was as little use to John Macnab as if he had been reading Sir Walter Scott in the Crask smoking-room.

It took him longer than he expected to pass that weariful mountain, and it was noon before he ate the remnants of the food he had brought in the hollow which lies at the head of the second main Machray corrie, Corrie na Sidhe. Here he observed that sight which at the same moment was perturbing Lamancha on the Beallach looking over to Crask. The mist was thinning—not breaking into gloomy corridors, but lightening everywhere with the sun behind it. The wind, too, had shifted; it was blowing in his face from the south. Suddenly the top of Stob Coire Easain in front of him stood clear and bright, and its upper crags, jewelled with falling waters, rose out of a rainbow haze. Far out on the right he saw a patch of silver which he knew for the sea. Nearer, and far below, was an olive-green splash which must be the Haripol woods. And then, as if under a wizard's wand, the glen below him, from a pit of vapour, became an enamelled cup, with the tawny Reascuill looped in its hollows.

It was time for Leithen to be up and doing. He crawled to a point which gave him cover and a view into the glen, and searched the place long and carefully with his glasses. There must be navy posts close at hand, but from where he lay he could not command the sinuosities of the hill-side below him. He saw the nest of upper corries which composed the Sanctuary, but not the Beallach, which was hidden by the ridge of Sgurr Mor...He lay there for half an hour, uncertain what he should do next. If he descended into the glen it meant certain capture, for he would be cut off by some lower post. The only plan seemed to be to show himself on the upper slopes and then try to draw the pursuit off towards Machray, but he did not see how such a course was going to help Lamancha in the Sanctuary. The plan of campaign, he decided, had been a great deal too elaborate, and his part looked like a wash-out.

He made his way along the hill-side towards the Machray peak which bore the name of Clonlet and the wide skirts of which made one side of the glen above Haripol, the opposite sentinel to Stob Ban. He had got well on to the slopes of that mountain when he detected something in the glen below. Men seemed to be moving down the stream—three at least—and to be moving fast. His sense of duty revived, for here seemed a task to his hand...He showed himself on an outjutting knoll and waited. The men below had their eyes about them, for he was almost instantly observed. He heard cries, he saw a hand waved, then he heard a whistle blown...After that he began to run.

At this point the chronicler must retrace his steps and follow the doings of Mr Johnson Claybody. That young gentleman had taken the threat of John Macnab most seriously to heart: he felt his honour involved, his sense of property outraged, and he saw the pride of the Claybodys lowered if the scoundrel were victorious on Haripol as he had been at Strathlarrig. Above all he feared the Press, which was making a holiday feature of this monstrous insolence. He it was who had devised the plan of defence, a plan which did credit to his wits. Not only had he placed his sentries with care, but he had arranged for peripatetic gillies to patrol between the stations and form an intelligence service for head-quarters. His *poste de commandement* was at Macnicol's cottage just beyond the gorge of the Reascuill and some two miles from the house.

All morning his temper had been worsening. The news of the journalistic invasion of Haripol, brought to him about ten o'clock by a heated garden-boy, had been the first shock. He had sent a message to his father, handing over to him that problem, with the results which we have seen. Also he was lamentably short of the force he had hoped to muster, owing to his mother's insistence on keeping Macnicol and two of the gillies behind to look for her dog. It was not until close on midday that, after a furious journey to the house in a two-seater car, he was able to recover the services of the head-stalker.

Macnicol, he felt, should have been on the edge of the Sanctuary at daybreak; instead he had had to send Macqueen, a surly ruffian whom he had dismissed for insolence, but whose hillcraft he knew to be of the first order. Johnson's plan was that towards midday he himself, with a posse, should patrol the upper forest, so that, if John Macnab should be lurking there, he might drive him north or south against the navy garrison. East, Sgurr Dearg shut the way, and west lay the grounds of Haripol, where escape would be impossible, since every living thing there was on the watch. Johnson's blood was up. If John Macnab had made his venture, he wanted to share directly in the chase and to be in at the death.

It was after midday before the flying column started. It was composed of Macnicol, Cameron the third stalker, two selected gillies, and three of the navvies who were more mobile than their fellows. Macnicol had prophesied that the weather would clear in the afternoon, so, though the mist was thick at the start, they took the road with confidence. Sure enough, it began to lift before they were half a mile up the glen, and Macnicol grunted his satisfaction.

"Macnab cannot escape noways," he said. "But I do not think he has come at all, unless he's daft. He would not get in, but, if he is in, he will never get out."

Johnson's one fear now was that the assault might not have been made. It would be a poor ending to his strategy if the pool were dragged and no fish were found in it. But presently he was reassured, for at the foot of Bheinn Fhada he met one of the patrolling gillies with tremendous news. A man had been seen that morning by the navvies at the Red Burn. He had passed as the Laird of Machray, and had given them whisky. The gillie knew that the Laird of Machray was a child of three dwelling at Bournemouth, and he had demanded a description of the visitor. It was a tallish man, they said, lean and clean-shaven, rather pale, and with his skin very tight over his cheek-bones. He had looked like a gentleman and had behaved as such. Now the only picture of John Macnab known to the gillies was that which had been broadcast in talk by Angus and Jimsie of Strathlarrig, and that agreed most startlingly with the navvies account. "A long, lean dog," Angus had said, "and whitish in the face." Wherefore the gillie had hastened with his tidings to head-quarters.

The news increased Johnson's pace. John Macnab was veritably in the forest, and at the thought he grew both nervous and wroth. There was something supernatural, he felt, about the impudence of a man who could march quietly up to a post of navvies and bluff them. Were all his subtle plans to be foiled? Then, half a mile on, appeared Macqueen, just descended from his eyrie.

Macqueen had to report that half an hour before, when the mist cleared and he could get a view of the corries, he had seen the deer moving. The wind at the same time had shifted to the south, and the beasts in the corrie below Beallach were frightened. He had seen nothing with his telescope—the beasts had been moved some time before, he thought, for they were well down the hill. In his opinion, if John Macnab was in the forest, he was on or beyond the Beallach.

Johnson considered furiously. "The fellow was at the Red Burn just before nine o'clock. He must have gone through the Sanctuary to be at the Beallach half an hour ago. Is that possible, Macnicol?"

"I don't ken," Macnicol scratched his head. "Macqueen says that only the beasts in the corrie below the Beallach were moved, but if he had gone through the Sanctuary they would have been all rinnin' oot. I'm fair puzzled, sir, unless he cam' down the water and worked up by Sgurr Mor. That Macnab's a fair deevil."

"We'll get after him," said Johnson, and then he stopped short. He had a sudden memory of what had happened at Glenraden. Why should not John Macnab have sent a confederate to gull them into the belief that he was busy in the Sanctuary, while he himself killed a stag in the woods around the house? There were plenty of beasts there, and it would be like his infernal insolence to poach one under the very windows of Haripol. It was true that the woodland stags were not easy to stalk, but Macnab had shown himself a mighty artist.

Johnson had a gift of quick decision. He briefly explained to his followers his suspicions. "The man at the Beallach may not be the man whom the navvies saw at the Red Burn. The Red Burn fellow may have gone down the Machray side, and be now in the woods...Cameron, you take Andrew and Peter, and get down the glen in double-quick time. If you see anybody on Clonlet or in the woods, hunt him like hell. I'll skin you if you let him escape. Drive him right down to the gardens, and send word to the men there to be on the look-out. You'll be a dozen against one. Macnicol, you come with me, and you, Macqueen, and you three fellows, and we'll make for the Beallach. We'll cut up through the Sanctuary, for it don't matter a damn about the deer if we only catch that swine. He's probably lying up there till he can slip out in the darkness... And, Cameron, tell them to send a car up the Doran road. I may want a lift home."

It was Cameron and his posse who spied Leithen on the side of Clonlet. All three were young men; they had the priceless advantage of acquaintance with the ground, while Leithen knew no more than the generalities of the map. As soon as he saw that he was pursued he turned up-hill with the purpose of making for Machray. He had had a long walk, but he felt fresh enough for another dozen miles or so, and he remembered his instructions to go north, if necessary even into Glenaicill.

But in this he had badly miscalculated. For the whistle of Cameron had alarmed a post of navvies in a nook of hill behind Leithen and at a greater altitude, who had missed him earlier for the simple reason that they had been asleep. Roused now to a sudden attention, they fanned out on the slope and cut him off effectively from any retreat towards Corrie na Sidhe. There were only two courses open to him—to climb the steep face of Clonlet or to go west towards the woods. The first would be hard, he did not even know whether the rock was climbable, and if he stuck there he would be an easy prey. He must go west, and trust to find some way to Machray round the far skirts of the mountain.

Cameron did not hurry, for he knew what would happen. So long as the navvies cut off retreat to the east the victim was

safe. Leithen did not realise his danger till he found himself above the woods on a broad grassy ledge just under the sheer rocks of Clonlet. It was the place called Crapnagower, which ended not in a hill-side by which the butt of Clonlet could be turned, but in a bold promontory of rock which fell almost sheer to the meadows of Haripol. Long before he got to the edge he had an uncomfortable suspicion of what was coming, but when he peered over the brink and saw cattle at grass far below him, he had an ugly shock. It looked as if he were cornered, and cornered too in a place far from the main scene of action, where his misfortunes could not benefit Lamancha.

He turned and plunged downward through the woods direct for Haripol. There was still plenty of fight in him, and his pursuers would have a run for their money. These pursuers were not far off. Andrew had climbed the hill and had been moving fast parallel to Leithen, but farther down among the trees. Cameron was on the lower road, a grassy aisle among the thickets, and Peter, the swifter, had gone on ahead to watch the farther slopes. It was not long before Leithen was made aware of Andrew, and the sight forced him to his right in a long slant which would certainly have taken him into the arms of Peter.

But at this moment the Fates intervened in the person of Crossby.

That eminent correspondent, having inspired his fellow-journalists with the spirit of all mischief and thereby sadly broken the peace of Haripol, was now lying up from further pursuit in the woods, confident that he had done his best for the cause. Suddenly he became aware of the ex-Attorney-General descending the hill in leaps and bounds, and a gillie not fifty yards behind on his trail...Crossby behaved like Sir Philip Sidney and other cavaliers in similar crises. "Thy need is the greater," was his motto, and as Leithen passed he whispered hoarsely to him to get into cover. Leithen, whose head was clear enough though his legs were aching, both heard and saw. He clapped down like a woodcock in a patch of bracken, while Crossby, whose garb and height were much the same as his, became the quarry in his stead.

The chase was not of long duration. The correspondent did not know the ground, nor did he know of the waiting Peter. Left to himself he might have outdistanced Andrew, but he was turned to his right, and rounded a corner to be embraced firmly and affectionately by the long arms of the gillie. "That's five pund in our pockets, Andra, ma man," the latter observed when the second gillie arrived. "If this is no John Macnab, it's his brither, and anyway we've done what we were telled." So, strongly held by the two men, the self-sacrificing Crossby departed into captivity.

Of these doings Leithen knew nothing. He did not believe that Crossby could escape, but the hunt had gone out of his ken. Now it is the nature of man that, once he is in flight, he cannot be content till he finds an indisputable place of refuge. This wood was obviously unhealthy, and he made haste to get out of it. But he must go circumspectly, and the first need was for thicker cover, for this upper part was too open for comfort. Below he saw denser scrub, and he started to make his way to it.

The trouble was that presently he came into Cameron's view. The stalker had heard the crash of Crossby's pursuit, and had not hurried himself, knowing the strategic value of Peter's position. He proposed to wait, in case the fugitive doubled back. Suddenly he caught sight of Leithen farther up the hill, and apparently unfollowed. Had the man given the two gillies the slip?...Cameron performed a very creditable piece of stalking. He wormed his way up-hill till he was above the bushes where Leithen was now sheltering. The next thing that much-enduring gentleman knew was that a large hand had been outstretched to grip his collar.

Like a stag from covert Leithen leaped forth, upsetting Cameron with his sudden bound. He broke through the tangle of hazel and wild raspberries, and stayed not on the order of his going. His pace downhill had always been remarkable, and Cameron's was no match for it. Soon he had gained twenty yards, then fifty, but he had no comfort in his speed, for somewhere ahead were more gillies and he was being forced straight on Haripol, which was thick with the enemy.

The only plan in his head was to make for the Reascuill, which as he was aware flowed at this part of its course in a deep-cut gorge. He had a faint hope that, once there, he might find a place to lie up in till the darkness, for he knew that the Highland gillie is rarely a rock-climber. But the place grew more horrible as he continued. He was among rhododendrons now, and well-tended grass walks. Yes, there was a rustic arbour and what looked like a summer-seat. The beastly place was a garden. In another minute he would be among flower-pots and vineries with twenty gardeners at his heels. But the river was below—he could hear its sound—so, like a stag hard pressed by hounds, he made for the running water. A long slither took him down a steep bank of what had once been foxgloves, and he found his feet on a path.

And there, to his horror, were two women.

By this time his admirable wind was considerably touched, and the sweat was blinding his eyes, so that he did not see clearly. But surely one of the two was known to him.

Janet rose to the occasion like a bird. As he stood blinking before her she laughed merrily:

"Sir Edward," she cried, "where in the world have you been? You've taken a very rough road." Then she turned to Lady Claybody. "This is Sir Edward Leithen. He is staying with us and went out for an enormous walk this morning. He is always doing it. It was lucky you came this way, Sir Edward, for we can give you a lift home."

Lady Claybody was delighted, she said, to meet one of whom she had heard so much. He must come back to the house at once and have tea and see her husband, "I call this a real romance," she cried. "First Mr Palliser-Yeates—and then Sir Edward Leithen dropping like a stone from the hill-side."

Leithen was beginning to recover himself, "I'm afraid I was trespassing," he murmured. "I tried a short cut and got into

difficulties. I hope I didn't alarm you coming down that hill like an avalanche. I find it the easiest way."

The mystified Cameron stood speechless, watching his prey vanishing in the company of his mistress.

XIV. — HARIPOL—WOUNDED AND MISSING

LAMANCHA watched Palliser-Yeates disappear along the hill-side, and then returned to the hollow top of the Beallach, which was completely cut off from view on either side. All that was now left of the mist was a fleeting vapour twining in scarves on the highest peaks, and the cliffs of Sgurr Dearg and Sgurr Mor towered above him in gleaming stairways. The drenched cloudberry sparkled in the sunlight, and the thousand little rivulets, which in the gloom had been hoarse with menace, made now a pleasant music. Lamancha's spirits rose as the world brightened. He proposed to wait for a quarter of an hour till Wattie with the stag was well down the ravine and Palliser-Yeates had secured the earnest attention of the navvies. Then he would join Wattie and help him with the beast, and within a couple of hours he might be wallowing in a bath at Crask, having bidden John Macnab a long farewell.

Meantime he was thirsty, and laid himself on the ground for a long drink at an icy spring, leaving his rifle on a bank of heather.

When he rose with his eyes dim with water he had an unpleasing surprise. A man stood before him, having in his hands his rifle, which he pointed threateningly at the rifle's owner.

"Ands up," the man shouted. He was a tall fellow in navy's clothes, with a shock head of black hair, and a week's beard—an uncouth figure with a truculent eye.

"Put that down," said Lamancha. "You fool, it's not loaded. Hand it over. Quick!"

For answer the man swung it like a cudgel.

"Ands up," he repeated. "Ands up, you—, or I'll do you in."

By this time Lamancha had realised that his opponent was the peripatetic navy, whom Palliser-Yeates had reported. An ugly customer he looked, and resolute to earn Claybody's promised reward.

"What do you want?" he asked. "You're behaving like a lunatic."

"I want you to 'ands up and come along o' me."

"Who on earth do you take me for?"

"You're the poacher—Macnab. I seen you, and I seen the old fellow and the stag. You're Macnab, I reckon, and you're the—I'm after. Up with your 'ands and look sharp."

Mendacity was obviously out of the question, so Lamancha tried conciliation.

"Supposing I am Macnab—let's talk a little sense. You're being paid for this job, and the man who catches me is to have something substantial. Well, whatever Lord Claybody has promised you I'll double it if you let me go."

The man stared for a second without answering, and then his face crimsoned. But it was not with avarice but with wrath.

"No, you don't," he cried. "By—, you don't come over me that way. I'm not the kind as sells his boss. I'm a white man, I am, and I'll— well let you see it. 'Ands up, you—, and march. I've a—good mind to smash your 'ead for tryin' to buy me."

Lamancha looked at the fellow, his shambling figure contorted by hard toil out of its natural balance, his thin face, his hot, honest eyes, and suddenly felt ashamed. "I beg your pardon," he grunted. "I oughtn't to have said that. I had no right to insult you. But of course I refuse to surrender. You've got to catch me."

He followed his words by a dive to his right, hoping to get between the man and the Sgurr Mor cliffs. But the navy was too quick for him, and he had to retreat baffled. Lamancha was beginning to realise that the situation was really awkward. This fellow was both active and resolved; even if he gave him the slip he would be pursued down to the Doran, and the destination of the stag would be revealed...But he was by no means sure that he could give him the slip. He was already tired and cramped, and he had never been noted for his speed, like Leithen and Palliser-Yeates...He thought of another way, for in his time he had been a fair amateur middle-weight.

"You're an Englishman. What about settling the business with our fists? Put the rifle down, and we'll stand up together."

The man spat sarcastically. "Ain't it likely?" he sneered. "Thank you kindly, but I'm takin' no risks this trip. You've to 'ands up and let me tie 'em so as you're safe and then come along peaceable. If you don't I'll 'it you as 'ard as Gawd 'll let me."

There seemed to be nothing for it but a scrap, and Lamancha, with a wary eye on the clubbed rifle, waited for his chance. He must settle this fellow so that he should be incapable of pursuit—a nice task for a respectable Cabinet Minister getting on in life. There was a pool beside his left foot, which was the source of one of the burns that ran down into the Sanctuary. Getting this between him and his adversary, he darted towards one end, checked, turned, and made to go round the other. The navy struck at him with the rifle, and narrowly missed his head. Then he dropped the weapon, made a wild clutch, gripped Lamancha by the coat, and with a sound of rending tweed dragged him to his arms. The next moment the two men were locked in a very desperate and unscientific wrestling bout.

It was a game Lamancha had never played in his life before. He was a useful boxer in his way, but of wrestling he was utterly ignorant, and so, happily, was the navy. So it became a mere contest of brute strength, waged on difficult ground with boulders, wells, and bog-holes adjacent. Lamancha had an athletic, well-trained body, the navy was powerful but ill-trained; Lamancha was tired with eight or nine hours' scrambling, his opponent had also had a wearing morning; but Lamancha had led a regular and comfortable life, while the navy had often gone supperless and had drunk many gallons of bad whisky. Consequently the latter, though the heavier and more powerful man, was likely to fail first in a match of endurance.

At the start, indeed, he nearly won straight away by the vigour of his attack. Lamancha cried out with pain as he felt his arm bent almost to breaking-point and a savage knee in his groin. The first three minutes it was anyone's fight; the second three Lamancha began to feel a dawning assurance. The other's breath laboured, and his sudden spasms of furious effort grew shorter and easier to baffle. He strove to get his opponent on to the rougher ground, while that opponent manoeuvred to keep the fight on the patch of grass, for it was obvious to him that his right course was to wear the navy down. There were no rules in this game, and it would be of little use to throw him; only by reducing him to the last physical fatigue could he have him at his mercy, and be able to make his own terms.

Presently the early fury of the man was exchanged for a sullen defence. Lamancha was getting very distressed himself, for the navy's great boots had damaged his shins and torn away strips of stocking and skin, while his breath was growing deplorably short. The two staggered around the patch of grass, never changing grips, but locked in a dull clinch into which they seemed to have frozen. Lamancha would fain have broken free and tried other methods, but the navy's great hands held him like a vice, and it seemed as if their power, in spite of the man's gasping, would never weaken.

In this preposterous stalemate they continued for the better part of ten minutes. Then the navy, as soldiers say, resumed the initiative. He must have felt his strength ebbing, and in a moment of violent disquiet have decided to hazard everything. Suddenly Lamancha found himself forced away from the chosen ground and dragged into the neighbouring moraine. They shaved the pool, and in a second were stumbling among slabs and screes and concealed boulders. The man's object was plain: if he could make his lighter antagonist slip he might force him down in a place from which it would not be easy to rise.

But it was the navy who slipped. He lurched backward, tripping over a stone, and the two rolled into a cavity formed by a boulder which had been split by its fall from Sgurr Mor in some bygone storm. It was three or four feet of a fall, and Lamancha fell with him. There was a cry from the navy, and the grip of his arms slackened.

Lamancha scrambled out and looked back into the hole where the man lay bunched up as if in pain.

"Hurt?" he asked, and the answer came back, garnished with much profanity, that it was his—leg.

"I'm dashed sorry. Look here, this fight is off. Let me get you out and see what I can do for you."

The man, sullen but quiescent, allowed himself to be pulled out and laid on a couch of heather. Lamancha had feared for the thigh or the pelvis and was relieved to find that it was a clean break below the knee, caused by the owner's descent, weighted by his antagonist, on an ugly, sharp-edged stone. But, as he looked at the limp figure, haggard with toil and poor living, and realised that he had damaged it in the pitiful capital which was all it possessed, its bodily strength, he suffered from a pang of sharp compunction. He loathed John Macnab and all his works for bringing disaster upon a poor devil who had to earn his bread.

"I'm most awfully sorry," he stammered. "I wouldn't have had this happen for a thousand pounds..." Then he broke off, for in the face now solemnly staring at him he recognised something familiar. Where had he seen that long crooked nose before and that cock of the eyebrows?

"Stokes," he cried, "You're Stokes, aren't you?" He recalled now the man who had once been his orderly, and whom he had last known as a smart troop sergeant.

The navy tried to rise and failed. "You've got my name right, guv'nor," he said, but it was obvious that in his eyes there was no recognition.

"You remember me—Lord Lamancha?" He had it all now—the fellow who had been a son of one of Tommy Deloraine's keepers—a decent fellow and a humorous, and a good soldier. It was like the cussedness of things that he should go breaking the leg of a friend.

"Gawd!" gasped the navy, peering at the shameful figure of Lamancha, whose nether garments were now well advanced in raggedness and whose peat-begrimed face had taken on an added dirtiness from the heat of the contest. "I can't 'ardly believe it's you, sir." Then, with many tropes of speech, he explained what, had he known, would have happened to Lord Claybody, before he interfered with the game of a gentleman as he had served under.

"What brought you to this?" Lamancha asked.

"I've 'ad a lot of bad luck, sir. Nothing seemed to go right with me after the war. I found the missus 'ad done a bunk, and I 'ad two kids on my 'ands, and there weren't no cushy jobs goin' for the likes of me. Gentlemen everywhere was puttin' down their 'osses, and I 'ad to take what I could get. So it come to the navyin' with me, like lots of other chaps. The Gov'ment don't seem to care what 'appens to us poor Gawd-forgotten devils, sir."

The navy stopped to cough, and Lamancha did not like the sound of it.

"How's your health?" he asked.

"Not so bad, barrin' a bit of 'oarseness."

"That explains a lot. You'll have consumption if you don't look out. If you had been the man you were five years ago you'd have had me on my back in two seconds...I needn't tell you, Stokes, that I'm dashed sorry about this, and I'll do all I can to make it up to you. First, we must get that leg right."

Lamancha began by retrieving the rifle. It was a light, double-barrelled express which fortunately could be taken to pieces. He had some slight surgical knowledge, and was able to set the limb, and then with strips of his handkerchief and the rifle-barrel to put it roughly into a splint. Stokes appeared to have gone without breakfast, so he was given the few sandwiches which remained in Lamancha's pocket and a stiff dram from his flask. Soon the patient was reclining in comparative comfort on the heather, smoking Lamancha's tobacco in an ancient stump of a pipe, while the latter, with heavy brows, considered the situation.

"You ought to get to bed at once, for you've a devil of a bad cough, you know. And you ought to have a doctor to look after that leg properly, for this contraption of mine is a bit rough. The question is, how am I going to get you down? You can't walk, and you're too much of a heavy-weight for me to carry very far. Also I needn't tell you that this hill-side is not too healthy for me at present. I mean to go down it by crawling in the open and keeping to the gullies, but I can't very well do that with you...It looks as if there is nothing for it but to wait till dark. Then I'll nip over to Crask and send some men here with a stretcher."

Mr Stokes declared that he was perfectly happy where he was, and deprecated the trouble he was giving.

"Trouble," cried Lamancha, "I caused the trouble, and I'm going to see you through it."

"But you'll get nabbed, sir, and there ain't no bloomin' good in my 'aving my leg broke if Claybody's going to nab you along of it. You cut off, sir, and never 'eed me."

"I don't want to be nabbed, but I can't leave you...Wait a minute! If I followed Wattie—that is my stalker—down to the Doran I could send a message to Crask about a stretcher and men to carry it. I might get some food too. And then I'll come back here, and we'll bukk about Palestine till it's time to go...It might be the best way..."

But, even as he spoke, further plans were put out of the question by the advent of six men who had come quietly through the Beallach from the Sanctuary, and had unostentatiously taken up positions in a circle around the two ex-antagonists. Lamancha had been so engaged in Stoke's affairs that he had ceased to remember that he was in enemy territory.

His military service had taught him the value of the offensive. The new-comers were, he observed, three navvies, two men who were clearly gillies, and a warm and breathless young man in a suit of a dapperness startling on a wild mountain. This young man was advancing towards him with a determined eye when Lamancha arose from his couch and confronted him.

"Hullo!" he cried cheerfully, "you come just in time. This poor chap here has had a smash—broken his leg—and I was wondering how I was to get him down the hill."

Johnson Claybody stopped short. He had rarely seen a more disreputable figure than that which had risen from the heather—dissolute in garment, wild of hair, muddy beyond belief in countenance. Yet these dilapidated clothes had once, very long ago, been made by a good tailor, and the fellow was apparently some kind of a gentleman. He was John Macnab beyond doubt, for in his hand was the butt-end of a rifle. Now Johnson was the type of man who is miserable if he feels himself ill-clad or dirty, and discovers in a sense of tidiness a moral superiority. He rejoiced to have found his enemy, and an enemy over whom he felt at a notable advantage. But, unfortunately for him, no Merkland had ever been conscious of the appearance he represented or cared a straw about it. Lamancha in rags would have cheerfully disputed with an emperor in scarlet, and suffered no loss of confidence because of his garb, since he would not have given it a thought. What he was considering at the moment was the future of the damaged Stokes.

"Who's that?" Johnson asked preemptorily, pointing to the navvy.

His colleagues hastened to inform him. "It's Jim Stokes," one of the three navvies volunteered. "What 'ave you been doing to yourself, Jim?" And Macnicol added: "That's the man that was to keep movin' along this side o' the hill, sir. I picked him, for he looked the sooplest."

Then the faithful Stokes uplifted his voice. "I done as I was told, sir, and kep' movin' all right, but I ain't seen nothing, and then I 'ad a nawsty fall among them blasted rocks and 'urt my leg. This gentleman comes along and finds me and 'as a try at patchin' me up. But for 'im, sir, I'd be lyin' jammed between two stones till the crows 'ad a pick at me."

"You're a good chap, Stokes," said Lamancha, "but you're a liar. This man," he addressed Johnson, "was carrying out your orders, and challenged me. I wanted to pass, and he wouldn't let me, so we had a rough-and tumble, and through no fault of his he took a toss into a hole, and, as you see, broke his leg. I've set it and bound it up, but the sooner we get the job properly done the better. Hang it, it's the poor devil's livelihood. So we'd better push along."

His tone irritated Johnson. This scoundrelly poacher, caught red-handed with a rifle, presumed to give orders to his own men. He turned fiercely on Stokes.

"You know this fellow? What's his name?"

"I can't say as I rightly knows 'im," was the answer. "But 'im and me was in the war, and he once gave me a drink outside Jerusalem."

"Are you John Macnab?" Johnson demanded.

"I'm anything you please," said Lamancha, "if you'll only hurry and get this man to bed."

"Damn your impudence! What business is that of yours? You've been caught poaching and we'll march you down to Haripol and get the truth out of you. If you won't tell me who you are, I'll find means to make you...Macnicol, you and Macqueen get on each side of him, and you three fellows follow behind. If he tries to bolt, club him...You can leave this man here. He'll take no harm, and we can send back for him later."

"I'm sorry to interfere," said Lamancha quietly, "but Stokes is going down now. You needn't worry about me. I'll come with you, for I've got to see him comfortably settled."

"You'll come with us!" Johnson shouted. "Many thanks for your kindness. You'll damn well be made to come. Macnicol, take hold of him."

"Don't," said Lamancha. "Please don't. It will only mean trouble."

Macnicol was acutely unhappy. He recognised something in Lamancha's tone which was perhaps unfamiliar to his master—that accent which means authority, and which, if disregarded, leads to mischief. He had himself served in Lovat's Scouts, and the voice of this tatterdemalion was unpleasantly like that of certain high-handed officers of his acquaintance. So he hesitated and shuffled his feet.

"Look at the thing reasonably," Lamancha said. "You say I'm a poacher called John Something-or-other. I admit that you have found me walking with a rifle on your ground, and naturally you want an explanation. But all that can wait till we get this man down to a doctor. I won't run away, for I want to satisfy myself that he's going to be all right. Won't that content you?"

Johnson, to his disgust, felt that he was being manoeuvred into a false position. He was by no means unkind, and this infernal Macnab was making him appear a brute. Public opinion was clearly against him; Macnicol was obviously unwilling to act, Macqueen he knew detested him, and the three navvies might be supposed to take the side of their colleague. Johnson set a high value on public opinion, and scrupled to outrage it. So he curbed his wrath, and gave orders that Stokes should be taken up. Two men formed a cradle with their arms, and the cortège proceeded down the hill-side.

Lamancha took care to give his captors no uneasiness. He walked beside Macqueen, with whom he exchanged a few comments about the weather, and he thought his own by no means pleasant thoughts. This confounded encounter with Stokes had wrecked everything, and yet he could not be altogether sorry that it had happened. He had a chance now of doing something for an honest fellow—Stokes's gallant lie to Johnson had convinced Lamancha of his superlative honesty. But it looked as if he were in for an ugly time with this young bounder, and he was beginning to dislike Johnson extremely. There were one or two points in his favour. The stag seemed to have departed with Wattie into the *Ewigkeit* and happily no eye at the Beallach had seen the signs of the gralloch. All that Johnson could do was to accuse him of poaching, *teste* the rifle; he could not prove the deed. Lamancha was rather vague about the law, but he was doubtful whether mere trespass was a grave offence. Then the Claybodys would not want to make too much fuss about it, with the journalists booming the doings of John Macnab...But wouldn't they? They were the kind of people that liked advertisement, and after all they had scored. What a tale for the cheap papers there would be in the capture of John Macnab! And if it got out who he was?...It was very clear that that at all costs must be prevented...Had Johnson Claybody any decent feelings to which he could appeal? A sportsman? Well, he didn't seem to be of much account in that line, for he had wanted to leave the poor devil on the hill.

It took some time for the party to reach the Doran, which they forded at a point considerably below Archie's former lair. Lamancha gave thanks for one mercy, that Archie and Wattie seemed to have got clean away. There was a car on the road which caused him a moment's uneasiness, till he saw that it was not the Ford but a large car with an all-weather body coming from Haripol. The driver seemed to have his instructions, for he turned round—no light task in that narrow road with its boggy fringes—and awaited their arrival.

Johnson gave rapid orders. "You march the fellow down the road, and bring the navvy—better take him to your cottage, Macqueen. I'll go home in the car and prepare a reception for John Macnab."

It may be assumed that Johnson spoke in haste, for he had somehow to work off his irritation, and desired to assert his authority.

"Hadn't Stokes better go in the car?" Lamancha suggested in a voice which he strove to make urbane. "That journey down the hill can't have done his leg any good."

Johnson replied by telling him to mind his own business, and then was foolish enough to add that he was hanged if he would have any lousy navvy in his car. He was preparing to enter, when something in Lamancha's voice stopped him.

"You can't," said the latter. "In common decency you can't."

"Who'll prevent me? Now, look here, I'm fed up with your insolence. You'll be well advised to hold your tongue till we make up our minds how to deal with you. You're in a devilish nasty position, Mr John Macnab, if you had the wits to see it. Macnicol, and you fellows, I'll fire the lot of you if he escapes on the road. You've my authority to hit him on the head if he

gets nasty.”

Johnson’s foot was on the step, when a hand on his shoulder swung him round.

“No, you don’t.” Lamancha’s voice had lost all trace of civility, for he was very angry. “Stokes goes in the car and one of the gillies with him. Here you, lift the man in.”

Johnson had grown rather white, for he saw that the situation was working up to the ugliest kind of climax. He felt dimly that he was again defying public opinion, but his fury made him bold. He cursed Lamancha with vigour and freedom, but there was a slight catch in his voice, and a hint of anticlimax in his threats, for the truth was that he was a little afraid. Still it was a flat defiance, though it concluded with a sneering demand as to what and who would prevent him doing as he pleased, which sounded a little weak.

“First,” said Lamancha, “I should have a try at wringing your neck. Then I should wreck any reputation you may have up and down this land. I promise you I should make you very sorry you didn’t stay in bed this morning.” Lamancha had succeeded in controlling himself—in especial he had checked the phrase “Infernal little haberdasher” which had risen to his lips—and his voice was civil and quiet again.

Johnson gave a mirthless laugh. “I’m not afraid of a dirty poacher.”

“If I’m a poacher that’s no reason why you should behave like a cad.”

It is a melancholy fact which exponents of democracy must face that, while all men may be on a level in the eyes of the State, they will continue in fact to be preposterously unequal. Lamancha had been captured in circumstances of deep suspicion which he did not attempt to explain; he had been caught on Johnson’s land, by Johnson’s servants; the wounded man was in Johnson’s pay, and might reasonably be held to be at Johnson’s orders; the car was without question Johnson’s own. Yet this outrageous trespasser was not only truculent and impenitent; he was taking it upon himself to give orders to gillies and navvies, and to dictate the use of an expensive automobile. The truth is, that if you belong to a family which for a good many centuries has been accustomed to command and to take risks, and if you yourself, in the forty-odd years of your life, have rather courted trouble than otherwise, and have put discipline into Arab caravans, Central African natives, and Australian mounted brigades—well, when you talk about wringing necks your words might carry weight. If, too, you have never had occasion to think of your position, because no one has ever questioned it, and you promise to break down somebody else’s, your threat may convince others, because you yourself are so wholly convinced of your power in that direction. It was the complete lack of bluster in Lamancha, his sober matter-of-factness, that made Johnson suddenly discover in this potato-bogle of a man something formidable. He hesitated, the gillies hesitated, and Lamancha saw his chance. Angry as he was, he contrived to be conciliatory.

“Don’t let us lose our tempers. I’ve no right to dictate to you, but you must see that we’re bound to look after this poor chap first. After that I’m at your disposal to give you any satisfaction you want”

Johnson had not been practised in commercial negotiations for nothing. He saw that obstinacy would mean trouble, and would gain him little, and he cast about for a way to save his face. He went through a show of talking in whispers to Macnicol—a show which did not deceive his head-stalker. Then he addressed Macqueen. “We think we’d better get this fellow off our hands. You take him down in the car to your cottage, and put him up in your spare bed. Then come round to the house and wait for me.”

“This is my show, if you’ll allow me, sir,” said Lamancha politely. He took a couple of notes from a wad he carried in an inner pocket. “Get hold of the nearest doctor—you can use the post-office telephone—and tell him to come at once, and get everything you need for Stokes. I’ll see you again. Don’t spare expense, for I’m responsible.”

The car departed, and the walking party continued its way down the Doran glen. Lamancha’s anger was evaporating, philosophy had intervened, and he was prepared to make allowances for Johnson. But he recognised that the situation was delicate and the future cloudy, and, since he saw no way out, decided to wait patiently on events, always premising that on no account must he permit his identity to be discovered. That might yet involve violent action of a nature which he could not foresee. His consolation was the thought of the stag, now without doubt in the Crask larder. If only he could get clear of his captors, John Macnab would have won two out of the three events. Yes, and if Leithen and Palliser-Yeates had not blundered into captivity.

He was presently reassured as to the fate of the latter. When the party entered the wooded lower glen of the Doran it was joined by four weary navvies who had been refreshing themselves by holding their heads in the stream. Interrogated by Macnicol, they told a tale of hunting an elusive man for hours on the hillside, of repeatedly being on the point of laying hold of him, of a demoniac agility and a diabolical cunning, and of his final disappearance into the depths of the wood. Questioned about Stokes, they knew nothing. He had last been seen by them in the early morning when the mist first cleared, but it was his business to keep moving high up the hill near the rocks and he had certainly not joined in the chase when it started.

Johnson’s temper was not improved by this news. Twice he had been put to public shame in front of his servants by this arrogant tramp who was John Macnab. He had been insulted and defied, but he knew in his heart that the true bitterness lay in the fact that he had also been frightened. Anger, variegated by fear, is apt to cloud a man’s common sense, and Johnson’s usual caution was deserting him. He was beginning to see red, and the news that there had been an accomplice was the last straw. Somehow or other he must get even with this bandit and bring him to the last extremity of disgrace. He

must get him inside the splendours of Haripol, where, his foot on his native heath, he would recover the confidence which had been so lamentably to seek on the hill...He would, of course, hand him over to the police, but his soul longed for some more spectacular denouement...

Then he thought of the journalists, who had made such a nuisance of themselves in the morning. They were certain to be still about the place. If they could see his triumphant arrival at Haripol they would write such a story as would blaze his credit to the world and make the frustrated poacher a laughing-stock.

As it chanced, as they entered one of the woodland drives of Haripol, they met the gillie, Andrew, on his way home for a late tea. He was asked if he had seen any of the correspondents, and replied that he and Peter and Cameron had captured one after a hard chase, who at the moment was in Cameron's charge and using strong language about the liberty of the Press. Andrew was privately despatched to bid Cameron bring his captive, with all civility and many apologies, up to the house, with a message that Mr Claybody would be glad to have a talk with him. Then, with three navvies as a vanguard and four as a rear-guard, Lamancha was conducted down the glade between Johnson and Macnicol—the picture of a criminal in the grip of the law. That picture was seen by a small boy who was lurking among the bracken. To the eyes of Benjie it spelt the uttermost disaster. The stag was safe at Crask, but the major part of John Macnab was in the hands of his enemies. Benjie thought hard for a minute, and then wriggled back into the covert and ran as hard as he could through the wood. To him at this awful crisis there seemed to be but a single hope. Force must be brought against force. The Bluidy Mackenzie, now tied up under a distant tree, must be launched against the foe. The boy was aware that the dog had accepted him as an ally, but that it had developed for Lamancha the passion of its morose and solitary life.

The prisoner's uneasiness grew with every step he took down the sweet-scented twilight glade. He was being taken to the house, and in that house there would be people—women, perhaps—journalists, maybe—and a most embarrassing situation for a Cabinet Minister. The whole enterprise, which had been so packed with comedy and adventure, was about to end in fiasco and disgrace, and it was he, the promoter, who had let the show down. For the first time since he arrived at Crask Lamancha whole-heartedly wished himself out of the thing with a clean sheet. There was something to be said, after all, for a man keeping to his groove...

They emerged from the trees, and before them stretched the lawns, with a large and important mansion at the other end. This was worse than his wildest dreams. He stopped short.

"Look here," he said, "isn't it time to end this farce? I admit I was trespassing, and was fairly caught out. Isn't that enough?"

"By Gad, it isn't," said Johnson, into whose bosom a certainty of triumph and revenge had at last entered. "Into the house you go, and there we'll get the truth out of you."

"I'll pay any fine in reason, but I'm damned if I'm going near that house."

For answer, Johnson nodded to Macnicol, and the two closed in on the prisoner. Lamancha, now really desperate, shook off the stalker and was about to break to the left, when Johnson tackled high and held him.

At the same moment the Bluidy Mackenzie took a hand in the game.

That faithful hound, conducted by Benjie, had just arrived on the scene of action. He saw his adored Lamancha, the first man who had really understood him, being assaulted by another whose appearance he did not favour. Like a stone from a sling he leaped from the covert straight at Mr Johnson Claybody's throat.

It all happened in one crowded instant. Lamancha felt the impact of part of Mackenzie's body, saw Johnson stagger and fall, and next observed his captor running wildly for the house with Mackenzie hot on his trail. Then, with that preposterous instinct to help human against animal which is deeper than reason, he started after him.

Never had a rising young commercial magnate shown a better gift of speed, for a mad dog was his private and particular fear, and this beast was clearly raving mad. Macnicol and the navvies were some twenty yards behind, but Lamancha was a close second. Crying hoarsely, Johnson leaped the flower-beds and doubled like a hare in and out of a pergola. Ahead lay his mother's pet new lily-pond, and, remembering dimly that mad dogs did not love water, he plunged into it, and embraced a lead Cupid in the centre.

Mackenzie loved water like a spaniel, and his great body shot after him. But the immersion caused a second's delay and enabled Lamancha to take a flying leap which brought him almost atop of the dog. He clutched his collar and swung him back, making a commotion in the fountain like a tidal wave. Mackenzie recognised his friend and did not turn on him, but he still strained furiously after Johnson, who was now emerging like Proteus on the far side.

Suddenly the windows of the house, which was not thirty yards off, opened, and the stage filled up with figures. First the amazed eyes of Lamancha saw Crossby entering from the right, evidently a prisoner, in the charge of two gillies. Then at one set of windows appeared Sir Edward Leithen with a scared face, while from the other emerged the forms of Sir Archibald Roylance, Mr Palliser-Yeates, and a stout gentleman in a kilt who might be Lord Claybody. To his mind, keyed by wrath and confusion to expectation of tragedy, there could only be one solution. Others besides himself had failed, and the secret of John Macnab was horridly patent to the world.

"Archie," he panted, "for God's sake call off your tripe-hound. I can't hold on any longer...He'll eat the little man."

Lord Claybody had unusual penetration. He observed his son and heir dripping and exhausted on the turf, and a figure

which looked like a caricature in the Opposition Press of an eminent Tory statesman, surrendering a savage hound to a small and dirty boy. Also he saw in the background a group of gillies and navvies. There was mystery here which had better be unriddled away from the gaze of the profane crowd. His eye caught Crossby's and Lamancha's.

"I think you'd better all come indoors," he said.

XV. — HARIPOL—THE ARMISTICE

THE great drawing-room had lost all its garishness with the approach of evening. Facing eastward, it looked out on lawns now dreaming in a green dusk, though beyond them the setting sun, over-topping the house, washed the woods and hills with gold and purple. Lady Claybody sat on a brocaded couch with something of the dignity of the late Queen Victoria, mystified, perturbed, awaiting the explanation which was her due. Her husband stood before her, a man with such an air of being ready for any emergency that even his kilt looked workmanlike. The embarrassed party from Crask clustered in the background; the shameful figures of Lamancha and Johnson stood in front of the window, thereby deepening the shadow. So electric was the occasion that Lady Claybody, finically proud of her house, did not notice that these two were oozing water over the polished parquet and devastating more than one expensive rug.

Lamancha, now that the worst had happened, was resigned and almost cheerful. Since the Claybodys had bagged Leithen and Palliser-Yeates and detected the complicity of Sir Archie, there was no reason why he should be left out. He hoped, rather vaguely, that his captors might not be inclined to make the thing public in view of certain episodes, but he had got to the pitch of caring very little. John Macnab was dead, and only awaited sepulture and oblivion. He looked towards Johnson, expecting him to take up the tale.

But Johnson had no desire to speak. He had been very much shaken and scared by the Bluidy Mackenzie and had not yet recovered his breath. Also a name spoken by his father, as they entered the room, had temporarily unsettled his wits. It was Lord Claybody who broke the uncomfortable silence.

"Who owns that dog?" he asked, looking, not at Lamancha, but at his son.

"The brute's mine," said Archie penitently. "He followed the car, and I left him tied up. Can't think how he got loose and started this racket."

The master of the house turned to Lamancha. "How did you come here, my lord? You look as if you had been having a rough journey."

Lamancha laughed. Happily the waning light did not reveal the full extent of his dirt and raggedness. "I have," he said, "I'm your son's prisoner. Fairly caught out. I daresay you think me an idiot, unless Leithen or Palliser-Yeates has explained."

Lord Claybody looked more mystified than ever.

"I don't understand. A prisoner?"

"He's John Macnab," put in Johnson, whose breath was returning, and with it sulkiness. He was beginning to see that there was to be no triumph in this business, and a good deal of unpleasant explanation.

"Well, a third of him," said Lamancha. "And as you've already annexed the other two-thirds you have the whole of the fellow under your roof."

Lord Claybody's gasp suddenly revealed to Lamancha that he had been premature in his confession. How his two friends had got into the Haripol drawing-room he did not know, but apparently it was not as prisoners. The mischief was done, however, and there was no going back.

"You mean to say that you three gentlemen are John Macnab? You have been poaching at Glenraden and Strathlarrig? Does Colonel Raden—does Mr Bandicott know who you are?"

Lamancha nodded. "They found out after we had had our shot at their preserves. They didn't mind—took it very well indeed. We hope you're going to follow suit?"

"But I am amazed. You had only to send me a note and my forest was at your disposal for as long as you wished. Why—why this—this incivility?"

"I assure you, on my honour, that the last thing we dreamed of was incivility...Look here, Lord Claybody, I wonder if I can explain. We three—Leithen, Palliser-Yeates, and myself—found ourselves two months ago fairly fed up with life. We weren't sick, and we weren't tired—only bored. By accident we discovered each other's complaint, and we decided to have a try at curing ourselves by attempting something very difficult and rather dangerous. There was a fellow called Tarras used to play this game—he was before your time—and we resolved to take a leaf out of his book. So we quartered ourselves on Archie—he's not to blame, remember, for he's been protesting bitterly all along—and we sent out our challenge. Glenraden and Strathlarrig accepted it, so that was all right; you didn't in so many words, but you accepted it by your action, for you took elaborate precautions to safeguard your ground...Well, that's all. Palliser-Yeates lost at Glenraden owing to Miss Janet. Leithen won at Strathlarrig, and now I've made a regular hat of things at Haripol. But we're cured, all of us. We're simply longing to get back to the life which in July we thought humbug."

Lord Claybody sat down in a chair and brooded.

"I still don't follow," he said. "You are people who matter a great deal to the world, and there's not a man in this country who wouldn't have been proud to give you the chance of the kind of holiday you needed. You're one of the leaders of my party. Personally, I have always considered you the best of them. I'm looking to Sir Edward Leithen to win a big case for me this autumn. Mr Palliser-Yeates has done a lot of business with my firm, and after the talk I've had with him this afternoon I look to doing a good deal more with him in the future. You had only to give me a hint of what you wished and I would have jumped at the chance of obliging you. You wanted the thrill of feeling like poachers. Well, I would have seen that you got it. I would have turned on every man in the place and used all my wits to make your escapade difficult. Wouldn't that have contented you?"

"No, no," Lamancha cried. "You are missing the point. Don't you see that your way would have taken all the gloss off the adventure and made it a game? We had to feel that we were taking real risks—that, being what we were, we should look utter fools if we were caught and exposed."

"Pardon me, but it is you who are missing the point." Lord Claybody was smiling. "You could never have been exposed—except perhaps by those confounded journalists," he added as he caught sight of Crossby.

"We had the best of them on our side," Lamancha put in. "Mr Crossby has backed us up nobly."

"Well, that only made your position more secure. Colonel Raden and Mr Bandicott accepted your challenge, and in any case they were sportsmen, and you knew it. If they had caught one or the other of you they would never have betrayed you. You must see that. And here at Haripol you were on the safest ground of all. I'm not what they call a sportsman—not yet—but I couldn't give you away. Do you think it conceivable that I would do anything to weaken the public prestige of a statesman I believe in, a great lawyer I brief, and a great banker whose assistance is of the utmost value to me. I'm a man who has made a fortune by my own hard work and I mean to keep it; therefore in these bad times I am out to support anything which buttresses the solid structure of society. You three are part of that structure. You might poach every stag on Haripol, and I should still hold my tongue."

Lamancha, regardless of the condition of his nether garments, sat down heavily on an embroidered stool which Lady Claybody erroneously believed to have belonged to Marie Antoinette, and dropped his head in his hands.

"Lord, I believe you're right," he groaned. "We've all been potting at sitting birds. John, do you hear? We've been making godless fools of ourselves. We thought we had got outside civilisation and were really taking chances. But we weren't. We were all the time as safe as your blessed bank. It can't be done—not in this country anyway. We're in the groove and have got to stay there. We've been a pretty lot of idiots not to think of that."

Then Johnson spoke. He had been immensely cheered by Lord Claybody's words, for they had seemed to raise Haripol again to that dignity from which it had been in imminent risk of falling.

"I don't complain personally, Lord Lamancha, though you've given me a hard day of it. But I agree with my father—you really were gambling on a certainty and it wasn't very fair to us. Besides, you three, who are the supporters of law and order, have offered a pretty good handle to the enemy, with those infernal journalists advertising John Macnab. There may be a large crop of Macnabs springing up, and you'll be responsible. It's a dangerous thing to weaken the sanctities of property."

He found, to his surprise, a vigorous opponent in his mother. Lady Claybody had passed from mystification to enlightenment, and from enlightenment to appreciation. It delighted her romantic soul that Haripol should have been chosen for the escapade of three eminent men; she saw tradition and legend already glorifying her new dwelling. Moreover, she scented in Johnson's words a theory of life which was not her own, a mercantile creed which conflicted with her notion of Haripol, and of the future of her family.

"You are talking nonsense, Johnson." She said "You are making property a nightmare, for you are always thinking about it. You forget that wealth is made for man, and not man for wealth. It is the personality that matters. It is so vulgar not to keep money and land and that sort of thing in its proper place. Look at those splendid old Jacobites and what they gave up. The one advantage of property is that you can disregard it."

This astounding epigram passed unnoticed save by Janet, for the lady, smiling benignly on the poaching trinity, went on to a practical application. "I think the whole John Macnab adventure has been quite delightful. It has brightened us all up, and I'm sure we have nothing to forgive. I think we must have a dinner for everybody concerned to celebrate the end of it. What Claybody says is perfectly true—you must have known you could count on us, just as much as on Colonel Raden and Mr Bandicott. But since you seem not to have realised that, you have had the fun of thinking you were in real danger, and after all it is what one thinks that matters. I am so glad you are all cured of being bored. But I'm not quite happy about those journalists. How can we be certain that they won't make a horrid story of it?"

"My wife is right," said Lord Claybody emphatically. "That is the danger." He looked at Crossby. "They are certain to want some kind of account."

"They certainly will," said the latter. "And that account must leave out names and—other details. I don't suppose you want the navy business made public?"

"Perhaps not. That was Johnson's idea, and I don't consider it a particularly happy inspiration."

"Well, there is nothing for it but that I should give them the story and expurgate it discreetly. John Macnab has been caught and dismissed with a warning—that's all there is to it. I suppose your gillies won't blab? They can't know very much,

but they might give away some awkward details.”

“I’ll jolly well see that they don’t,” said Johnson. “But who will you make John Macnab out to be?”

“A lunatic—unnamed. I’ll hint at some family skeleton into which good breeding forbids me to inquire. The fact that he has failed at Haripol will take the edge off my colleagues’ appetites. If he had got his stag they would have been ramping on the trail. The whole thing will go the way of other stunts, and be forgotten in two days. I know the British Press.”

Within half an hour the atmosphere in that drawing-room had changed from suspicion to something not far from friendliness, but the change left two people unaffected. Johnson, doubtless with Lamancha’s behaviour on the hill in his memory, was still sullen, and Janet was obviously ill at ease.

Lamancha, who was suffering a good deal from thirst and hunger and longed for a bath, arose from his stool.

“I think,” he said, “that we three—especially myself—owe you the most abject of apologies. I see now that we were taking no risks worth mentioning, and that what we thought was an adventure was only a faux pas. It was abominably foolish, and we are all very sorry about it. I think you’ve taken it uncommonly well.”

Lord Claybody raised a protesting hand. “Not another word. I vote we break up this conference and give you something to drink. Johnson’s tongue is hanging out of his mouth.”

The voice of Janet was suddenly raised, and in it might have been detected a new timidity. “I want to apologise also. Dear Lady Claybody, I stole your dog...I hope you will forgive me. You see we wanted to do something to distract Macnicol, and that seemed the only way.”

A sudden silence fell. Lady Claybody, had there been sufficient light, might have been observed to flush.

“You—stole—Rogueie,” she said slowly, while Janet moved closer to Sir Archie. “You—stole—Wee Rogueie. I think you are the—”

“But we were very kind to him, and he was very happy.”

“I wasn’t happy. I scarcely slept a wink. What right had you to touch my precious little dog? I think it is the most monstrous thing I ever heard in my life.”

“I’m so very sorry. Please, please forgive me. But you said yourself that the only advantage of property was that you could disregard it.”

Lady Claybody, to her enormous credit, stared, gasped, and then laughed. Then something in the attitude of Janet and Archie stopped her, and she asked suddenly: “Are you two engaged?”

“Yes,” said Janet, “since ten minutes past one this afternoon.”

Lady Claybody rose from the couch and took her in her arms.

“You’re the wickedest girl in the world and the most delightful. Oh, my dear, I am so pleased. Sir Archibald, you will let an old woman kiss you. You are brigands, both of you, so you should be very very happy. You must all come and dine here to-morrow night—your father and sister too, and we’ll ask the Bandicotts. It will be a dinner to announce your engagement, and also to say good-bye to John Macnab. Poor John! I feel as if he were a real person who will always haunt this glen, and now he is disappearing into the mist.”

“No,” said Lamancha, “he is being shrivelled up by coals of fire. By the way”—and he turned to Lord Claybody—“I’ll send over the stag in the morning. I forgot to tell you I got a stag—an old beast with a famous head, who used to visit Crask. It will look rather well in your hall. It has been in Archie’s larder since the early afternoon.”

Then Johnson Claybody was moved to a course which surprised his audience, and may have surprised himself. His sullenness vanished in hearty laughter.

“I think,” he said, “I have made rather a fool of myself.”

“I think we have all made fools of ourselves,” said Lamancha.

Johnson turned to his late prisoner and held out his hand.

“Lord Lamancha, I have only one thing to say. I don’t in the least agree with my mother, and I’m dead against John Macnab. But I’m your man from this day on—whatever line you take. You’re my leader, for, by all that’s holy, you’ve a most astonishing gift of getting the goods.”

EPILOGUE

CROSSBY, from whom I had most of this narrative, was as good as his word, though it went sorely against the grain. He himself wrote a tale, and circulated his version to his brother journalists, which made a good enough yarn, but was a sad anticlimax to the Return of Harald Blacktooth. He told of a gallant but frustrated attempt on the Haripol Sanctuary, the taking of the culprit, and the magnanimous release by young Mr Claybody of a nameless monomaniac—a gentleman, it was hinted, who had not recovered from the effects of the war. The story did not occupy a prominent page in the papers, and presently, as he had prophesied, the world had forgotten John Macnab, and had turned its attention to the cinema star, just arrived in London, whom for several days, to the disgust of that lady's agents, it had strangely neglected.

The dinner at Haripol, Crosby told me, was a hilarious function, at which four men found reason to modify their opinion of the son of the house, and the host fell in love with Janet, and Archie with his hostess. There is talk, I understand, of making it an annual event to keep green the memory of the triune sportsman who once haunted the place. If you go to Haripol, as I did last week, you will see above the hall chimney a noble thirteen-pointer, and a legend beneath proclaiming that the stag was shot on the Sgurr Dearg beat of the forest by the Earl of Lamancha on a certain day of September in a certain year. Lady Claybody, who does not like stag's heads as ornaments, makes an exception of this; indeed it is one of her household treasures to which she most often calls her guests' attention.

Janet and Archie were married in November in the little kirk of Inverlarrig, and three busy men cancelled urgent engagements to be there. Among the presents was one not shown to the public or mentioned in the papers, and a duplicate of it went to Junius and Agatha at their wedding in the following spring. It was a noble loving-cup in the form of a quaich, inscribed as the gift of John Macnab. Below four signatures were engraved—Lamancha, Edward Leithen, and John Palliser-Yeates, and last, in a hand of surprising boldness, the honoured name of Benjamin Bogle.

THE END

THE DANCING FLOOR

PART I

CHAPTER 1

This story was told me by Leithen, as we were returning rather late in the season from a shooting holiday in North Ontario. There were few passengers, the weather was a succession of snow blizzards and gales, and as we had the smoking-room for the most part to ourselves, we stoked up the fire and fell into a mood of yarns and reminiscences. Leithen, being a lawyer, has a liking for careful detail, and his tale took long in the telling; indeed, snatches of it filled the whole of that rough October passage. The version I have written out is amplified from his narrative, but I think it is accurate, for he took the trouble to revise it.

Romance (he said) is a word I am shy of using. It has been so staled and pawed by fools that the bloom is gone from it, and to most people it stands for a sugary world as flat as an eighteenth-century Arcadia. But, dry stick as I am, I hanker after my own notion of romance. I suppose it is the lawyer in me, but I define it as something in life which happens with an exquisite aptness and a splendid finality, as if Fate had suddenly turned artist—something which catches the breath because it is so wholly right. Also for me it must happen to youth. I do not complain of growing old, but I like to keep my faith that at one stage in our mortal existence nothing is impossible. It is part of my belief that the universe is on the whole friendly to man, and that the ordering of the world is in the main benevolent ... So I go about expecting things, waiting like an old pagan for the descent of the goddess. And once—only once—I caught the authentic shimmer of her wings.

I

My story begins in January 1913, when I took my nephew Charles to dine with the Amysforts for a ball they were giving. Balls are not much in my line, for when I came first to London it was the foolish fashion of young men not to dance, but to lounge superciliously in doorways, while their elders took the floor. I had a good deal of work on hand, and I meant to leave immediately after dinner, but the necessity of launching Charles made me linger through the first few dances. My nephew was a cheerful young gentleman in his second year at Oxford, and it presently appeared that he did not want for friends of his own age. There was a perpetual bandying of nicknames and occult chaff with other fresh-coloured boys.

One in particular caught my attention. He was a tall young man of about Charles's age, who was not dancing but stood beside one of the windows with his head silhouetted against a dark curtain. He was uncommonly handsome after the ordinary English pattern, but our youth is mostly good to behold, and that would not have fixed my attention. What struck me was his pose. He was looking at the pretty spectacle with a curious aloofness—with eyes that received much but gave out nothing. I have never seen any one so completely detached, so clothed with his own atmosphere, and since that is rare at the age of twenty, I asked Charles if he knew him.

"Rather. It's old Milburne. He's up at Magdalen with me. First string for the 'Varsity mile. Believed"—his voice became reverential—"to be going to knock five seconds off his last year's time. Most awful good chap. Like me to introduce you?"

The young man in response to my nephew's beckoning approached us. "Hullo, Vernon, how's life?" said my nephew. "Want to introduce you to my uncle—Sir Edward Leithen—big legal swell, you know—good fellow to have behind you if you run up against the laws of England."

Charles left us to claim a partner, and I exchanged a few commonplaces with his friend, for I too—*consule Planco* [in the good old days]—had run the mile. Our short talk was the merest platitudes, but my feeling about his odd distinction was intensified. There was something old-fashioned in his manner—wholly self-possessed yet with no touch of priggishness—a little formal, as if he had schooled himself to be urbanely and delicately on his guard. My guess at the time was that he had foreign blood in him, not from any difference of colouring or feature, but from his silken reserve. We of the North are apt to be angular in our silences; we have not learned the art of gracious reticence.

That boy's face remained clearly fixed in my memory. It is a thing that often happens to me, for without any reason on earth I will carry about with me pictures of some casual witnesses or clients whom I am bound to recognize if I ever see them again. It is as freakish a gift as that which makes some men remember scraps of doggerel. I saw the face so vividly in my mind that, if I had been an artist, I could have drawn it accurately down to the finest lines of the mouth and the wary courtesy of the eyes. I do not suppose I gave the meeting another conscious thought, for I was desperately busy at the time, but I knew that I had added another portrait to the lumber-room of my absurd memory.

I had meant to go to Scotland that Easter vacation to fish, but a sudden pressure of Crown cases upset all my plans, and I had to limit my holiday to four days. I wanted exercise, so I took it in the most violent form, and went for a walk in the Westmorland hills. The snow lay late that year, and I got the exercise I sought scrambling up icy gullies and breasting north-easters on the long bleak ridges. All went well till the last day, which I spent among the Cartmel fells intending to catch a train at an obscure station which would enable me to join the night mail for London at Lancaster. You know how those little hills break down in stony shelves to the sea. Well, as luck would have it, I stepped into a hole between two boulders masked with snow, and crawled out with the unpleasing certainty that I had either broken or badly wrenched my ankle. By the time I had hobbled down to the beginning of the stonewalled pastures I knew that it was a twist and not a break, but before I reached a road I knew also that I would never reach the station in time for my train.

It had begun to snow again, the spring dusk was falling, and the place was very lonely. My watch told me that even if I found a farm or inn and hired a trap I should miss my train. The only chance was to get a motor-car to take me to Lancaster. But there was no sign of farm or inn—only interminable dusky snowy fields, and the road was too small and

obscure to make a friendly motor-car probable. I limped along in a very bad temper. It was not a matter of desperate urgency that I should be in London next morning, though delay would mean the postponement of a piece of business I wanted to get finished. But the prospect was black for my immediate comfort. The best I could look forward to was a bed in a farm- or a wayside public-house, and a slow and painful journey next day. I was angry with myself for my clumsiness. I had thought my ankles beyond reproach, and it was ridiculous that after three days on rough and dangerous mountains I should come to grief on a paltry hillock.

The dusk thickened, and not a soul did I meet. Presently woods began to creep around the road, and I walked between two patches of blackness in a thin glimmer of twilight which would soon be gone. I was cold and hungry and rather tired, and my ankle gave me a good deal of pain. I tried to think where I was, and could only remember that the station, which had been my immediate objective, was still at least six miles distant. I had out my map and wasted half a dozen matches on it, but it was a map of the hill country and stopped short of my present whereabouts. Very soon I had come to a determination to stop at the first human habitation, were it a labourer's cottage, and throw myself upon the compassion of its inmates. But not a flicker of light could I see to mark the presence of man.

Then something white glimmered faintly on my left, and I saw that it was a wicket gate. This must mean a house near at hand, so I hopefully pushed it open and entered. I found myself in a narrow path running among fir trees. It was nearly pitch-dark in that place, and I was in fear of losing the road, which was obscured by the fallen snow, and getting lost in a wood. Soon, however, I was clear of the firs and in more open country among what looked like beeches. The wind, too, had swept the path bare, and there was just enough light to make it out as it twined up and down a little glade. I suspected that I was in a demesne of some considerable house, and the suspicion became a certainty when my track emerged on a broad gravel drive. After that my way was clear. The drive took me into a park—I knew it was a park because of the frequent swing-gates for cattle—and suddenly it bore to the right and I saw half a dozen irregularly placed lights high up in the air before me. This was the house, and it must be a large one, for some of the lights were far apart.

Five minutes later I found myself ringing the bell in a massive pillared porch, and explaining my case to a very old butler, to whom I gave my card.

"I've had an accident on the hills," I said, "and twisted my ankle rather badly. I wonder if I might ask for some assistance—to get to an inn or a station. I'm afraid I don't in the least know where I am."

"This is Severns Hall, sir," said the man. "My master is Mr. Vernon Milburne. If you will come in, sir, I will acquaint him with the position."

"Mr. Vernon Milburne?" I cried. "I believe I have met him. I think he is at Oxford with my nephew."

"Mr. Milburne is a member of the University of Oxford," said the ancient man. He led me into a vast hall of the worst kind of Victorian Gothic, in which a big bright wood fire crackled. When he saw me clearly the butler proved a very angel of mercy. "I think, sir, you should first have a little refreshment," he said, and brought me a whisky-and-soda. Then, while I thawed my frozen bones before the logs, he departed to seek his master.

I was too preoccupied with my own grievances to feel much interest in the fact that I had stumbled upon the dwelling of the boy who had so intrigued me at Lady Amysfort's ball. But as I warmed my hands at the blaze it did occur to me that this was the last kind of house I would have linked him with—this sham-mediaeval upholstered magnificence. It was Gothic with every merit of Gothic left out, and an air of dull ecclesiasticism hung about it. There was even an organ at one end, ugly and staring, as if it had come out of some *nouveau riche* provincial church. Every bit of woodwork was fretted and tortured into fancy shapes.

I heard a voice at my elbow.

"I think we have met before, Sir Edward," it said. "I am so sorry for your misfortune. Let's get the boot off and look at the ankle."

"It's only a sprain," I said. "I really don't want to bother you. If you would be so very kind as to lend me a car to take me to Lancaster, I can manage to travel all right. I ought to be in London to-morrow morning."

"Nonsense!" He smiled in a pleasant boyish way. "You are going to stay here to-night, and if you're well enough I'll send you into Lancaster to-morrow. You look simply fagged out. Let's get the boot off and see if we need a doctor."

He summoned the butler, and the two of them soon had my foot bare, while the boy, who seemed to know something about sprains, ran a light hand over the ankle bone.

"Nothing very bad here," he said; "but it must have been jolly painful to walk with. We'll bandage it and you need only limp for a day or two. Beaton, find out if Sir Edward's room is ready. You'd better have a hot bath and then we'll do the bandaging. After that you'll want some food. I'll lend you a dressing-gown and dry clothes."

The next hour was spent in restoring me to some ease of body. Severns might be an ugly house, but whoever built it had a pretty notion of comfort in bedrooms. I had two rooms, each with a cheerful fire, and when I had had my bath the two Samaritans bandaged my ankle as neatly as a hospital nurse, and helped me into a suit of flannels. Then Vernon disappeared, and when he returned he was dressed for dinner. A table had been laid for me in the sitting-room, and Beaton was waiting to ask me what I would drink.

"Champagne," said Vernon. "I prescribe it."

"But you're making far too much fuss about me," I protested. "I can easily dine downstairs with you."

"I think you ought to dine here. You've put yourself in my hands and I'm your medical adviser."

He saw me start my meal before he left me.

"Do you mind if I say good-night now?" he said. "You ought to get to bed pretty soon, and I have some work I want to do after dinner. Sound sleep and pleasant dreams."

I dined excellently, and after a single pipe was resolutely put to bed by Beaton the butler. They were benevolent despots in this house who were not to be gainsaid. I was sufficiently weary to be glad to go to sleep, but before I dropped off I wondered just a little at the nature of my reception. There were no other guests, Beaton had told me, and it seemed odd that a boy of nineteen alone in this Gothic mausoleum should show so little desire for human companionship. I should have expected, even if I were not allowed downstairs, to have had him come and talk to me for an hour or so before turning in. What work had he to which he was so faithful? I remembered that Charles had mentioned that he was a bit of a swell at his books, but, as Charles himself had been ploughed for Pass Mods, that might mean very little. Anyhow, there was something morbid about a conscience which at nineteen forced its possessor to work in vacation time after dinner. He had been immensely hospitable, but obviously he had not wanted my company. That aloofness which I had remarked at Lady Amysfort's ball had become a heavy preoccupation. His attitude had been courteously defensive; there had been a screen which robbed his kindness of all geniality. I felt quite distinctly that there was something in or about the house, something connected with himself, from which I was being resolutely excluded.

I slept well, and was awakened by Beaton bringing my early tea. He had undrawn the curtains and opened one of the windows, and a great flood of sunlight and spring airs was pouring through. The storm had passed, and April was in her most generous mood. My ankle felt lumpish and stiff, but when Beaton examined it he pronounced that it was mending nicely. "But you can't press on it to-day, sir," he added. "Mr. Vernon won't let you move to-day... Breakfast will be laid in the sitting-room, and Mr. Vernon's compliments and he proposes to join you at nine o'clock. I will return and bandage the ankle and assist you to rise as soon as Prayers are over."

Presently, as I lay watching a ridge of distant hill seen through the window and trying to decide what it could be, the sound of singing rose from some room below me. It must be Prayers. The old-fashioned hymn tune reminded me of my childhood, and I wondered how many young men of to-day kept up the fashion of family worship when alone in a country house. And then I suddenly remembered all about the Milburnes, for they had been my mother's friends.

Humphrey Milburne had been a rich Lancashire cotton-spinner, whose father or grandfather—I forget which—had been one of the pioneers of the industry. I don't think he had ever concerned himself greatly with business, for his *métier* had always been that of the devout layman who is more occupied with church affairs than any bishop. He had been a leader of the Evangelical party, a vigorous opponent of ritualist practices, and a noted organizer of religious revivals. Vague memories of him came back to me from my childhood, for my own family had been of the same persuasion. I had a recollection of a tall, bearded man who, on a visit to us, had insisted on seeing the children, and had set me on his knee, and had asked me, a shivering, self-conscious mite, embarrassing questions about my soul. I remembered his wife, Lady Augusta, more clearly. She was a thin little woman who never seemed to be separated from a large squashy Bible stuffed with leaflets and secured by many elastic bands. She had had a knack of dropping everything as she moved, and I had acted as page to retrieve her belongings. She had been very kind to me, for to her grief she had then no children... I remembered that a son had at last been born—"a child of many prayers," my mother had called him. And then came a vague recollection of a tragedy. Lady Augusta had died when the boy was an infant, and her husband had followed within the year. After that the Milburnes passed out of my life, except that their nurse had come to us when I was at Oxford, and had had much to say of young Master Vernon.

My vague remembrance seemed to explain my host. The child of ageing parents and an orphan from his early years—that would account for his lack of youthful spontaneity. I liked the notion of him I was acquiring; there was something quaint and loyal in his keeping up the family ritual—an evangelical athlete with the looks of Apollo. I had fancied something foreign in his air, but that of course was nonsense. He came of the most prosaic British stock, cotton-spinning Milburnes, and for his mother a Douglas-Ernott, whose family was the quintessence of Whig solidity.

I found Vernon waiting for me in the sunny sitting-room, dressed in rough grey homespun, and with an air of being ready for a long day in the open. There was a change in him since the night before. His eyes were a little heavy, as if he had slept badly, but the shutters were lifted from them. His manner was no longer constrained, and the slight awkwardness I had felt in his presence was gone. He was now a cheerful communicative undergraduate.

"Beaton says you had a good night, sir, but you mustn't use that foot of yours. You can't think of London to-day, you know. I've nothing to do except look after you, so you'd better think of me as Charles with a nephew's privileges. It's going to be a clinking fine day, so what do you say to running up in the car to the moors above Shap and listening to the curlews? In the spring they're the joiiliest things alive."

He was a schoolboy now, looking forward to an outing, and we might have been breakfasting in Oxford rooms before going out with the Bicester. I fell into his holiday mood, and forgot to tell him that I had long ago met his parents. He lent me an ulster and helped me downstairs, where he packed me into the front of a big Daimler and got in beside me. In the clear spring sunshine, with the park a chessboard of green grass and melting snow, and the rooks cawing in the beech tops, Severns looked almost venerable, for its lines were good and the stone was weathering well. He nodded towards the long

façades. “Ugly old thing, when you think of Levens or Sizergh, but it was my grandfather’s taste, and I mean to respect it. If we get a fine sunset you’ll see it light up like an enchanted castle. It’s something to be able to see the hills from every window, and to get a glimpse of the sea from the top floor. Goodish sport, too, for we’ve several miles of salmon and sea trout, and we get uncommon high birds in the upper coverts.”

We sped up by winding hill-roads to the moors, and there were the curlews crying over the snow-patched bent with that note which is at once eerie, and wistful, and joyful. There were grouse, too, busy about their nesting, and an occasional stone-chat, and dippers flashing their white waistcoats in every beck. It was like being on the roof of the world, with the high Lake hills a little foreshortened, like ships coming over the horizon at sea. Lunch we had with us, and ate on a dry bank of heather, and we had tea in a whitewashed moorland farm. I have never taken to any one so fast as I took to that boy. He was in the highest spirits, as if he had finished some difficult task, and in the rebound he became extraordinarily companionable. I think he took to me also, for he showed a shy but intense interest in my doings, the eagerness with which an undergraduate prospects the channels of the world’s life which he is soon to navigate. I had been prepared to find a touch of innocent priggishness, but there was nothing of the kind. He seemed to have no dogmas of his own, only inquiries.

“I suppose a lawyer’s training fits a man to examine all kinds of problems—not only legal ones,” he asked casually at luncheon. “I mean he understands the value of any sort of evidence, for the principles of logical truth are always the same?”

“I suppose so,” I replied, “though it’s only legal conundrums that come my way. I was once asked my opinion on a scientific proof—in the higher mathematics—but I didn’t make much of it—couldn’t quite catch on to the data or understand the language.”

“Yes, that might be a difficulty,” he admitted. “But a thing like a ghost story, for instance—you’d be all right at that, I suppose?”

The boy had clearly something in his head, and I wondered if the raw magnificence of Severns harboured any spooks. Could that be the reason of his diffidence on the previous evening?

When we got home we sat smoking by the library fire, and while I skimmed the *Times* Vernon dozed. He must have been short of his sleep and was now making up for it in the way of a healthy young man. As I watched his even breathing I decided that here there could be no abnormality of body or mind. It was like watching a tired spaniel on the rug, too tired even to hunt in his dreams.

As I lifted my eyes from the paper I saw that he was awake and was looking at me intently, as if he were hesitating about asking me some question.

“I’ve been asleep,” he apologized. “I can drop off anywhere after a day on the hills.”

“You were rather sleepless as a child, weren’t you?” I asked.

His eyes opened. “I wonder how you know that?”

“From your old nurse. I ought to have told you that in my boyhood I knew your parents a little. They stayed with us more than once. And Mrs. Ganthony came to my mother from you. I was at Oxford at the time, and I remember how she used to entertain us with stories about Severns. You must have been an infant when she left.”

“I was four. What sort of things did she tell you?”

“About your bad nights, and your pluck. I fancy it was by way of censure of our declamatory habits. Why, after all these years I remember some of her phrases. How did the thing go? ‘What fidgeted me was the way his lordship ‘eld his tongue. For usual he’d shout as lusty as a whelp, but on these mornings I’d find him with his eyes like moons and his skin white and shiny, and never a cheep the whole blessed night, with me lying next door, and a light sleeper at all times, Mrs. Wace, ma’am.’ Was Mrs. Wace a sort of Mrs. Harris?”

He laughed merrily. “To think that you should have heard that! No, she was our housekeeper, and Ganthony, who babbled like Sairey Gamp, made a litany of her name. That’s the most extraordinary thing I ever heard.”

“You’ve outgrown that childish ailment anyhow,” I said.

“Yes. I have outgrown it.” My practice with witnesses made me detect just a shade of hesitation.

At dinner he returned to the subject which seemed to interest him, the exact nature of the legal training. I told him that I was an advocate, not a judge, and so had no need to cultivate a judicial mind.

“But you can’t do without it,” he protested. “You have to advise your client and pronounce on his case before you argue it. The bulk of your work must be the weighing of evidence. I should have thought that that talent could be applied to any subject in the world if the facts were sufficiently explained. In the long run the most abstruse business will boil down to a fairly simple deduction from certain data. Your profession enables you to select the relevant data.”

“That may be true in theory, but I wouldn’t myself rate legal talent so high. A lawyer is apt to lack imagination, you know.” Then I stopped, for I had suddenly the impression that Vernon wanted advice, help of some kind—that behind all his ease he was profoundly anxious, and that a plea, almost a cry, was trembling on his lips. I detest confidences and labour to avoid them, but I could no more refuse this boy than stop my ears against a sick child. So I added, “Of course lawyers make good confidants. They’re mostly decent fellows, and they’re accustomed to keeping their mouths shut.”

He nodded, as if I had settled some private scruple, and we fell to talking about spring salmon in the Tay.

"Take the port into the library," he told Beaton. "Sir Edward doesn't want coffee. Oh, and see that the fire is good. We shan't need you again to-night. I'll put Sir Edward to bed."

There was an odd air of purpose about him, as he gave me his arm to the library and settled me with a cigar in a long chair. Then he disappeared for a minute or two and returned with a shabby little clasped leather book. He locked the door and put the key on the mantelpiece, and when he caught me smiling he smiled too, a little nervously.

"Please don't think me an ass," he said. "I'm going to ask a tremendous favour. I want you to listen to me while I tell you a story, something I have never told to any one in my life before... I don't think you'll laugh at me, and I've a notion you may be able to help me. It's a confounded liberty, I know, but may I go on?"

"Most certainly," I said. "I can't imagine myself laughing at anything you had to tell me; and if there's anything in me that can help you it's yours for the asking."

He drew a long breath. "You spoke of my bad nights as a child and I said I had outgrown them. Well, it isn't true."

II

When Vernon was a very little boy he was the sleepest and healthiest of mortals, but every spring he had a spell of bad dreams. He slept at that time in the big new night-nursery at the top of the west wing, which his parents had built not long before their death. It had three windows looking out to the moorish flats which run up to the fells, and from one window, by craning your neck, you could catch a glimpse of the sea. It was all hung, too, with a Chinese paper whereon pink and green parrots squatted in wonderful blue trees, and there seemed generally to be a wood fire burning. He described the place in detail, not as it is to-day, but as he remembered it.

Vernon's recollection of his childish nightmares was hazy. They varied, I gathered, but narrowed down in the end to one type. He used to find himself in a room different from the nursery and bigger, but with the same smell of wood smoke. People came and went, such as his nurse, the butler, Simon the head keeper, Uncle Appleby his guardian, Cousin Jennifer, the old woman who sold oranges in Axby, and a host of others. Nobody hindered them from going away, and they seemed to be pleading with him to come too. There was danger in the place; something was going to happen in the big room, and if by that time he was not gone there would be mischief... But it was quite clear to him that he could not go. He must stop there, with the wood smoke in his nostrils, and await the advent of the something. But he was never quite sure of the nature of the compulsion. He had a notion that if he made a rush for the door at Uncle Appleby's heels he would be allowed to escape, but that somehow he would be behaving badly. Anyhow, the place put him into a sweat of fright, and Mrs. Ganthony looked darkly at him in the morning.

Those troubled springs continued—odd interludes in a life of nearly unbroken health. Mrs. Ganthony left because she could not control her tongue and increased the boy's terrors, and Vernon was nine—he thought—before the dream began to take a really definite shape. The stage was emptying. There was nobody in the room now but himself, and he saw its details a little more clearly. It was not any apartment in Severns. Rather it seemed like one of the big old panelled chambers which he remembered from visits to the Midland country houses of his mother's family, when he had arrived after dark and had been put to sleep in a great bed in a place lit with dancing firelight. In the morning it had looked only an ordinary big room, but at that hour of the evening it had seemed an enchanted cave. The dream-room was not unlike these, for there was the scent of a wood fire and there were dancing shadows, but he could not see clearly the walls or the ceiling, and there was no bed. In one corner was a door which led to the outer world, and through this he knew that he might on no account pass. Another door faced him, and he knew that he had only to turn the handle for it to open.

But he did not want to, for he understood quite clearly what was beyond. There was a second room just like the first one; he knew nothing about it except that opposite the entrance another door led out of it. Beyond was a third chamber, and so on interminably. There seemed to the boy to be no end to this fantastic suite. He thought of it as a great snake of masonry, winding up hill and down dale away to the fells or the sea... Yes, but there *was* an end. Somewhere far away in one of the rooms was a terror waiting on him, or, as he feared, coming towards him. Even now it might be flitting from room to room, every minute bringing its soft tread nearer to the chamber of the wood fire.

About this time of his life the dream was an unmitigated horror. Once it came while he was ill with a childish fever, and it sent his temperature up to a point which brought Dr. Moreton galloping from Axby. In his waking hours he did not, as a rule, remember it clearly; but during the fever, asleep and awake, that sinuous building, one room thick, with each room opening from the other, was never away from his thoughts. It amazed him to think that outside were the cheerful moors where he hunted for plovers' eggs, and that only a thin wall of stone kept him from pleasant homely things. The thought used to comfort him when he was awake, but in the dream it never came near him. Asleep, the whole world seemed one suite of rooms, and he, a forlorn little prisoner, doomed grimly to wait on the slow coming through the many doors of a fear which transcended word and thought.

He became a silent, self-absorbed boy, and, though the fact of his nightmares was patent to the little household, the details remained locked up in his head. Not even to Uncle Appleby would he tell them, when that gentleman, hurriedly kind, came to visit his convalescent ward. His illness made Vernon grow, and he shot up into a lanky, leggy boy. But the hills soon tautened his sinews, and all the time at his preparatory school he was a healthy and active child. He told me that he tried to exorcise the dream through his religion—to "lay his burden on the Lord," as the old evangelical phrase has it;

but he signally failed, though he got some comfort from the attempt. It was borne in on him, he said, that this was a burden which the Lord had laid quite definitely on him and meant him to bear like a man.

He was fifteen and at Eton when he made the great discovery. The dream had become almost a custom now. It came in April at Severns about Easter-tide—a night's discomfort (it was now scarcely more) in the rush and glory of the holidays. There was a moment of the old wild heart-fluttering; but a boy's fancy is more quickly dulled than a child's, and the endless corridors were now more of a prison than a witch's antechamber. By this time, with the help of his diary, he had fixed the date of the dream; it came regularly on the night of the first Monday of April. Now the year I speak of he had made a long expedition into the hills, and had stridden homeward at a steady four miles an hour among the gleams and shadows of an April twilight. He was alone at Severns, so he had had his supper in the big library, where afterwards he sat watching the leaping flames on the open stone hearth. He was very weary, and sleep fell upon him in his chair. He found himself in the wood-smoke chamber, and before him the door leading to the unknown... But it was no indefinite fear that now lay beyond. He knew clearly—though how he knew he could not tell—that each year the something came a room nearer, and was even now but twelve rooms off. In twelve years his own door would open, and then—

He woke in the small hours, chilled and mazed, but with a curious new assurance in his heart. Hitherto the nightmare had left him in gross terror, unable to endure the prospect of its recurrence, till the kindly forgetfulness of youth relieved him. But now, though his nerves were fluttering, he perceived that there was a limit to the mystery. Some day it must declare itself and fight on equal terms.

The discovery opened a new stage in his life. As he thought over the matter in the next few days he had the sense of being forewarned and prepared for some great test of courage. The notion exhilarated as much as it frightened him. Late at night, or on soft dripping days, or at any moment of lessened vitality, he would bitterly wish that he had been born an ordinary mortal. But on a keen morning of frost, when he rubbed himself warm after a cold tub, or at high noon of summer, the adventure of the dream almost pleased him. Unconsciously he must have braced himself to a harder discipline. His fitness, moral and physical, became his chief interest for reasons that would have been unintelligible to his friends or his masters.

He passed through school—as I knew from Charles—an aloof and rather splendid figure, a magnificent athlete with a brain as well as a body, a good fellow in every one's opinion, but a grave one. He could have had no real intimates, for he never shared the secret of the spring dream. At this period, for some reason which he could not tell, he would have burned his hand off sooner than breathe a hint of it. Pure terror absolves from all conventions and demands a confidant, so terror, I think, must have largely departed from the nightmare as he grew older. Fear, indeed, remained, and awe and disquiet, but these are human emotions, whereas terror is of hell.

Had he told any one, he would no doubt have become self-conscious and felt acutely his difference from other people, so it was a sound instinct which kept him silent. As it was, he seems to have been an ordinary schoolboy, much liked, and, except at odd moments, unaware of any brooding destiny. As he grew older, and his ambition awoke, the moments when he remembered the dream were apt to be disagreeable, for a boy's ambitions are strictly conventional and his soul revolts at the abnormal. By the time he was ready for the university he wanted above all things to run the mile a second faster than any one else, and he had hopes of academic distinction, for he was an excellent classic. For most of the year he lived with these hopes and was happy; then came April, and for a short season he was groping in dark places. Just before and after each dream he was in the mood of exasperation; but when it actually came he was plunged in a different atmosphere, and felt the quiver of fear and the quick thrill of expectation.

During his first year at Oxford he had made an attempt to avoid it. He and three others were on a walking tour in Brittany in gusty spring weather, and came late one evening to an inn by an estuary where sea-gulls clattered about the windows. Youth-like they made a great and foolish feast, and sat all night round a bowl of punch, while school songs and "John Peel" contended with the dirling of the gale. At daylight they took the road again, without having closed an eye, and Vernon told himself that he was rid of his incubus. He wondered at the time why he was not more cheerful, for to his surprise he had a sense of loss, of regret, almost of disappointment.

"That was last year," he said, and he opened the little locked diary and showed me the entry. "Last night I went to bed not knowing what to think, but far more nervous than I had been since I was a baby. I hope I didn't show it, but I wasn't much in the mood for guests when you turned up."

"What happened?" I asked eagerly. "Did the dream come back?"

He nodded and passed me the diary so that I could read that morning's entry. The dream had not failed him. Once more he had been in the chamber with the wood fire; once again he had peered at the door and wondered with tremulous heart what lay beyond. For the something had come nearer by two rooms, and was now only seven doors away. I read the bare account in his neat, precise handwriting, and it gave me a strong impression of being permitted to peep through a curtain at a stage mysteriously set. I noticed that he had added some lines from Keats's *Indian Maid's Song*:

*"I would deceive her,
And so leave her,
But ah! she is so constant and so kind."*

There was a mark of exclamation against the "she," as if he found some irony in it.

He seemed to be waiting for me to speak, waiting shyly and tensely like a child expecting the judgment of an elder. But I found it hard to know what to say.

"That is a very wonderful story!" I ventured at last. "I am honoured that you should have chosen me to tell it to. Perhaps it will be a relief to you to know that some one else understands what you are going through... I don't suppose you want sympathy, but I would like to congratulate you on your fortitude."

"I don't need sympathy—or congratulation. But I want help—the help of your brain and your experience... You see, in seven years some tremendous experience is coming to me, and I want—I'd like—to know what it is."

"I wonder if a good doctor wouldn't be the best person to consult."

"No, no," he cried almost angrily. "I tell you there's nothing pathological about it—not now that I'm a man. I don't want it exorcised as if it were an evil spell. I think— now—that I'd break my heart if it all vanished into moonshine... I believe in it as I believe in God, and I'm ready to face whatever is coming. But I want to be forewarned and forearmed, if possible, for it's going to be a big thing. If I only knew something about what was coming—even the smallest something!"

Those were the days before psycho-analysis had become fashionable, but even then we had psychologists, and in my bewilderment I tried that tack.

"Might not it all spring from some fright—some strange experience at any rate—which you had as a baby? Such things often make an abiding impression."

He smiled. "You're still thinking it is pathological. Fright would account for recurring nightmares, but surely not for a thing so rational as this—a fixed day every year, the same room, the time limit. It would not explain the thing moving on a room last year when I had no dream."

"I suppose not," I admitted. "Have you looked up your family history? I have heard stories of inherited obsessions and premonitions—what they call a 'weird' in Scotland."

"I thought of that, but there's nothing—nothing. There are no Milburne records much beyond my grandfather, and by all accounts they were the most prosaic kind of business men. My mother's family—well, there's plenty of records there, and I've waded through most of the muniment room at Appleby. But there's no hint of anything mysterious in the Douglas-Ernotts. They were a time-serving lot, who knew how the cat was going to jump, but they kept out of crime and shunned anything imaginative like the plague. I shouldn't think one of them had ever an ambition which couldn't be put in terms of office or money, or a regret except that he had missed a chance of getting at the public purse. True-blue Whigs, all of them."

"Then I'm hanged if I know what to say. But, now you've told me, I want you to remember that you can always count on me. I may not be able to help, but I'm there whenever you want me. Perhaps—you never know—the thing will reveal itself more clearly in the next seven years and come within the scope of my help. I've taken a tremendous liking to you, my dear chap, and we're going to be friends."

He held out his hand.

"That's kind of you... Shall I tell you what I think myself? I was taught to believe that everything in our lives is foreordained by God. No caprice of our own can alter the eternal plan. Now, why shouldn't some inkling of this plan be given us now and then—not knowledge, but just an inkling that we may be ready? My dream may be a heavenly warning, a divine foreshadowing—a privilege, not a cross. It is a reminder that I must be waiting with girt loins and a lit lamp when the call comes. That's the way I look on it, and it makes me happy."

I said nothing, for I did not share his Calvinism, but I felt that suddenly that library had become rather a solemn place. I had listened to the vow of the young Hannibal at the altar.

CHAPTER 2

I

I have a preposterous weakness for youth, and I fancy there is something in me which makes it accept me as a coeval. It may be my profession. If you are a busy lawyer without any outside ambitions you spend your days using one bit of your mind, and the rest remains comparatively young and unstaled. I had no wife and few near relations, and while I was daily growing narrower in my outlook on the present and the future I cherished a wealth of sentiment about the past. I welcomed anything which helped me to recapture the freshness of boyhood, and Vernon was like a spring wind in my arid life. Presently we forgot that I was nearly twice his age, and slipped into the manner of contemporaries. He was far more at his ease with me than with the men of his own year. I came to think that I was the only person in the world who *knew* him, for though he had an infinity of acquaintances and a good many people who ranked as friends, I suppose I was his only comrade. For I alone knew the story of his dreams.

My flat in Down Street became his headquarters in London, and I never knew when he would stick his head into my Temple chambers and insist on our dining or lunching together. In the following winter I went to Oxford occasionally, nominally to visit Charles; but my nephew led a much occupied life, and it generally ended by my spending my time with Vernon. I kept a horse with the Bicester that season and we hunted occasionally together, and we had sometimes a walk which filled the short winter day, and dined thereafter and talked far into the night. I was anxious to learn how his contemporaries regarded him, and I soon found that he had a prodigious reputation, which was by no means explained by his athletic record. He at once impressed and puzzled his little world. I think it was the sense of brooding power about him which attracted people and also kept them at a respectful distance. His ridiculous good looks and his gentle courtesy seemed to mark him out for universal popularity, but there was too much austerity for a really popular man. He had odd ascetic traits. He never touched wine now, he detested loose talk, and he was a little intolerant of youthful follies. Not that there was anything of the prig in him—only that his character seemed curiously formed and mature. For all his urbanity he had a plain, almost rugged, sagacity in ordinary affairs, a tough core like steel harness under a silk coat. That, I suppose, was the Calvinism in his blood. Had he been a less brilliant figure, he would probably have been set down as “pi.”

Charles never professed to understand him, and contented himself with prophesying that “old Vernon would be the devil of a swell some day.” On inquiry I found that none of his friends forecast any special career for him; it would have seemed to them almost disrespectful to condescend upon such details. It was not what Vernon would do that fired their sluggish imaginations, but what they dimly conceived that he already was.

There was the same fastidiousness about all his ways. I have never known a better brain more narrowly limited in its range. He was a first-class “pure” scholar, and had got a Craven and been *proxime* for the Hertford. But he was quite incapable of spreading himself, and his prospects looked bad for “Greats” since he seemed unable to acquire the smattering of loose philosophy demanded by that school. He was strictly circumscribed in his general reading; I set it down at first to insensitiveness, but came soon to think it fastidiousness. If he could not have exactitude and perfection in his knowledge, he preferred to remain ignorant. I saw in him the makings of a lawyer. Law was just the subject for a finical, exact, and scrupulous mind like his. Charles had once in his haste said that he was not a man of the world, and Charles had been right. He was a man of his own world, not the ordinary one. So with his intellectual interests. He would make his own culture, quite regardless of other people. I fancy that he felt that his overmastering private problem made it necessary to husband the energies of his mind.

During that year I think he was quite happy and at peace about the dream. He had now stopped hoping or fearing; the thing had simply become part of him, like his vigorous young body, his slow kindliness, his patient courage. He rarely wanted to talk of it, but it was so much in my thoughts that I conducted certain researches of my own. I began by trying the psychological line, and plagued those of my acquaintances who had any knowledge of that dismal science. I cannot say I got much assistance. You see I had to state a hypothetical case, and was always met by a demand to produce the patient for cross-examination—a reasonable enough request, which of course I could not comply with. One man, who was full of the new Vienna doctrine, talked about “complexes” and “repressions” and suggested that the dream came from a child having been shut up by accident in a dark room. “If you can dig the memory of it out of his subconsciousness, you will lay that ghost,” he said. I tried one evening to awake Vernon’s earliest recollections, but nothing emerged. The dream itself was the furthest-back point in his recollection. In any case I didn’t see how such an explanation would account for the steady development of the thing and its periodicity. I thought I might do better with family history, and I gave up a good deal of my leisure to the Douglas-Ernotts. There was nothing to be made of the Ernotts—gross utilitarian Whigs every one of them. The Douglas strain had more mystery in it, but the records of his branch of the great Scottish house were scanty, and sadly impersonal. Douglases many had endured imprisonment and gone to the scaffold, but history showed them as mere sounding names, linked to forays and battles and strange soubriquets, but as vague as the heroes of Homer. As for the Milburnes, I got an ancient aunt who had known Vernon’s father to give me her recollections, and a friend on the Northern Circuit collected for me the Lancashire records. The first of them had been a small farmer somewhere on the Ribble; the second had become a mill-owner; and the third, in the early nineteenth century, had made a great fortune, had been a friend of William Wilberforce and later of Richard Cobden, and had sat in the first Reform parliament. As I looked at the portrait of that whiskered reformer, bland and venerable in his stiff linen and broadcloth, or at the early Millais of his son, the bearded Evangelical, I wondered what in them had gone to the making of Vernon. It was like seeking for the ancestry of a falcon among barnyard fowls.

In the spring of 1914 I badly needed a holiday, and Lamancha asked me to go cruising in his yacht. He gave me permission to bring Vernon, whom he knew slightly, for I wanted to be near him on the first Monday of April. We were to join the yacht at Constantinople, and cruise through the Northern Aegean to Athens, and then by way of the Corinth canal to Corfu, where we would catch the steamer for Brindisi and so home. Vernon was at first a little disinclined, for he had a notion that he ought to be at Severns, but when he allowed himself to be persuaded he grew very keen about the trip, for he had been little out of England.

He and I travelled by the Orient Express to Constantinople, and after three days there and one day at Brousa shaped our course westward. We landed one morning on the Gallipoli peninsula, and found birds' eggs on Achi Baba where, in a year's time, there was to be nothing but barbed wire and trenches. We spent a day at Lemnos, which at that time few people had visited except the British Navy, and then turned south. On the first Monday of April we had half a gale, an uncomfortable thing in those shallow seas. It blew itself out in the afternoon, and after tea we anchored for the night under the lee of a big island. There was a little bay carved out of the side of a hill; the slopes were covered with heath and some kind of scrub, and the young green of crops showed in the clearings. Among the thyme of the nearest headland a flock of goats was browsing, shepherded by a little girl in a saffron skirt, who sang shrilly in snatches. After the yeasty Aegean the scene was an idyll of pastoral peace. Vernon had all day shown signs of restlessness, and he now proposed a walk; so, leaving the others playing bridge, we two were put ashore in the dinghy.

We walked northward towards the other horn of the bay, past little closes of fruit blossom, and thickets of wildwood, and stony patches of downland bright with anemones and asphodel. It was a strange, haunted world, bathed in a twilight of gold and amethyst, filled with a thousand aromatic scents, and very silent except for the wash of the waves and a far-off bleating of goats. Neither of us wanted to talk, being content to drink in the magic of the evening. Vernon walked like a man in a dream, stopping now and then to lift his head and stare up the long scrubby ravines to the sharp line of the crest.

Suddenly a cuckoo's note broke into the stillness and echoed along the hillside. When it died away it seemed to be answered by a human voice, sweet and high and infinitely remote, a voice as fugitive as a scent or a colour.

Vernon stopped short.

"Listen to that," he cried. "It is the Spring Song. This has probably been going on here since the beginning of time. They say that nothing changes in these islands—only they call Demeter the Virgin Mary and Dionysos St. Dionysius."

He sat down on a boulder and lit his pipe. "Let's burn tobacco to the gods," he said. "It's too enchanted to hurry through... I suppose it's the way I've been educated, but I could swear I've known it all before. This is the season of the Spring Festival, and you may be sure it's the same here to-day as it was a thousand years before Homer. The winter is over, and the Underworld has to be appeased, and then the Goddess will come up from the shades."

I had never heard Vernon talk like this before, and I listened with some curiosity. I am no classical scholar, but at that moment I too felt the spell of a very ancient and simple world.

"This was the beginning of the year for the Greeks, remember," he went on—"for the Greeks as we know them, and for the old Mediterranean peoples before them whose ritual they absorbed. The bones of that ritual never altered... You have to begin with purification—to feed the ghosts of the dead in the pot-holes with fireless and wineless sacrifices and so placate them, and to purify your own souls and bodies and the earth by which you live. You have your purgation herbs like buckthorn and agnus castus, and you have your *pharmakos*, your scapegoat, who carries away all impurities. And then, when that is done, you are ready for the coming of the Maiden. It is like Easter after Good Friday—the festival after the fast and penitence. It is always the woman that simple folk worship—the Mother who is also the Maid. Long ago they called her Pandora or Persephone, and now they call her the Blessed Virgin, but the notion is the same—the sinless birth of the divine. You may be sure it is she whom the peasants in this island worship, as their fathers did three thousand years ago—not God the Father.

"The Greeks had only the one goddess," he went on, "though she had many names. Later they invented the Olympians—that noisy, middle-class family party—and the priests made a great work with their male gods, Apollo and the like. But the woman came first, and the woman remained. You may call her Demeter, or Aphrodite, or Hera, but she is the same, the Virgin and the Mother, the 'mistress of wild things,' the priestess of the new birth in spring. Semele is more than Dionysos, and even to sophisticated Athens the Mailed Virgin of the Acropolis was more than all the pantheon... Don't imagine it was only a pretty fancy. The thing had all the beauty of nature, and all the terror too." He flung back his head and quoted some sonorous Greek.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Euripides," he replied. "It has been well translated," and he quoted:

*"For her breath is on all that hath life, and she floats in the air
Bee-like, death-like, a wonder."*

"I can see it all," he cried. "The sacred basket, the honey and oil and wine, the torches crimsoning the meadows, the hushed, quiet people waiting on the revelation. They are never more than a day or two from starvation all the winter, and the coming of the Maiden is a matter for them of life and death. They wait for her as devout souls to-day wait for the Easter

Resurrection. I can hear the ritual chant and the thin, clear music of the flutes... Yes, but they were seeing things which are now hid from us—Dionysos with his thyrsus, and goat-feet in the thickets, and the shadows of dancing nymphs! If you starve for three months and put your soul into waiting for the voice from heaven, you are in the mood for marvels. Terror and horror, perhaps, but unspeakable beauty, too, and a wild hope. That was the Greek religion, not the Olympians and their burnt offerings. And it is the kind of religion that never dies.”

I thought this pretty good for the scion of an evangelical family, and I said so.

He laughed. “It isn’t my own creed, you know. I dislike all kinds of priestcraft. But, though I’m a stout Protestant, I’m inclined to think sometimes that it is a pity that we have departed from the practice of all other religions and left out the Mother of God... Let’s go on—I want to see what is on the other side of the cape.”

Beyond the little headland we came suddenly on a very different scene. Here was the harbour of the island. Beside a rude quay some fisher-boats lay at anchor with their brown sails furled. Along the water-front ran a paved terrace, a little dilapidated and with bushes growing in the cracks of the stones. Above rose a great building, showing to seaward as a blank white wall pierced with a few narrow windows. At first sight I took it for a monastery, but a second glance convinced me that its purpose had never been religious. It looked as if it had once been fortified, and the causeway between it and the sea may have mounted guns. Most of it was clearly very old, but the architecture was a jumble, showing here the enriched Gothic of Venice, and there the straight lines and round arches of the East. It had once, I conjectured, been the hold of some Venetian sea-king, then the palace of a Turkish conqueror, and was now, perhaps, the manor-house of this pleasant domain. The owners, whoever they might be, were absent, for not a chimney smoked.

We passed the quay and wandered along the great terrace, which was as solidly masoned as a Roman road. For a little the house hung sheer above us, its walls level with the rock, with in three places flights of steps from the causeway ending in small postern doors. Obviously the main entrance was on the other side. There were no huts to be seen, and no sign of life except a little group of fishermen below on the shore, who were sitting round a fire over which a pot was boiling. As we continued along the terrace beyond the house we came to orchards and olive yards, no doubt part of the demesne, and had a glimpse of a rugged coast running out into the sunset.

The place impressed even my sluggish fancy. This great silent castle in the wilds, hung between sky and earth, and all rosy in the last fires of the sun, seemed insubstantial as a dream. I should not have been surprised if it had vanished like a mirage and left us staring at a bare hillside. Only the solid blocks of the causeway bound us to reality. Here, beyond doubt, men had lived and fought far back in the ages. The impression left on my mind was of a place inhabited for aeons, sunk for the moment in sleep, but liable to awake suddenly to a fierce life. As for Vernon he seemed positively rapt.

“There’s your castle in Spain,” he cried. “Odd thing! but I seem to have seen all this before. I knew before we turned the corner that there were olive trees there, and that the rocks tumbled just in that way into the cove. Listen!”

The sound of voices drifted up from the beach, and there was a snatch of a song.

“That’s Antiphilos of Byzantium—you remember in the *Anthology*—the fisher-boys singing round the broth-pot. Lord! what a haunted spot! I’d like to spend the night here.”

I can give no reason for it, but I suddenly felt a strange uneasiness, which made me turn back and stride at a good pace along the terrace. We seemed to have blundered outside the ordinary natural world. I had a feverish desire to get away from the shadow of that pile of masonry, to get beyond the headland and in sight of the yacht. The place was wonderful, secret, beautiful, yet somehow menacing. Vernon clearly felt nothing of all this, for he grumbled at my haste. “Hang it, we’re not walking for a wager,” he complained. “There’s loads of time before dinner... I want to stay on here a bit. I never saw such a place.”

At the beginning of the paved terrace, close to the quay, we came suddenly upon two men, probably from the fishermen’s party we had seen on the shore. They were well-set-up fellows, with handsome, clear-cut faces, for the true Greek strain is still found in the islands. We came on them by surprise as we turned the corner of a rock, and they may have thought from our direction that we were coming from the house. Anyhow they seemed to get the fright of their lives. Both leaped aside and looked at us with startled angry eyes. Then they flung up their right hands; and for a moment I thought they were going to attack us.

But they contented themselves with spitting on their breasts and each holding out a clenched fist with the little finger and the thumb extended. I had seen this before—the ancient protection against the evil eye. But what impressed me was the expression in their faces. It was at Vernon that they stared, and when their stare moved from him it took in the pile of the house above. They seemed to connect us in some way with the house, and in their eyes there was an almost animal fear and hate... I looked after them when they had passed, and observed that they were hurrying with bent heads up the path which may have led to their village.

Vernon laughed. “Queer chaps! They looked as scared as if they had seen Pan.”

“I don’t like this place,” I told him when we were approaching the dinghy. “Some of your infernal gods and goddesses have got loose in it. I feel as if I want to run.”

“Hullo!” he cried. “You’re getting as impressionable as a minor poet... Hark! There it is again! Do you hear? The Spring Song?”

But the thin notes which drifted down from the upland no longer seemed to me innocent. There was something horrible

about that music.

Next morning, when we were steaming south in calm weather with the island already dim behind us, I found Vernon smoking peacefully on deck and looking at sea-birds through a glass. He nodded gaily as I sat down beside him.

"I had the dream all right—one room nearer. But the room in which I wait has changed. It must be due to being out here, for hitherto I've always spent April in England. I suppose I furnished it unconsciously with things I had seen at home—there was a big lacquer cabinet for one thing, and something like pictures or tapestry on the walls—and there were great silver fire-dogs. But now it's quite bare. The same room of course—I couldn't mistake it—but scarcely any furniture in it except a dark lump in a corner... Only the fire-dogs are the same... Looks as if the decks were being cleared for action."

I had expected to find him a little heavy about the eyes, but he appeared as fresh as if he had just come from a morning swim, and his voice had a boyish carelessness.

"Do you know," he said, "I've lost every scrap of funk or nervousness about the dream? It's a privilege, not an incubus. Six years to wait! I wish I knew how I was going to put them in. It will be a dull business waiting."

III

Fate contrived that to Vernon, as to several million others, the next four years should scarcely deserve the name of dull. By the middle of August I was being cursed by a Guards sergeant in Chelsea barrack yard, and Vernon was training with his Yeomanry somewhere in Yorkshire.

My path was plain compared to that of many honest men. I was a bachelor without ties, and though I was beyond the statutory limit for service I was always pretty hard trained, and it was easy enough to get over the age difficulty. I had sufficient standing in my profession to enable me to take risks. But I am bound to say I never thought of that side. I wanted, like everybody else, to do something for England, and I wanted to do something violent. For me to stay at home and serve in some legal job would have been a thousand times harder than to go into the trenches. Like everybody else, too, I thought the war would be short, and my chief anxiety was lest I should miss the chance of fighting. I was to learn patience and perspective during four beastly years.

I went to France in October '14, and Vernon dined with me before I started. He had got a curious notion into his head. He thought that the war would last for full six years, and his reason was that he was convinced that his dream had to do with it. The opening of the last door would be on the battlefield—of that he was convinced. The consequence was that he was in no hurry. My nephew Charles, who was in the same Yeomanry, spent his days pleading to be sent abroad and trying to exchange into any unit he thought would get away first. On the few occasions I met him he raved like a lunatic about the imbecility of a Government that kept him kicking his heels in England. But Vernon, the night he dined with me, was as placid as Buddha. "I'm learning my job," he said, "and I've a mighty lot to learn. I ought to be a fair soldier in six years' time—just when the crisis is due." But he was very anxious about me, and wanted to get into the Guards to be beside me. Only his fatalism kept him from agitating for a change, for he felt that as he had begun in the Yeomanry, Providence most likely meant him to continue there. He fussed a good deal about how we were to correspond, for I seemed to have taken the place of his family. But on the whole I was happy about him, his purpose was so clear and his mind so perfectly balanced. I had stopped thinking seriously about the dream, for it seemed only a whimsy in the middle of so many urgent realities.

I needn't tell you the kind of time I had in France. It was a long dismal grind, but I had the inestimable advantage of good health, and I was never a day off duty because of sickness. I suppose I enjoyed it in a sense; anyhow I got tremendously keen about my new profession, and rose in it far quicker than I deserved. I was lucky, too. As you know, I stopped something in every big scrap—at Festubert, Loos, Ginchy, Third Ypres, Cambrai, and Bapaume—so that I might have covered my sleeve with wound-stripes if I had been so minded. But none of the damage was serious, and I can hardly find the marks of it to-day. I think my worst trial was that for more than three years I never had a sight of Vernon.

He went out in the summer of '15 to the Dardanelles and was in the Yeomanry fight at Suvla, where a bit of shrapnel made rather a mess of his left shoulder. After that he was employed on various staff jobs, and during '16 was engaged in some kind of secret service in the Aegean and the Levant. I heard from him regularly, but of course he never spoke of his work. He told me he had learned modern Greek and could speak it like a native, and I fancy he had a hand in Venizelos's revolution. Then he went back to his regiment, and was in the "Broken Spurs" division when the Yeomanry were dismounted. He was wounded again in Palestine in '17, just before the taking of Jerusalem, and after that was second in command of a battalion.

When I was on leave in February '18 Charles dined with me at the Club—a much older and wiser Charles, with an empty sleeve pinned to his tunic, who was now employed in home training.

"It's a bloody and disgusting war," said my nephew, "and if any fellow says he likes it, you can tell him from me that he's a liar. There's only one man I ever met who honestly didn't mind it, and that was old Vernon, and everybody knows that he's cracked."

He expatiated on the exact nature of Vernon's lunacy.

"Cracked—as—cracked, and a very useful kind of insanity, too. I often wish I had half his complaint. He simply didn't give a hang for the old war. Wasn't interested in it, if you see what I mean. Oh, brave as you-be-damned, of course, but plenty of other chaps were brave. His was the most cold-blooded, unearthly kind of courage. I've seen the same thing in

men who were sick of life and wanted to be killed and knew they were going to be killed, but Vernon wasn't that sort. He had no notion of being killed—always planning out the future and talking of what he was going to do after the war. As you know, he got badly mauled at Suvla, and he nearly croaked with malaria in Crete, and he had his head chipped at Neby Samwil, so he didn't bear what you might call a charmed life. But some little bird had whispered in his ear that he wasn't going to be killed, and he believed that bird. You never saw a fellow in your life so much at his ease in a nasty place.

"It wasn't that he was a fire-eater," Charles went on. "He never went out to look for trouble. It was simply that it made no difference to him where he was or what he was doing—he was the same composed old fish, smiling away, and keeping quiet and attending to business, as if he thought the whole thing rather foolishness."

"You describe a pretty high class of soldier," I said. "I can't understand why he hasn't gone quicker up the ladder."

"I can," said Charles emphatically. "He was a first-class battalion officer but he wasn't a first-class soldier. The trouble with him, as I say, is that he wasn't interested in the war. He had no initiative, you understand—always seemed to be thinking about something else. It's like Rugby football. A man may be a fine player according to the rules, but unless his heart is in the business and he can think out new tactics for himself he won't be a great player. Vernon wasn't out to do anything more than the immediate situation required. You might say he wasn't dead-set enough on winning the war."

I detected in Charles a new shrewdness. "How did the others get on with him?" I asked.

"The men believed in him and would have followed him into hell, and of course we all respected him. But I can't say he was exactly popular. Too dashed inhuman for that. He ought to fall in love with a chorus-girl and go a regular mucker. Oh, of course, I like him tremendously and know what a rare good fellow he is! But the ordinary simple-minded, deserving lad jibs at Sir Galahad crossed with the low-church parson and the 'Varsity don."

The Broken Spurs came to France in the early summer of '18, but I had no chance of meeting them. My life was rather feverish during the last weeks of the campaign, for I was chief staff-officer to my division, and we were never much out of the line. Then, as you know, I nearly came by my end in September, when the Boche made quite a good effort in the way of a gas attack. It was a new gas, which we didn't understand, and I faded away like the grin of the Cheshire cat, and was pretty ill for a time in a base hospital. Luckily it didn't do me any permanent harm, but my complexion will be greenery-yallery till the day of my death.

I awoke to consciousness in a tidy little bed to learn that the war was all but over and the Boche hustling to make peace. It took me some days to get my head clear and take notice, and then, one morning, I observed the man in the bed next to me. His head was a mass of bandages, but there was something about the features that showed which struck me as familiar. As luck would have it, it turned out to be Vernon. He had been badly hit, when commanding his battalion at the crossing of the Scheldt, and for a day or two had been in grave danger. He was recovering all right, but for a time neither of us was permitted to talk, and we used to lie and smile at each other and think of all the stories we would presently tell. It was just after we got the news of the Armistice that we were allowed to say how d'ye do. We were as weak as kittens, but I, at any rate, felt extraordinarily happy. We had both come through the war without serious damage, and a new world lay before us. To have Vernon beside me put the coping-stone on my contentment, and I could see that he felt the same. I remember the thrill I had when we could stretch out our arms and shake hands.

Slowly we began to build up each other's records for the four years. I soon knew, what I had guessed before, the reason of that inhuman composure which Charles had described. Vernon had had a complete assurance that his day of fate was not due yet awhile, and therefore the war had taken a second place in his thoughts. Most men who fought bore the marks of it in harder lines about the mouth and chin and older eyes. But Vernon had kept his youth intact. His face had always had a certain maturity beyond his years, and his eyes had been curiously watchful. These traits were perhaps slightly intensified, but otherwise I noticed no difference.

"You remember what I told you when we last met in October '14?" he said. "I was wrong and I'm rather sorry. I thought the war would last for six years, and that the last stage of my dream would be in the field. That would have been such a simple and right solution. As it is, I must wait."

I asked if the dream had come regularly in the past four years.

"Quite regularly," was the answer. "The room hasn't changed either, except that the dark shadow in the corner has moved, so I think it must be a human figure. The place is quite bare and empty now, except for the silver fire-dogs... I think there is a little window in the wall, rather high up."

"You have only two years more to wait," I said, "less—a year and a half." It was then November '18.

"I know... But I am impatient again. I thought the climax would come in the war, so I stopped speculating about it... I thought I would be called on as a soldier to do something very difficult, and I was quite ready... But that has all gone, and I am back in the fog. I must think it all out again from the beginning."

CHAPTER 3

The immediate consequence of peace was to keep Vernon and myself apart. You see, we neither of us got better very quickly. When his wounds were healed a kind of neuritis remained; he was tortured with headaches, didn't sleep well and couldn't recover his lost weight. He was very patient and cheerful about it, and did obediently what he was told, for his one object seemed to be to get fit again. We returned to England together, but presently the doctors packed him off abroad with instructions to bask in the sun and idle at a Riviera villa which had been dedicated to such cases. So I spent a lonely Christmas in London.

Heaven knows I had nothing to complain of compared with most fellows, but I count the six months after the Armistice the most beastly in my life. I had never been seriously ill before, all the four years of war I had been brimming over with energy, and it was a new experience for me to feel slack and under-engined. The gas had left a sort of poison in my blood which made every movement an effort. I was always sleepy, and yet couldn't sleep, and to my horror I found myself getting jumpy and neurotic. The creak of a cart in the street worried me so that I wanted to cry; London noise was a nightmare, and when I tried the country I had a like horror of its silence. The thing was purely physical, for I found I could think quite clearly and sanely. I seemed to be two persons, one self-possessed enough watching the antics of the other with disgust and yet powerless to stop them.

Acton Croke was reassuring. "You're a sick man, and you've got to behave as such," he told me. "No attempt to get back into harness. Behave as if you were recovering from a severe operation—regular life, no overstrain physical or mental, simply lie fallow and let nature do its work. You have a superb constitution which, given a chance, will pick up its balance. But don't forget that you're passing through a crisis. If you play the fool you may have indifferent health for the rest of your days."

I was determined that at all events that mustn't happen, so I was as docile as a good child. As I say, I had mighty little to complain of, when you consider the number of good men who, far seedier than I, came back to struggle for their daily bread. I had made a bit of money, so I had a solid hump to live off. There was a dearth at the time of leaders at the Bar, and I could have stepped at once into a bigger practice than I had ever dreamed of. Also, I had a chance, if I wished, of becoming one of the law officers of the Crown. I was still a member of Parliament, and at the December election, though I had never gone near the place, my old constituency had returned me with a majority of more than ten thousand. A pretty gilded position for a demobbed soldier! But for the present I had to put all that aside and think only of getting well.

There has been a good deal of nonsense talked about the horror of war memories and the passionate desire to bury them. The vocal people were apt to be damaged sensitives, who were scarcely typical of the average man. There were horrors enough, God knows, but in most people's recollections these were overlaid by the fierce interest and excitement, even by the comedy of it. At any rate that was the case with most of my friends, and it was certainly the case with me. I found a positive pleasure in recalling the incidents of the past four years. The war had made me younger. You see—apart from regular officers—I had met few of my own year and standing. I had consorted chiefly with youth, and had recovered the standpoint of twenty years ago. That was what made my feeble body so offensive. I could not regard myself as a man in middle age, but as a sick undergraduate whose malady was likely to keep him out of the Boat or the Eleven.

You would have laughed if you could have seen the way I spent my time. I was so angry with my ill-health that I liked to keep on reminding myself of the days when I had been at the top of my form. I remember I made out a complete record of my mountaineering exploits, working them out with diagrams from maps and old diaries, and telling myself furiously that what I had once done I could do again... I got out my old Oxford texts and used to construe bits of the classics, trying to recapture the mood when those things meant a lot to me... I read again all the books which used to be favourites, but which I hadn't opened for a score of years. I turned up the cram books for the Bar exams, and the notes I had taken in my early days in chambers, and the reports of my first cases. It wasn't sentiment, but a deliberate attempt to put back the clock, and, by recalling the feelings of twenty-five, to convince myself that I had once been a strong man... I even made risky experiments. I went up to Oxford in vacation and managed to get put up in my old diggings in the High. That would have been intolerable if they had recalled war tragedies, but they didn't. The men who had shared them with me were all alive—one a Colonial bishop, one a stockbroker, another high up in the Indian Civil Service. It did me good to see the big shabby sitting-room where, in my day, a barrel of beer had adorned one corner. In March, too, I spent three nights at a moorland inn on the Borders which had once been the headquarters of a famous reading-party. That was not quite so successful, for the weather and the food were vile, and I was driven to reflect on the difference of outlook between twenty and forty-three.

Still my childishness did me good, and I began slowly to gain ground. The spring helped me, which was early that year, you remember, so that the blossom had begun on the fruit trees in the first days of April. I found that it was the time just before the war that it comforted me most to recall, for then I had been healthy enough and a creature more near my present state than the undergraduate of twenty. I think, too, it was because those years were associated with Vernon. He was never much out of my mind, and the reports from him were cheering. The headaches had gone, he had recovered his power of sleep, and was slowly putting on weight. He had taken to sailing a small boat again, had bought a racing cutter, and had come in third in one of the events at the Cannes Regatta.

I had this last news in a letter which reached me while I was staying at Minster Carteron, and it turned my mind back to the yachting trip I had made with Vernon in 1914 in the Aegean. It revived the picture I had almost forgotten—the green island flushed with spring, the twilight haunted with wild music, the great white house hanging like a cliff over the sea. I

had felt the place sinister—I remembered the two men with scared faces and their charm against the evil eye—and even after five years a faint aura of distaste lingered about the memory. That was sufficient to awake my interest, and one afternoon I rummaged in the library. Plakos had been the island's name, and I searched for it in gazetteers.

It was the day of the famous April snowstorm which wrought such havoc among English orchards. The windows of the great room were blurred with falling snow, and the fires on the two hearths were hissing and spluttering while I pursued my researches. Folliot, I remember, was dozing beside one of them in an arm-chair. You know old Folliot, with his mild cattish ways and his neat little Louis Napoleon beard. He wants to be the Horace Walpole of our time, and publishes every few years a book of reminiscences, from which it would appear that he has been the confidant of every great man in Europe for the last half-century. He has not much of a mind, but he has a good memory, and after all there is a faint interest about anybody who has dined out in good company for fifty years.

I woke the old fellow when I dropped by misadventure a big atlas on the floor, and he asked testily what I was after.

"I'm trying to find a beastly Greek islet," I said. "You haven't by any chance in your travels visited a place called Plakos?"

The name roused him. "No," he said, "but of course I have often heard of it. It belonged to Shelley Arabin."

"Now, who on earth was Shelley Arabin?"

"You young men!" old Folliot sighed. "Your memories are so short and your ignorance so vast. Shelley Arabin died last year, and had half a column in the *Times*, but he will have a chapter in my memoirs. He was one of the most remarkable men of his day. Shelley Arabin—to think you never heard of him! Why, I knew his father."

I drew up an arm-chair to the hearth opposite him. "It's a foul afternoon," I said, "and there's nothing to do. I want to hear about Shelley Arabin. I take it from his name that he was a Levantine."

Folliot was flattered by my interest. He had begun to bore people, for the war had created a mood unfavourable to his antique gossip. He still stayed a good deal in country houses, but spent most of his time in the libraries and got rather snubbed when he started on his reminiscences.

"Bless you, no! A most ancient English house—the Arabins of Irtling in Essex. Gone out for good now, I fear. As a boy I remember old Tom Arabin—a shabby old bandit, who came to London once in five years and insulted everybody and then went back again. He used to dine with my family, and I remember watching him arrive, for I had a boyish romance about the man who had been a friend of Byron. Yes, he was with Byron when he died at Missolonghi, and he was an intimate of all the poets of that time—Byron, Shelley—he called his son after Shelley—Keats too, I think—there's a mention of him in the *Letters* I'm almost sure—and he lived with Landor in Italy till they quarrelled. A most picturesque figure, but too *farouche*, for comfort. With him a word was a blow, you understand. He married—now, who did he marry?—one of the Manorwaters, I fancy. Anyhow, he led her the devil of a life. He bought or stole or acquired somehow the island of Plakos, and used it as a base from which to descend periodically upon the civilized world. Not a pleasant old gentleman, but amazingly decorative. You may have seen his translation of Pindar. I have heard Jebb say that it was a marvellous piece of scholarship, but that his English style was the exact opposite of everything that Pindar stood for. Dear me! How short the world's memory is!"

"I want to hear about his son," I said.

"You shall—you shall! Poor Shelley, I fear he had not the kind of upbringing which is commonly recommended for youth. Tom disliked his son, and left him to the care of the family priest—they were Catholics of course. All his boyhood he spent in that island among the peasants and the kind of raffish company that his father invited to the house. What kind of company? Well, I should say all the varieties of humbug that Europe produces—soldiers of fortune, and bad poets, and the gentry who have made their native countries too hot for them. Plakos was the refuge of every brand of outlaw, social and political. Ultimately the boy was packed off to Cambridge, where he arrived speaking English a generation out of date, and with the tastes of a Turkish pasha, but with the most beautiful manners. Tom, when he wasn't in a passion, had the graciousness of a king, and Shelley was a young prince in air and feature. He was terribly good-looking in a way no man has a right to be, and that prejudiced him in the eyes of his young contemporaries. Also there were other things against him."

"How long did Cambridge put up with him?" I asked.

"One year. There was a scandal—rather a bad one, I fancy—and he left under the blackest kind of cloud. Tom would not have him at home, but he gave him a good allowance, and the boy set up in London. Not in the best society, you understand, but he had a huge success in the half-world. Women raved about him, and even when his reputation was at its worst, he would be seen at a few good houses... I suppose a lawyer does not concern himself with poetry, but I can assure you that Shelley Arabin made quite a name for himself in the late eighties. I believe bibliophiles still collect his first editions. There was his epic on the Fall of Jerusalem—a very remarkable performance as a travesty of history. And there were his love sonnets, beautiful languid things, quite phosphorescent with decay. He carried Swinburne and Beaudelaire a stage further. Well, that mood has gone from the world, and Shelley Arabin's reputation with it, but at one time sober critics felt obliged to praise him even when they detested him. He was a red-hot revolutionary, too, and used to write pamphlets blackguarding British policy ... I saw quite a lot of him in those days, and I confess that I found him fascinating. Partly it was his beauty and his air, partly that he was like nobody I had ever met. He could talk wonderfully in his bitter, high-coloured way. But I never liked him. Oh no, I never liked him. There was always a subtle cruelty about him. Old Tom

had been a blackguard, but he had had a heart—Shelley, behind all his brilliance, was ice and stone. I think most people came to feel this, and he had certainly outstayed his welcome before he left London.”

“What made him leave?”

“His father’s death. Tom went out suddenly from old age just before the war between Greece and Turkey. Shelley left England with a great gasconade of Greek patriotism—he was going to be a second Byron and smite the infidel. By all accounts he did very little. I doubt if he had old Tom’s swashbuckling courage: indeed I have heard ugly stories of the white feather ... Anyhow England knew him no more. He married a girl he met in Rome—Scotch—a Miss Hamilton, I think, but I never knew of what Hamiltons. He treated her shamefully after the Arabin tradition. She did not live long, and there were no children, I believe, and now Shelley is dead and the Arabins are extinct. Not a pleasant family, you will say, and small loss to the world. But there was a certain quality, too, which under happier circumstances might have made them great. And assuredly they had looks. There was something almost unholy about Shelley’s beauty in his early days. It made men instinctively dislike him. If I had had a son I should have liked him to be snub-nosed and bullet-headed, for ugliness in the male is a security for virtue and a passport to popularity.”

This was probably a sentence from one of Folliot’s silly books of reminiscences. My curiosity about Plakos was not exhausted, and I asked what kind of life had been lived there. “The house is a tremendous affair,” I said, “with room for a regiment.”

“I know,” said Folliot, “and it was often full. I had always a great curiosity to go there, though I daresay I should have found the atmosphere too tropical for my taste. Shelley never invited me, but if I had arrived he could scarcely have turned me away. I entertained the notion at one time, but I kept putting it off till my taste for that kind of adventure declined... No, I have never been nearer Plakos than Athens, where I once spent a fortnight when Fanshawe was our Minister there. I asked about Shelley, of course, and Fanshawe gave me an ugly report. Plakos, you must know, is a remote and not over-civilized island where the writ of the Greek Government scarcely runs, so it was very much a patriarchal despotism. I gathered that Shelley was not a popular landlord. There had been many complaints, and one or two really horrid stories of his treatment of the peasantry. It seemed that he saw a good deal of company, and had made his house a resort for the rascality of Europe. The rascality—not merely the folly, as in his father’s time. The place fairly stank in Fanshawe’s nostrils. ‘The swine still calls himself an Englishman,’ he told me, ‘still keeps his English domicile, so we get the blame of his beastliness. And all the while, too, he is sluicing out venom about England. He is clever enough to keep just inside the tinpot Greek law. I’d give a thousand pounds to see him clapped in gaol.’”

I had heard all I wanted to know, and picked up a book, while Folliot busied himself with the newspaper. A little later he interrupted me.

“I have just remembered something else. You knew Wintergreen, the archaeologist? He was at the British school in Athens, and then excavated Hittite remains in Asia Minor. Poor fellow, he died of dysentery as an intelligence officer in Mesopotamia. Well, Wintergreen once spoke to me of Plakos. I suppose he had been there, for he had been everywhere. We were talking, I remember, one night in the club about Gilles de Rais—the French Bluebeard, you know, the friend of Joan of Arc—and I asked if anything approaching that kind of miscreant still existed on the globe. Somebody said that the type was fairly common in the East, and mentioned some Indian potentate. Wintergreen broke in. ‘You don’t need to go to the East,’ he said. ‘You can find it in Europe,’ and he started to speak of Shelley Arabin. I don’t recollect what exactly he said, but it was pretty bad, and of course strictly libellous. By his account Shelley had become a connoisseur and high priest of the uttermost evil, and the cup of his iniquities was nearly full. It seemed that Wintergreen had been in the island excavating some ancient remains and living among the peasants, and had heard tales that sickened him. He thought that some day soon the great house would go flaming to heaven, set alight by an outraged people.

“Well, it hasn’t happened.” Folliot returned to his *Times*. “Shelley has died in his bed, which is perhaps more than he deserved. Not agreeable people, I fear. It is a good thing that he left no posterity.”

That evening I thought a good deal about Plakos. I was glad to have discovered the reason for the aversion which I had felt on our visit, and was inclined to believe that I must be a more sensitive person than my friends would admit. After that the subject passed from my mind.

By the end of April I was so much recovered that I went back to my practice at the Bar, and was almost snowed under by the briefs which descended on my shoulders as soon as there was a rumour of my return. It would have been a difficult job to select, and I daresay I should have slipped into overwork, had I not been made a Law Officer. That, so to speak, canalized my duties, and since my task was largely novel and, at the moment, of extraordinary interest, the change completed my convalescence. In May I was my normal self, and when Vernon returned to England in June he found me eating, sleeping, and working as in the old days—a fitter man, indeed, than in 1914, for the war seemed to have drawn off the grosser humours of middle life.

Vernon, too, was fit again. If a young man starts with a fine constitution and a strong character, and applies all the powers of his mind to the task of getting well, he is almost certain to succeed. He came back to London a lean, sunburnt creature, with an extraordinarily *rarified* look about him. He had lost nothing of his youth, indeed he scarcely looked his twenty-five years; but he had been fined down and tautened and tested, so that his face had a new spirituality in it as if there was a light shining behind. I have noticed the same thing in other cases of head wounds. You remember how Jim Barraclough, who used to be a heavy red-haired fellow, came out of hospital looking like a saint in an Italian primitive.

Vernon was changed in other ways. You see, he belonged to a generation which was nearly cleaned out by the war, and he had scarcely a friend of his own year left except my nephew Charles. That should not have meant so much to him as to other people, for he had never depended greatly on friends, but I think the thought of all the boys who had been at school and college with him lying under the sod gave him a feeling of desperate loneliness, and flung him back more than ever on himself. I could see that even I meant less to him than before, though I still meant a good deal.

I was partly to blame for that, perhaps. The war had altered everybody's sense of values, and unconsciously I had come to take his dream less seriously. I had got into a mood of accepting things as they came and living with short horizons, and the long perspective which dominated his thoughts seemed to me a little out of the picture. I was conscious of this change in myself, and strove not to show it, but he must have felt it, and the blinds came down ever so little between us. For it was clear that the dream meant more than ever to him. He was in the last lap now, had rounded the turn and was coming up the straight, and every nerve and sinew were on the stretch. I couldn't quite live up to this ardour, though I tried hard, and with that lightning instinct of his he was aware of it, and was sparing of his confidences. The thing made me miserable, for it increased his loneliness, and I longed for the next year to be over and the apocalyptic to be driven out of his life. The mere fact that I took for granted that nothing would happen showed that I had lost my serious interest in his dream. Vernon had to outgrow a childish fancy, as one outgrows a liability to chicken-pox—that was all.

He had become harder too, as a consequence of loneliness. You remember that curious summer of 1919 when everybody was feverishly trying to forget the war. They were crazy days, when nobody was quite himself. Politicians talked and writers wrote clotted nonsense, statesmen chased their tails, the working man wanted to double his wages and halve his working hours at a time when the world was bankrupt, youth tried to make up for the four years of natural pleasure of which it had been cheated, and there was a general loosening of screws and a rise in temperature. It was what I had looked for, and I sympathized with a good deal of it, but, Lord bless me! Vernon was like an Israelitish prophet at a feast of Baal. I recalled what Charles had said about him in the war, and I wondered if Charles had not been right. Vernon seemed destitute of common humour.

I took him to dine at the Thursday Club, which had just been started. There he behaved well enough, for he found people who could talk his own language. But I noticed how complete was his apathy when politics were the subject of conversation. He was as uninterested in the setting to rights of the world as a hermit in a cell. He was oddly uncompanionable, too. Burminster's rollicking chaff got nothing out of him but a Monna Lisa smile. "What has happened to the boy?" that worthy asked me afterwards. "Shell-shock or what? Has he left a bit of his mind out in France? He's the most buttoned-up thing I ever struck."

He was worse with the ordinary young man. I gave a dinner or two for him, and, as we had one club in common, we occasionally found ourselves together in smoking-room gatherings. I had an immense pity for youth struggling to adjust its poise, and often I could have found it in my heart to be annoyed with Vernon's uncanny balance, which was not far from egotism. These poor lads were splashing about in life, trying to find their feet, and for their innocent efforts he had only a calm contempt. He sat like a skeleton at the feast, when they chattered about their sporting and amorous ventures, and discussed with abysmal ignorance how money was to be made in a highly expensive world. I have a vivid recollection of his courteous, insulting aloofness.

"What rot to say that the war has done any good," he remarked to me once as we walked back to the flat. "It has killed off the men, and left only the half-wits."

Charles, now endeavouring without much success to earn a living in the City, was vehement on the subject, and he had a characteristic explanation. "Vernon has become a wonderful old fossil," he said. "Not gone to seed, like some of the rest, but a fossil—dried up—mummified. It isn't healthy, and I'm pretty certain about the cause. He's got something on his mind, and I shouldn't be surprised if he was preparing to come an everlasting cropper. I think it's a girl."

It certainly was not a girl. I often wished it had been, for to a fellow as lonely as Vernon the best cure, as I saw it, would have been to fall in love. People had taken furiously to dancing, and that summer, though there were no big balls, every dinner-party seemed to end in a dance, and every restaurant was full of rag-time music and ugly transatlantic shuffling. For youth it was a good way of working off restlessness, and foolish middle age followed the guiding of youth. I had no fault to find with the fashion. The poor girls, starved for four years of their rights, came from dull war-work and shadowed schoolrooms determined to win back something. One could forgive a good deal of shrillness and bad form in such a case. My one regret was that they made such guys of themselves. Well-born young women seemed to have taken for their models the cretinous little oddities of the film world.

One night Vernon and I had been dining at the house of a cousin of mine and had stayed long enough to see the beginning of the dance that followed. As I looked on, I had a sharp impression of the change which five years had brought. This was not, like a pre-war ball, part of the ceremonial of an assured and orderly world. These people were dancing as savages danced—to get rid of or to engender excitement. Apollo had been ousted by Dionysos. The nigger in the band, who came forward now and then and sang some gibberish, was the true master of ceremonies. I said as much to Vernon, and he nodded. He was watching with a curious intensity the faces that passed us.

"Everybody is leaner," I said, "and lighter on their feet. That's why they want to dance. But the women have lost their looks."

"The women!" he murmured. "Look at that, I beseech you!"

It was a tall girl, who was dancing with a handsome young Jew, and dancing, as I thought, with a notable grace. She was very slim, and clearly very young, and I daresay would have been pretty, if she had let herself alone. I caught a glimpse of fine eyes, and her head was set on her neck like a flower on its stalk. But some imp had inspired her to desecrate the gifts of the Almighty. Her hair was bobbed, she had too much paint and powder on her face, she had some kind of barbaric jewels in her ears which put her head out of drawing, and she wore a preposterous white gown. Don't ask me to describe it, for I am not an expert on dress; but it seemed to me wrong by every canon of decency and art. It had been made, no doubt, with the intention of being provocative, and its audacious lines certainly revealed a great deal of its wearer's body. But the impression was rather of an outrage perpetrated on something beautiful, a foolish ill-bred joke. There was an absurd innocence about the raddled and half-clad girl—like a child who for an escapade has slipped down to the drawing-room in her nightgown.

Vernon did not feel as I felt. His eyes followed her for a little, and then he turned to me with a face like stone.

“So much for our righteous war,” he said grimly. “It's to produce *that* that so many good fellows died.”

CHAPTER 4

Early in November I went down to Wirlesdon for the first big covert shoot. I am not a great performer with the gun, and you will not find me often in the first flight in the hunting-field, but, busy as I was, I made time now for an occasional day's shooting or hunting, for I had fallen in love with the English country, and it is sport that takes you close to the heart of it. Is there anything in the world like the corner of a great pasture hemmed in with smoky brown woods in an autumn twilight: or the jogging home after a good run when the moist air is quickening to frost and the wet ruts are lemon-coloured in the sunset; or a morning in November when, on some upland, the wind tosses the driven partridges like leaves over tall hedges, through the gaps of which the steel-blue horizons shine? It is the English winter that intoxicates me more even than the English May, for the noble bones of the land are bare, and you get the essential savour of earth and wood and water.

It was a mild evening as we walked back from the last stand to the house, and, though so late in the year, there was still a show in the garden borders. I like the rather languid scent of autumn flowers when it is chastened by a touch of wood smoke from the gardeners' bonfires; it wakes so many memories and sets me thinking. This time my thoughts were chiefly of Vernon, whom I had not seen for several months. We were certainly drawing apart, and I didn't see how it could be avoided. I was back in the ordinary world again, with a mighty zest for it, and he was vowed and consecrated to his extraordinary obsession. I could not take it seriously myself, but about one thing I was grave enough—its effect on Vernon. Nothing would happen when next April came—of that I was convinced, but if nothing happened what would Vernon do? The linch-pin would be out of his life. At twenty-six, with a war behind him, a man should have found his groove in life, but at twenty-six Vernon would be derelict, like one who has trained himself laboriously for an occupation which is gone. I put aside the notion that anything could happen, for in my new mood I was incredulous of miracles. But my scepticism did not dispel my anxiety.

The hall at Wirlesdon is a big, comfortable, stone-flagged Georgian place, and before one of the fireplaces, with two great Coromandel screens for a shelter, there was the usual encampment for tea. It was a jolly sight—the autumn dusk in the tall windows, the blazing logs, and the group of fresh-coloured young faces. I had gone straight to the covert-side that morning, so I had still to greet my hostess, and I was not clear who were staying in the house. Mollie Nantley, busied in making tea, muttered some indistinct introductions, and I bowed to several unfamiliar young women in riding-habits who were consuming poached eggs. I remembered that this was the Saturday country for the Mivern, and presently one of the red backs turned towards me, and I saw that it was Vernon.

The Mivern cut-away became him uncommonly well, and his splashed breeches and muddy boots corrected the over-precision which was apt to be the fault of his appearance. Once he would have made a bee-line towards me, but now he contented himself with a smile and a wave of his hand. We were certainly drifting apart... He was talking to one of the Nantley girls, a pretty shy creature, just out of the schoolroom, and Tom Nantley, her father, made a third in the conversation. As I drank my tea I looked round the little gathering. There were Bill Marcus and Heneage Wotton and young Cheviot who had been of the shooting party. Lady Altrincham was there with her wonderful pearls—she is one of those people whose skin nourishes pearls, and she is believed to take them to bed with her. Young Mrs. Lamington, who had been walking with the guns, was kicking the burning logs with her mannish shoes and discussing politics with the son of the house, Hugo Brune, who was in Parliament. There were several girls, all with clear skins and shorn curls, and slim, straight figures. I found myself for the first time approving the new fashion in clothes. These children looked alert and vital like pleasant boys, and I have always preferred Artemis to Aphrodite.

But there was one girl who caught and held my eyes. She had been hunting, and her flat-brimmed hat was set deep on her small head and rather tilted back, for her bobbed hair gave it no support. Her figure, in a well-cut coat and habit, was graceful and workmanlike, and there was a rakish elegance about her pose, as she stood with one foot on the stone curb of the hearth, holding a tea-cup as a Wise Virgin may have carried a lamp. But there was little of the Wise Virgin about her face. Any colour the weather might have whipped into it had disappeared under a recent powdering, and my impression was of very red lips against a dead white background. She had been talking over her left shoulder to her hostess, and now her eyes were roaming about the place, with a kind of arrogant nonchalance. They met mine, and I saw that they were curiously sullen and masterful. Then they passed from me, for a middle-aged lawyer did not interest them, dwelt for a moment on Cheviot and Wotton, who were having an argument about woodcock, and finally rested on Vernon. She had the air of being bored with her company.

Vernon, talking idly to Tom Nantley, suddenly found himself addressed.

"Your mare wants practice in jumping stone walls," she said. "You'll cut her knees to ribbons. Better try her in caps next time."

You can cut into a conversation gracefully, and you can cut in rudely. This girl did it rudely. I could see Vernon's face harden as he replied that this bit of the Mivern country was strange to him.

"It's the only decent going in the shire. I'm sick of the rotten pastures in the vale country. What on earth does one hunt for except for pace?"

"Some of us hunt to follow hounds," was Vernon's curt rejoinder.

She laughed—a rather ugly, hard little laugh. "Follow your grandmother! If hounds are all you care about you may as

well go beagling! Give me a cigarette, will you?"

"Sorry. I haven't any," he replied.

Several men proffered cases. "You'll find heaps, Corrie dear," Mollie Nantley said, "in the box behind you." The girl reached behind her for the box and offered it to Vernon. When he declined she demanded a match, and Vernon, with an ill grace, lit her cigarette. It was plain that he detested her manners.

So most certainly did I. The little incident I had witnessed was oddly ill-bred and brazen. And yet "brazen" was not quite the word, for it implies self-consciousness. This masterful girl had no shadow of doubt as to her behaviour. She seemed to claim the right to domineer, like a barbaric princess accustomed to an obsequious court. Yes, "barbaric" was the right epithet. Mollie had called her "Corrie," and the name fitted her. No doubt she had been baptized Cora or Corisande, names which for me recalled the spangles and sawdust of a circus.

She had decided that Vernon was the most interesting of the lot of us, and she promptly annexed him, moving to his side and swinging on an arm of a tapestry chair. But Vernon was a hard fellow to drive against his will. His air was a frigid courtesy, and presently he went up to his hostess. "We must be off, Lady Nantley," he said, "for it's getting dark, and we are eight miles from home." He collected two of the men and three of the hunting girls, like a chaperone at a ball, shook hands with Mollie and Tom, nodded to me, and marched to the door.

The girl, who was apparently my fellow-guest, followed him with her eyes, and her scarlet lips seemed to twitch in a flicker of amusement. If she had been rude, so had been Vernon, and, had she known it, it was something of a triumph to have cracked his adamant good manners. When the party had gone, she strolled to the front of the hearth, stretched her arms above her head, and yawned.

"Lord, how stiff I am!" she proclaimed. "Heigho for a bath! I hope you've the right kind of bath salts, Mollie, or I'll be on crutches to-morrow. Come and talk to me, Dolly!" She picked up her crop, made a noose with the lash around the waist of one of the daughters of the house and drew her with her. The child, to my surprise, went smilingly.

I, too, had a bath, and read papers till it was time to dress. I felt happier about Vernon, for the sight of his unmistakable ill-temper seemed to bring him into the common human category. I had never seen him show dislike so markedly to any human being as to that atrocious girl, and I considered that it would be a good thing if his Olympian calm could be ruffled more often in the same way. I wondered casually who she could be, and why the Nantleys should have her to stay. Probably she was some daughter of profiteers who had bought her way into an unfamiliar world, though that would not explain her presence at Wirlesdon. But an ill-bred young woman did not interest me enough for my thoughts to dwell long on her, and my only prayer was that I might not be placed next her at dinner.

It was a very young party which I found assembled in Mollie's sitting-room, and a hasty glance convinced me that I would be sent in with Mrs. Lamington. Old Folliot was there, and presently he sidled up to me to tell me a new piece of gossip. Having been out all day in strong air I was ravenous, and impatient for the announcement of dinner.

"Now, who are we waiting for?" Tom Nantley fussed around. "Oh, Corrie, of course. Corrie is always late. Confound that girl, she has probably gone to sleep in her bath. Pam, you go and dig her out... Hullo, here she comes at last!"

In her hunting-kit she had looked handsome in an outlandish way, but as she swept down—without any apology—on our hungry mob there was no question of her beauty. For one thing she walked superbly. Few women can walk, and the trouble about the new fashion in clothes is that it emphasizes ugly movement. She wore a gown of a shade of green which would have ruined most people's looks, but she managed to carry it off, and something more. For a young girl she was far too heavily made up, but that, too, she forced one to accept. I suddenly had a new view of her, and realized that there was quality here, a masterfulness which might charm, an arrogance which perhaps was not *blasé* but virginal.

I realized, too, that I had seen her before. This was the girl whom Vernon and I had watched at my cousin's dance in July. I wondered if he had understood this in their encounter at the tea-table.

I had barely recovered from this surprise, when I had another. Folliot's hand was on my arm and he was purring in my ear:

"We talked once of Shelley Arabin, and I told you he left no children. My memory betrayed me, for that young lady is his daughter. She has the true Arabin eyes and all their unfathomable conceit. She is what in my day we would have called 'shocking bad form.' Rather common, I think."

From which I knew that she must have dealt hardly with old Folliot.

At dinner I sat between Mollie and Mrs. Lamington, and since my hostess had the garrulous Cheviot on her right hand, I devoted myself to my other neighbour. That charming lady, who gives to political intrigue what time she can spare from horseflesh, had so much to tell me that I had no need to exert myself. She was eloquent on the immense importance of certain pending Imperial appointments, especially on the need of selecting men with the right kind of wives, the inference being that George Lamington's obvious deficiencies might be atoned for by the merits of his lady. I must have assented to everything that she said, for she told Mollie afterwards that the war had improved me enormously and had broadened my mind. But as a matter of fact I was thinking of Miss Arabin.

She sat nearly opposite to me, and I could watch her without staring. Her manner seemed to alternate between an almost hoydenish vivacity and complete abstraction. At one moment she would have her young neighbours laughing and

protesting volubly, and then she would be apparently deaf to what they said, so that they either talked across her or turned to their other partners... In these latter moods her eyes seemed almost sightless, so wholly were they lacking in focus or expression. Sometimes they rested on the table flowers, sometimes on the wall before her, sometimes on Mrs. Lamington and myself—but they were always unseeing. Instead of their former sullenness, they seemed to have a brooding innocence... I noticed, too, the quality of her voice when she spoke. It was singularly arresting—clear, high, and vital. She talked the usual staccato slang, but though she rarely finished a sentence grammatically, the cadence and intonation were always rounded off to a satisfying close. Only her laugh was ugly, as if it were a forced thing. Every other sound that came from her had a musical completeness.

She had the foreign trick of smoking before the close of dinner, and, as if to preserve her beautiful fingers from contamination, before lighting a cigarette she would draw on her right hand a silk glove of the same colour as her gown. The Nantley's seemed to be accustomed to this habit, but it at last withdrew Mrs. Lamington from her Imperial propaganda.

"What an extraordinary young woman!" she whispered to me. "Who is she? Is she a little mad, or only foreign?"

I paraphrased old Folliot in my reply: "Pure English, but lives abroad."

The green glove somehow recalled that April evening at Plakos. This outlandish creature was interesting, for God knew what strange things were in her upbringing and her ancestry. Folliot was an old fool; she might be odious, but she was assuredly not "common." As it chanced the end of dinner found her in one of her fits of absent-mindedness, and she trailed out of the room with the other women like a sleep-walker. The two youngsters who had been her companions at table stared after her till the door closed.

Later in the drawing-room I returned to my first impression. The girl was detestable. I would have liked a sleepy evening of bridge, but the young harpy turned the sober halls of Wirlesdon into a cabaret. She behaved like a man-eating shark, and swept every male, except Tom Nantley, Folliot, and myself, into her retinue. They danced in the library, because of its polished empty floor, and when I looked in I saw that the kind of dances were not what I should have chosen for youth, and was glad that Pam and Dolly had been sent to bed. I heard a clear voice declaring that it was "devilish slow," and I knew to whom the voice belonged. At the door I passed old Folliot on his way to his room, and he shook his head and murmured "Common." This time I almost agreed with him.

In the drawing-room I found my hostess skimming the weekly press, and drew up a chair beside her. Mollie Nantley and I count cousinship, though the relation is slightly more remote, and she has long been my very good friend. She laid down her paper and prepared to talk.

"I was so glad to see Colonel Milburne again. He looks so well too. But, Ned dear, you ought to get him to go about more, for he's really a little old-maidish. He was scared to death by Corrie Arabin."

"Well, isn't she rather—shall we say disconcerting? More by token, who is she?"

"Poor little Corrie! She's the only child of a rather horrible man who died last year—Shelley Arabin. Did you never hear of him? He married a sort of cousin of mine and treated her shamefully. Corrie had the most miserable upbringing—somewhere in Greece, you know, and in Rome and Paris, and at the worst kind of girls' school where they teach the children to be snobs and powder their noses and go to confession. The school wouldn't have mattered, for the Arabins are Romans, and Corrie couldn't be a snob if she tried, but her home life would have ruined St. Theresa. She was in London last summer with the Ertzbergers, and I was rather unhappy about her living among cosmopolitan Jew *rastaquouères*, so I am trying to do what I can for her this winter. Fortunately she has taken madly to hunting, and she goes most beautifully. She has never had a chance, poor child. You must be kind to her, Ned."

I said that I was not in the habit of being brutal to young women, but that she was not likely to want my kindness. "She seems to be a success in her way. These boys follow her like sheep."

"Oh, she has had one kind of success, but not the best kind. She casts an extraordinary spell over young men, and does not care a straw for one of them. I might be nervous about Hugo, but I'm not in the least, for she is utterly sexless—more like a wild boy. It is no good trying to improve her manners, for she is quite unconscious of them. I don't think there is an atom of harm in her, and she has delightful things about her—she is charming to Pam and Dolly, and they adore her, and she is simply the most honest creature ever born. She must get it from her mother, for Shelley was an infamous liar."

Mollie's comely face, with her glorious golden-red hair slightly greying at the temples, had a look of compassionate motherliness. With all her vagueness, she is one of the shrewdest women of my acquaintance, and I have a deep respect for her judgment. If she let her adored Pam and Dolly make friends of Miss Arabin, Miss Arabin must be something more than the cabaret girl of my first impression.

"But I'm not happy about her," Mollie went on. "I can't see her future. She ought to marry, and the odds are terribly against her marrying the right man. Boys flock after her, but the really nice men—like Colonel Milburne—fly from her like the plague. They don't understand that her bad form is not our bad form, but simply foreignness... And she's so terribly strong-minded. I know that she hates everything connected with her early life, and yet she insists on going back to that Greek place. Her father left her quite well off, I believe—Tom says so, and he has looked into her affairs—and she ought to settle down here and acclimatize herself. All her superficial oddities would soon drop off, for she is so clever she could make herself whatever she wanted. It is what she wants, too, for she loves England and English ways. But there is a touch

of 'daftness' about her, a kind of freakishness which I can never understand. I suppose it is the Arabin blood."

Mollie sighed.

"I try to be tolerant about youth," she added, "but I sometimes long to box its ears. Besides, there is the difficulty about the others. I am quite sure of Corrie up to a point, but I can't be responsible for the young men. George Cheviot shows every inclination to make a fool of himself about her, and what am I to say to his mother? Really, having Corrie in the house is like domesticating a destroying angel."

"You're the kindest of women," I said, "but I think you've taken on a job too hard for you. You can't mix oil and wine. You'll never fit Miss Arabin into your world. She belongs to a different one."

"I wonder what it is?"

"A few hours ago I should have said it was the world of cabarets and Riviera hotels and Ertzbergers. After what you have told me I'm not so sure. But anyhow it's not our world."

As I went to bed I heard the jiggling of dance music from the library, and even in so large a house as Wirlesdon its echoes seemed to pursue me as I dropped into sleep. The result was that I had remarkable dreams, in which Miss Arabin, dressed in the spangles of a circus performer and riding a piebald horse, insisted on my piloting her with the Mivern, while the Master and Vernon looked on in stony disapproval.

The next morning was frosty and clear, and I came down to breakfast to find my hostess alone in the dining-room.

"Corrie behaved disgracefully last night," I was informed. "She started some silly rag with George Cheviot, and made hay of Mr. Harcus's bedroom. Tom had to get up and read the Riot Act in the small hours. I have been to her room and found her asleep, but as soon as she wakes I am going to talk to her very seriously. It is more than bad manners—it is an offence against hospitality."

I went to church with Tom and his daughters, and when we returned we found Miss Arabin breakfasting before the hall fire on grapes and coffee, with the usual young men in attendance. If she had been given a lecture by her hostess, there was no sign of it in her face. She looked amazingly brilliant—all in brown, with a jumper of brown arabesque and long amber ear-rings. A russet silk glove clothed the hand in which she held her cigarette.

Vernon came over to luncheon and sat next to Mollie, while at the other end of the table I was placed between Miss Arabin and Lady Altrincham. The girl scarcely threw a word to me, being occupied in discussing, quite intelligently, with Hugo Brune the international position of Turkey. I could not avoid overhearing some of their talk, and I realized that when she chose she could behave like a civilized being. It might be that Mollie's morning discourse had borne fruit. Her voice was delightful to listen to, with its full, clear tones and delicate modulations. And then, after her habit, her attention wandered, and Hugo's platitudes fell on unheeding ears. She was staring at a picture of a Jacobean Nantley on the wall, and presently her eyes moved up the table and rested on Vernon.

She spoke to me at last.

"Who is the man next to Mollie—the man who came to tea last night? You know him, don't you?"

I told her his name.

"A soldier?" she asked.

"Has been. Does nothing at present. He has a place in Westmorland."

"You are friends?"

"The closest." There was something about the girl's brusqueness which made me want to answer in monosyllables. Then she suddenly took my breath away.

"He is unhappy," she said. "He looks as if he had lost his way."

She turned to Hugo and, with an urbanity which I had thought impossible, apologized for her inattention, and took up the conversation at the point at which she had dropped it.

Her words made me keep my eyes on Vernon. Unhappy! There was little sign of it in his lean smiling face, with the tanned cheeks and steady eyes. Mollie was clearly delighted with him; perhaps her maternal heart had marked him down for Dolly. Lost his way? On the contrary he seemed at complete ease with the world. Was this strange girl a sorceress to discover what was hidden deep in only two men's minds? I had a sense that Vernon and Miss Arabin, with nothing on earth in common, had yet a certain affinity. Each had a strain of romance in them—romance and the unpredictable.

Vernon had motored over to Wirlesdon and proposed to walk back, so I accompanied him for part of the road. I was glad of a chance for a talk, for I was miserably conscious that we were slipping away from each other. I didn't see how I could help it, for I was immersed in practical affairs, while he would persist in living for a dream. Before the war I had been half under the spell of that dream, but four years' campaigning had given me a distaste for the fantastic and set my feet very solidly on the rock of facts. Our two circles of comprehension, which used to intersect, had now become self-contained.

I asked him what he was doing with himself, and he said hunting, and shooting, and dabbling in books. He was writing something—I think about primitive Greek religion, in consequence of some notions he had picked up during his service in the Aegean.

"Seriously, old fellow," I said, "isn't it time you settled down to business? You are twenty-five, you have first-class brains, and you are quite fit now. I can't have you turning into a *flâneur*."

"There is no fear of that," he replied rather coldly. "I am eager for work, but I haven't found it yet. My training isn't finished. I must wait till after next April."

"But what is going to happen after that?"

"I don't know. I must see what happens *then*."

"Vernon," I cried, "we are old friends, and I am going to speak bluntly. You really must face up to facts. What is going to happen next April? What *can* happen? Put it at its highest. You may pass through some strange mental experience. I can't conceive what it may be, but suppose the last door does open and you see something strange and beautiful or even terrible — I don't know what. It will all happen inside your mind. It will round off the recurring experiences you have had from childhood, but it can't do anything more."

"It will do much more," he said. "It will be the crisis of my life... Why have you become so sceptical, Ned? You used to think as I do about it."

"It will only be a crisis if you make it so, and it's too risky. Supposing, on the other hand, that nothing happens. You will have keyed your whole being up to an expectation which fails. You will be derelict, cut clean from your moorings. It's too risky, I tell you."

He shook his head. "We have fallen out of understanding each other. Your second alternative is impossible. I know it in my bones. Something will happen—must happen—and then I shall know what I have to do with my life. It will be the pistol-shot for the start."

"But, my dear old man, think of the hazard. You are staking everything on a wild chance. Heaven knows, I'm not unsympathetic. I believe in you—I believe in a way in the reality of the dream. But life is a prosaic thing, and if you are to have marvels in it you should take them in your stride. I want to see you with some sort of policy for the future, and letting the last stage of your dream drop in naturally into a strategic plan. You can't, at twenty-six, sit waiting on a revelation. You must shape your own course, and take the revelation when it comes. If you don't, you'll find yourself derelict. Damn it, you're far too good to be a waif."

He smiled a little sadly. "We're pretty far apart now, I'm afraid. Can't you see that the thing is too big a part of me to be treated as a side-show? It's what I've been sent into the world for. I'm waiting for my marching orders."

"Then you're waiting for a miracle," I said testily.

"True. I am waiting for a miracle," he replied. "We needn't argue about it, Ned, for miracles are outside argument. In less than six months I will know. Till then I am content to live by faith."

After leaving him, I walked back to the house in an uncomfortable frame of mind. I realized that the affection between us was as deep as ever, but I had a guilty sense of having left him in the lurch. He was alone now, whereas once I had been with him, and I hated to think of his loneliness.

As I crossed the bridge between the lakes I met Miss Arabin sauntering bareheaded in the autumn sunlight. I would have passed on, with a curt greeting, for I was in no mood to talk trivialities to a girl I disliked, but to my surprise she stopped and turned with me up the long grassy aisle which led to the gardens.

"I came out to meet you," she said. "I want to talk to you."

My response cannot have been encouraging, but she took no notice of that.

"You're a lawyer, aren't you?" she went on. "Mollie says you are very clever. You look clever."

I daresay I grinned. I was being comprehensively patronized.

"Well, I want you to help me. I have some tiresome legal complications to disentangle, and my solicitor is a sheep. I mean to sack him."

I explained the etiquette of my profession.

"Oh, then you can tell him what to do. You'll understand his silly talk, which I don't. You make him obey you."

"My dear young lady," I said, "I cannot undertake private business. You see I'm in the employ of the Government."

"Don't be afraid, I can pay you all right." The words were too naïve to be insulting.

I said nothing, and she darted before me and looked me in the face.

"You mean that you won't help me?" she asked.

"I mean that I'm not allowed," I replied. Without another word she swung round and disappeared up a side glade. As she vanished among the beech trees, a figure as russet as the drift of leaves, I thought I had never seen anything more quick and slender, and I fervently hoped that I should never see her again.

CHAPTER 5

In that hope I was mistaken. A fortnight later the Treasury Solicitor sent me the papers in one of those intricate international cases which were the debris of the war. It was a claim by a resident abroad, who had not lost his British nationality, for compensation for some oppressive act of one of the transient Greek Governments. I left the thing to my “devil,” and just skimmed his note before the necessary conference with the plaintiff’s solicitors. To my surprise I saw that it had to do with the island of Plakos and the name of Arabin.

Mr. Mower, of the reputable firm of Mower and Lidderdale, was not unlike a sheep in appearance—a Leicester ewe for choice. He had a large pale high-boned face, rimless spectacles, a crop of nice fleecy white hair, and the bedside manner of the good family solicitor. My hasty study of the papers showed me that the oppressive acts were not denied, but that the title of the plaintiff was questioned.

“This is a matter of domestic law,” I said—“the *lex loci rei sitae*. If the title to the land is disputed, it is a case for the Greek courts.”

“We have reason to believe that the defence is not seriously put forward, for the title is beyond dispute, and we are at a loss to understand the attitude of the Greek Government. The documents are all in our possession, and we took Mr. Blakeney’s advice on them. His opinion is among the papers left with you—and you will see that he has no doubt on the matter.”

Mr. Blakeney certainly had not, as I saw from his opinion, nor had my “devil.” The latter characterized the defence as “monstrous.” It seemed to be based on an arbitrary act of the old Greek National Assembly of 1830. My note said that the title was complete in every respect, and that the attempt to question it seemed to be a species of insanity. A name caught my attention.

“What is Koré?” I asked.

“It is Miss Arabin’s Christian name. Greek, I presume,” said Mr. Mower, very much in the tone in which Mr. Pecksniff observed, “Pagan, I regret to say.”

I read the note again, and Blakeney’s opinion. Blakeney was an authority from whom I was not disposed to differ, and the facts seemed too patent for argument. As I turned over the papers I saw the name of another solicitor on them.

“You have not always acted for the Arabin family?” I asked.

“Only within the last few months. Derwents were the family solicitors, but Miss Arabin was dissatisfied with them and withdrew her business. Curiously enough, they advised that the claim of the Greek Government was good, and should not be opposed.”

“What!” I exclaimed. Derwents are one of the best firms in England, and the senior partner, Sebastian Derwent, was my oldest client. He was not only a sound lawyer, but a good scholar and a good fellow. What on earth had induced him to give such paradoxical advice?

I told Mr. Mower that the matter seemed plain enough, but that for my own satisfaction I proposed to give further consideration to the papers. I took them home with me that evening, and the more I studied them the less I could understand Derwent’s action. The thing seemed a bluff so impudent as to be beyond argument. The abstract of title was explicit enough, and Blakeney, who had had the original documents, was emphatic on the point. But the firm of Derwents was not in the habit of acting without good cause... I found myself becoming interested in the affair. Plakos was still a disquieting memory, and the outrageous girl at Wirlesdon was of a piece with its strangeness.

A day or two later I was dining at the Athenaeum before going down to the House, and I saw Sebastian Derwent eating a solitary meal at an adjacent table. I moved over beside him, and after some casual conversation I ventured to sound him on the subject. With another man it might have been a delicate task, but we were old and confidential friends.

I told him I had had the Plakos case before me. “You used to act for the Arabins?” I said.

He nodded, and a slight embarrassment entered his manner. “My father and grandfather, too, before me. The firm had a difficult time with old Tom Arabin. He had a habit of coming down to the office with a horsewhip, and on one occasion my grandfather was compelled to wrest it from him, break it over his knee, and pitch it into the fire.”

“I can imagine easier clients. But I am puzzled about that preposterous Greek claim. I can’t think how it came to be raised, for it is sheer bluff.”

He reddened a little, and crumbled his bread.

“I advised Miss Arabin not to dispute it,” he said.

“I know, and I can’t imagine why. You advised her to sit down under a piece of infamous extortion.”

“I advised her to settle it.”

“But how can you settle a dispute when all the rights are on one side? Do you maintain that there was any law or equity in the Greek case?”

He hesitated for a second. “No,” he said, “the claim was bad in law. But its acceptance would have had certain

advantages for Miss Arabin."

I suppose I looked dumbfounded. "It's a long story," he said, "and I'm not sure that I have the right to tell it to you."

"Let us leave it at that, then. Of course it's no business of mine." I did not want to embarrass an old friend.

But he seemed disinclined to leave it. "You think I have acted unprofessionally?" he ventured.

"God forbid! I know you too well, and I don't want to poke my nose into private affairs."

"I can tell you this much. Miss Arabin is in a position of extreme difficulty. She is alone in the world, without a near relation. She is very young, and not quite the person to manage a troublesome estate."

"But surely that is no reason why she should surrender her patrimony to a bogus demand?"

"It would not have been exactly surrender. I advised her not to submit but to settle. Full compensation would have been paid if she had given up Plakos."

"Oh, come now," I cried. "Who ever heard of voluntary compensation being paid by a little stony-broke Government in Eastern Europe?"

"It would have been arranged," he said. "Miss Arabin had friends—a friend—who had great influence. The compensation was privately settled, and it was on a generous scale. Miss Arabin has fortunately other sources of income than Plakos: indeed, I do not think she draws any serious revenue from the island. She would have received a sum of money in payment, the interest on which would have added substantially to her income."

"But I still don't see the motive. If the lady is not worried about money, why should her friends be so anxious to increase her income?"

Mr. Derwent shook his head. "Money is not the motive. The fact is that Plakos is a troublesome property. The Arabin family have never been popular, and the inhabitants are turbulent and barely civilized. The thing is weighing on her mind. It is not the sort of possession for a young girl."

"I see. In order to rid Miss Arabin of a *damnosa haereditas* you entered into a friendly conspiracy. I gather that she saw through it."

He nodded. "She is very quick-witted, and was furious at the questioning of her title. That was my mistake. I underrated her intelligence. I should have had the thing more ingeniously framed. I can assure you that my last interview with her was very painful. I was forced to admit the thinness of the Greek claim, and after that I had a taste of Tom Arabin's temper. She is an extraordinary child, but there is wonderful quality in her, wonderful courage. I confess I am thankful as a lawyer to be rid of her affairs, but as a friend of the family I cannot help being anxious... She is so terribly alone in the world."

"That is a queer story," I said. "Of course you behaved as I should have expected, but I fancy that paternal kindness is thrown away on that young woman. I met her a few weeks ago in a country house, and she struck me as peculiarly able to look after herself. One last question. Who is the friend who is so all-powerful at Athens?"

"That I fear I am not at liberty to tell you," was the answer.

This tale whetted my curiosity. From old Folliot I had learned something of the record of the Arabins, and I had my own impression of Plakos as clear as a cameo. Now I had further details in my picture. Koré Arabin (odd name! I remembered from my distant schooldays that Koré was Greek for a "maiden"—it had nothing to do with Corisande of the circus) was the mistress of that sinister island and that brooding house of a people who detested her race. There was danger in the place, danger so great that some friend unknown was prepared to pay a large price to get her out of it, and had involved in the plot the most decorous solicitor in England. Who was this friend? I wanted to meet him and to hear more of Plakos, for I realized that he and not Derwent was the authority.

Speculation as to his identity occupied a good deal of my leisure, till suddenly I remembered what Lady Nantley had told me. Miss Arabin had been living in London with the Ertzbergers before she came to Wirlesdon. The friend could only be Theodore Ertzberger. He had endless Greek connections, was one of the chief supporters of Venizelos, and it was through his house that the new Greek loan was to be issued. I had met him, of course, and my recollection was of a small bright-eyed man with a peaked grey beard and the self-contained manner of the high financier. I had liked him, and found nothing of the *rastaquouère* in him to which Mollie objected. His wife was another matter. She was a large, flamboyant Belgian Jewess, a determined social climber, and a great patron of art and music, who ran a salon, and whose portraits were to be found in every exhibition of the young school of painters. It was borne in on me that my curiosity would not be satisfied till I had had a talk with Ertzberger.

Lady Amysfort arranged the meeting at a Sunday luncheon, when Madame Ertzberger was mercifully stricken with influenza.

Except for the hostess, it was a man's party, and afterwards she manoeuvred that Ertzberger and I should be left alone in a corner of the big drawing-room.

I did not waste time beating about the bush, for I judged from his face that this man would appreciate plain dealing. There was something simple and fine about his small regular features and the steady regard of his dark eyes.

"I am glad to have this chance of a talk with you," I said. "I have lately been consulted about Plakos, and Miss Arabin's

claim against the Greek Government. Also, a few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of meeting Miss Arabin. The whole business interests me strongly—not as a lawyer but as a human being. You see, just before the war I happened to visit Plakos, and I can't quite get the place out of my head. You are a friend of hers, and I should like to know something more about the island. I gather that it's not the most comfortable kind of estate."

He looked me straight in the face. "I think you know Mr. Sebastian Derwent," he said.

"I do. And he gave me a hint of Miss Arabin's difficulties, and the solution proposed. His conduct may not have been strictly professional, but it was extraordinarily kind. But let me make it quite clear that he never mentioned your name, or gave me any sort of clue to it. I guessed that you were the friend, because I knew that Miss Arabin had been staying in your house."

"You guessed rightly. It is not a thing that I naturally want made public, but I am not in the least ashamed of the part I played. I welcome the opportunity of discussing it with you. It is a curious thing, but Miss Arabin has already spoken of you to me."

"She asked me to advise her, and I'm afraid was rather annoyed when I told her that I couldn't take private practice."

"But she has not given up the notion. She never gives up any notion. She has somehow acquired a strong belief in your wisdom."

"I am obliged to her, but I am not in a position to help."

He laid his hand on my arm. "Do not refuse her," he said earnestly. "Believe me, no woman ever stood in more desperate need of friends."

His seriousness impressed me. "She has a loyal one in you, at any rate. And she seems to be popular, and to have a retinue of young men."

He looked at me sharply. "You think she is a light-headed girl, devoted to pleasure—rather second-rate pleasure—a little ill-bred perhaps. But you are wrong, Sir Edward. Here in England she is a butterfly—dancing till all hours, a madcap in town and in the hunting-field, a bewitcher of foolish boys. Oh, bad form, I grant you—the worst of bad form. But that is because she comes here for an anodyne. She is feverishly gay because she is trying to forget—trying not to remember that there is tragedy waiting behind her."

"Where?" I asked.

"In the island of Plakos."

Tragedy—that was the word he used. It had an incongruous sound to me, sitting in a warm London drawing-room after an excellent luncheon, with the sound of chatter and light laughter coming from the group around my hostess. But he had meant it—his grave voice and burdened face showed it—and the four walls seemed to fade into another picture—a twilight by a spring sea, and under a shadowy house two men with uplifted hands and hate and fear in their eyes.

"If you will do me the honour to listen," Ertzberger was speaking, "I should like to tell you more about Miss Arabin's case."

"Have you known her long?" I asked. A sudden disinclination had come over me to go further in this affair. I felt dimly that if I became the recipient of confidences I might find myself involved in some distasteful course of action.

"Since she was a child. I had dealings with her father—business dealings—he was no friend of mine—but there was a time when I often visited Plakos. I can claim that I have known Miss Arabin for nearly fifteen years."

"Her father was a bit of a blackguard?"

"None of the words we use glibly to describe evil are quite adequate to Shelley Arabin. The man was rotten to the very core. His father—I remember him too—was unscrupulous and violent, but he had a heart. And he had a kind of burning courage. Shelley was as hard and cold as a stone, and he was also a coward. But he had genius—a genius for wickedness. He was beyond all comparison the worst man I have ever known."

"What did he do?" I asked. "I should have thought the opportunities for wrong-doing in a remote island were limited."

"He was a student of evil. He had excellent brains and much learning, and he devoted it all to researches in devilry. He had his friends—people of his own tastes, who acknowledged him as their master. Some of the gatherings at Plakos would have made Nero vomit. Men and women both... The place stank of corruption. I have only heard the orgies hinted at—heathenish remnants from the backstairs of the Middle Ages. And on the fringes of that hell the poor child grew up."

"Unsmirched?"

"Unsmirched! I will stake my soul on that. A Muse, a Grace, a nymph among satyrs. Her innocence kept her from understanding. And then as she grew older and began to have an inkling of horrors, she was in flaming revolt... I managed to get her sent away, first to school, then to my wife's charge. Otherwise I think there would have been a tragedy."

"But surely with her father's death the danger is gone."

He shook his head. "Plakos is a strange place, for the tides of civilization and progress seem to have left it high and dry. It is a relic of old days, full of wild beliefs and pagan habits. That was why Shelley could work his will with it. He did not

confine his evil-doing to his friends and the four walls of his house. He laid a spell of terror on the island. There are horrid tales—I won't trouble you with them—about his dealings with the peasants, for he revelled in corrupting youth. And terror grew soon into hate, till in his last days the man's nerve broke. He lived his last months in gibbering fear. There is something to be said after all for mediaeval methods. Shelley was the kind of scoundrel whom an outraged people should have treated with boiling oil."

"Does the hatred pursue his daughter?" I asked.

"Most certainly. It took years for Plakos to recognize Shelley's enormities, and now the realization has become cumulative, growing with every month. I have had inquiries made—it is easy for me since I have agents everywhere in the Aegean—and I can tell you the thing has become a mania. The war brought the island pretty near starvation, for the fishing was crippled and a succession of bad seasons spoiled the wretched crops. Also there was a deadly epidemic of influenza. Well, the unsettlement of men's minds, which is found all over the world to-day, has become in Plakos sheer madness. Remember, the people are primitive, and have savagery in their blood and odd faiths in their hearts. I do not know much about these things, but scholars have told me that in the islands the old gods are not altogether dead. The people have suffered, and they blame their sufferings on the Arabins, till they have made a monstrous legend of it. Shelley is in hell and beyond their reach, but Shelley's daughter is there. She is the witch who has wronged them, and they are the kind of folk who are capable of witch-burning."

"Good God!" I cried. "Then the girl ought never to be allowed to return."

"So I thought, and hence my little conspiracy which failed. I may tell you in confidence that it was I who prompted the action of the Greek Government, and was prepared to find the compensation. But I was met by a stone wall. She insists on holding on to the place. Worse, she insists on going back. She went there last spring, and the spring is a perilous time, for the people have had the winter to brood over their hatred. I do not know whether she is fully conscious of the risk, for sometimes I think she is still only a child. But last year she was in very real danger, and she must have felt it. Behind all her bravado I could see that she was afraid."

It was an odd tale to hear in a commonplace drawing-room, and it was odder to hear it from such a narrator. There was nothing romantic about Ertzberger. I daresay he had the imaginative quickness of his race, but the dominant impression was of solid good sense. He looked at the thing from a business man's point of view, and the cold facts made him shudder.

"What on earth is her reason?" I asked. "Has she any affection for Plakos?"

"She hates it. But there is some stubborn point of honour which forbids her to let it go. She has her grandfather's fierce obstinacy. Fate has dared her to defend her own, and she has accepted the challenge... It is not merely the sense of property. I think she feels that she has a duty—that she cannot run away from the consequences of her father's devilry. Her presence there at the mercy of the people is a kind of atonement."

"Has she any friends in the island?"

"An old steward is the only man in the house. She may have her well-wishers outside, but they cannot be many, for she has not lived continuously there for years. Last spring I tried to have her guarded, but she saw through my plan and forbade it. All I could do was to have the place watched on my own account. This winter my information is that things are worse. There is famine in the hills, and the hillmen are looking with jealous eyes towards the house by the sea. The stories grow wilder, too."

"What kind?"

"Oh, witchcraft. That the Arabins are sorcerers, and that she herself is a witch. Every misfortune in the island is laid to her account. God knows what may happen this spring, if she persists in going back! My hope was that she might find some lover who would make her forget the obsession, but on the contrary the obsession has made her blind to lovers. Perhaps you have noticed it... She seems to flirt outrageously, but she keeps every man at a distance ... Now, do you understand Miss Arabin a little better?"

I was beginning to. A picture was growing up in my mind of something infinitely pathetic, and terribly alone. A child terrified by a nightmare life which she did not understand—carried off to a new environment from which she extracted what was most feverish and vulgar, for she had no canons, yet keeping through it all a pitiful innocence—returning to a half-comprehension which revolted her soul—resolute to face the consequences of the past with an illogical gallantry. I did not know when I had heard a tale that so moved me.

"You will not refuse her if she asks your help?" Ertzberger pleaded.

"But what can I do?" I said. "I'm a lawyer, and she doesn't want legal advice, even if I were free to give it her."

"She has got the notion that you can help her. Don't ask me why or how. Call it a girl's fancy and make the best of it. I cannot influence her, Derwent couldn't, but you may, because for some reason or other she believes that you are wise... I think... I think that she thinks that you can tell her what precisely she has to fear in Plakos. There is a mass of papers, you know."

"What to fear?" I exclaimed. "Surely you have just made that plain. A famished and half-civilized peasantry with a long record of ill treatment. Isn't that enough?"

"There may be something more," Ertzberger said slowly. "She has an idea that there is something more... and she is

terrified of that something. If you can get rid of her terrors you will be doing a humane act, Sir Edward. The trouble, as I have told you, is that she will take so few into her confidence."

"Look here, Mr. Ertzberger," I said. "I will be quite frank with you. Miss Arabin did not attract me—indeed I have not often been more repelled by a young woman. But what you have said puts a new complexion on her behaviour. Tell her I am willing to do my best for her, to advise her, to help her in any way I can. But if she wouldn't listen to you, you may be certain she won't listen to me."

"That's very good of you," he said, rising. "She proposes to go to Plakos in March. Pray God we can put some sanity into her in the next three months."

CHAPTER 6

Two days later I had to go north by an early train from Euston, and opposite my platform a special was waiting to take a hunting party down to somewhere in the Shires. Around the doors of the carriages stood a number of expensive-looking young people, among whom I recognized Miss Arabin. She wore a long fur coat, and sniffed at a bunch of violets, while in her high, clear voice she exchanged badinage with two young men. As she stood with one foot on the carriage step, her small head tilted backward, her red lips parted in laughter, it was hard to connect her with the stricken lady of Ertzberger's story. Just as the special was leaving, I saw Vernon hurry up, also in hunting-kit. He cast one glance at Miss Arabin, and found a seat in another carriage. I hoped the Pytchley would have a fast day, for I did not see these two fraternizing during waits at covert-side.

Curiously enough I saw the girl again the same week, also in a railway train. I was returning from Liverpool, and our trains halted beside each other at Rugby. She was alone in her carriage, the winter dusk was falling, but the lights were not yet lit, and I saw her only faintly, silhouetted against the farther window. She was not asleep, but her head was sunk as if in a dream. In the few seconds during which I watched I had a strong impression of loneliness, almost of dejection. She was alone with her thoughts, and they were heavy.

That evening, on my return to my flat, I found a big parcel of papers. Characteristically there was no covering letter or identification of any sort, but a glance showed me what they were. My time after dinner that night was at my own disposal, and I devoted it to reading them. I believe I would have put aside work of whatever urgency for that purpose, for Plakos had begun to dominate my thoughts.

The papers were a curious jumble—no legal documents, but a mass of family archives and notes on the island. I observed that there was nothing concerned with Shelley. Most of the things had to do with old Tom Arabin—correspondence, original and copied, which had passed between him and his friends or enemies. There were letters from Byron and Shelley and Trelawny, one from no less a person than Sir Walter Scott, many from John Cam Hobhouse, official dispatches from the British Foreign Office, a formal note or two from Castlereagh, and several long and interesting epistles from Canning, who seemed to have had some friendship for the old fellow. There was a quantity, too, of correspondence with Continental statesmen, and I observed several famous names. All this I put on one side, for it did not concern my purpose.

Then there was old Tom Arabia's diary, which I skimmed. It was a very human and explosive document, but there was little about Plakos in it. Tom was more interested in the high politics of Europe than in the little domain he had acquired. Next I turned up a manuscript history of the island in French, written apparently about 1860 by a Greek of the name of Karapanos. This was a dull work, being merely a summary of the island's record under Venetian and Turkish rule, and the doings of its people in the War of Liberation. Then came a bundle of early nineteenth-century maps and charts, and some notes on olive culture. There was a batch, too, of verses in Greek and English, probably Tom's work and not very good. There was a pedigree of the Arabin family in the old Irtling days, and a great deal more junk which had not even an antiquarian interest. I shoved away the papers with a sense of failure. There was nothing here to throw light on Plakos; if such material existed it must have been in Shelley's papers, of which his daughter had doubtless made a bonfire.

Then I noticed something among the notes on olive culture, and drew out a thick, old-fashioned envelope heavily sealed with green wax, which bore the Arabin device of a Turk's head. I opened it and extracted a sheet of yellowish parchment, covered closely with Greek characters. I was taught Greek at school, though I have forgotten most of it, but I never professed to be able to read even the printed Greek of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This document seemed to be of that date, and its insane ligatures and contractions completely defeated me. But there might be something in these hieroglyphics, so I bundled up the rest of the papers and locked the envelope in a dispatch box.

Next day I paid a visit to a Chancery barrister of my acquaintance whose hobby was mediaeval Greek, and who had written a monograph on Aldus Manutius. He examined the thing with delight, pronounced the calligraphy fifteenth century, and promised to write out the contents for me in decent Greek script.

It was not till early in the New Year that I got the manuscript back from him. The task, he said, had been very difficult, and though he was pretty certain that he had got the transliteration correct, he did not profess to be able to construe it. "I'm a typographer," he wrote, "not a scholar. The thing, too, is obviously corrupt, and I should call it the work of an uneducated man who copied what he did not understand. But it is very curious. It seems to be an account of a place called Kynaetho. Better show it to—" and he mentioned several names.

I did not happen to know any of the people he cited, and it occurred to me that I might consult Vernon. He was, I knew, a fine scholar, and he had kept up his interest in Greek literature. So I sent the original and the modern version to him, saying that the document had come into my hands professionally and I should like to know if he could make anything of it.

Next day I had Vernon on the telephone and he seemed to be excited. "Where on earth did you pick up that thing?" he asked. "I suppose it isn't a fake?"

"Genuine enough," I replied, "but I can't tell you its story yet. Can you make sense of it?"

"I wouldn't say exactly 'sense,' but I can translate it after a fashion. I worked at it last night till the small hours. If I knew the *provenance* of the manuscript, I might be able to understand it better. Come and dine to-night, and we'll talk about it."

Vernon had taken a flat in Cleveland Row, and it was a proof of our gradual estrangement that till that evening I had

never been inside its doors. Indeed we had not met since that Sunday at Wirlesdon.

"I saw you at Euston one morning before Christmas," I said. "Miss Arabin was going to hunt in the same train."

"Miss Arabin?" he puzzled. "I don't think I know—"

"The queer girl who was at Wirlesdon."

"Is that her name? I didn't know it. She rides well, but her manners are atrocious. Lord, how I dislike these *déracinés*! Let's get dinner over, for I've a lot to say to you about your jigsaw puzzle. It's extremely interesting, you know."

Later in the evening he put before me several sheets of foolscap on which he had written the translation in his small beautiful hand.

"The thing is headed *Ta Exotika*," he said. "That puzzled me at first, till I remembered the phrase in Basil of Caesarea. It was the word used by the early Christians to describe the old divinities. Whoever wrote this—I don't mean the fifteenth-century scribe, but the original author—was no doubt a Christian, and he is describing a belief and a rite which existed in his time at a place called Kynaetho."

"Where is that?"

"I'm hanged if I know. It's a fairly common place name in Greece. There's one in Arcadia."

I read his translation and could not make much of it. It reminded me of a schoolboy's version of a bit of Herodotus. "In Kynaetho," said the writer, "there is a custom at the Spring Festival of welcoming the Queen (*Despoina* was the word) with the rites of the tympanon and the keston, such as they use in the Mysteries. There is a certain sacred place, a well beside a white cypress, from which all save the purified are excluded. In Kynaetho the Queen is known as Fairborn (Kalligenia). In winter the Queen is asleep, but she wakes in Spring, wherefore the Spring month is called by her name..." After this came a fuller description of the rites and a lot of talk about "mantic birds."

"There's nothing much in the first part," said Vernon. "It's the ordinary ceremony of the rebirth of Demeter. But notice that she is called 'Lady of the Wild Things.' There was a mighty unpleasant side to Demeter as well as an idyllic one, and it didn't do to take liberties with the Queen of the Shades. But read on."

The writer went on to say that in time of great distress at Kynaetho there was a different ceremony. It then became necessary to invite not only the Mistress but the Master. For this purpose a virgin and a youth must be chosen and set apart in a hallowed place, and fed upon sacred food. The choosing was done by the victor in a race, who was given the name of King. Then on the appointed day, after the purification, when the dithyramb had been sung, Bromios would be born from Semele in the fire, and with him would come the Mistress. After that the place would be loved by the Gods, and corn, and oil, and wine would be multiplied.

That was the gist of the story. The manuscript must have been imperfect, for there were gaps and some obvious nonsense, and there were fragments of verse quoted which I took to be part of the dithyramb. One ran like this:

*"Io, Kouros most great. I give thee hail.
Come, O Dithyrambos, Bromios come, and bring with thee
Holy hours of thy most holy Spring...
Then will be flung over earth immortal a garland of flowers,
Voices of song will rise among the pipes,
The Dancing Floor will be loud with the calling of crowned Semele."*

I laid the paper down. Vernon was watching me with bright eyes.

"Do you see what it is? Some of those lines I recognize. They come from the Hymn of the Kouretes, which was discovered the other day in Crete, and from the Paean to Dionysos found at Delphi, and there is a fragment of Pindar in them too. We know Koré, the Maiden, and we know the Kouros, who might be any male god—Dionysos or Zeus, or Apollo—but this is the only case I ever heard of where both Koré and Kouros are found in the same ceremony. Kynaetho, wherever it was, must have fairly gone on the bust ... It's amazingly interesting, and that's why I want to know the story of the manuscript. I tell you it's a find of the first importance to scholarship. Look at the other things too—the sacred race, and the winner called the King, just like the Basileus at the Olympic games.

"And there's more," he went on. "Look at the passage about the hallowing of the maiden and the youth. How does it go?" He picked up the paper and read: "'Then the Consecrator shall set aside a youth and a virgin, who shall remain consecrate in a sanctity which for all others shall be a place unapproachable. For seven days they shall be fed with pure food, eggs, and cheese, and barley-cakes, and dried figs, and water from the well by the white cypress.' Do you see what that means? It was a human sacrifice. The fellow who wrote this skates lightly over the facts—I don't believe he was a Christian after all, or he wouldn't have taken it so calmly. The boy and the girl had to die before the Gods could be re-born. You see, it was a last resource—not an annual rite, but one reserved for a desperate need. All the words are ritual words—*horkos*, the sanctuary, and *abatos*, the tabu place, and *hosioter*, the consecrator. If we knew exactly what *hosiotheis* meant we should know a good deal about Greek religion. There were ugly patches in it. People try to gloss over the human sacrifice side, and of course civilized Greeks, like the Athenians, soon got rid of it; but I haven't a doubt the thing went on all through classical times in Thessaly, and Epirus, and Arcadia, and some of the islands. Indeed, in the islands it survived till almost the other day. There was a case not so long ago in Santorini."

He pressed me to tell him the origin of the paper, but I felt reluctant to mention Miss Arabin. He was so deeply prejudiced against the girl, that it seemed unfair to reveal to him even the most trivial of her private affairs. I put him off by saying it was the property of a client, and that I would find out its history and tell him later.

"I have made a copy of the Greek text," he said. "May I keep it?"

I told him, certainly. And that was all that happened during the evening. Formerly we would have sat up talking and smoking till all hours, but now I felt that the curtain was too heavy between us to allow of ordinary conversation. We would get at once into difficult topics. Besides, I did not want to talk. The fact was that I was acquiring an obsession of my own—a tragic defiant girl moving between mirthless gaiety and menaced solitude. She might be innocent of the witchcraft in which Plakos believed, but she had cast some outlandish spell over me.

Before the end of the week Miss Arabin rang me up.

"You're Sir Edward Leithen? I sent you some papers. Have you looked at them?"

I told her I had.

"Then you had better come and talk to me. Come on Saturday and I'll give you luncheon. Half-past one."

There was no word of thanks for my trouble, but I obeyed the summons as if it had been a royal command. She had taken a flat in a block off Berkeley Square, and I wondered what sort of environment she had made for herself. I think I expected a slovenly place full of cushions and French novels and hot-house flowers. Instead I found a large room wholly without frippery—a big bare writing-table, leather arm-chairs like a man's smoking-room, and on the walls one or two hunting prints and some water-colour sketches of English landscape. There were few books, and those I looked at were county history. It was a mild frosty day, and the windows were wide open. The only decorations were some dogwood branches and hedgerow berries—the spoil which townsfolk bring back in winter from country week-ends.

She was in tweeds, for she was off to Wirlesdon that afternoon, and—perhaps in my honour—she had forborne to powder her face. Once again I was struck by the free vigour of her movements, and the quick vitality of her eyes. The cabaret atmosphere was clearly no part of the real woman; rather, as I now saw her, she seemed to carry with her a breath of the fields and hills.

At luncheon we talked stiltedly of the Nantleys and hunting, but no sooner was coffee served than she came to business.

"Theodore has told you about me? You see the kind of fence I'm up against. What I want to know is just exactly how high and thick it is, and that no one can tell me. I liked your looks the first time I saw you, and every one says you are clever. Now, understand one thing about me, I'm not going to show the white feather. Whatever it is, I'm going to stick it out. Have you that clear in your head?"

As I looked at the firm little chin I believed her.

"Well, can you enlighten me about the fence? You've heard all that Theodore has to say, and you know the cheerful sort of family I belong to. Did you find anything in the papers?"

"You've read them yourself?" I asked.

"I tried to, but I'm not clever, you see. I thought my grandfather's journal great nonsense. I had never heard of most of the names. But you're good at these things. Did you make nothing of them?"

"Nothing." I ran over the items in the bundle, not mentioning the Greek manuscript, which seemed to me to have nothing to do with the subject. "But there must be other papers."

She flushed slightly. "There were many others, but I burned them. Perhaps you can guess why."

"Miss Arabin," I said, "I want to help you, but I don't think we need bother about the papers. Let's go back to the beginning. I suppose it's no use my urging you to get out of Plakos, settle in England, and wipe all the past out of your memory?"

"Not the slightest."

"I wonder why. After all, it's only common sense."

"Common cowardice," she retorted, with a toss of her head. "I have known Theodore all my life, and I have forbidden him to raise that question. I have known you about a month, and I forbid *you*."

There was something so flat-footed and final about her that I laughed. She stared at me haughtily for a moment, and then laughed also.

"Go on with what you were saying," she said. "I stay at Plakos, and you must make your book for that. Now then."

"Your family was unpopular—I understand, justly unpopular. All sorts of wild beliefs grew up about them among the peasants, and they have been transferred to you. The people are half savages, and half starved, and their mood is dangerous. They are coming to see in you the cause of their misfortunes. You go there alone and unprotected, and you have no friends in the island. The danger is that, after a winter of brooding, they may try in some horrible way to wreak their vengeance on you. That is what I learned from Mr. Ertzberger."

The summary, as I made it, sounded unpleasant enough, but the girl did not seem to feel it so. She nodded briskly. "That,

at any rate, is what Theodore says. He thinks they may make me a sacrifice. Stuff and nonsense, *I* say.”

The word “sacrifice” disquieted me. It reminded me of the Greek which Vernon had translated.

“Some risk there must be,” I went on, “but what I cannot tell is the exact moment of it. Even among a savage people unpopularity need not involve tragedy. You were in Plakos last spring. Tell me what happened.”

She fitted a cigarette into a long amber holder, and blew a cloud of smoke which she watched till it disappeared.

“Nothing much. I was left entirely to myself. There was only one servant in the house, old Mitri the steward, and I had also my maid. The whole establishment was sent to Coventry. We had to get our food from the mainland, for we could buy nothing, except now and then a little milk through Mitri’s married daughter. It wasn’t pleasant, I can tell you. But the worst was when I went for a walk. If I met a man he would make the sign of the evil eye and spit. If I spoke to a child its mother would snatch it up and race indoors with it. The girls and women all wore blue beads as a charm against me, and carried garlic. I could smell it wherever I went. Sometimes I wanted to cry, and sometimes I wanted to swear, but you can do nothing with a silent boycott. I could have shaken the fools.”

“What had they against you? Did you ever find out?”

“Oh, Mitri used to tell us gossip that he had heard through his daughter, but Mitri isn’t too popular himself, and he is old and can go about very little. It seemed they called me Basilissa. That means Queen, and sounds friendly enough, but I think the word they really used was *diabolissa*, which means a she-devil. The better disposed ones thought I was a Nereid—that’s what they call fairies—but some said I was a *strigla*—that’s a horrible kind of harpy, and some thought I was a *vrykolakas*, which is a vampire. They used to light little fires in the graveyards to keep me away. Oh, I got very sick of my reputation. It was a hideous bore not to be able to go anywhere without seeing scared people dodging up byways, and making the sign of the cross, and screaming for their children—simply damnable.”

“It must have been damnable. I should have thought it rather terrifying too.”

“Don’t imagine that they frightened me. I was really more sorry than angry. They were only foolish people scared half out of their minds, and, after all, my family has done a good deal to scare them. It is folly—nothing but folly, and the only way to beat folly is to live it down. I don’t blame the poor devils, but I’m going to bring them to a better mind. I refuse to run away because of a pack of fairy tales.”

“There were no hostile acts?” I asked.

She seemed to reflect. “No,” she answered. “One morning we found a splash of blood on the house door, which sent old Mitri to his prayers. But that was only a silly joke.”

“Mr. Ertzberger hinted that there might be trouble this year from the people in the hills?”

Her face hardened.

“I wish to Heaven I knew that for certain. It would be the best news I ever got. Those hillmen are not my people, and if they interfere I will have them whipped off the place. I will not have any protection against my own peasantry—Theodore is always pressing me, but I won’t have it—it would spoil everything—it wouldn’t be the game. But if those filthy mountaineers come within a mile of Plakos I will hire a regiment to shoot them down. Pray God they come. We of the coast have always hated the mountains, and I believe I could rally my people.”

“But I thought you owned the whole island?”

“No one owns the hills. My grandfather obtained the seigneurie of Plakos, but he never claimed more than the good land by the sea. The hills have always been a no-man’s-land full of bandits. We paid them dues—I still pay them—and we did not quarrel, but there was no coming and going between us. They are a different race from our pure Greek stock—mongrels of Slav and Turk, I believe.”

The spirit of the girl comforted me. If Ertzberger’s news was true, it might save the situation, and bring the problem out of the realm of groping mystery to a straightforward defence of property... But, after all, the hills were distant, and the scared tenants were at the house door. We must face the nearer peril.

“Is there no one in the village,” I said, “whom you can have it out with? No big farmer? What about the priests?”

She shook her head. “No one. The priests do not love my family, for they call themselves Christians, while we are Catholics.”

Twenty years spent in examining witnesses has given me an acute instinct about candour. There was that in the girl’s eyes and voice as she spoke which told me that she was keeping something back, something which made her uneasy.

“Tell me everything,” I said. “Has no priest talked to you?”

“Yes, there was one. I will tell you. He is an old man, and very timid. He came to me at night, after swearing Mitri to tell no one. He urged me to go away for ever.”

Her eyes were troubled now, and had that abstracted look which I had noted before.

“What was his reason?”

“Oh, care for his precious church. He was alarmed about what had happened at Easter.”

She stopped suddenly.

"Have you ever been in Greece at Easter—during the Great Week? No? Then you cannot imagine how queer it is. The people have been starved all Lent, living only on cuttle-fish soup and bread and water. Every one is pale and thin and ill-tempered. It is like a nightmare."

Then in rapid staccato sentences she sketched the ritual. She described the night of Good Friday, when the bier with the figure of the crucified Christ on it stands below the chancel step, and the priests chant their solemn hymn, and the women kiss the dead face, and the body is borne out to burial. With torches and candles flickering in the night wind, it is carried through the village streets, while dirges are sung, and the tense crowd breaks now and then into a moan or a sigh. Next day there is no work done, but the people wander about miserably, waiting on something which may be either death or deliverance. That night the church is again crowded, and at midnight the curtains which screen the chancel are opened, and the bier is revealed—empty, but for a shroud. "Christ is risen," the priest cries, as a second curtain is drawn back, and in the sanctuary, in an ineffable radiance, stands the figure of the risen Lord. The people go mad with joy, they light their tapers at the priest's candle, and, like a procession of Bacchanals, stream out, shouting "He is risen indeed." Then to the accompaniment of the firing of guns and the waving of torches the famished peasants, maddened by the miracle they have witnessed, feast till morning on wine and lamb's flesh in the joy of their redemption.

She drew the picture for me so that I saw it as if with my own eyes, and my imagination quickened under the spell of her emotion. For here was no longer the cool, matter-of-fact young woman of the world, with no more than tolerance for the folly of superstition. It was some one who could enter into that very mood, and feel its quivering nerves and alternate despair and exultation.

"What had the priest to complain of?" I asked.

"He said that the people were becoming careless of the Easter holiness. He said that last year the attendance at the rite was poor. He feared that they were beginning to think of something else."

"Something else!" Two of the most commonplace words in the language. She spoke them in an even voice in an ordinary London dining-room, with outside the wholesome bustle of London and the tonic freshness of an English winter day. She was about to go off to a conventional English week-end party at a prosaic country house. But the words affected me strangely, for they seemed to suggest a peril far more deadly than any turbulence of wild men from the hills—a peril, too, of which she was aware.

For she was conscious of it—that was now perfectly clear to me—acutely conscious. She had magnificent self-command, but fear showed out from behind it, like light through the crack of a shutter. Her courage was assuredly not the valour of ignorance. She was terrified, and still resolute to go on.

It was not my business to add to that terror. Suddenly I had come to feel an immense pity and reverence for this girl. Ertzberger was right. Her hardness, her lack of delicacy and repose, her loud frivolity, were only on the surface—a protective sheathing for a tormented soul. Out of a miserable childhood and a ramshackle education she had made for herself a code of honour as fine and as hard as steel. It was wildly foolish, of course, but so perhaps to our dull eyes the innocent and the heroic must always be.

Perhaps she guessed my thoughts. For when she spoke again it was gently, almost hesitatingly.

"I scarcely hoped that you could tell me anything about Plakos. But I rather hoped you would say I am right in what I am doing. Theodore has been so discouraging... I rather hoped from your face that you would take a different view. You wouldn't advise me to run away from my job—?"

"God forbid that I should advise you at all," I said. "I see your argument, and, if you will let me say so, I profoundly respect it. But I think you are trying yourself—and your friends also—too high. You must agree to some protection."

"Only if the hill folk give trouble. Don't you see, protection would ruin everything if I accepted it against my own people? I must trust myself to them—and—and stick it out myself. It is a sort of atonement."

Then she got up briskly and held out her hand.

"Thank you very much, Sir Edward. It has done me good to talk to you. I must be off now or I'll miss my train. I'll give your love to Mollie and Tom."

"We shall meet again. When do you leave England?"

"Not till March. Of course we'll meet again. Let me know if you have any bright idea... Élise, Élise! Where's that fool woman?"

Her maid appeared.

"Get a taxi at once," she ordered. "We haven't any time to waste, for I promised to pick up Lord Cheviot at his flat."

I asked one question as I left. "Have you ever heard of a place called Kynaetho?"

"Rather. It's the big village in Plakos close to the house."

CHAPTER 7

I once read in some book about Cleopatra that that astonishing lady owed her charm to the fact that she was the last of an ancient and disreputable race. The writer cited other cases—Mary of Scots, I think, was one. It seemed, he said, that the quality of high-coloured ancestors flowered in the ultimate child of the race into something like witchcraft. Whether they were good or evil, they laid a spell on men's hearts. Their position, fragile and forlorn, without the wardenship of male kinsfolk, set them on a romantic pinnacle. They were more feminine and capricious than other women, but they seemed, like Viola, to be all the brothers as well as all the daughters of their father's house, for their soft grace covered steel and fire. They were the true sorceresses of history, said my author, and sober men, not knowing why, followed blindly in their service.

Perhaps Koré Arabia was of this sisterhood. At any rate one sober man was beginning to admit her compelling power. I could not get the girl from my thoughts. For one thing I had awakened to a comprehension of her beauty. Her face was rarely out of my mind, with its arrogant innocence, its sudden brilliancies and its as sudden languors. Her movements delighted me, her darting grace, the insolent assurance of her carriage, and then, without warning, the relapse into the child or the hoyden. Even her bad manners soon ceased to annoy me, for in my eyes they had lost all vulgarity. They were the harshnesses of a creature staving off tragedy. Indeed it was her very extravagances that allured, for they made me see her as a solitary little figure set in a patch of light on a great stage among shadows, defying of her own choice the terrors of the unknown.

What made my capture complete was the way she treated me. She seemed to have chosen me as her friend, and to find comfort and security in being with me. To others she might be rude and petulant, but never to me. Whenever she saw me she would make straight for me, like a docile child waiting for orders. She would dance or sit out with me till her retinue of youth was goaded to fury. She seemed to guess at the points in her behaviour which I did not like and to strive to amend them. We had become the closest friends, and friendship with Koré Arabin was a dangerous pastime.

The result was that I was in a fair way of making a fool of myself. No... I don't think I was in love with her. I had never been in love in my life, so I was not an expert on the subject, but I fancied that love took people in a different way. But I was within measurable distance of asking her to be my wife. My feeling was a mixture of affection and pity and anxiety. She had appealed to me, and I had become her champion. I wanted to protect her, but how was a middle-aged lawyer to protect a determined girl from far-away perils which he did not comprehend? The desperate expedient of marriage occurred to me, but I did not believe she would accept me, and, if she did, would not the mating of age and youth be an outrage and a folly? Nevertheless I was in a mood to venture even on that.

I must have presented a strange spectacle to my friends. There were other men of forty in London at the time who behaved as if they were twenty-five—one buxom Cabinet Minister was to be seen at every dance—but none, I am certain, cut an odder figure than I. The dancing Cabinet Minister sought the ballroom for exercise, because he preferred dancing to golf. I had no such excuse, for I danced comparatively little; my object was patently the society of one particular lady. In Koré's train I found myself in strange haunts. I followed her into the Bohemian *coulisses* to which Shelley Arabin's daughter had an entrée—queer studio parties in Chelsea where the women were shorn and the men left shaggy: the feverish literary and artistic salons of the emancipated and rather derelict middle-class: dances given at extravagant restaurants by the English and foreign new-rich, where I did not know or wish to know one single soul. Also we appeared together at houses which I had frequented all my life, and there my friends saw me. Of course they talked. I fancy that for about two months I was the prime subject of London gossip. I didn't care a hang, for I was in a queer, obstinate, excitable mood. We hunted together, too, and there is no such nursery of scandal as the hunting-field. With a great deal of work on hand I found this new life a considerable strain, and I was perfectly conscious that I was playing the fool. But, though I don't think I was in love with her, I simply could not let the girl out of my sight.

Now and then my conscience awoke, and I realized with a shock that the time was slipping past, and that the real problem was still unsolved. I knew that I could not shake Koré in her resolution, and I suppose I hoped blindly that something would occur to prevent her acting on it. That something could only be a love affair. I was perfectly certain that she was not in love with me, but she might accept me, and at the back of my head I had the intention of putting it to the test. Ertzberger had divined what was going on and seemed to approve. "A boy is no use to her," he said more than once. "Besides, she wouldn't look at one. She must marry a grown man." He implied that I filled the bill, and the man's assumption gave me an absurd pleasure. If any one had told me that I would one day go out of my way to cultivate a little Jew financier, I would have given him the lie, yet the truth is that, when I was not with Koré, I hungered for Ertzberger's company. He alone understood what was in my mind, and shared my anxieties. "She must not go back," he kept declaring; "at all costs she must be kept away from Plakos—at any rate during this spring. I get disquieting reports. There is mischief brewing in the hills, and the people of the coast have had a bitter winter of famine. There has been a lot of sickness, too, and in the village at the house gates the mortality among the children has been heavy."

"You mean Kynaetho?" I asked,

"Kynaetho." He looked at me curiously. "You seem to have been getting up the subject... Well, I don't like it. If she goes there in April there may be a disaster. Upon my soul, we should be justified in having her kidnapped and shut up in some safe place till the summer. So far as I can learn, the danger is only in the spring. Once let the people see the crops springing and the caiques bringing in fish, and they will forget their grievances."

Early in March I was dining with the Nantleys, and after dinner Mollie took me aside for a talk. As I have told you, she is one of my oldest friends, for when I was a grubby little private schoolboy and she was a girl of thirteen, we used to scamper about together. I had had her son Hugo in my chambers, before he went into Parliament, and Wirlesdon had always been a sort of home to me. Mollie was entitled to say anything she liked, but when she spoke it was rather timidly.

"I hear a good deal of talk about you," she said, "and I can't help noticing too. Do you think it is quite fair, Ned?"

"Fair to whom?" I asked.

"To Koré Arabin. You're different from the boys who run after her. You're a distinguished man with a great reputation. Is it fair to her to turn her head?"

"Is that very likely? What if she has turned mine?"

"Do you really mean that?" she cried. "I never thought of it in that way. Do you honestly want to marry her?"

"I don't know... I don't know what I want except that I must stand by her. She's in an appallingly difficult position, and badly needs a friend."

"Yes. But there's only one way in which a man can protect a young woman. Do you mean to marry her?"

"She wouldn't accept me."

"But you mean to ask her?"

"It may come to that," I said.

"But, Ned dear, can't you see it wouldn't do? Koré is not the right sort of wife for you. She's—she's too—Well, you've a career before you. Is she the woman to share it with you?"

"It's not many months since, at Wirlesdon, you implored my charity for Miss Arabin."

"Oh, I don't want to say a word against her, and if you were really desperately in love I would say nothing and wish you luck. But I don't believe you are. I believe it's what you say—charity, and that's a most rotten foundation to build on."

Mollie, in such affairs, is an incurable romantic.

"I promise never to ask her to marry me unless I am in love," I said.

"Well, that means you are not quite in love yet. Hadn't you better draw back before it is too late? I can't bear to see you making a bad blunder, and Koré, dear child, would be a bad blunder for you. She's adorably pretty, and she has wonderful qualities, but she is a little savage, and very young, and quite unformed. Really, really it wouldn't do."

"I admit the difficulties, my dear Mollie. But never mind me, and think of Miss Arabin. You said yourself that she was English at heart and would be very happy settled in England."

"But not with you."

"She wouldn't accept me, and I may never propose. But if I did, and she accepted me, why not with me?"

"Because you're you—because you're too good for a rash experiment."

"I'm not good enough for her, for I'm too old, as you've just told me. But anyhow your argument thinks principally of me, not of Miss Arabin. It is she who matters."

Mollie rose with a gesture of impatience. "You are hopeless, Ned. I'm sick of you hard, unsusceptible, ambitious people. You never fall in love in your youth, but wait till after forty, and then make idiots of yourselves."

I had a different kind of remonstrance from Vernon. We saw little of each other in these days beyond a chance word in the street or a casual wave of the hand in the club smoking-room. When I thought of him it was with a sense of shame that I had let him slip so hopelessly out of my life. Time had been when he was my closest friend, and when his problem was also my problem. Now the whole story of his dream seemed a childish fancy.

One night in March I found him waiting for me in my rooms.

"I came round to say good-bye," he said. "I shall probably leave London very soon."

It shows how completely I had forgotten his affairs that I did not remember that his particular crisis was drawing near, that, as he believed, the last door of his dream-world would soon be opened.

Then, before I could ask about his plans, he suddenly broke out:

"Look here, I hope there's no truth in what people tell me."

His tone had the roughness of one very little at his ease, and it annoyed me. I asked coldly what he meant.

"You know what I mean—that you're in love with Miss What's-her-name—the girl I met at Wirlesdon."

"I don't know that you've any right to ask the question, and I'm certainly not going to answer it."

"That means that you are in love," he cried. "Good God, man, don't tell me that you want to marry that—that tawdry girl!"

I must have reddened, for he saw that he had gone too far.

"I don't mean that—I apologize. I have no reason to say anything against her."

Then his tone changed.

"Ned, old man, we have been friends for a long time, and you must forgive me if I take liberties. We have never had any secrets from each other. My own affairs give me a good deal to think about just now, but I can't go away with an easy mind till I know the truth about you. For God's sake, old fellow, don't do anything rash. Promise me you won't propose to her till I come back in April."

His change of manner had softened me, and as I saw the trouble in his honest eyes I felt a return of the old affection.

"Why are you anxious on my account?"

"Because," he said solemnly, "I know that if you married that girl our friendship would be over. I feel it in my bones. She would always come between us."

"I can't make any promises of that kind. But one thing I can promise—that no woman will ever break our friendship."

"You don't understand. Some women wouldn't, but that girl—! Well, I can say no more. Good-bye, Ned. I'll hunt you up when I come back."

He left me with a feeling of mingled regret and irritation. I hated to go against Vernon's wishes, but his manner when he had spoken of Koré, the look in his eyes, the inflection in his voice, conveyed an utter distaste which made me angry. I pictured him at Severns nursing his unreasoning dislike of the poor child. Vernon, as my nephew Charles had said, was a prig, and his narrow world had room only for blameless and vapid virginity. The promise he had asked of me was an outrage.

* * * * *

Yet I kept a promise which I had never made. For suddenly Cinderella disappeared from the ball. After a country-house dance I drove her back to town in my car, and left her at the door of her flat. During the long drive she had talked more seriously than I had ever known her to talk before, had spoken of herself and her affairs with a kind of valiant simplicity. The only sophisticated thing about her was her complexion. All day afterwards my conviction was growing that she was the woman for me, that I could make her not only secure but happy. We were by way of dining with the Lamanchas, and I think if we had met that night I should have asked her to marry me... But we did not meet, for by the evening she was gone.

I looked for her in vain in the Lamanchas' drawing-room, and my hostess guessed what I sought. "I'm so sorry about Koré Arabin," she whispered to me. "She was coming to-night, but she telephoned this afternoon that she was unexpectedly called out of town." I did not enjoy my dinner, and as soon as I could decently leave I hurried off to her flat. It was shut up, and from the porter on the ground floor I learned that she and her maid had left with a quantity of luggage to catch the night boat to France. He was positive that she had gone abroad, for he had seen the foreign labels, and Miss Arabin had told him she would not be back for months. The keys of the flat had been sent to her solicitors.

With a very uneasy mind I drove to the Ertzbergers' house in Belgrave Square. Ertzberger had just come in from a City dinner, and his wife seemed to be giving some kind of musical party, for the hall was full of coats and hats and extra footmen, and the jiggling of fiddles drifted down the staircase. He took me to his study at the back of the house, and when he heard my news his face grew as solemn as my own. There was nothing to be done that night, for the Continental mail had long since gone, so I went back to my chambers with a pretty anxious mind. I felt that I had let something rare and precious slip out of my hand, but far more that this preciousness was in instant danger. Honestly I don't think that I was much concerned about myself. I wanted Koré Arabin saved—for me—for every one—for the world. If I was in love with her it was with an affection more impersonal than usually goes by that name. It was as if an adored child had gone amissing.

Regardless of our many engagements, Ertzberger and I appeared on the doorstep of Messrs. Mower and Lidderdale, the solicitors, at the hour when, according to the information given me by telephone, the senior partner usually arrived. Mr. Mower confirmed our fears. Miss Arabin had returned to Plakos; she had been preparing for some weeks for the journey; he had not advised it—indeed he had not been asked his advice nor would he have dared to volunteer it. "A very strong-minded young lady," he repeated—"I might almost say strong-headed." She had sold the lease of her flat, and had left no instructions about her return. Yes, she was well supplied with money. Miss Arabin was her own mistress absolutely, for her father had created no trust. He had nothing more to tell us, and Ertzberger departed for the City and I for the Temple.

In the afternoon I was rung up by Ertzberger in my room in the House of Commons. He had been making inquiries, he said—he had his own ways of doing that sort of thing—and he had discovered that Koré had recently sold large parcels of stocks. She had been selling out steadily throughout the winter, and now had practically no investments left. The proceeds had been deposited on current account in her bank. There his information stopped, but he was profoundly disquieted. "That child has all her fortune in cash under her hand," he said, "and God knows what she means to do with it. Any moment she may beggar herself, and no one can prevent her."

That night I understood that my infatuation was over, if indeed it had ever existed. I wanted the girl safe, and I did not care who saved her, but I wanted it so much that at the moment nothing in heaven or earth seemed to matter in comparison.

It was now near the end of March, the Courts had just risen, and Parliament was about to adjourn for the Easter

vacation. I had a good deal of important work on hand, but I was entitled to a holiday, and I thought I could arrange for at any rate a fortnight's absence from town. But whether I could arrange it or not I meant to go, for I could no more settle to my tasks than a boy can settle to Tacitus on the day he is playing for his school. When Ertzberger, according to our arrangement, turned up at my chambers that night after dinner, he found me busy with an atlas and a Continental Bradshaw.

"I am going to Plakos," I said.

"That is good. You are still a young man, and you have been a soldier. It is very good. But if you had not gone, I had decided to go myself."

"This is Wednesday. Miss Arabin left last night. She will get there—when?"

He made some calculations. "Not before Tuesday. You might overtake her, but I do not think that is necessary. Easter is the danger-point, and the Greek Easter is still a fortnight off. Besides you must stop a day in Athens."

"I shall want help. Can you get me half a dozen handy fellows I can trust?"

"I had thought of that. Indeed I telegraphed about it this afternoon. I can find you the men—and money, of course, if you want it. I will find you a lieutenant, too, and make all arrangements about transport. That at least I can do. You realize, Sir Edward, that there is a certain danger in this enterprise?"

"I realize that Miss Arabin in a week's time will be in deadly danger... I must have a day or two to wind up my work here. I think I can leave on Saturday morning."

As a matter of fact I left London on the Friday night.

PART II

CHAPTER 8

I came to Plakos in a blind sea-fog. After a day and a night of storm the wind died utterly, and we made the isle on a compass course, feeling our way in by constant soundings. A thick salt dew hung on every stay and hawser, the deck and bulwarks swam with moisture, and our coats were in an instant drenched as if we had been out in a hurricane. Sea and land alike were invisible. The air was thick and oppressive to the breath, and every muscle in the body felt weak and flaccid. Also there was a strange quiet—only the ripple caused by our slow movement and the creak of sodden cordage. I might have been a shade looking on an island of the dead.

I had reached Athens in record time, but there I found a weariful delay. In spite of Ertzberger's influence the wheels were clogged. I was met at the Piraeus by his agent, one Constantine Maris, whose instructions were to hold himself at my disposal. I took to Maris at once—a young fellow of thirty, who had been in the Greek regular army and had been the right-hand man of Zimbrakis when at Salonika his troops declared for Venizelos. He had been all through the war till it ended in Bulgaria's submission, had been twice wounded and once in prison, and had been chosen by Ertzberger to represent him in Athens because of his truculent honesty and tireless energy. Both in character and appearance he was more like a Frenchman than a Greek—a Norman, for choice, for he had reddish-brown hair and a high-bridged northern nose. He had the additional merit of being well educated, having put in two years at the Sorbonne: and he talked excellent French. His family were of Athens, but his mother, I think, was from one of the islands. He had the looks and manners of a soldier.

But Maris had found the task set him almost impossible. Ertzberger had bidden him get together a batch of reliable fellows who would obey orders and ask no questions, but as we rumbled Athens-ward from the Piraeus in the little train he confessed that such men were not to be found. In the war it was otherwise, but the best had all gone back to the country villages. He had collected a dozen, but he was not enthusiastic about them, except a certain Janni, who had been a corporal in his old battalion. When he paraded them for my inspection I was inclined to agree with him. They were an odd mixture—every kind of clothes from the dirty blue jeans of the stoker to the black coat and pointed yellow shoes of the clerk—ages from nineteen to sixty—physique from prize-fighter to sneak-thief. All had served in the war, however, and the best of them, Janni, had an empty left sleeve. After much consultation we dismissed two and were left with ten who at any rate looked honest. Whether they would be efficient was another matter. Maris proposed to arm them with revolvers, but not till we got to Plakos, in case they started shooting up the town. They were told that they were wanted as guards for an estate which was threatened by brigands, but I doubt if they believed it. The younger ones seemed to think that our object was piracy.

Transport was another problem. I had hoped to be able to hire a small steam yacht, but such a thing was not to be had, and the best we could do was to induce a dissolute-looking little Leghorn freighter, named the *Santa Lucia*, to go out of its way and touch at Plakos. Maris told the captain a yarn about men being needed there for making a new sea-wall. The boat was bound for the Dodecanese, and would pick us up on her return a fortnight later.

Before we rounded Cape Sunium we got into foul weather, a heavy north-easter and violent scurries of rain. Our ruffians were all sea-sick and lay about like logs, getting well cursed by the Italian sailors, while Maris and I, in the one frowsy little cabin, tried to make a plan of campaign. I found out at once that Maris was well informed about the situation in Plakos, partly from Ertzberger and partly from his own knowledge. He knew about Shelley Arabin's career, which seemed to be the common talk of the Aegean. Of Koré he had heard nothing save from Ertzberger, but he had much to tell me of Plakos and its people. They had a name for backwardness and turbulence, and the Government seemed to leave them very much to themselves. There were gendarmes, of course, in the island, but he fancied they didn't function. But the place had sent good soldiers to Venizelos, and its people were true Hellenes. After an interval when he expatiated on that Hellenic empire of the islands which was the dream of good Venizelists, he returned to their superstition. "That is the curse of my countrymen," he cried. "They are priest-ridden." He was himself, he told me, a free-thinker and despised all mumbo-jumbo.

I told him that the trouble was not with the priests, but he did not seem to understand, and I did not attempt to explain.

Our task, as we saw it, was straightforward enough—to protect the House during the Easter season when fear of the girl as a witch and the memory of Shelley's misdeeds might induce some act of violence. There was also the trouble with the hill folk, and this seemed to him the greater danger. The dwellers in the stony mountains which filled the centre and south of the island had always been out of hand, and, since the winter had been cruel and the war had unsettled the whole earth, he thought it likely that they might have a try at looting the House, which they no doubt held to be full of treasure, since the Arabins had a name for wealth. I could see that he didn't quite believe in danger from the coast folk, however beastly their superstitions might be. He had the Greek respect for a mountaineer and contempt for the ordinary peasant.

We studied the map—a very good one prepared for the British Navy—and on Maris's advice I decided to begin by dividing our forces. My first business was to get into the House and discover how things were going. But with danger threatening from the hills it would be unwise for all of us to concentrate in a place from which egress might be difficult. Now the House stood at the northwest corner of the island, and the hill country began about ten miles to the south-east. He proposed to send five of our men, under Corporal Janni, to a little port called Vano on the west coast some miles south of the House. They would take supplies with them—we were well provided with these—and reconnoitre towards the hills, giving out that they were a Government survey party. The rest of us would land at the House, and, after satisfying ourselves about the position, would get in touch with Janni by the overland route. Our first business was strictly reconnaissance;

Janni could not hope to prevent mischief from the hills if it were really on its way, but he could satisfy himself as to its extent and character, and then join us in the defence of the House, which was our main task. Maris was confident about this. He did not see how a dozen armed men in a strong place could fail to hold off a mob of undisciplined peasants.

For an extra payment the captain of the *Santa Lucia* was induced to carry Janni and his men to Vano. Weapons were served out to all, and I gave Janni a map which he professed to be able to read. Then in the shrouding fog Maris and I and our five got into the ship's one boat and were rowed ashore. We had our supplies both of food and ammunition in half a dozen wooden cases, and the wretched cockle was pretty low in the water. I knew from my former visit that the landing-place was just below the House, and the fog seemed to me a godsend, for it would enable us to get indoors unobserved. My only doubt was the kind of reception we might get from Koré.

As it turned out, the mist was our undoing. We were landed at a stone jetty in a dead white blanket which made it difficult to see a yard ahead. Our baggage was put on shore, the boat started back, and in a moment both sound and sight of it were swallowed up. It was an eerie business, and I felt the craziness of our errand as I stood blinking on the wet cobbles. There was no human being about, but the dim shapes of several caiques and some kind of lugger seemed to show below us as we started along the jetty. Our five ruffians had recovered from their sea-sickness, and, feeling solid ground beneath them, were inclined to be jolly. One of them started a song, which I promptly checked. Maris ordered them to wait behind with the boxes, and to keep dead quiet, while he and I prospected inland.

My recollection of that visit in 1914 was hazy, for I had only seen the landing-place from the causeway above it, and at the time I had been too preoccupied to observe accurately. But I was pretty certain that at the shore end of the jetty there were some rough stone steps which led to the causeway. I groped for them in the mist but could not find them. Instead I came on a broad track which bore the mark of wheels and which led away to the left. I waited for the steep to begin, but found no sign of it. The land was dead flat for a long way, and then I came on a rough boundary wall.

It was an orchard with blossoming trees—that much I could see through the brume—and at the end was a cottage. My first thought was to retrace my steps and try a cast to the right, for I still believed that we had found the proper landing-place, and had somehow missed the causeway. But, as I hesitated, there came one of those sudden clearings in the air which happen in the densest fogs, and I had a prospect of some hundreds of yards around me. We were on the edge of a village, the cottage we had reached was at the extreme seaward end, a little detached from the rest; beyond lay what seemed to be a shallow valley with no sign of the House and its embattled hill.

It would have been well for us if, there and then, we had turned and gone back to the jetty, even at the risk of relinquishing our supplies and having to scramble for miles along a difficult shore. For, of course, we had come in that infernal fog to the wrong place. The skipper had landed us at Kynaetho instead of below the House, and though I knew from the map that Kynaetho was at the House's gates, yet it was on the east side, distant at least two miles by coast from the spot which Vernon and I had visited.

It was Maris who decided me. The cottage seemed a solitary place where discreet inquiries might be made without rousing attention. He had little stomach for wandering around Plakos in fog, and we had our five men and the baggage to think of. I followed him into the rough courtyard, paved with cobbles, and strewn with refuse. The low walls were washed with red ochre and above the lintel a great black pentacle was painted. Also over the door was hung a bunch of garlic.

There was a woman standing in the entry watching us. Maris took off his hat with a flourish, and poured out a torrent of soft-sounding dialect. She replied in a harsher accent, speaking with the back of her throat. She seemed to be inviting us to enter, but her face was curiously without expression, though her eyebrows worked nervously. She was a middle-aged woman, terribly disfigured by smallpox; her features were regular, and she had large, prominent, vacant black eyes. She was not in the least repulsive, but somehow she was not reassuring.

As we entered the cottage she called out to some one at the back. A second later I heard footsteps as of a child running.

Maris, as I learned afterwards, told her the story we had agreed on—that we were a Government survey party sent from Athens to make a map of the island. Then he felt his way to more delicate subjects. This was Kynaetho, he understood? There was a large house near which belonged to some foreigners? English, weren't they? Where, exactly, did it lie from the village, for, if he might venture to explain what madam no doubt knew, one must have a starting-point for a survey, and the Government had chosen that house?

The woman's eyebrows twitched, and she crossed herself. She flung a hand over her left shoulder. "The place is there," she said. "I know nothing of it. I do not speak of it."

All the time she was looking at us with her staring empty eyes, and I realized that she was in an extreme fright. There was certainly nothing in our appearance to discompose her, and I had the uneasy feeling which one has in the presence of a human being who is suffering from an emotion that one cannot fathom. Maris whispered to me that he did not like the look of things. "She has not offered us food," he said.

Her ear must have caught some sound from out of doors, for her face suddenly showed relief. She walked to the window and cried to some one outside. Then she turned to us. "There are men now to speak with you." She had found her tongue, for as she hustled us out she kept muttering, with sidelong glances at us, what seemed to be an invocation to Saint Nicolas. Also she gripped Maris violently by the shoulder and spat words into his ear. He told me afterwards that she was advising him not to be a fool and to go home.

The little courtyard had filled with people, most of them men, but with two or three old crones in the forefront. Their aspect was not threatening, but rather puzzled and timid. The men took off their hats in response to Maris's bow, and politely waited for him to speak. I noticed that they were a well-made, upstanding lot, but with the same flat expressionlessness as the woman of the cottage, and I guessed that that was a mask to hide fear.

Maris told them the same story of our errand. He said—I repeat what he told me later—that our men and baggage were still down by the beach, and that he wanted to be directed to the inn. There was dead silence. The little crowd stared at us as if their lives depended on it, but not a syllable came in reply.

This made Maris angry. "Are you dumb mules," he asked, "not to answer a simple question? I have heard that you of the islands boasted of your hospitality. Is this the way to treat strangers?"

Still no answer. His taunts were as futile as his exposition. But, since I had nothing to do but to look on, I saw something which made me uneasy. The crowd was drawing together, and each was covertly touching the other's sleeve. There was a purpose in this mob, a purpose of action, and I don't like that kind of purpose when it is accompanied by fear.

"Since you will not speak," Maris cried, "I will go to your priest. Where is his dwelling? Or do you treat your church as you treat your visitors?"

This time he got a reply. A dozen voices spoke, and a dozen hands pointed towards the village.

"It seems you are not dumb after all? We will seek a lodging from the priest, who doubtless has some regard for his country's Government. We have baggage with us—boxes of instruments and food—and they are now at the jetty. I want two able-bodied fellows to help carry them, and I will pay them well. Who offers?"

But no one offered. Once again they were like gaping cattle. And then an old beldam in the foreground, who had been crossing herself vigorously, cried out a monosyllable, and instantly it was taken up in a shout.

Maris turned to me with an angry smile. "They are advising us to go home. I can mention an island, my friend, in which there is going to be trouble. Let us go back to the shore. Perhaps the sight of our belongings will change their mind."

They did not obstruct us, but opened a lane for us to pass—opened it with feverish haste, as if they were afraid of coming too near us. The fog had now thinned to a light haze, through which I already felt the glow of the sun. As we moved shorewards they trailed after us, keeping always a respectful distance, and halted fifty yards from the jetty.

Our five fellows were sitting smoking on the boxes, and since we could get no help from the villagers, there was nothing for it but to carry the baggage ourselves. My first notion was to go straight to the House, of which by this time I could judge the whereabouts, and it would have been well for us perhaps if I had acted on that impulse. But, until I had prepared the way, I was shy of facing Koré Arabia with a defence force which would make her furious, and I had a notion, too, that if I marched in broad daylight to the House gates there might be trouble with these scared and sullen natives. So I decided to go first to the inn, where we could leave our stuff, and then to interview the priest. After all, I knew from Koré that the priest was alarmed about the local situation, and from him I might get some counsel. It seemed to me a case for wary walking.

I could have laughed at that progress village-wards, if I hadn't been so anxious. The mob in front of us had doubled in size, and retreated mechanically before us till we were in the village street. The sun was now bright in the sky, and I had a view of the straggling houses, grouped thickly in the centre where there seemed to be a kind of *place*, and thinning out into farms and enclosures on the slopes of the green hills. It was a wide, shallow vale bounded on the south by low ridges; but on the west rose a higher tree-clad hill, and there were glimpses of white masonry which I took to be the House. Once we were in the village the crowd was enlarged by women and children. They kept a good distance, retiring a pace for every step we took, and when we entered the untidy square they huddled against the house doors as if they were forming guard. They were perfectly silent, even the children. It was an eerie business, I can assure you, promenading before that speechless, staring gallery. They were not an ill-looking race, as I have said, for the men were mostly well-built and upstanding, and though the old wives looked like the Witch of Endor, the young ones were often comely. But you could see that they were bitter poor, for their cheeks were thin and their eyes hollow. And beyond doubt they were in the throes of some nervous terror. I felt as if at any moment something might snap and the air be filled with a wild screaming.

The inn was easy enough to find. A big plane tree grew before it, and in the yard behind the low whitewashed walls grew a second, beside a stone fountain which had not been erected within these last five hundred years. The place was only a wine-shop, with no guest-rooms for travellers, but there were ample outbuildings where our men could encamp. But there was no sign of any landlord. Maris and I pushed indoors and found no trace of life in the big drinking-room with its sanded floor, or in the purlieus beyond. The inn folk must have gone to swell the crowd in the street. But we found a reasonably clean barn at the back of the yard, and there Maris bade our fellows make their quarters, get ready their breakfast and await our return. Then the two of us set out to find the priest.

The villagers had not pressed nearer. When we emerged into the street they were standing as we had left them, patiently staring. Maris cried out, asking to be shown the priest's house, and at that the spell seemed to be broken, for there was a shout in reply. A visit to the priest seemed to be in the popular view the right course for us to take. We were directed to a house a hundred yards on, next door to a squat church, and to my surprise we were not followed. Once they had seen us enter, the crowd remained to watch the inn door.

The priest had evidently been apprised of our coming. His dwelling was only a bigger cottage, but in the furnishing of it

there were a few signs of a class above the peasantry—a shelf of books, one or two gaudy religious pictures, a Swiss cuckoo clock, and, incongruously enough, two of the cheap copies of Tanagra statuettes which they sell in the Athens shops. I daresay he imagined that they were figures of saints. He was an old man, nearer eighty than seventy to my eye, and much bent in the shoulders. An unkempt beard fell over his chest, and his white hair was long and brushed back from his forehead like a recent fashion among young men in England. The skin was waxen white, and the lines on his face were like the grey shadows in a snowdrift. His eyes were mild, benevolent, and fanatical. He looked stupid but kind and, like everybody else in that mad place, horribly frightened.

With him Maris went straight to the point.

“We are a Government survey party, Pappa,” he said. “But that story is for the peasants. To you we open our hearts. This gentleman is a colonel in the army of Britain, and likewise a member of the British Government. He is also a friend of the lady in the House of Plakos. What gadfly has bitten the people of this island? Come! We know much already, but we would hear your tale.”

The priest—his venerable name was Hieronymos— was ready enough to tell. With a wealth of gesticulation remarkable in one so ancient, but always with a lowered voice, he repeated crudely what we already knew. The people of Plakos had suffered much and long, and were now resolved to make an end of their incubus. The girl was a witch, and they had determined that she must die. They were only waiting till the convenient season. All this he said in the most matter-of-fact tone, as if it were a natural sequence of cause and effect.

“But you would not consent to such barbarity?” Maris asked.

“My consent is not asked,” he replied. “Beyond doubt the woman is evil and comes of an evil stock. But the Scriptures teach mercy, and, though doubtless death is deserved, I would not counsel it. For if she is evil she is also witless. Why else did she return here, when she knew that the whole island desired her death? Did I not go to her secretly, as Nicodemus went to our Lord, and besought her never to return? And she has given immense sums of money to her enemies. Me she gave gold for the Church and that I have secure, but she has given it to others who have bought guns. The men from the hills, who are most bitter against her, carry rifles bought with her money.”

Now I knew why the foolish child had realized her investments.

The priest was gaining confidence.

“The death of a witch may be a righteous deed,” he said, “but the hearts of this people are not righteous. They are dabbling in a blacker magic than hers, for they are following the Outland Things. And that is heresy and blasphemy, which in the eyes of Holy Church are sins not less mortal than witchcraft.”

Real anger, the jealous anger of a priest for his own prerogatives, blazed in his old eyes. He used for “outland things” the word *exotika*, the very word which had puzzled Vernon in the manuscript I gave him, till he found help from Basil of Caesarea. The word caught my ear, and I made Maris translate for me. He had clearly no compassion for poor Koré, but he was up in arms for his Church. Maris tried to probe the trouble, but he got the vaguest answers. The man seemed eager to unburden his soul, and yet terrified to speak, and his eyes were always turning to the window and the closed street door.

Last Eastertide there had been a lamentable neglect of sacred rites. This year the carelessness was complete. Holy Week had begun, but the minds of the people were not on its solemnities. “They fast indeed,” he said, “but they do not pray.” They had gone a-whoring after other gods, and what those other gods were it did not become a Christian man to consider. They meditated a sacrifice, but they had forgotten the sacrifice on which their salvation hung. “There is a madness which surges up at times in these islands. It happened so in my grandfather’s day in Santorini, and there is no quelling it till some black deed has been done and the people come to their right minds in a bitter repentance.” He, their priest, had become less regarded than a cur dog. Men stopped talking in the streets when he drew near, and would not meet his eyes. If he spoke, they moved off. They were conscious of a guilty purpose, and yet resolved on it, and he was powerless to check them. “They will come back, doubtless, and bemoan their folly, but in the meantime they are breaking the hearts of the saints and loading their miserable souls with sin.”

Then he broke off, and his face took an expression of shrewdness.

“You have brought men with you. How many?”

Maris told him ten stout fellows all armed.

“What foolishness!” he cried. “The Government should have sent a regiment—a regiment with cannons. The madmen in Plakos are fifty times your number, and they have the hill folk at their back, and that is a thousand more.”

“Nevertheless,” said Maris, “we may be sufficient to garrison the House, and protect the lady. I have heard that it is a strong place.”

He looked at us queerly. “No garrison is sufficient against fire. They will burn the House and all that is in it... Listen to me, sirs. I do not think as you think. I have no care for the woman nor for any of her accursed race, but I have much care for the souls of this wayward people, and would save them from mortal sin. There are no two ways about it—the woman must burn, or she must depart. Can you carry her off?”

Maris translated to me rapidly. “Things look ugly,” he said, “and I rather think this old one talks sense. But to carry off the lady we must have a ship, and God knows where we shall find one. At Vano perhaps? Maybe we did wrong to separate

our forces. It strikes me that the sooner we get into touch with friend Janni the better. It is indicated that one of us must presently make his way into the House, and that one had better be you. Let us interrogate the old one about the topography of this damned village."

"You must enter the House," said the priest, in reply to Maris's question, "but it will be a task, I promise you, for Digenes the Cyprian. The place is guarded at all hours, and no one enters or leaves it without the knowledge of the warders. But it might be achieved by bold men under cover of dark. The moon is nearing its full, and when it has set in the small hours there might be a chance."

I got out the map of the island, and tried to get him to give me my bearings. But he was hopeless with a map, and instead on the white hearthstone he drew a plan of his own. The main road to the House from Kynaetho ran west from the village square, up a lane lined with crofts and past a big olive grove, till it reached the wood of chestnuts which was the beginning of the demesne. All the ground on this side rose steeply, and there were dwellings almost to the gates, so that it would be hard to escape detection. To the left the slopes curved in a shallow vale, bounded on the east by the main road to the hills and to Vano, and to south and west by a rim of upland beyond which lay the rugged coastline and the sea. This vale was broad and flat, and tilted up gently towards the west, and it bore the curious name of the Dancing Floor. In the old days, said the priest, the Panegyria were held in it, the island festivals before poverty and madness came to Plakos. The Dancing Floor bordered on the demesne, and he thought that a way of entry might be found there.

I made Maris ask about the shore road, but the priest was emphatic against it. There was no way into the House on that side except by the staircases from the jetty, which Vernon and I had seen in 1914, and there it was certain the watchers would be most vigilant. Besides the staircases were disused, and he believed that the postern doors had been walled up. The cliffs could not be climbed, and if the coast was followed towards the south the difficulties increased. From my recollection of the place, I thought he exaggerated, but I was not prepared to bank on a dim memory.

"There is no time to lose," he said, with an earnestness which convinced me that, though our motives might be different, our purposes were alike. "In two days it will be Good Friday, and the night after comes the solemn hour when our Lord breaks the bonds of death. I grievously fear that that is the hour which my foolish folk have fixed for this sacrilege. If great sin is to be averted, the woman must be gone by then and the House given to the flames. The flames, I say, for whatever happens, there will be no peace in Plakos till it is in ashes. But let it be burned honestly and religiously, and not made an altar to the outland devils whom Holy Church has long ago cast into the darkness."

The problem seemed to me to be clarifying itself. I was inclined to think that the priest was too badly scared to take a balanced view of things, and also too wrapped up in his religious anxieties. I agreed that we must somehow induce Koré to come away, and that for this purpose we must get all our ten men together and beg, borrow, or steal some kind of boat. It was also plain that the sooner I got inside the House the better, for Koré would need some persuading. I was not able to view the black magic of the villagers quite seriously. It was obviously a real peril, but it was so wholly outside the range of my mental conception that I took it as a straightforward risk, like that from a wild animal or a thunderstorm.

Maris and I had a short talk in French, and settled our plans. He would go back to the inn and see our fellows fixed up for the night. Then he would make his way on foot towards Vano and get into touch with Janni. We fixed a point on his map, on the edge of the cliffs about two miles south of the House, where he was to bring Janni and his posse, and where next morning I was to take out the others to join him. There seemed no risk in leaving the five men in the inn for the night. The villagers would scarcely interfere with strangers who purported to be a Government survey party and had no desire to move. Nor was it likely that any obstacle would be set in the way of Maris's own journey. After all he was moving towards Vano and away from the prohibited area.

My own case was more intricate. If I went back to the inn, it would be harder to make my way from it to the Dancing Floor, for I should have the village street to go through. We put this to the priest, and he proved unexpectedly helpful. Why should I not stay on in his house till the evening? The church was adjacent, and behind the church lay the graveyard, by which a road could be found to the Dancing Floor. He would give me food, if I cared to share his humble meal. The old fellow might be a bigot, but he was honest and friendly and patently on our side. I beamed on him and thanked him in dumb show, while Maris made ready to start.

"Get into the House somehow and fix up a plan with the lady," he said. "That is the first job. You are quite clear about the rendezvous on the cliffs? You had better get back to the inn somehow, and to-morrow morning bring the men to join me there. The village will think we've started on our surveying—and a long way off the danger-point. You will have to open the boxes and make each man carry his own supplies. You have your gun?"

I patted my pocket. "Yes, but there isn't going to be any shooting. We haven't a dog's chance at that game, with Miss Arabin arming the natives with Mauser rifles."

CHAPTER 9

Many times that day I wished that my education had included modern Greek. Through the hot afternoon and evening I remained in the little room, bored and anxious and mystified, while the priest sat opposite me, a storehouse of vital knowledge which I could not unlock. I raked up my recollection of classical Greek, and tried him with a sentence or two, but he only shook his head. Most of the time he read in a little book, a breviary no doubt, and his lips muttered. An old woman came in and made ready a meal. We lunched off onion soup and black bread, and I was given a glass of some wine which smacked of turpentine. I smoked one of the two cigarettes left in my case, and afterwards fell asleep. When I woke the old man was sitting just as I had left him, but he had laid down his book and seemed to be praying. There was no reserve now in the old face; I saw the age of it, and the innocence, and also the blind fear. He seemed to be pleading fiercely with his God, and his mouth worked like a child's in a passion of disquiet.

Of course I might have strolled out of doors, and gone back to the inn, where I could have seen our five men and retrieved my pipe and pouch. It struck me that we were behaving like fools; we had come to visit the House, and we ought to lose no time in getting there. My nap had put our previous talk out of my head, and I found myself on my feet in a sudden impulse. Then I remembered how Maris had enjoined the utmost caution, and I remembered, too, the look of those queer people in the street. The House was *tabu*, and if I was seen going towards it I should be stopped, and I might even precipitate some wild mischief without Maris to help me. There in the priest's homely kitchen, with a belt of golden light on the floor and the hum of flies in the window, I had an acute sense of being among shadows which might suddenly turn into monstrous forms of life. The whole island seemed to me like a snake still numb from the winter cold, but thawing fast into a malignant activity. And meantime Koré was all alone in that ill-omened House with the circle of hate closing around her, and I, who had come there to protect her, was still outside the cordon. I cursed the infernal fog which had brought us so fatally out of our course; and I resolved that no power on earth would hinder me, when the dark came, from piercing the barrier.

The presbytery opened into a narrow lane with outbuildings in front of it, but from the window I could see a corner of the main street. The sun poured into the lane, and I watched the little green lizards on the wall beyond. There was scarcely a sign of life in the segment I saw of the main street; indeed there was a silence strange in a village, so that every tiny natural noise—the chirping of grasshoppers, the slow flight of a dove—came with a startling clearness. Once a woman with a shawl over her head hurried past the opening. There should have been children playing at the corner, but there were no children nor any sound of them. Never a cart rumbled by, nor mule nor horse crossed my line of vision. The village seemed to be keeping an eerie fast.

One man indeed I saw—a big fellow with a white blouse and long boots of untanned leather. He stood staring down the alley, and I noticed that he carried a rifle. I beckoned to the priest, and we watched him together out of a corner of the window. The old man shook his head violently and muttered something which ended in “bounos.” Then he added between his teeth a word which sounded like “Callicantzari.” I had heard that word from Maris as a term of abuse—he had said, I remember, that it meant men who become beasts, like the ancient Centaurs. I guessed that this fellow must be one of the mountain men who were now in league with their old enemies of the coast. If they were among the besiegers, Koré could no longer refuse our help. “I will hire a regiment to shoot them down,” she had furiously told me. But what good was *our* help likely to be?

The sight of that fellow put an edge to my discomfort, and before the shadows had begun to fall I was roaming about the little room like a cat in a cage. The priest left me, and presently I heard the ringing of a bell. In the quiet, now deepened by the hush of twilight, the homely sound seemed a mockery—like the striking of the bells of a naval battery I once heard on the Yser. Then, in the midst of mud and death, it had incongruously suggested tea on the cool deck of a liner; now this tintinnabulation, with its call to a meek worship, had the same grotesque note of parody. Clearly there were no worshippers. I went to the back of the cottage, and from the window of the bare little bedroom had a view of the church in that amethyst gloaming. It was a baroque edifice, probably five centuries old, but renovated during the last fifty years, and in part painted a violent red. Beside it was a tiny bell-tower, obviously far more ancient. I could see a faint light in the window, and beyond that a dark clump of ilex above which the evening star was rising.

When the priest returned it was almost dark. He lit a lamp and carefully locked the door and shuttered the window. His barren service seemed to weigh heavily on him, for he moved wearily and did not raise his long-lidded eyes. It was borne in on me that at any price I must find some means of communicating with him, for my hour of action was approaching.

I tried him in French, but he never lifted his head.

Then it occurred to me that even a priest of the Greek Church must know a little Latin. I used the English pronunciation, and though he did not understand me, he seemed to realize what tongue I was talking, for he replied in a slow, broad Latin. I could not follow it, but at any rate we had found a common speech. I tore a page from my notebook and was about to write, when he snatched it and the pencil from my hand. There was something he badly wanted to say to me. He hesitated a good deal, and then in laborious capitals he wrote:

SI POPULUS ALIQUID PERICULI TIBI MINATUR, INVENIES REFUGIUM IN ECCLESIA

Then he scored out “REFUGIUM” and wrote in “SANCTUARIUM.”

“QUID PERICULI?” I wrote.

He looked at me helplessly, and spread out his hands. Danger, he seemed to suggest, lay in every quarter of the compass.

We used up five pages in a conversation in the doggiest kind of style. My Latin was chiefly of the legal type, and I often used a word that puzzled him, while he also set me guessing with phrases which I suppose were ecclesiastical. But the result was that he repeated the instructions he had given me through Maris. If I was to enter the House, the only way was by the Dancing Floor—it took me some time to identify “*locus saltatorum*”—and to climb the great wall which separated it from the demesne. But it would be guarded, probably by the “*incolae montium*,” and I must go warily, and not attempt it till the moon was down. Also I must be back before the first light of dawn.

I showed him my pistol, but he shook his head violently and went through a pantomime, the meaning of which was clear enough. I was not to shoot, because, though the guards were armed, there would be no shooting. But all the same I was in some deadly danger. He scribbled in abusive Latin that the people I had to fear were “*pagani, nefasti, mysteriorum abominabilium cultores*.” If I were seen and pursued my only hope was to reach the church. Not his house—that was no use—but the church. Twice he printed in emphatic capitals: “*Pete sanctuarium ecclesiae*.”

Then he took me into his little bedroom, and showed me the lie of the land. The moon was now up, the fog of the morning had gone out of the air, and the outline of the church and the bell-tower and the ilex grove beyond might have been cut in amber and jet. Through the trees there appeared a faint reddish glow as if fires were burning. I asked what this might be, and after a good deal of biting the stump of my pencil he wrote that there lay the graveyard, and the lights were burning “*ut vrykolakes absint*.” He seemed to doubt whether I could follow his meaning, but I did, for I knew about this from Koré—how the peasants kept lamps at the grave-heads to ward off vampires.

He was clear that I must traverse the valley of the Dancing Floor while the moon was up, for otherwise I should miss my way. He looked at me appraisingly and wrote “You are a soldier,” implying, as I took it, that there was cover for a man accustomed to use cover. Then he drew a plan on which he marked my road. If I skirted the graveyard I should find myself on a hillside which sloped towards the Dancing Floor. I must keep this ridge, which was the northern containing wall of the place, till I reached the boundaries of the House. On no account must I go down into the valley, and when I asked why, he said that it was “*nefasta*.” That could not mean merely that it was well-guarded, but that it was held in dread by the people of Kynaetho, a dread which their priest shared.

I left the house just after eleven o’clock. Our long, silent sederunt had made the two of us good friends, for he wept at parting, and insisted on blessing me and kissing me on the forehead. I was on his side, on the side of his Church, a crusader going into peril in a strife with heathenish evil.

It was a marvellous night for scent and colour, but as silent as the deeps of the sea. I got with all speed into the shade of the ilexes, and climbed up a rocky slope so that I looked down on the village graveyard beyond the trees. Dozens of little lights twinkled in it like fireflies, those undying lamps which were lit to preserve the inmates from outrage by the terrible demons that enter into the bodies of the dead. Suddenly I remembered with horror that it was Koré against whom these precautions were taken—Koré, now because of her crazy gallantry alone in a doomed House, dreaming perhaps that she was winning back the hearts of her people, and knowing little of the dark forces massing against her out of the ancients’ time. There was that in this mania of superstition which both infuriated and awed me; it was a thing against which a man could find no weapon. And I had the ironic recollection of how little more than a week earlier, in a case before the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, I had been defending the legalization of certain African rites, on the ground that what to one man was superstition might to another be an honest faith. I had struck a belief which had the compelling power of a fanatical religion, though it was born of the blackness of night.

The hillside was a mass of scrub and boulder, giving excellent cover, and, since the ridge shut me off from the village, I could move with reasonable speed and safety. My spirits were rising with the exercise, and the depression which had overwhelmed me in the priest’s house was lifting. Then suddenly I topped a rise and found myself looking down on the Dancing Floor.

It was not a valley so much as an upland meadow, for there was no stream in it nor had there ever been one, and, though tilted up gently towards the west, most of it was as flat as a cricket-field. There it lay in the moonlight, yellow as corn in its cincture of broken ridges, a place plainly hallowed and set apart. All my life I have cherished certain pictures of landscape, of which I have caught glimpses in my travels, as broken hints of a beauty of which I hoped some day to find the archetype. One is a mountain stream running in broad shallows and coming down through a flat stretch of heather from a confusion of blue mountains. Another is a green meadow, cut off like a garden from neighbouring wildernesses, secret and yet offering a wide horizon, a place at once a sanctuary and a watch-tower. This type I have found in the Scottish Borders, in the Cotswolds, once in New Hampshire, and plentifully in the Piedmont country of Virginia. But in the Dancing Floor I had stumbled upon its archetype. The moonlight made the farther hills look low and near, and doubtless lessened the size of the level ground, but the constriction only served to increase its preciousness.

I sat down and stared at the scene, and in that moment I underwent a great lightening of spirit. For this meadow was a happy place, the home of gentle and kindly and honourable things. Mildness and peace brooded over it. The priest had said that it was “*nefasta*,” but he could only have meant that it was sacred. Sacred indeed it must be, what the Greeks of old called a *temenos*, for the dullest could not be blind to the divinity that dwelt here. I had a moment of wonder why the Arabians, lords of the island, had not included a spot so gracious in their demesne, until I saw that that could not be. The Dancing Floor must be open to the winds and the starry influences and the spirits of earth; no human master could own or enclose it.

You will call me fantastic, but, dull dog as I am, I felt a sort of poet's rapture as I looked at those shining spaces, and at the sky above, flooded with the amber moon except on the horizon's edge, where a pale blue took the place of gold, and faint stars were pricking. The place was quivering with magic drawn out of all the ages since the world was made, but it was good magic. I had felt the oppression of Kynaetho, the furtive, frightened people, the fiasco of Eastertide, the necromantic lamps beside the graves. These all smacked evilly of panic and death. But now I was looking on the Valley of the Shadow of Life. It was the shadow only, for it was mute and still and elusive. But the presage of life was in it, the clean life of fruits and flocks, and children, and happy winged things, and that spring purity of the earth which is the purity of God.

The moon was declining, but it would be at least two hours before I could safely approach the House. The cover was good, I was protected by the ridge from the side of the village, and no human being was likely to be abroad on the Dancing Floor. I decided that I must get within sight of my destination before the light failed and spy out the land. It was rough going among the ribs of rock and stone-falls and dense thickets of thorn and arbutus, but sometimes I would come on a patch of turf drenched with dew and scented with thyme. All the myrrh of Arabia was in the place, for every foot of sward I trod on and every patch of scrub I brushed through was aromatic, and in the open places there was the clean savour of night and the sea. Also at my left hand and below lay the Dancing Floor, lambent under the moon like the cool tides of a river.

By-and-by I came to the end of the ridge, and had a view of the crest where the House stood. There was a blur of ebony which must be the wood that surrounded it, and bounding it a ribbon of silver-grey. I puzzled at this, till I realized that it was the wall of which the priest had spoken—a huge thing, it seemed, of an even height, curving from the dip where the village lay and running to what seemed to be the seaward scarp of the island. I was now in the danger zone, and it behoved me to go warily, so I found a shelter where the cover of the ridge ended and studied the details of the scene. The wall could not be less than fifteen feet in height, and it appeared to be regularly masoned and as smooth as the side of a house. In that landscape it was a startling intrusion of something crude and human, a defiance of nature. Shelley Arabin had built it for the sake of his sinister privacy, but why had he built it so high? And then I guessed the reason. He wanted to shut out the Dancing Floor from his life. That blessed place would have been a mute protest against his infamies.

There was a black patch in the even sheen of the wall. I wormed my way a little nearer and saw that for perhaps a dozen yards the wall had been broken down. I could see the ragged edges and the inky darkness of the shrubberies beyond. This had been done recently, perhaps within the last month. And then I saw something more. There were men—guards—stationed at the gap. I made out their figures, and they seemed to have the baggy white shirts of the mountaineer I had seen in the village. Also they were armed. One stood in the gap, and the two others patrolled the sides, and I could see that they carried rifles at the trail. It seemed absurd that three men were needed for that tiny entrance, and I concluded that they wanted each other's company. There must be something in the task which put a heavy strain on their courage. I noticed, too, that they kept their faces resolutely averted from the Dancing Floor. When one moved he walked with his head screwed round facing the House. The shining meadow might be *nefastus*, as the priest had said, or it might be too sacred at this solemn hour of night for the profane gaze.

When I had watched them for a little it seemed to me that, though the moon had not set, these fellows were too preoccupied to be dangerous, and that I might safely continue my reconnaissance. There was not much cover, but the declining moon made an olive shadow at the upper end of the Dancing Floor, and I proceeded to crawl across it like a gillie after deer. I went very cautiously, stopping every now and then to prospect, but I found the wall now beyond my range, and I had to chance the immobility of the sentries. My breeches were sopping with dew before I reached the point which I judged to be out of sight of the gap. The wall, as I had observed, curved at the sea end, and once there—unless there were further guards—I should be at liberty to test my climbing powers. The thing looked a most formidable barrier, but I was in hopes that it might be turned where it abutted on the cliffs.

Before I realized it, I was looking down on the sea.

The coast bent inward in a little bight, and a hundred feet below me the water lapped on a white beach. It was such a revelation of loveliness as comes to a man only once or twice in his lifetime. I fancy that the short commons on which I had subsisted all day and the sense of dwelling among portents had keyed me up to a special receptiveness. Behind me was the Dancing Floor, and in front a flood of translucent colour, the shimmer of gold, the rarest tints of sapphire and amethyst, fading into the pale infinity of the sky. I had come again into a world which spoke. From below came the sound of dreamily moving water, of sleepy pigeons in the rocks. Recollections of poetry fled through my mind:

*"... where Helicon breaks down
In cliff to the sea..."*

*Where the moon-silver'd inlets
Send far their light voice—"*

Yes, but something was wanting. There should have been white flocks on the sward, something to link up nature with the homely uses of man, in order to produce the idyllic. This place was not idyllic, it was magical and unearthly. Above me was a walled mystery, within which evil had once been followed and a greater evil might soon be done, and there were men with quaking hearts bent upon ancient devilries.

I followed the edge of the scarp as it rose to the highest point where the wall ended. There I had a sharp disappointment. The wall ran sheer to the edge of the cliff, and a steep buttress descended to the face of the limestone crag. The stone was as

smooth as a water-worn pebble. I have been a rock-climber since I was an undergraduate, and have faced in my time some awkward problems, but this was starkly impossible. Even with a companion and a rope I do not believe it could have been done, and to attempt it alone meant the certainty of a broken neck.

I prospected eastward along the wall, and found no better hope there. The thing was simply not to be climbed except by a lizard. If I had had Maris with me I might have stood on his shoulders and made a jump for the coping; as it was it might have been a hundred feet high instead of fifteen for all the good it was to me. There were no branches about to make a ladder, or loose stones to make a cairn—nothing but the short downland turf.

The sight of this insuperable obstacle effectively put a stop to my brief exhilaration of spirit. I felt small, and feeble, and futile. It was imperative that I should get into the House without further delay and see Koré, and yet the House was as impracticable as the moon, now swiftly setting. The rapid darkening of the world pointed out the only road. I must dodge the sentries and get through the breach in the wall. It was a wild notion, but my growing ill-temper made me heedless of risks. The men had no pistols, only rifles, and were probably not too ready in the use of them. After all, I had played this game before with success. In the first winter of the war, when I was a subaltern, I used to be rather good at wriggling across No-man's-land and eavesdropping beside the German trenches.

I didn't give my resolution time to weaken, but in the shadow of the wall made the best pace I could towards the gap. It was now really dark, with only a faint glow from the stars, and I moved in what seemed to my eyes impenetrable shade after the brightness of the moon. I was wearing rubber-soled boots and cloth gaiters, my garments were subfusc in colour, and I have always been pretty light on my feet. I halted many times to get my bearings, and presently I heard the sound of a man's tread. So far as I could judge before, two of the sentries had their patrol well away from the wall, and I might escape their notice if I hugged the stones. But one had had his stand right in the breach, and with him I would have difficulty. My hope was to dart through into the shelter of the thick shrubbery. Even if they fired on me they would be likely to miss, and I believed that they would not follow me into the demesne.

I edged my way nearer, a foot at a time, till I guessed by the sound that I was inside the beat of the patrols. I had no white about me, for my shirt and collar were drab, and I kept my face to the wall. Suddenly my hands felt the ragged edge of the gap and I almost stumbled over a fallen stone. Here it was very dark, and I had the shadow of the trees inside to help me. I held my breath and listened, but I could not hear any noise from within the breach. Had the sentry there deserted his post?

I waited for a minute or so, trying to reckon up the chances. The tread of the man on my right was clear, and presently I could make out also the movement of the man on my left. Where was the third? Suddenly I heard to the right the sound of human speech. The third must be there. There was a sparkle of fire, too. The third sentry had gone to get a light for his cigarette.

Now was my opportunity, and I darted into the darkness of the gap. I was brought up sharp and almost stunned by a blow on the forehead. There was a gate in the gap, a stout thing of wattles with a pole across. I strained at it with my hands, but it would not move.

There was nothing for it but to bolt. The sentries had been alarmed—probably horribly alarmed—by the noise, and were drawing together. The only safety lay in violent action, for they had a means of getting light and would find me if I tried to lurk in the shadows. I raised my arms in the orthodox ghostly fashion, howled like a banshee, and broke for the open.

I was past them before they could stop me and plunging down the slope towards the Dancing Floor. I think that for the first moments they were too scared to shoot, for they must have believed that I had come out of the forbidden House, and when they recovered their nerve I was beyond their range. The upper slope was steep, and I went down it as Pate-in-Peril in *Redgauntlet* went down Errickstane-brae. I rolled over and over, found my feet, lost them again, and did not come to rest till I was in the flats of the meadow. I looked back and saw a light twinkling at the gap. The guards there must have been amazed to find the gate intact, and were now doubtless at their prayers.

I did not think that, even if they believed me flesh and blood, they would dare to follow me to the Dancing Floor. So I made my way down it at a reasonable pace, feeling rather tired, rather empty, and very thirsty. On the road up I had decided that there was no stream in it, but almost at once I came to a spring. It was a yard across, bubbling up strongly, and sending forth a tiny rill which presently disappeared in some fissure of the limestone. The water was deliciously cold, and I drank pints of it. Then it occurred to me that I must put my best foot forwards, for there was that trembling in the eastern sky which is the presage of dawn. My intention was to join my fellows in the inn courtyard, and meet Maris there in the morning. After all, the inhabitants of Kynaetho had nothing as yet against me. All they knew of me was that I was a surveyor from the Government at Athens, whose presence no doubt was unwelcome but who could hardly be treated as an enemy.

I reached the eastern bounds of the Dancing Floor, and scrambled up on the ridge above the ilexes of the graveyard. The lamps were still twinkling like glow-worms among the graves. From there it was easy to get into the lane where stood the priest's house, and in a few minutes I was in the main village street. The chilly dawn was very near, and I thought lovingly of the good food in our boxes. My first desire was a meal which should be both supper and breakfast.

The door of the courtyard stood open, and I pushed through it to the barn beyond. The place was empty—not a sign of men or baggage. For a moment I thought they might have been given quarters in the inn, till I remembered that the inn had no guest-room. I tried the other outbuildings—a stable, a very dirty byre, a place which looked like a granary. One and all were empty.

It was no use waking the landlord, for he probably would not answer, and in any case I did not understand his tongue. There was nothing for it but to go back to the priest. My temper was thoroughly embittered, and I strode out of the courtyard as if I were at home in my own village.

But my entrance had been observed, and the street was full of people. I doubt if Kynaetho slept much these days, and now it seemed that from every door men and women were emerging. There was something uncanny in that violent vigilance in the cold grey light of dawn. And the crowd was no longer inert. In a second I saw that it was actively hostile, that it wanted to do me a mischief, or at any rate to lay hands on me. It closed in on me from every side, and yet made no sound.

It was now that I had my first real taste of fear. Before I had been troubled and mystified, but now I was downright afraid. Automatically I broke into a run, for I remembered the priest's advice about the church.

My action took them by surprise. Shouts arose, meaningless shouts to me, and I broke through the immediate circle with ease. Two fellows who moved to intercept me I handed off in the best Rugby football style. The street was empty before me and I sprinted up it at a pace which I doubt if I ever equalled in my old running days.

But I had one determined pursuer. I caught a glimpse of him out of a corner of my eye, one of the young men from the hills, a fellow with a dark hawk-like face and a powerful raking stride. In my then form he would have beaten me easily if the course had been longer, but it was too short to let him develop his speed. Yet he was not a yard behind me when I shot through the open door of the church.

I flung myself gasping on the floor behind one of the squat pillars. As I recovered my breath I wondered why no shot had been fired. A man with a gun could have brought me down with the utmost ease, for I had been running straight in the open. My second thought was that the priest had been right. The peasant had stopped in his tracks at the church door. I had found safety for the moment—a sanctuary or, it might be, a prison.

CHAPTER 10

The morning light was filtering through the windows, and since the glass was a dirty yellow, the place seemed still to be full of moonshine. As my eyes grew accustomed to it, I made out the features of the interior. A heavy curtain separated the sanctuary from the chancel; the floor was of rough stone, worn with the feet and knees of generations of worshippers; there were none of the statues and images which one is accustomed to in a Roman church, not even a crucifix, though there may have been one above the hidden altar. From a pillar hung an assortment of votive offerings, crutches, oar-blades, rudders of ships, old-fashioned horn spectacles. The walls were studded with little ikons of saints, each one with its guttering lamp before it. The place smelt dank and unused and mouldy, like a kirk in winter-time in some Highland glen. Behind me the open door showed an oval of pure pale light.

I was in a mood of profound despondency which was very near despair. The men had gone and with them our stores of food and ammunition. God knew where Maris was or how I should find him again. The village was actively hostile, and I was shut up in the church as in a penitentiary. I was no nearer Koré than when we landed—farther away indeed, for I had taken the wrong turning, and she was shut off from me by mountainous barriers. I could have laughed bitterly when I thought of the futility of the help which I had been so confident of giving her. And her danger was far more deadly than I had dreamed. She was the mark of a wild hate which had borrowed some wilder madness out of the depths of the past. She had spoken of a “sacrifice.” That was the naked truth of it; any moment tragedy might be done, some hideous rite consummated, and youth and gallantry laid on a dark altar.

The thought drove me half crazy. I fancy the lack of food and sleep had made me rather lightheaded, for I sat in a stupor which was as much anger as pity—anger at those blinded islanders, at my own feebleness, at Koré’s obstinacy. This was succeeded by an extreme restlessness. I could not stay still, but roamed about examining the ill-favoured ikons. There was a little recess on the right of the chancel which was evidently the treasury, for I found a big chest full of dusty vestments and church plate. Sacrilege must have been an unknown crime in Kynaetho, for the thing was unlocked.

Then I noticed a strange object below the chancel step. It seemed to be a bier with a shrouded figure laid on it. The sight gave me a shock, for I thought it a dead body. Reluctantly I approached it and drew back the shroud, expecting to see the corpse of a peasant.

To my amazement it was a figure of Christ—a wooden image, rudely carved but with a strange similitude of life. It reminded me of a John the Baptist by Donatello which I once saw in Venice. The emaciated body was naked but for the loin cloth, the eyes were closed, the cheeks sunken. It was garishly painted, and the stigmata were done in a crude scarlet. But there was power in it, and dignity, and a terrible pitifulness. I remembered Koré’s story. This was the figure which on the night of Good Friday, after the women had kissed and wailed over it, was borne in procession among the village lanes and then restored to its sepulchre. This was the figure which at the Easter Resurrection stood in a blaze of candles before the altar, the Crucified and Risen Lord.

That sight worked a miracle with me. I suddenly felt that I was not alone, but had august allies. The Faith was behind me, that faith which was deep in the heart of Kynaetho though for the moment it was overlaid. The shabby church, the mazed and ignorant priest took on suddenly a tremendous significance... They were the visible sign and warrant of that creed which we all hold dumbly, even those who call themselves unbelievers—the belief in the ultimate omnipotence of purity and meekness.

I reverently laid the shroud again over the figure, and must have stood in a muse before it, till I found that the priest had joined me. He knelt beside the bier, and said his prayers, and never have I heard such an agony of supplication in a man’s voice. I drew back a little, and waited. When he had finished he came to me and his eyes asked a question.

I shook my head and got out my notebook.

He asked me if I had breakfasted, and when I wrote the most emphatic negative which my Latin could compass, he hobbled off and returned with some food under his cassock. It was only walnuts and black bread, but I ate it wolfishly and felt better for it. I looked on the old man now with a sincere liking, for he was my host and my ally, and I think he had changed his attitude towards me. Those minutes beside the bier had established a bond between us.

In the recess I have mentioned there was a door which I had not hitherto noticed. This opened into a kind of sacristy, where the priest kept his odds and ends. There was a well in the floor of it, covered by an immense oaken lid, a well of cold water of which I had a long drink. The old man drew several buckets, and set about cleaning the chancel, and I was glad to lend a hand. I spent the better part of the morning like a housemaid on my knees scrubbing the floor and the chancel step, while he was occupied inside the sanctuary. The physical exertion was an anodyne to my thoughts, which in any case were without purpose. I could do nothing till the night came again.

On one of my journeys to the sacristy to fetch water I saw a face at the little window, which opened on the yard of the priest’s house. To my immense relief it was Maris, very dirty and dishevelled, but grinning cheerfully. That window was a tight fit, but he managed to wriggle half through, and a strong pull from me did the rest. He drank like a thirsty dog out of my bucket, and then observed that a church had its drawbacks as a resort, since one couldn’t smoke.

“I have much to tell you, my friend,” he said, “but first I must interview his Holiness. By God, but he has the mischievous flock.”

I do not know what he said to the priest, but he got answers which seemed to give him a melancholy satisfaction. The old man spoke without ever looking up, and his voice was flat with despair. Often he shook his head, and sometimes he held up his hand as if to avert a blasphemy. Maris turned to me with a shrug of the shoulders. "This madness is beyond him, as it is beyond me. It is a general breaking down of wits. What can you and I, soldiers though we be, do against insanity? Presently I must sleep, and you too, my friend, to judge by your heavy eyes. But first I make my report."

"I suppose we are safe here?" I said.

"Safe enough, but impotent. We can take our sleep confidently, but it is hard to see that we can do much else. We are in quarantine, if you understand. But to report—"

He had gone to the inn the night before, and found our five men supping and playing cards like Christians. They seemed to understand what was required of them—to wait for me and then join Janni and the others at the rendezvous on the western cliffs. So far as he could judge they had had no communication of any kind with the people of the village. Then he had set out with an easy mind on the road to Vano. No one had hindered him; the few villagers he met had stared but had not attempted even to accost him. So over the moonlit downs he went, expecting to find Janni and the other five in bivouac in the open country towards the skirts of the hills.

He found Janni alone—on the roadside some miles east of Vano, squatted imperturbably by a fire, in possession of five revolvers and ample stores, but without a single follower. From the one-armed corporal he heard a strange tale. The party had made Vano before midday in the *Santa Lucia*, had landed, and marched inland from the little port, without apparently attracting much attention. He himself had explained to the harbour-master that they had been sent to do survey work, and the wine shop, where they stopped for a drink, heard the same story. They had then tramped up the road from Vano to the hills, stopping at the little farms to pass the time of day and pick up news. They heard nothing till nightfall, when they encamped beside a village among the foothills. There Janni talked to sundry villagers and heard queer stories of Kynaetho. There was a witch there who by her spells had blighted the crops and sent strange diseases among the people, and the cup of her abominations was now full. So Dionysios had appeared to many in a dream summoning them to Kynaetho in the Great Week, and the best of the young men had already gone thither.

That was all that Janni heard, for being the man in authority he spoke only with the elders, and they were wary in their talk. But the others, gossiping with the women, heard a fuller version which scared them to the bone. Your Greek townsman is not a whit less superstitious than the peasant, and he lacks the peasant's stolidity, and is prone to more speedy excitement. Janni did not know exactly what the women had told his men, except that Kynaetho was the abode of vampires and harpies for whom a surprising judgment was preparing, and that no stranger could enter the place without dire misfortune. There might be throat-cutting, it was hinted, on the part of the young men now engaged in a holy war, and there would for certain be disaster at the hand of the *striglas* and *vrykolakes* in the House, for to them a stranger would be easy prey.

Whatever it was, it brought the men back to Janni gibbering with terror and determined to return forthwith to Vano. The island was accursed and the abode of devils innumerable, and there was nothing for honest men to do but to flee. They would go back to Vano and wait on a boat, the *Santa Lucia* or some other. To do the rascals justice, Janni thought that they might have faced the throat-cutting, but the horrors of the unseen and the occult were more than they could stomach. Janni, who was a rigid disciplinarian, had fortunately possessed himself of their pistols when they encamped for the night, and he was now in two minds whether he should attempt to detain them by force. But the sight of their scared eyes and twitching lips decided him that he could do nothing in their present mood, and he resolved to let them go back to Vano till he had seen Maris and received instructions. They had already had wages in advance, and could fend for themselves till he made a plan. So he doled out to each man a share of the supplies and watched them scurry off in the direction of the coast, while he smoked his pipe and considered the situation. There, about two in the morning, Maris found him.

The defection of these five men suggested to Maris that the same kind of trouble might be expected with the batch in Kynaetho. So he and Janni humped the stores and started off across the downs to the rendezvous on the cliffs which he had settled with me. That occupied a couple of hours, and there Janni was left with orders not to stir till he was summoned. The place was a hollow on the very edge of the sea, far removed from a road or a dwelling—a lucky choice, for it had been made at haphazard from the map without any local knowledge. Then Maris set off at his best pace for Kynaetho, skirting the Dancing Floor on the south, and striking the road to Vano a mile or so from the village.

There he met the rest of our posse, and a more dilapidated set of mountebanks he declared he had never seen. So far as he could gather from their babble, they had been visited in the small hours by a deputation of villagers, who had peremptorily ordered them to depart. The deputation backed its plea not by threats but by a plain statement of facts. Kynaetho was labouring under a curse which was about to be removed. No doubt the villagers expounded the nature of the curse with details which started goose-flesh on their hearers. What was about to be done was Kynaetho's own affair, and no stranger could meddle with it and live. They may have enforced their argument with a sight of their rifles, but probably they did not need any mundane arguments to barb the terror which their tale inspired. For they succeeded in so putting a fear of unknown horrors into these five Athens guttersnipes that they decamped without a protest. They did not even stay to collect some provender, but fled for their lives along the Vano road.

When Maris met them they were padding along in abject panic. One man still carried unconsciously a tin from which he had been feeding, another clutched a crumpled pack of cards. They had their pistols, but they had no thought of using them. Pantingly they told their story, irking to be gone, and when Maris seemed to be about to detain them they played

away from him like frightened sheep. Like Janni, he decided that it was no good to try to stop them—indeed he was pretty clear by now that even if they stayed they would be useless for the job we had in hand. He cursed their female relatives for several generations and speeded the hindmost on his way with a kick.

His next business was to find me, and he concluded that I would probably be still in the neighbourhood of the House. So, as the moon was down, he retraced his steps by the south side of the Dancing Floor and reached the edge where the wall abutted on the cliffs probably an hour after I had been there. He shared my view about the impracticality of an entrance to the demesne at that point. As it was now almost daylight he did not dare to follow the wall, but returned to Janni on the cliffs, who gave him breakfast. He was getting anxious about my doings, for he argued that if I returned to the inn to look for the men there would probably be trouble. It seemed to him important that the village should still believe him to have gone off, so he was determined not to show himself. But he must get in touch with me, and for that purpose he decided first to draw the priest's house. He had a difficult journey in the broad daylight by way of the graveyard. It would have been impossible, he said, if the village had been living its normal life, for he had to pass through a maze of little fields and barns. But all farm work seemed to have been relinquished, and not a soul was to be seen at the lower end of the Dancing Floor. Everybody, except the guards round the House, seemed to be huddling in the village street. In the end he got into the priest's house, found it empty and followed on to the church.

I told him briefly my doings of the night. I could see that he was completely in the dark as to what was happening, except that Kynaetho, under the goad of some crazy superstition, intended very resolute mischief to the House and its chatelaine. You see he had not talked to Koré—had indeed never seen her, nor had he read the disquieting manuscript which Vernon had translated for me. I did not see how I could enlighten him, for on that side he was no scholar, and was too rooted in his brand of minor rationalism to take my tale seriously. It was sufficient that we were both agreed that the House must be entered, and Koré willy-nilly removed.

"But we have no ship," he cried. "The lady would be no safer in the open than in the House, for they mean most certainly that she shall die. I think it may come to putting our backs to the wall, and the odds are unpleasant. We cannot telegraph for help, for the office is in the village and it has been destroyed. I have ascertained that there is no wire at Vano, or elsewhere in the island."

Things looked pretty ugly, as I was bound to admit. But there was one clear and urgent duty, to get into the House and find Koré. Before we lay down to snatch a little sleep, we made a rough plan. Maris would try the coast to the north and see if an entrance could be effected by a postern above the jetty where Vernon and I had first landed. He thought that he had better undertake this job, for it meant skirting the village, and he believed he might pass in the darkness as one of the men from the hills. He could talk the language, you see, and, if accosted, could put up some kind of camouflage. I was to make for Janni, and then the two of us would try along the shore under the cliffs in the hope that some gully might give us access to the demesne north of the point where the wall ended. We were to rendezvous about breakfast time at Janni's camp, and from the results of the night frame a further programme.

I slept without a break till after eight o'clock in the evening, when the priest woke us and gave us another ration of the eternal bread and walnuts. I felt frowsy and dingy, and would have given much for a bath. The priest reported that the day in the village had passed without incident, except that there had been a great gathering in the central square and some kind of debate. He had not been present, but the thing seemed to have deepened his uneasiness. "There is no time to lose," he told Maris, "for to-morrow is Good Friday, and to-morrow I fear that unhallowed deeds may be done." Maris discussed his route with him very carefully, and several more pages of my notebook were used up in plans. It was going to be a ticklish business to reach the jetty—principally, I gathered, because of the guards who watched all the sides of the demesne which were not bounded by the cliffs or the great wall. But the priest seemed to think it possible, and Maris's Gascon soul had illimitable confidence.

My road was plain—up the ridge on the south side of the Dancing Floor till it ended at the sea, a matter of not more than four miles. I skirted as before the little graveyard with its flickering lamps, and then made a cautious traverse of a number of small fields each with its straw-covered barn. Presently I was out on the downs, with the yellow levels of the Dancing Floor below me on the right. I was in a different mood from the previous night, for I was now miserably conscious of the shortness of our time and the bigness of our task. Anxiety was putting me into a fever of impatience and self-contempt. Here was I, a man who was reckoned pretty competent by the world, who had had a creditable record in the war, who was considered an expert at getting other people out of difficulties—and yet I was so far utterly foiled by a batch of barbarian peasants. I simply dared not allow my mind to dwell on Koré and her perils, for that way lay madness. I had to try to think of the thing objectively as a problem to be solved, but flashes of acute fear for the girl kept breaking through to set my heart beating.

I found Janni cooking supper by his little fire in a nook of the downs, and the homely sight for the moment comforted me. The one-armed corporal was, I daresay, by nature and upbringing as superstitious as any other Greek peasant, but his military training had canalized his imagination, and he would take no notice of a legend till he was ordered to by his superior officer. It reminded me of the policeman Javert in *Les Misérables*: his whole soul was in the ritual of his profession, and it must have been a black day for Janni when the war stopped. Maris, whom he worshipped blindly, had bidden him take instructions from me, and he was ready to follow me into the sea. Mercifully his service at Salonika had taught him a few English words and a certain amount of bad French, so we could more or less communicate.

He had supplies with him, so I had a second supper—biscuits and sardines and coffee, which after two days of starvation

tasted like nectar and ambrosia. Also he had a quantity of caporal cigarettes with which I filled my pockets. Our first business was to get down to the beach, and fortunately he had already discovered a route a few hundred yards to the south, where a gully with a stone shoot led to the water's edge. Presently we stood on the pebbly shore looking out to the luminous west over a sea as calm as a mill-pond. I would have liked to bathe, but decided that I must first get the immediate business over.

That shore was rough going, for it was a succession of limestone reefs encumbered with great boulders which had come down from the rocks during past winters. The strip of beach was very narrow and the overhang of the cliffs protected us from observation from above, even had any peasant been daring enough to patrol the Dancing Floor by night. We kept close to the water, where the way was easiest, but even there our progress was slow. It took us the better part of an hour to get abreast of the point where the wall ended. There the cliffs were at least two hundred feet high, and smooth as the side of a cut loaf. Crowning them we could see the dark woodlands of the demesne.

My object was to find a route up them, and never in all my mountaineering experience had I seen a more hopeless proposition. The limestone seemed to have no fissures, and the faces had weathered smooth. In the Dolomites you can often climb a perpendicular cliff by the countless little cracks in the hard stone, but here there were no cracks, only a surface glassy like marble. At one point I took off my boots and managed to ascend about twenty yards, when I was brought up sharp by an overhang, could find no way to traverse, and had my work cut out getting down again. Janni was no cragsman, and in any case his one arm made him useless.

Our outlook ahead was barred by a little cape, and I was in hopes that on the other side of that the ground might become easier. We had a bad time turning it, for the beach stopped and the rock fell sheer to the water. Happily the water at the point was shallow, and partly wading and partly scrambling, we managed to make the passage. In the moonlight everything was clear as day, and once round we had a prospect of a narrow bay, backed by the same high perpendicular cliffs and bounded to the north by a still higher bluff, which ended to seaward in a sheer precipice.

I sat down on a boulder with a sinking heart to consider the prospect. It was more hopeless than the part we had already prospected. There was no gully or chimney in the whole glimmering semicircle, nothing but a rim of unscalable stone crowned with a sharp-cut fringe of trees. Beyond the bluff lay the olive-yards which I had seen six years before when I landed from the yacht, but I was pretty certain that we would never get round the bluff. For the margin of shore had now disappeared, and the cliffs dropped sheer into deep water.

Suddenly Janni by my side grunted and pointed to the middle of the little bay. There, riding at anchor, was a boat.

At first it was not easy to distinguish it from a rock, for there was no riding light shown. But, as I stared at it, I saw that it was indeed a boat—a yawl-rigged craft of, I judged, about twenty tons. It lay there motionless in the moonlight, a beautiful thing which had no part in that setting of stone and sea—a foreign thing, an intruder. I watched it for five minutes and nothing moved aboard.

The sight filled me with both hope and mystification. Here was the “ship” which Maris had postulated. But who owned it, and what was it doing in this outlandish spot, where there was no landing? It could not belong to Kynaetho, or it would have been lying at the jetty below the House, or in the usual harbour. Indeed it could not belong to Plakos at all, for, though I knew little about boats, I could see that the cut of this one spoke of Western Europe. Was any one on board? It behoved me forthwith to find that out.

I spoke to Janni, and he whistled shrilly. But there was no answer from the sleeping bay. He tried again several times without result. If we were to make inquiries, it could only be by swimming out. Janni, of course, was no swimmer, and besides, the responsibility was on me. I can't say I liked the prospect, but in three minutes I had stripped and was striking out in the moon-silvered water.

The fresh, cold, aromatic sea gave me new vigour of body and mind. I realized that I must proceed warily. Supposing there was some one on board, some one hostile, I would be completely at his mercy. So I swam very softly up to the stern and tried to read the name on it. There was a name, but that side was in shadow and I could not make it out. I swam to the bows, and there again saw a name of which I could make nothing, except that the characters did not seem to me to be Greek.

I trod water and took stock of the situation. It was the kind of craft of which you will see hundreds at Harwich and Southampton and Plymouth—a pleasure boat, obviously meant for cruising, but with something of the delicate lines of a racer. I was beginning to feel chilly, and felt that I must do something more than prospect from the water. I must get on board and chance the boat being empty or the owner asleep.

There was a fender amidships hanging over the port side. I clutched this, got a grip of the gunwale, and was just about to pull myself up, when a face suddenly appeared above me, a scared, hairy face, surmounted by a sort of blue nightcap. Its owner objected to my appearance, for he swung a boathook and brought it down heavily on the knuckles of my left hand. That is to say, such was his intention, but he missed his aim and only grazed my little finger.

I dropped off and dived, for I was afraid that he might start shooting. When I came up a dozen yards off and shook the water out of my eyes, I saw him staring at me as if I was a merman, with the boathook still in his hand.

“What the devil do you mean by that?” I shouted, when I had ascertained that he had no pistol. “What boat is it? Who are you?”

My voice seemed to work some change in the situation, for he dropped the boathook, and replied in what sounded like Greek. I caught one word "Ingleez" several times repeated.

"I'm English," I cried, "English... philos... philhellene—damn it, what's the Greek for a friend?"

"Friend," he repeated, "Ingleez," and I swam nearer.

He was a tough-looking fellow, dressed in a blue jersey and what appeared to be old flannel bags, and he looked honest, though puzzled. I was now just under him, and smiling for all I was worth. I put a hand on the fender again, and repeated the word "English." I also said that my intentions were of the best, and I only wanted to come aboard and have a chat. If he was well disposed towards England, I thought he might recognize the sound of the language.

Evidently he did, for he made no protest when I got both hands on the gunwale again. He allowed me to get my knee up on it, so I took my chance and swung myself over. He retreated a step and lifted the boathook, but he did not attempt to hit me as I arose, like Proteus, out of the sea and stood dripping on his deck.

I held out my hand, and with a moment's hesitation he took it. "English ... friend," I said, grinning amicably at him, and to my relief he grinned back.

I was aboard a small yacht, which was occidental in every line of her, the clean decks, the general tidy, workmanlike air. A man is not at his most confident standing stark naked at midnight in a strange boat, confronting somebody of whose speech he comprehends not one word. But I felt that I had stumbled upon a priceless asset if I could only use it, and I was determined not to let the chance slip. He poured out a flow of Greek, at which I could only shake my head and murmur "English." Then I tried the language of signs, and went through a vigorous pantomime to explain that, though I could not speak his tongue, I had a friend on shore who could. The yacht had a dinghy. Would he row me ashore and meet my friend?

It took me the devil of a time to make this clear to him, and I had to lead him to where the dinghy lay astern, point to it, point to the shore, point to my dumb mouth, and generally behave like a maniac. But he got it at last. He seemed to consider, then he dived below and returned with a thing like an iron mace which he brandished round his head as if to give me to understand that if I misbehaved he could brain me. I smiled and nodded and put my hand on my heart, and he smiled back.

Then his whole manner changed. He brought me a coat and an ancient felt hat, and made signs that I should put them on. He dived below again and brought up a bowl of hot cocoa, which did me good, for my teeth were beginning to chatter. Finally he motioned me to get into the dinghy and set his mace beside him, took the sculls and pulled me in the direction I indicated.

Janni was sitting smoking on a stone, the image of innocent peace. I cried out to him before we reached shore, and told him that this was the skipper and that he must talk to him. The two began their conversation before we landed, and presently it seemed that Janni had convinced my host that we were respectable. As soon as we landed I started to put on my clothes, but first I took the pistol from my coat pocket and presented the butt-end to my new friend. He saw my intention, bowed ceremoniously, and handed it back to me. He also pitched the mace back into the dinghy, as if he regarded it as no longer necessary.

He and Janni talked volubly and with many gesticulations, and the latter now and then broke off to translate for my benefit. I noticed that as time went on the seaman's face, though it remained friendly, grew also obstinate.

"He says he awaits his master here," said Janni, "but who his master is and where he is gone he will not tell. He says also that this island is full of devils and bad men, and that on no account will he stay on it."

I put suggestions to Janni, which he translated, but we could get nothing out of the fellow, except the repeated opinion—with which I agreed—that the island was full of devils, and that the only place for an honest man was the water. About his master he remained stubbornly silent. I wanted him to take me in his boat round the farther bluff, so that we could land on the olive-yard slopes and possibly get in touch with Maris, but he peremptorily refused. He would not leave the bay, which was the only safe place. Elsewhere were the men and women of Plakos, who were devils.

After about an hour's fruitless talk I gave it up. But one thing I settled. I told him through Janni that there were others besides ourselves and himself who were in danger from the devils of the island. There was a lady—an English lady—who was even now in dire peril. If we could bring her to the spot would he be on the watch and take her on board?

He considered this for a little, and then agreed. He would not leave the island without his master, but he would receive the lady if necessary, and if the devils followed he would resist them. He was obviously a fighting man, and I concluded he would be as good as his word. Asked if in case of pursuit he would put to sea, he said, "No, not till his master returned." That was the best I could make of him, but of that precious master he refused to speak a syllable. His own name he said was George—known at home as Black George, to distinguish him from a cousin, George of the Hare-lip.

We parted in obscure friendliness. I presented him with my empty cigarette-case, and he kissed me on both cheeks. As I handed him back the garments which he had lent me to cover my nakedness, I noticed a curious thing. The coat was an aquascutum so old that the maker's tab had long since gone from it. But inside the disreputable felt hat I saw the name of a well-known shop in Jermyn Street.

CHAPTER 11

Janni and I returned to the camp before dawn. For some unknown reason a heavy weariness overcame me on the way back, and I could scarcely drag my limbs over the last half-mile of shore and up the stone shoot to the edge of the downs. I dropped on the ground beside the ashes of the fire, and slept like a drugged man.

When I awoke it was high forenoon. The sun was beating full on the little hollow, and Janni was cooking breakfast. My lethargy had gone, and I woke to a violent, anxious energy. Where was Maris? He ought to have rejoined us, according to plan, before sunrise. But Janni had seen no sign of him. Had he got into the House? Well, in that case he would find means to send us a message, and to send it soon, for this was Good Friday, the day which the priest feared. I was in a fever of impatience, for I had found a boat, a means of escape of which Maris did not know. If he was in the House, I must get that knowledge to him, and he in turn must get in touch as soon as possible with me. Our forces were divided with no link of communication.

I did my best to possess my soul in that hot scented forenoon, but it was a hard job, for the sense of shortening time had got on my nerves. The place was cooled by light winds from the sea, and for Janni, who lay on his back and consumed cigarettes, it was doubtless a pleasant habitation. Rivers of narcissus and iris and anemone flooded over the crest and spilled into the hollow. The ground was warm under the short herbage, and from it came the rich clean savour of earth quickening after its winter sleep under the spell of the sun. The pigeons were cooing in the cliffs below me, and the air was full of the soft tideless swaying of the sea. But for all the comfort it gave me I might have been stretched on frozen bricks in a dungeon. I was constantly getting up and crawling to a high point which gave me a view of the rim of the downs up to the wall, and eastwards towards the Vano road. But there was no sign of Maris in the wide landscape.

About one o'clock the thing became unbearable. If Maris was in the House I must find touch with him; if he had failed, I must make the attempt myself. It was a crazy thing to contemplate in broad daylight, but my anxiety would not let me stay still. I bade Janni wait for me, and set off towards the Vano road, with the intention of trying Maris's route of the previous night and making a circuit by the east side of the village towards the jetty.

I had the sense to keep on the south side of the ridge out of sight of the Dancing Floor and the high ground beyond it. There was not a soul to be seen in all that grassy place; the winding highway showed no figure as far as the eye could reach; even the closes and barns clustered about the foot of the Dancing Floor seemed untenanted of man or beast. I gave the village a wide berth, and after crossing some patches of cultivation and scrambling through several ragged thickets found myself due east of Kynaetho and some three hundred feet above it.

There I had the prospect of the church rising above a line of hovels, a bit of the main street, the rear of the inn, and the houses which straggled seaward toward the jetty. The place had undergone another transformation, for it seemed to be deserted. Not one solitary figure appeared in the blinding white street. Every one must be indoors engaged in some solemn preparation against the coming night. That gave me a hope that the northern approaches to the House might be unguarded. So great was my anxiety that I set off at a run, and presently had reached the high ground which overlooked the road from the village to the harbour. Here I had to go circumspectly, for once I descended to the road I would be in view of any one on the jetty, and probably, too, of the northernmost houses in the village.

I scanned the foreground long and carefully with my glass, and decided that no one was about, so I slipped down from the heights, crossed the road a hundred yards above the harbour, and dived into the scrub which bordered the beach on the farther side. Here I was completely sheltered, and made good going till I rounded a little point and came into a scene which was familiar. It was the place where, six years before, Vernon and I had landed from Lamancha's yacht. There were the closes of fruit blossom, the thickets, the long scrubby ravine where we had listened to the Spring Song. I had a sudden sense of things being predestined, of the ironical fore-ordination of life.

I knew what to expect. Round the horn of the little bay where I stood lay the House with its jetty and the causeway and the steep stairs to the postern gates. My success thus far had made me confident, and I covered the next half-mile as if I were walking on my own estate. But I had the wit to move cautiously before I passed the containing ridge, and crept up to the skyline.

It was well that I did so, for this was what I saw. On the jetty there were guards, and there were posts along the causeway. More, some change had been wrought in the seaward wall of the House. The huge place rose, blank and white, in its cincture of greenery, but at the points where the steps ended in postern doors there seemed to be a great accumulation of brushwood which was not the work of nature. My glass told me what it was. The entrance was piled high with fagots. The place had been transformed into a pyre.

But it was not that sight which sent my heart to my boots—I had been prepared for that or any other devilry; it was the utter impossibility of effecting an entrance. The fabric rose stark and silent like a prison, and round it stood the wardens.

I didn't wait long, for the spectacle made me mad. I turned and retraced my steps, as fast as I could drag my legs, for every ounce of vigour had gone out of me. It was a dull, listless automaton that recrossed the harbour road, made the long circuit east of the village, and regained the downs beyond the Dancing Floor. When I staggered into camp, where the placid Janni was playing dice, it was close on five o'clock.

I made myself a cup of tea and tried to piece the situation together. Maris could not have entered the House—the thing was flatly impossible, and what had happened to him I could only guess. Where he had failed I certainly could not succeed,

for the cliffs, the wall, and the guards shut it off impenetrably from the world. Inside was Koré alone—I wondered if the old servant whom she had called Mitri was with her, or the French maid she had had in London—and that night would see the beginning of the end. The remembrance of the fagots piled about the door sent a horrid chill to my heart. The situation had marched clean outside human power to control it. I thought with scorn of my self-confidence. I had grievously muddled every detail, and was of as little value as if I had remained in my Temple chambers. Pity and fear for the girl made me clench my hands and gnaw my lips. I could not stay still. I decided once more to prospect the line of the cliffs.

One-armed Janni was no use, so I left him behind. I slid down the stone-shoot and in the first cool of evening scrambled along that arduous shore. When I had passed the abutment of the wall I scanned with my glass every crack in the cliffs, but in daylight they looked even more hopeless than under the moon. At one place a shallow gully permitted me to reach a shelf, but there I stuck fast, for the rock above could only have been climbed by a hanging rope. The most desperate man—and by that time I was pretty desperate—could not find a way where the Almighty had decided that there should be none. I think that if there had been the faintest chance I would have taken it, in spite of the risks; I would have ventured on a course which at Chamonix or Cortina would have been pronounced suicidal; but here there was not even the rudiments of a course—nothing but that maddening glassy wall.

By-and-by I reached the cape beyond which lay the hidden bay and Black George with his boat. It occurred to me that I had not prospected very carefully the cliffs in this bay, and in any case I wanted to look again at the boat, that single frail link we had with the outer world. But first I stripped and had a bathe, which did something to cool the fret of my nerves. Then I waded round the point to the place where Janni and I had talked with the seaman.

Black George had gone. There was not a trace of him or the boat in the shining inlet into which the westering sun was pouring its yellow light. What on earth had happened? Had his mysterious master returned? Or had he been driven off by the islanders? Or had he simply grown bored and sailed away? The last solution I dismissed: Black George, I was convinced, was no quitter.

The loss of him was the last straw to my hopelessness. I was faced with a situation with which no ingenuity or fortitude could grapple—only some inhuman skill in acrobatics or some Berserker physical powers which I did not possess. I turned my glass listlessly on the cliffs which lined the bay. There was nothing to be done there. They were as sheer as those I had already prospected, and, although more rugged and broken, it was by means of great noses of smooth rock on which only a fly could move.

I was sitting on the very boulder which Janni had occupied the night before, and I saw on the shingle one or two of his cigarette stumps. And then I saw something else.

It was a cigarette end, but not one of Janni's caporals. Moreover it had been dropped there during the past day. Janni's stumps, having been exposed to the night dews, were crumpled and withered; this was intact, the butt end of an Egyptian cigarette of a good English brand. Black George must have been here in the course of the day. But I remembered that Black George had smoked a peculiarly evil type of Greek tobacco. Perhaps he had been pilfering his master's cigarettes? Or perhaps his master had come back?

I remembered that he had refused to utter one word about that master of his. Who could he be? was he an Englishman? He might well be, judging from Black George's reverence for the word "English." If so, what was he doing in Plakos, and how had he reached this spot, unless he had the wings of a bird? If he had come along the downs and the shore Janni would have seen him... Anyhow, he was gone now, and our one bridge with a sane world was broken.

I made my way back to Janni with a feeling that I had come to the edge of things and would presently be required to go over the brink. I was now quite alone—as much alone as Koré—and fate might soon link these lonelines. I had had this feeling once or twice in the war—that I was faced with something so insane that insanity was the only course for me, but I had no notion what form the insanity would take, for I still saw nothing before me but helplessness. I was determined somehow to break the barrier, regardless of the issue. Every scrap of manhood in me revolted against my futility. In that moment I became primitive man again. Even if the woman were not my woman she was of my own totem, and whatever her fate she should not meet it alone.

Janni had food ready for me, but I could not eat it. I took out my pistol, cleaned and reloaded it, and told Janni to look to his. I am not much of a pistol shot, but Janni, as I knew from Maris, was an expert. There would be something astir when the moon rose, and I had an intuition that the scene would be the Dancing Floor. The seaward end of the House might be the vital point in the last stage of the drama, but I was convinced that the Dancing Ground would see the first act. It was the holy ground, and I had gathered from the priest that some dark ritual would take the place of the Good Friday solemnity.

There was only one spot where Janni and I might safely lie hidden, and at the same time look down on the Dancing Floor, and that was in the shadow of the wall between the guarded breach and the cliffs. There were large trees there, and the progress of the moon would not light it up, whereas everywhere else would be clear as noonday. Moreover it was the strategic point, for whatever mischief was intended against the House would pass through the breach and therefore under our eyes. But it was necessary to get there before the moon was fully risen, for otherwise to men coming from the village we should be silhouetted against the cliff edge. I cut Janni's supper short and we started out, using every crinkle of the ground as cover, much as stalkers do when they are fetching a circuit and know that the deer are alarmed and watchful.

We had not much more than a mile to go, and by the route we chose we managed, as it happened, to keep wholly out of

sight of the Dancing Floor. Janni—no mountaineer—grumbled at my pace, for I had acquired an extraordinary lightness of limb so that I felt as if I could have flown. I was puzzled to explain this, after my listlessness of the day, but I think it was due partly to tense nerves and partly to the magic of the evening. The air was cool and exhilarating, and when the moon rose with a sudden glory above the House it was as tonic as if one had plunged into water... Soon we were on the edge of the inky belt of shadow and moving eastward to get nearer the breach. But now I noticed something I had forgotten. The wall curved outward, and beyond that bulge—a couple of hundred yards from the breach—the light flooded to the very edge of the stone. We came to a halt at the apex of the curve, flat on our faces, and I turned to reconnoitre the Dancing Floor.

I wish to Heaven that I had the gift of words. It is too much to ask a man whose life has been spent in drawing pleadings and in writing dull legal opinions to describe a scene which needs the tongue or pen of a poet. For the Dancing Floor was transfigured. Its lonely beauty had been decked and adorned, as an altar is draped for high festival. On both slopes people clustered, men, women, and children, all so silent that I thought I could hear them breathe. I thought, too, that they mostly wore white—at any rate the moonlight gave me the impression of an immense white multitude, all Kynaetho, and doubtless half the hills. The valley was marked out like a race-course. There seemed to be posts at regular intervals in a broad oval, and at each post was a red flicker which meant torches. The desert had become populous, and the solitary places blossomed with roses of fire.

The people were clustered toward the upper end, making an amphitheatre of which the arena was the Dancing Floor, and the entrance to the stage the breach in the wall of the House. I saw that this entrance was guarded, not as before by three sentries, but by a double line of men who kept an avenue open between them. Beyond the spectators and round the arena was the circle of posts, and between them lay the Dancing Floor, golden in the moon, and flanked at its circumference by the angry crimson of the torches. I noticed another thing. Not quite in the centre but well within the arena was a solitary figure waiting. He was in white—gleaming white, and, so far as I could judge, he was standing beside the spring from which I had drunk the night before.

I have set out the details of what I saw, but they are only the beggarly elements, for I cannot hope to reproduce the strangeness which caught at the heart and laid a spell on the mind. The place was no more the Valley of the Shadow of Life, but Life itself—a surge of daemonic energy out of the deeps of the past. It was wild and yet ordered, savage and yet sacramental, the home of an ancient knowledge which shattered for me the modern world and left me gasping like a cave-man before his mysteries. The magic smote on my brain, though I struggled against it. The passionless moonlight and the passionate torches—that, I think, was the final miracle—a marrying of the eternal cycle of nature with the fantasies of man.

The effect on Janni was overwhelming. He lay and gibbered prayers with eyes as terrified as a deer's, and I realized that I need not look for help in that quarter. But I scarcely thought of him, for my trouble was with myself. Most people would call me a solid fellow, with a hard head and a close-texture mind, but if they had seen me then they would have changed their view. I was struggling with something which I had never known before, a mixture of fear, abasement, and a crazy desire to worship. Yes—to worship. There was that in the scene which awakened some ancient instinct, so that I felt it in me to join the votaries.

It took me a little time to pull myself together. I looked up at the dome of the sky, where on the horizon pale stars were showing. The whole world seemed hard and gem-like and unrelenting. There was no help there. Nature approved this ritual. And then a picture flashed into my mind which enabled me to recover my wits. It was the carved Christ lying in its shroud in the bier in the deserted church. I am not a religious man in the ordinary sense—only a half-believer in the creed in which I was born. But in that moment I realized that there was that in me which was stronger than the pagan, an instinct which had come down to me from believing generations. I understood then what were my gods. I think I prayed, I know that I clung to the memory of that rude image as a Christian martyr may have clung to his crucifix. It stood for all the broken lights which were in me as against this ancient charmed darkness.

I was steadier now, and with returning sanity came the power of practical thought. Something, some one, was to be brought from the House. Was there to be a trial in that arena? Or a sacrifice? No—I was clear that to-night was only the preparation, and that the great day was the morrow. There was no sound from the gathering. I could not see the faces, but I knew that every one, down to the smallest child, was awed and rapt and expectant. No crowd, hushing its breath in the decisive moments of a great match, was ever more rigidly on the stretch. The very air quivered with expectation.

Then a movement began. Figures entered the arena at the end farthest from me—men, young men, naked I thought at first, till my glass showed me that each wore a sort of loin-cloth or it may have been short drawers... They aligned themselves, like runners at the start of a race, and still there was no sound. The figure who had been standing by the well was now beside them and seemed to be speaking softly. Each held himself tense, with clenched hands, and his eyes on the ground. Then came some kind of signal, and they sprang forward.

It was a race—such a race as few men can have witnessed. The slim youths kept outside the torches, and circled the arena of the Dancing Floor. Over the moonlit sward they flew, glimmering like ghosts—once round, a second time round. And all the while the crowd kept utter silence.

I ran the mile myself at school and college, and know something about pace. I could see that it was going to be a close finish. One man I noted, I think the very fellow who had hunted me into the church—he ran superbly, and won a lead at the start. But the second time round I fancied another, a taller and leaner man, who had kept well back in the first round, and was slowly creeping ahead. I liked his style, which was oddly like the kind of thing we cultivate at home, and he ran with judgment too. Soon he was abreast of the first man, and then he sprinted and took the lead. I was wondering where the

finish would be, when he snatched a torch from one of the posts, ran strongly up the centre of the Dancing Floor, and plunged the flame in the spring.

Still there was no sound from the crowd. The winner stood with his head bent, a noble figure of youth who might have stepped from a Parthenon frieze. The others had gone; he stood close beside the well with the white-clad figure who had acted as master of ceremonies—only now the victor in the race seemed to be the true master, on whom all eyes waited.

The sight was so strange and beautiful that I watched it half in a trance. I seemed to have seen it all before, and to know the stages that would follow ... Yes, I was right. There was a movement from the crowd and a man was brought forward. I knew the man, though he wore nothing but pants and a torn shirt. One could not mistake the trim figure of Maris, or his alert, bird-like head.

He stood confronting the beautiful young barbarian beside the spring, looking very much as if he would like to make a fight of it. And then the latter seemed to speak to him, and to lay a hand on his head. Maris submitted, and the next I saw was that the runner had drawn a jar of water from the well and was pouring it over him. He held it high in his arms and the water wavered and glittered in the moonshine; I could see Maris spluttering and wringing out his wet shirt-sleeves.

With that recollection flooded in on me. This was the ceremonial of which Vernon had read to me from Koré's manuscript. A virgin and a youth were chosen and set apart in a hallowed place, and the chooser was he who was victor in a race and was called the King. The victims were hallowed with water from the well by the white cypress. I was looking at the well, though the cypress had long since disappeared. I was looking at the King, and at one of those dedicated to the sacrifice. The other was the girl in the House... Vernon had said that if we knew what the word *hosiotheis* meant we should know a good deal about Greek religion. That awful knowledge was now mine.

It was as I expected. The consecrator and the consecrated were moving, still in the same hushed silence, towards the *horkos*—the sanctuary. The torches had been extinguished as soon as the victor plunged his in the spring, and the pure light of the moon seemed to have waxed to an unearthly brightness. The two men walked up the slope of the Dancing Floor to the line of guards which led to the breach in the wall. I could not hold my glass because of the trembling of my hands, but I could see the figures plainly—the tall runner, his figure poised like some young Apollo of the great age of art, his face dark with the sun but the skin of his body curiously white. Some youth of the hills, doubtless—his crisp hair seemed in the moonlight to be flaxen. Beside him went the shorter Maris, flushed and truculent. He must have been captured by the guards in his attempt on the House, and as a stranger and also a Greek had been put forward as the male victim.

I was roused by the behaviour of Janni. He had realized that his beloved *capitaine* was a prisoner, towards whom some evil was doubtless intended, and this understanding had driven out his fear and revived his military instincts. He was cursing fiercely, and had got out his pistol.

"Sir," he whispered to me, "I can crawl within shot, for the shadow is lengthening, and put a bullet into yon bandit. Then in the confusion my *capitaine* will escape and join us and break for the cliffs. These people are sheep and may not follow."

For a second it appeared to me the only thing to do. This evil Adonis was about to enter the House, and on the morrow Koré and Maris would find death at his hands, for he was the sacrificer. I seemed to see in his arrogant beauty the cruelty of an elder world. His death would at any rate shatter the ritual.

And then I hesitated and gripped Janni firmly by his one arm. For, as the two men passed out of my sight towards the breach in the wall, I had caught a glimpse of Maris's face. He was speaking to his companion, and his expression was not of despair and terror, but confident, almost cheerful. For an instant the life of the young runner hung on a thread, for I do not think that Janni would have missed. Then I decided against the shot, for I felt that it was a counsel of despair. There was something which I did not comprehend, for Maris's face had given me a glimmer of hope.

I signed to Janni, and we started crawling back towards the cliffs. In that hour the one thing that kept me sane was the image of the dead Christ below the chancel step. It was my only link with the reasonable and kindly world I had lost.

CHAPTER 12

I had only one impulse at that moment—an overwhelming desire to get back to the church and look again at the figure on the bier. It seemed to me the sole anchor in the confusion of uncharted tides, the solitary hope in a desert of perplexities. I had seen ancient magic revive and carry captive the hearts of a people. I had myself felt its compelling power. A girl whom I loved and a man who was my companion were imprisoned and at the mercy of a maddened populace. Maris was, like Ulysses, an old campaigner and a fellow of many wiles, but what could Maris do in the face of multitudes? An unhallowed epiphany was looked for, but first must come the sacrifice. There was no help in the arm of flesh, and the shallow sophistication of the modern world fell from me like a useless cloak. I was back in my childhood's faith, and wanted to be at my childhood's prayers.

As for Janni, he had a single idea in his head, to follow his captain into the House and strike a blow for him, and as he padded along the seaward cliffs he doubtless thought we were bent on attacking the place from another side. We took pretty much the road I had taken in the morning, skirting the Dancing Floor on its southern edge. One strange thing I saw. The Dancing Floor was still thronged, though a space was kept clear in the centre round the well. Clearly it was no longer *tabu*, but a place of holiday. Moreover the people seemed to intend to remain there, for they had lit fires and were squatting round them, while some had already stretched themselves to sleep. Kynaetho had moved in a body to the scene of the sacrament.

When we reached the fringe of the village I saw that I had guessed correctly. There was not a sign of life in the streets. We walked boldly into the central square, and it might have been a graveyard. Moreover, in the graveyard itself the lamps by the graves had not been lit. Vampires were apparently no longer to be feared, and that struck me as an ill omen. Keats's lines came into my head about the "little town by river or sea shore" which is "emptied of its folk this pious morn." Pious morn!

And then above us, from the squat campanile, a bell began to toll—raggedly, feebly, like the plaint of a child. Yet to me it was also a challenge.

The church was bright with moonshine. The curtains still shrouded the sanctuary, and there were no candles lit, nothing but the flickering lamps before the ikons. Below the chancel step lay the dark mass which contained the shrouded Christ. Janni, like myself, seemed to find comfort in being here. He knelt at a respectful distance from the bier, and began to mutter prayers. I went forward and lifted the shroud. The moon coming through one of the windows gave the carved wood a ghastly semblance of real flesh, and I could not bear to look on it. I followed Janni's example and breathed incoherent prayers. I was bred a Calvinist, but in that moment I was not worshipping any graven image. My prayer was to be delivered from the idolatry of the heathen.

Suddenly the priest was beside me. In one hand he held a lighted candle, and the other carried a censer. He seemed in no way surprised to see us, but there was that about him which made me catch my breath. The man had suddenly become enlarged and ennobled. All the weakness had gone out of the old face, all the languor and bewilderment out of the eyes, the shoulders had straightened, his beard was no longer like a goat's, but like a prophet's. He was as one possessed, a fanatic, a martyr.

He had forgotten that I knew no Greek, for he spoke rapidly words which sounded like a command. But Janni understood, and went forward obediently to the bier. Then I saw what he meant us to do. We were to take the place of the absent hierophants and carry the image of the dead Christ through the bounds of the village. The bier was light enough even for one-armed Janni to manage his share. The shroud was removed, he took the fore-end, and I the back, and behind the priest we marched out into the night.

The streets were deathly still, the cool night air was unruffled by wind, so that the candle burned steadily; the golden dome of the sky was almost as bright as day. Along the white beaten road we went, and then into the rough cobbles of the main street. I noticed that though the houses were empty every house door was wide open. We passed the inn and came into the road to the harbour and to the cottage among fruit trees where I had first made inquiries. Then we turned up the hill where lay the main entrance to the House, past little silent untenanted crofts and olive-yards, which were all gleaming grey and silver. The old man moved slowly, swinging his censer, and intoning what I took to be a dirge in a voice no longer tremulous, but masterful and strong, and behind him Janni and I stumbled along bearing the symbol of man's salvation.

I had never been present at a Greek Good Friday celebration, but Koré had described it to me—the following crowds tortured with suspense, the awed, kneeling women, the torches, the tears, the universal lamentation. Then the people sorrowed, not without hope, for their dead Saviour. But the ordinary ceremonial can never have been so marvellous as was our broken ritual that night. We were celebrating, but there were no votaries. The torches had gone to redden the Dancing Floor, sorrow had been exchanged for a guilty ecstasy, the worshippers were seeking another Saviour. Our rite was more than a commemoration, it was a defiance, and I felt like a man who carries a challenge to the enemy.

The moon had set and darkness had begun before we returned to the church. Both Janni and I were very weary before we laid down our burden in the vault below the nave, a place hewn out of the dry limestone rock. By the last flickering light of the candle I saw the priest standing at the head of the bier, his hands raised in supplication, his eyes bright and rapt and unseeing. He was repeating a litany in which a phrase constantly recurred. I could guess its meaning. It must have been "He will yet arise."

I slept till broad daylight in the priest's house, on the priest's bed, while Janni snored on a pile of sheepskins. Since Kynaetho was deserted, there was no reason now for secrecy, for the whole place, and not the church only, had become a sanctuary. The aged woman who kept house for the priest gave us a breakfast of milk and bread, but we saw no sign of him, and I did not wish to return to the church and disturb his devotions. I wondered if I should ever see him again; it was a toss-up if I should ever see anybody again after this day of destiny. We had been partners in strange events, and I could not leave him without some farewell, so I took the book of his which seemed to be most in use, put two English five-pound notes inside, and did my best in laboriously printed Latin to explain that this was a gift for the Church and to thank him and wish him well.

I did another thing, for I wrote out a short account of the position, saying that further information might be obtained from Ertzberger and Vernon Milburne. Anything might happen to-day, and I wanted to leave some record for my friends. I addressed the document under cover to the priest, and—again in Latin—begged him, should anything happen to me, to see that it reached the British Minister in Athens. That was about all I could do in the way of preparation, and I had a moment of grim amusement in thinking how strangely I, who since the war had seemed to be so secure and cosseted, had moved back to the razor-edge of life.

I have said that there was no need for secrecy, so we walked straight through the village towards the harbour. Janni had made a preliminary survey beyond the graveyard in the early morning, and had reported that the people of Kynaetho were still encamped around the Dancing Floor. The trouble would not begin till we approached the House, for it was certain that on that day of all days the guards would be vigilant. We were both of us wholly desperate. We simply had to get in, and to get in before the evening; for that purpose anything, even wholesale homicide, was legitimate. But at the same time it would do no good to get caught, even if we succeeded in killing several of our captors.

I think I had a faint, unreasonable hope that we should find the situation at the causeway more promising than it had appeared on the day before. But when—after a walk where we had seen no trace of man or beast—we came to the crest of the little cape beyond which lay the jetty and the House, I had a sad disillusionment. The place was thick with sentries. I saw the line of them along the causeway and at the head of the jetty; moreover there seemed to be men working to the left of the House where there was a cluster of outbuildings descending to the shallow vale up which ran the road from the sea. My glass showed me what they were doing. They were piling more straw and brushwood, so that from the outbuildings, which were probably of wood and would burn like tinder, the flames might have easy access to the windows of the House. The altar was being duly prepared for the victim.

Long and carefully I prospected the ground. There was cover enough to take us down to within a few yards of the jetty. If I tried to cross it I should be within view of the people on the causeway, and even if I got across unobserved there was the more or less open beach between the causeway and the sea. It was true that directly under the wall I should be out of sight of the causeway guards, but then again, though I could get shelter behind some of the boulders, I could not move far without being noticed by whoever chose to patrol the jetty. Nevertheless that was the only road for me, for my object was to get to the far end of the causeway, where before the cliffs began there were olive-yards and orchards, through which some route must be possible to the House.

I considered the left side of the picture, where the valley led upwards past the outbuildings. That way I could see no hope, for if I succeeded in passing the fagot-stackers I would only reach the confines of the main entrance to the demesne from Kynaetho, which was certain to be the best warded of all.

I had also to consider what to do with Janni. He would be a useful ally if it came to a scrap, but a scrap would be futile against such numbers, and in stalking or climbing his lack of an arm would be a serious handicap. Besides, if our business was to escape observation, one man would be better than two ... But it was possible that he might create a diversion. Supposing he tried the road on the left up the valley and made himself conspicuous, he might draw off attention while I crossed the jetty and got under the lee of the causeway wall. That meant, of course, that one of us would be put out of action, but unless we tried something of the kind we should both fail.

I put the thing to him, as we lay among the scrubby arbutus, and though he clearly did not like the proposal, since his notion was to manhandle somebody on Maris's behalf, he was too good a soldier not to see the sense of it. He pointed out various difficulties, and then shook his head like a dog and said that he agreed. For his own sake I forbade any shooting. If he were merely hunted and captured, it was unlikely that any harm would befall him. He could explain that he was one of the survey party who had lost the others, and at the worst he would be shut up temporarily in some barn. He might even find the means to make himself useful later in the day.

So it was settled that I should try to worm my way as near to the jetty as the cover would allow. He was to watch my movements, and when he saw my hand raised three times he was to march boldly towards the jetty. I would not be able to see what was happening, so when he was pursued and started up the little valley he was to shout as if in alarm. That would be the signal to me that the sentry had left the jetty and that I might try to cross it.

I started out at once on my first stage. As I have said, the cover was good—boulders overgrown with heath and vines, and patches of arbutus and a very prickly thorn. I tried to behave as if I were on a Scotch hill stalking alone, with deer where the sentries stood. It was not a very difficult passage, for my enemies had no eyes for the ground on my side, their business being to prevent egress from the House. After about half an hour's careful crawling, I found myself within six yards of the jetty looking through the tangle to the rough masonry of it, with a sideway view of the point where it joined the causeway. I could see none of the guards, but I heard distinctly the sound of their speech. I had marked the spot where I now lay before

I started, and knew that it was within sight of Janni. So I straightened myself and thrice raised my arms above the scrub.

For a minute or two nothing happened. Janni must have started but had not yet attracted attention. I raised my body as far as I dared, but I could only see the shoreward end of the jetty—neither the jetty itself nor any part of the causeway. I waited for a cry, but there was no sound. Was Janni being suffered to make his way up the little valley unopposed?

Then suddenly a moving object flashed into my narrow orbit of vision. It must be one of the watchers from the causeway, and he was in a furious hurry—I could hear the scruff of his heelless boots on the dry stones as he turned a corner... He must be in pursuit of Janni... There would no doubt be others too at the job. Their silence might be a ritual business. *Favete linguis*, perhaps? If Janni shouted I never heard him.

I resolved to take the chance, and bolted out of cover to the jetty. In two bounds I was beyond it and among the gravel and weed of the farther beach. But in that short progress I saw enough of the landscape to know that I was undiscovered, that there was nobody on the causeway within sight, or at the mouth of the little glen. Janni had certainly been followed, and by this time was no doubt in the hands of the Philistines out of my ken.

I ran close under the lee of the sea-wall, and at first I had a wild hope of getting beyond the causeway into the region of the olive groves before the sentries returned. But some remnant of prudence made me halt and consider before I attempted the last open strip of beach. There I had a view of the bit of the causeway towards the jetty, and suddenly figures appeared on it, running figures, like men returning to duty after a hasty interlude. If I had moved another foot I should have been within view.

There was nothing for it but to wait where I was. I crouched in a little nook between a fallen boulder and the wall, with the weedy rim of the causeway six feet above me. Unless a man stood on the very edge and peered down I was safe from observation. But that was the sum of my blessings. I heard soft feet above me as the men returned to their posts, and I dared not move a yard. It was now about two in the afternoon; I had brought no food with me, though I found a couple of dusty figs in my pocket; the sun blazed on the white wall and the gravel of the shore till the place was like a bakehouse; I was hot and thirsty, and I might have been in the middle of the Sahara for all the chance of a drink. But the discomfort of my body was trivial compared with the disquiet of my mind.

For I found myself in a perfect fever of vexation and fear. The time was slipping past and the crisis was nigh, and yet, though this was now my fourth day on the island, I was not an inch farther forward than the hour I landed. My worst fears—nay, what had seemed to me mere crazy imaginings—had been realized. I was tortured by the thought of Koré—her innocent audacities, her great-hearted courage, her loneliness, her wild graces. “Beauteous vain endeavour”—that was the phrase of some poet that haunted me and made me want to howl like a wolf. I realized now the meaning of a sacrifice and the horror of it. The remembrance of the slim victor in the race, beautiful and pitiless, made me half-crazy. Movement in that place was nearly impossible, but it was utterly impossible that I should stay still. I began in short stages to worm my way along the foot of the wall.

I do not suppose that the heat of that April afternoon was anything much to complain of, but my fever of mind must have affected my body, for I felt that I had never been so scorched and baked in my life. There was not a scrap of shade, the rocks almost blistered the hand, the dust got into my throat and nose and made me furiously thirsty, and my head ached as if I had a sunstroke... The trouble was with the jetty and the watchers on it, for I was always in view of them. Had they detected a movement below the wall, a single glance would have revealed me. So I had to make my stages very short, and keep a wary outlook behind... There seemed to be much astir on the jetty. Not only the guards, but other figures appeared on it, and I saw that they were carrying up something from a boat at anchor. That, I think, was what saved me. Had the sentries had nothing to do but to stare about them I must have been discovered, but the portage business kept them distracted.

The minutes seemed hours to my distraught mind, but I did indeed take an inconceivable time crawling along that grilling beach, with the cool sea water lapping not a dozen yards off to give point to my discomfort. When I reached the place where the causeway ceased, and long ribs of rock took the place of the boulders of the shore, I found by my watch that it was nearly six o'clock. The discovery put quicksilver into my weary limbs. Looking back I saw that I was out of sight of the jetty, and that a few yards would put me out of sight of the causeway. I wriggled into the cover of a bush of broom, lay on my back for a minute or two to rest, and then made for the shade of the olive-yards.

The place was weedy and neglected—I don't know anything about olive culture, but I could see that much. There was a wilderness of a white umbelliferous plant and masses of a thing like a spineless thistle. I pushed uphill among the trees, keeping well in the shade, with the west front of the House glimmering through the upper leaves at a much higher elevation. Above me I saw a deeper shadow which I took to be cypresses, and beyond them I guessed must lie the demesne. I hoped for a gate, and in any case expected no more than a hedge and a palisade.

Instead I found a wall. There was a door to be sure, but it was no use for me, for it was massive and locked. I might have known that Shelley Arabin would leave no part of his cursed refuge unbarricaded. I sat and blinked up at this new obstacle, and could have cried with exasperation. It seemed to run direct from the House to the edge of the cliffs which began about a quarter of a mile to my right, and was an exact replica of the wall above the Dancing Floor.

I decided that it was no good trying it at the House end, for there I should certainly be in view of some of the guards. The masonry was comparatively new and very solid, and since none of the olive trees grew within four yards of it, it was impossible to use them as a ladder. Already I felt the approach of night, for the sun was well down in the west, and a great

tide of sunset was flooding the sky. I do not think I have ever before felt so hopeless or so obstinate. I was determined to pass that wall by its abutment on the cliffs or break my neck in the effort.

My memory of the next hour is not very clear. All I know is that in the failing daylight I came to the cliffs' edge and found an abutment similar to the one at the Dancing Floor. Similar, but not the same. For here some storm had torn the masonry, and it seemed to me that it might be passed. The rock fell steep and smooth to the sea, but that part which was the handiwork of man was ragged. I took off my boots and flung them over the wall, by way of a gage of battle, and then I started to make the traverse.

It was a slow and abominable business, but I do not think it would have been very difficult had the light been good, for the stone was hard enough and the cracks were many. But in that dim gloaming with a purple void beneath me, with a heart which would not beat steadily and a head which throbbed with pain, I found it very near the limit of my powers. I had to descend before I could traverse, and the worst part was the ascent on the far side. I knew that, when I at last got a grip of a wind-twisted shrub and tried to draw myself over the brink, it needed every ounce of strength left in me. I managed it, and lay gasping beside the roots of a great pine—inside the demesne at last.

When I got my breath I found that I had a view into the narrow cove where Janni and I had seen the boat. Black George had returned, and returned brazenly, for he was showing a riding light. A lantern swung from the mast, and, more, there was a glow from the cabin skylight. I wondered what was going on in the little craft, and I think the sight gave me a grain of comfort, till I realized that I was hopelessly cut off from Black George. What was the good of a link with the outer world when unscalable walls and cliffs intervened—when at any moment murder might be the end of everything?

Murder—that was the word which filled my head as I pushed inland. I had never thought of it in that way, but of course I was out to prevent murder. To prevent it? More likely to share in it... I had no plan of any kind, only a desire to be with Koré, so that she should not be alone. It was her loneliness that I could not bear... And anyhow I had a pistol, and I would not miss the runner. "The priest who slew the slayer and shall himself be slain"—the tag came unbidden to my lips. I think I must have been rather light-headed.

The last fires of the sunset did not penetrate far into the pine wood, the moon had not yet risen, and as I ran I took many tosses, for the place was very dark. There were paths, but I neglected them, making straight for where I believed the House to lie. I was not exact in my course, for I bore too much to the right in the direction of the breach in the wall at the Dancing Floor. Soon I was among shrubberies in which rides had been cut, but there were still many tall trees to make darkness. I thought I saw to the right, beyond where the wall lay, a reddish glow. That would be the torches on the Dancing Floor, where the people waited for the epiphany.

Suddenly on my left front a great blaze shot up to heaven. I knew it was the signal that the hour had come. The outbuildings had been fired, and the House would soon be in flames. The blaze wavered and waned, and then waxed to a mighty conflagration as the fire reached something specially inflammable. In a minute that wood was bright as with an obscene daylight. The tree trunks stood out black against a molten gold, which at times crimsoned and purpled in a devilish ecstasy of destruction.

I knew now where the House lay. I clutched my pistol, and ran down a broad path, with a horrid fear that I was too late after all. I ran blindly, and had just time to step aside to let two figures pass.

They were two of the guards—hillmen by their dress—and even in my absorption I wondered what had happened to them. For they were like men demented, with white faces and open mouths. One of them stumbled and fell, and seemed to stay on his knees for a second, praying, till his companion lugged him forward. I might have faced them with impunity, for their eyes were sightless. Never have I seen men suffering from an extremer terror.

The road twisted too much for my haste, so I cut across country. The surge and crackle of the flames filled the air, but it seemed as if I heard another sound, the sound of running feet, of bodies, many bodies, brushing through the thicket. I was close on the House now, and close on the road which led to it from the broken wall and the Dancing Floor. As I jumped a patch of scrub and the gloom lightened in the more open avenue, I bumped into another man and saw that it was Maris.

He was waiting, pistol in hand, beside the road, and in a trice had his gun at my head. Then he recognized me and lowered it. His face was as crazy as the hillmen's who had passed me, and he still wore nothing but breeches and a ragged shirt, but his wild eyes seemed to hold also a dancing humour.

"Blessed Jesu!" he whispered, "you have come in time. The fools are about to receive their Gods. You have your pistol? But I do not think there will be shooting."

He choked suddenly as if he had been struck dumb, and I too choked. For I looked with him up the avenue towards the burning House.

PART III

CHAPTER 13

This part of the story (said Leithen) I can only give at second-hand. I have pieced it together as well as I could from what Vernon told me, but on many matters he was naturally not communicative, and at these I have had to guess for myself...

Vernon left England the day after the talk with me which I have already recorded, sending his boat as deck cargo to Patras, while he followed by way of Venice. He had a notion that the great hour which was coming had best be met at sea, where he would be far from the distractions and littlenesses of life. He took one man with him from Wyvenhoe, a lean gipsy lad called Martell, but the boy fell sick at Corfu and he was obliged to send him home. In his stead he found a Epirote with a string of names, who was strongly recommended to him by one of his colleagues in the old Aegean Secret Service. From Patras they made good sailing up the Gulf of Corinth, and, passing through the Canal, came in the last days of March to the Piraeus. In that place of polyglot speech, whistling engines, and the odour of gasworks, they delayed only for water and supplies, and presently had rounded Sunium, and were beating up the Euripus with the Attic hills rising sharp and clear in the spring sunlight.

He had no plans. It was a joy to him to be alone with the racing seas and the dancing winds, to scud past the little headlands, pink and white with blossom, or to lie of a night in some hidden bay beneath the thymy crags. He had discarded the clothes of civilization. In a blue jersey and old corduroy trousers, bareheaded and barefooted, he steered his craft and waited on the passing of the hours. His mood, he has told me, was one of complete happiness, unshadowed by nervousness or doubt. The long preparation was almost at an end. Like an acolyte before a temple gate, he believed himself to be on the threshold of a new life. He had that sense of unseen hands which comes to all men once or twice in their lives, and both hope and fear were swallowed up in a calm expectancy.

Trouble began under the snows of Pelion as they turned the north end of Euboea. On the morning of the first Monday in April the light winds died away, and foul weather came out of the northwest. By midday it was half a gale, and in those yeasty shallow seas, with an iron coast to port and starboard, their position was dangerous. The nearest harbour was twenty miles distant, and neither of the crew had ever been there before. With the evening the gale increased, and it was decided to get out of that maze of rocky islands to the safer deeps of the Aegean.

It was a hard night for the two of them, and there was no chance of sleep. More by luck than skill they escaped the butt of Skiathos, and the first light found them far to the south-east among the long tides of the North Aegean. They ran close-reefed before the gale, and all morning with decks awash nosed and plunged in seas which might have been the wintry Atlantic. It was not till the afternoon that the gale seemed to blow itself out and two soaked and chilly mortals could relax their vigil. Soon bacon was frizzling on the cuddy-stove, and hot coffee and dry clothes restored them to moderate comfort.

The sky cleared, and in bright sunlight, with the dregs of the gale behind him, Vernon steered for the nearest land, an island of which he did not trouble to read the name, but which the chart showed to possess good anchorage. Late in the evening, when the light was growing dim, they came into a little bay carved from the side of a hill. They also came into fog. The wind had dropped utterly, and the land which they saw was only an outline in the haze. When they cast anchor the fog was rolling like a tide over the sea, and muffling their yards. They spent a busy hour or two, repairing the damage of the storm, and then the two of them made such a meal as befits those who have faced danger together. Afterwards Vernon, as his custom was, sat alone in the stern, smoking and thinking his thoughts. He wrote up his diary with a ship's lantern beside him, while the mist hung about him low and soft as an awning.

He had leisure now for the thought which had all day been at the back of his mind. The night—the great night— had passed and there had been no dream. The adventure for which all his life he had been preparing himself had vanished into the Aegean tides. The hour when the revelation should have come had been spent in battling with the storm, when a man lives in the minute at grips with too urgent realities.

His first mood was one of dismal relaxedness. He felt as useless as an unstrung bow. I, the only man to whom he had ever confided his secret, had been right, and the long vigil had ended in fiasco. He tried to tell himself that it was a relief, that an old folly was over, but he knew that deep down in his heart there was bitter disappointment. The fates had prepared the stage, and rung up the curtain, and lo! there was no play. He had been fooled, and somehow the zest and savour of life had gone from him. After all, no man can be strung high and then find his preparations idle without suffering a cruel recoil.

And then anger came to stiffen him—anger at himself. What a God-forsaken ass he had been, frittering away his best years in following a phantom!... In his revulsion he loathed the dream which he had cherished so long. He began to explain it away with the common sense which on my lips he had accounted blasphemy... The regular seasonal occurrence was his own doing—he had expected it and it had come—a mere case of subjective compulsion... The fact that each year the revelation had moved one room nearer was also the result of his willing it to be so, for subconsciously he must have desired to hasten the consummation... He went through every detail, obstinately providing some rationalistic explanation for each. I do not think he can have satisfied himself, but he was in the mood to deface his idols, and one feeling surged above all others—that he was done with fancies now and for ever. He has told me that the thing he longed for chiefly at that moment was to have me beside him that he might make formal recantation.

By-and-by he argued himself into some philosophy. He had dallied certain years, but he was still young, and the world was before him. He had kept his body and mind in hard training, and that at any rate was not wasted, though the primal purpose had gone. He was a normal man now among normal men, and it was his business to prove himself. He thought in

his Calvinistic way that the bogus vision might have been sent to him for a purpose—the thing might be hallucination, but the *askesis* which it had entailed was solid gain ... He fetched from his locker the little book in which he had chronicled his inner life, and wrote in it “Finis.” Then he locked it and flung the key overboard. The volume would be kept at Severns to remind him of his folly, but it would never be opened by him.

By this time he was his own master again. He would sail for England next morning and get hold of me and make a plan for his life.

He was now conscious for the first time of his strange environment. The boat was in a half-moon of bay in an island of which he had omitted to notice the name but whose latitude and longitude he roughly knew. The night was close around him like a shell, for the fog had grown thicker, though the moon behind it gave it an opaque sheen. It was an odd place in which to be facing a crisis...

His thoughts ran fast ahead to the career which he must shape from the ruins of his dream. He was too late for the Bar. Business might be the best course—he had big interests in the north of England which would secure him a footing, and he believed that he had the kind of mind for administration... Or politics? There were many chances for a young man in the confused post-bellum world...

He was absorbed in his meditations and did not hear the sound of oars or the grating of a boat alongside. Suddenly he found a face looking at him in the ring of lamplight—an old bearded face curiously wrinkled. The eyes, which were shrewd and troubled, scanned him for a second or two, and then a voice spoke:

“Will the Signor come with me?” it said in French.

Vernon, amazed at this apparition, which had come out of the mist, could only stare.

“Will the Signor come with me?” the voice spoke again. “We have grievous need of a man.”

Vernon unconsciously spoke not in French but in Greek.

“Who the devil are you, and where do you come from?”

“I come from the House. I saw you enter the bay before the fog fell. Had there been no fog, they would not have let me come to you.”

“Who are ‘they’?” Vernon asked.

But the old man shook his head. “Come with me and I will tell you. It is a long story.”

“But what do you want me to do? Confound it, I’m not going off with a man I never saw before who can’t tell me what he wants.”

The old man shrugged his shoulders despairingly. “I have no words,” he said. “But Mademoiselle Élise is waiting at the jetty. Come to her at any rate and she will reason with you.”

Vernon—as you will admit, if I have made his character at all clear to you—had no instinct for melodrama. He had nothing in him of the knight-errant looking for adventure, and this interruption out of the fog and the sea rather bored him than otherwise. But he was too young to be able to refuse such an appeal. He went below and fetched his revolver and an electric torch which he stuffed into a trouser pocket. He cried to the Epirote to expect him when he saw him, for he was going ashore.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll come and see what the trouble is.”

He dropped over the yacht’s side into the cockleshell of a boat, and the old man took up the sculls. The yacht must have anchored nearer land than he had thought, for in five minutes they had touched a shelving rock. Somebody stood there with a lantern which made a dull glow in the fog.

Vernon made out a middle-aged woman with the air and dress of a lady’s maid. She held the lantern close to him for a moment, and then turned wearily to the other. “Fool, Mitri!” she cried. “You have brought a peasant.”

“Nay,” said the old man, “he is no peasant. He is a Signor, I tell you.”

The woman again passed the light of her lantern over Vernon’s face and figure. “His dress is a peasant’s, but such clothes may be a nobleman’s whim. I have heard it of the English.”

“I am English,” said Vernon in French.

She turned on him with a quick movement of relief.

“You are English... and a gentleman? But I know nothing of you... only that you have come out of the sea. Up in the House we women are alone, and my mistress has death to face, or worse than death. We have no claim on you, and if you give us your service it means danger—oh, what danger! See, the boat is there. You can return in it and go away, and forget that you have been near this accursed place. But oh, Monsieur, if you hope for Heaven and have pity on a defenceless angel, you will not leave us.”

Vernon’s blood was slow to stir, and as I have said, he had no instinct for melodrama. This gesticulating French maid was like something out of an indifferent play.

"Who is your mistress?" he asked. "Did she send you for me?"

The woman flung up her hands.

"I will speak the truth. My mistress does not know you are here. Only Mitri and I saw you. She will not ask help, for she is foolishly confident. She is proud and fearless, and will not believe the evidence of her eyes. She must be saved in spite of herself. I fear for her and also for myself, for the whole House is doomed."

"But, Mademoiselle, you cannot expect me to intrude uninvited on your mistress. What is her name? What do you want me to do?"

She clutched his arm and spoke low and rapidly in his ear.

"She is the last of her line, you must know—a girl with a wild estate and a father dead these many months. She is good and gracious, as I can bear witness, but she is young and cannot govern the wolves who are the men of these parts. They have a long hatred of her house, and now they have it rumoured that she is a witch who blights the crops and slays the children ... Once, twice, they have cursed our threshold and made the blood mark on the door. We are prisoners now, you figure. They name her Basilissa, meaning the Queen of Hell, and there is no babe but will faint with fright if it casts eyes on her, and she as mild and innocent as Mother Mary... The word has gone round to burn the witch out, for the winter has been cruel and they blame their sorrows on her. The hour is near, and unless salvation comes she will go to God in the fire."

There was something in the hoarse, excited voice which forbade Vernon to dismiss lightly this extraordinary tale. The woman was patently terrified and sincere. It might be a trap, but he had his pistol, and from an old man and a woman he had nothing to fear. On the other hand, there might be some desperate need which he could not disregard. It seemed to him that he was bound to inquire further.

"I am willing to go to your mistress," he said, and the woman, murmuring "God's mercy," led the way up a steep causeway to some rocky steps cut in a tamarisk thicket.

She stopped half-way to whisper an injunction to go quietly. "They cannot see us in this blessed fog," she whispered, "but they may hear us." Then to Vernon: "They watch us like wild beasts, Monsieur; their sentries do not permit us to leave the House, but this night the kind God has fooled them. But they cannot be far off, and they have quick ears."

The three crept up the rock staircase made slippery by the heavy mist. Presently a great wall of masonry rose above them, and what seemed the aperture of a door. "Once," the woman whispered, "there were three such posterns, but two were walled up by my lady's father—walled up within, with the doors left standing. This our enemies do not know, and they watch all three, but this the least, for it looks unused. Behold their work!"

Vernon saw that tall bundles of brushwood had been laid around the door, and that these had with difficulty been pushed back when it was opened.

"But what...?" he began.

"It means that they would burn us," she hissed. "Now, Monsieur, do you believe my tale, and, believing, does your courage fail you?"

To Vernon, shy, placid, a devotee of all the conventions, it was beginning to seem a monstrous thing to enter this strange house at the bidding of two servants, primed with a crazy tale, to meet an owner who had given no sign of desiring his presence. A woman, too—apparently a young woman. The thing was hideously embarrassing, the more so as he suddenly realized that he was barefooted, and clad in his old jersey and corduroys. I think he would have drawn back except for the sight of the fagots—that and the woman's challenge to his courage. He had been "dared" like a schoolboy, and after twenty-four hours fighting with storms and the shattering of the purpose of a lifetime he was in that half-truculent, half-reckless mood which is prone to accept a challenge. There was business afoot, it appeared, ugly business.

"Go on. I will see your mistress," he said.

With a key the old man unlocked the door. The lock must have been recently oiled, for it moved easily. The three now climbed a staircase which seemed to follow the wall of a round tower. Presently they came into a stone hall with ancient hangings like the banners in a church. From the open frame of the lantern a second was kindled, and the two lights showed a huge desolate place with crumbling mosaics on the floor and plaster dropping from the walls and cornices. There was no furniture of any kind, and the place smelt damp and chilly like a vault.

"These are unused chambers," the woman said, and her voice was no longer hushed but high-pitched with excitement. "We live only on the landward side."

Another heavy door was unlocked, and they entered a corridor where the air blew warmer, and there was a hint of that indescribable scent which comes from human habitation. The woman stopped and consulted in whispers with the old man. Now that she had got Vernon inside, her nervousness seemed to have increased. She turned to him at last:

"I must prepare my mistress. If Monsieur will be so good he will wait here till I fetch him."

She opened a door and almost pushed Vernon within. He found himself in black darkness, while the flicker of the lantern vanished round a bend in the corridor.

CHAPTER 14

From his pocket Vernon drew his electric torch and flashed it round the room in which he found himself. It was the extreme opposite of the empty stone hall, for it was heavily decorated and crowded with furniture. Clearly no one had used it lately, for dust lay on everything, and the shutters of the windows had not been unbarred for months. It had the air, indeed, of a lumber-room, into which furniture had been casually shot. The pieces were, for the most part, fine and costly. There were several Spanish cabinets, a wonderful red-lacquer couch, quantities of Oriental rugs which looked good, and a litter of Chinese vases and antique silver lamps.

But it was not the junk which filled it that caught Vernon's eye. It was the walls, which had been painted and frescoed in one continuous picture. At first he thought it was a Procession of the Hours or the Seasons, but when he brought his torch to bear on it he saw that it was something very different. The background was a mountain glade, and on the lawns and beside the pools of a stream figures were engaged in wild dances. Pan and his satyrs were there, and a bevy of nymphs, and strange figures half animal, half human. The thing was done with immense skill—the slanted eyes of the fauns, the leer in a contorted satyr face, the mingled lust and terror of the nymphs, the horrid obscenity of the movements. It was a carnival of bestiality that stared from the four walls. The man who conceived it had worshipped darker gods even than Priapus.

There were other things which Vernon noted in the jumble of the room. A head of Aphrodite, for instance—Pandemos, not Urania. A broken statuette of a boy which made him sick. A group of little figures which were a miracle in the imaginative degradation of the human form. Not the worst relics from the lupanars of Pompeii compared with these in sheer subtlety of filth. And all this in a shuttered room stifling with mould and disuse.

There was a door at the farther end which he found unlocked. The room beyond was like a mortuary—the walls painted black and undecorated save for one small picture. There was a crack in the shutters here, and perhaps a broken window, for a breath of the clean sea air met him. There was no furniture except an oblong piece of yellow marble which seemed from the rams' heads and cornucopias to be an old altar. He turned his torch on the solitary picture. It represented the stock scene of Salome with the head of John the Baptist, a subject which bad artists have made play with for the last five hundred years. But this was none of the customary daubs, but the work of a master—a perverted, perhaps a crazy, genius. The woman's gloating face, the passion of the hands caressing the pale flesh, the stare of the dead eyes, were wonderful and awful. If the first room had been the shrine of inhuman lust, this had been the chapel of inhuman cruelty.

He opened another door and found himself in a little closet, lined to the ceiling with books. He knew what he would find on the shelves. The volumes were finely bound, chiefly in vellum, and among them were a certain number of reputable classics. But most belonged to the backstairs of literature—the obscenities of Greek and of silver Latin, the diseased sidewalks of the Middle Ages, the aberrations of the moderns. It was not common pornography; the collection had been made by some one who was a scholar in vice.

Vernon went back to the first room, nauseated and angry. He must get out of this damned place, which was, or had been, the habitation of devils. What kind of owner could such a house possess? The woman had said that it was a young girl, as virtuous as the Virgin. But, great God! how could virtue dwell in such an environment?

He had opened the door to begin his retreat when a lantern appeared in the corridor. It was the woman, and with a finger on her lips she motioned him back into the room.

"My mistress is asleep," she said, "and it would not be well to wake her. Monsieur will stay here to-night and speak with her in the morning?"

"I will do nothing of the kind," said Vernon. "I am going back to my boat."

The woman caught his involuntary glance at the wall paintings, and clutched his arm. "But that is not her doing," she cried. "That was the work of her father, who was beyond belief wicked. It is his sins that the child is about to expiate. The people have condemned her, but you surely would not join in their unjust judgment."

"I tell you I will have nothing to do with the place. Will you kindly show me the way back?"

Her face hardened. "I cannot. Mitri has the key."

"Well, where the devil is Mitri?"

"I will not tell... Oh, Monsieur, I beseech you, do not forsake us. There has been evil in this House enough to sink it to hell, but my mistress is innocent. I ask only that you speak with her. After that, if you so decide, you can go away."

The woman was plainly honest and in earnest, and Vernon was a just man. He suddenly felt that he was behaving badly. There could be no harm in sleeping a night in the house, and in the morning interviewing its owner. If it was a case of real necessity he could take her and her maid off in his boat... After all, there might be serious trouble afoot. The sight of those hideous rooms had given him a sharp realization of the ugly things in life.

He was taken to a clean, bare little attic at the top of the house which had once no doubt been a servant's quarters. Having been up all the previous night, his head had scarcely touched the rough pillow before he was asleep. He slept for ten hours, till he was awakened by Mitri, who brought him hot water and soap and a venerable razor with which he made some attempt at a toilet. He noticed that the fog was still thick, and from the garret window he looked into an opaque blanket.

He had wakened with a different attitude towards the adventure in which he found himself. The sense of a wasted youth and defrauded hopes had left him; he felt more tightly strung, more vigorous, younger; he also felt a certain curiosity about this Greek girl who in an abominable house was defying the lightnings.

Mitri conducted him to the first floor, where he was taken charge of by the Frenchwoman.

"Do not be afraid of her," she whispered. "Deal with her as a man with a woman, and make her do your bidding. She is stiff-necked towards me, but she may listen to a young man, especially if he be English."

She ushered Vernon into a room which was very different from the hideous chambers he had explored the night before. It was poorly and sparsely furnished, the chairs were chiefly wicker, the walls had recently been distempered by an amateur hand, the floor was of bare scrubbed boards. But a bright fire burned on the hearth, there was a big bunch of narcissus on a table set for breakfast, and flowering branches had been stuck in the tall vases beside the chimney. Through the open window came a drift of fog which intensified the comfort of the fire.

It was a woman's room, for on a table lay some knitting and a piece of embroidery, and a small ivory housewife's case bearing the initials "K. A." There were one or two books also, and Vernon looked at them curiously. One was a book of poems which had been published in London a month before. This Greek girl must know English; perhaps she had recently been in England... He took up another volume, and to his amazement it was a reprint of Peter Beckford's *Thoughts on Hunting*. He could not have been more surprised if he had found a copy of the *Eton Chronicle*. What on earth was the mistress of a lonely Aegean island doing with Peter Beckford?

The fire crackled cheerfully, the raw morning air flowed through the window, and Vernon cast longing eyes on the simple preparations for breakfast. He was ferociously hungry, and he wished he were now in the boat, where the Epirote would be frying bacon...

There was another door besides that by which he had entered, and curiously enough it was in the same position as the door in the room of his dream. He angrily dismissed the memory of that preposterous hallucination, but he kept his eye on the door. By it no doubt the mistress of the house would enter, and he wished she would make haste. He was beginning to be very curious about this girl... Probably she would be indignant and send him about his business, but she could scarcely refuse to give him breakfast first. In any case there was the yacht... There was a mirror above the mantelpiece in which he caught a glimpse of himself. The glimpse was not reassuring. His face was as dark as an Indian's, his hair wanted cutting, and his blue jersey was bleached and discoloured with salt water. He looked like a deck-hand on a cargo boat. But perhaps a girl who read Beckford would not be pedantic about appearances. He put his trust in Peter—

The door had opened. A voice, sharp-pitched and startled, was speaking, and to his surprise it spoke in English.

"Who the devil are you?" it said.

He saw a slim girl, who stood in the entrance poised like a runner, every line of her figure an expression of amazement. He had seen her before, but his memory was wretched for women's faces. But the odd thing was that, after the first second, there was recognition in her face.

"Colonel Milburne!" said the voice. "What in the name of goodness are you doing here?"

She knew him, and he knew her, but where—when— had they met? He must have stared blankly, for the girl laughed.

"You have forgotten," she said. "But I have seen you out with the Mivern, and we met at luncheon at Wirlesdon in the winter."

He remembered now, and what he remembered chiefly were the last words he had spoken to me on the subject of this girl. The adventure was becoming farcical.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered. "You are Miss Arabin. I didn't know—"

"I am Miss Arabin. But why the honour of an early morning call from Colonel Milburne?"

"I came here last night in a yacht." Vernon was making a lame business of his explanation, for the startled angry eyes of his hostess scattered his wits. "I anchored below in the fog, and an old man came out in a boat and asked me to come ashore. There was a woman on the beach—your maid—and she implored my help—told a story I didn't quite follow—"

"The fog!" the girl repeated. "That of course explains why you were allowed to anchor. In clear weather you would have been driven away."

She spoke in so assured a tone that Vernon was piqued.

"The seas are free," he said. "Who would have interfered with me? Your servants?"

She laughed again, mirthlessly. "My people. Not my servants. Continue. You came ashore and listened to Élise's chatter. After that?"

"She said you were asleep and must not be wakened, but that I should speak to you in the morning. She put me up for the night."

"Where?" she asked sharply.

"In a little room on the top floor."

"I see. 'Where you sleeps you breakfasts.' Well, we'd better have some food."

She rang a little silver hand-bell, and the maid, who must have been waiting close at hand, appeared with coffee and boiled eggs. She cast an anxious glance at Vernon as if to inquire how he had fared at her mistress's hands.

"Sit down," said the girl when Élise had gone. "I can't give you much to eat, for these days we are on short rations. I'm sorry, but there's no sugar. I can recommend the honey. It's the only good thing in Plakos."

"Is this Plakos? I came here once before—in 1914—in a steam yacht. I suppose I am in the big white house which looks down upon the jetty. I could see nothing last night in the fog. I remember a long causeway and steps cut in the rock. That must have been the road I came."

She nodded. "What kind of sailor are you to be so ignorant of your whereabouts? Oh, I see, the storm! What's the size of your boat?"

When he told her, she exclaimed. "You must have had the devil of a time, for it was a first-class gale. And now on your arrival in port you are plunged into melodrama. You don't look as if you had much taste for melodrama, Colonel Milburne."

"I haven't. But is it really melodrama? Your maid told me a rather alarming tale."

Her eyes had the hard agate gleam which he remembered from Wirlesdon. Then he had detested her, but now, as he looked at her, he saw that which made him alter his judgment. The small face was very pale, and there were dark lines under the eyes. This girl was undergoing some heavy strain, and her casual manner was in the nature of a shield.

"Is it true?" he asked.

"So-so. In parts, no doubt. I am having trouble with my tenants, which I am told is a thing that happens even in England. But that is my own concern, and I don't ask for help. After breakfast I would suggest that you go back to your yacht."

"I think you had better come with me. You and your maid. I take it that the old man Mitri can fend for himself."

"How kind of you!" she cried in a falsetto, mimicking voice. "How extraordinarily kind! But you see I haven't asked your help, and I don't propose to accept it... You're sure you won't have any more coffee! I wonder if you could give me a cigarette? I've been out of them for three days."

She lay back in a wicker chair, rocking herself and lazily blowing smoke clouds. Vernon stood with his back to the fire and filled a pipe.

"I don't see how I can go away," he said, "unless I can convince myself that you're in no danger. You're English, and a woman, and I'm bound to help you whether you want it or not." He spoke with assurance now, perhaps with a certain priggishness. The tone may have offended the girl, for when she spoke it was with a touch of the insolence which he remembered at Wirlesdon.

"I'm curious to know what Élise told you last night."

"Simply that you were imprisoned here by the people of Plakos—that they thought you a witch, and might very likely treat you in the savage way that people used to treat witches."

She nodded. "That's about the size of it. But what if I refuse to let any one interfere in a fight between me and my own people? Supposing this is something which I must stick out for the sake of my own credit? What then, Colonel Milburne? You have been a soldier. You wouldn't advise me to run away?"

"That depends," said Vernon. "There are fights where there can be no victory—where the right course is to run away. Your maid told me something else. She said that the evil reputation you had among the peasants was not your own doing—that, of course, I guessed—but a legacy from your family, who for very good reasons were unpopular. Does that make no difference?"

"How?"

"Why, there's surely no obligation in honour to make yourself a vicarious sacrifice for other people's misdeeds!"

"I—don't—think I agree. One must pay for one's race as well as for oneself."

"Oh, nonsense! Not the kind of thing your family seem to have amused themselves with."

"What do you mean?"

"I was put into a room last night"—Vernon spoke hesitatingly—"and I saw some books and paintings. They were horrible. I understood—well, that the peasants might have a good deal of reason—something to say for themselves, you know. Why should you suffer for that swinishness?"

The morning sun had broken through the fog and was shining full on the girl's face. She sprang to her feet, and Vernon saw that she had blushed deeply.

"You entered those rooms!" she cried. "That fool Élise! I will have her beaten. Oh, I am shamed... Get off with you! You are only making me wretched. Get off while there's time."

The sight of her crimson face and neck moved Vernon to a deep compassion.

"I refuse to leave without you, Miss Arabin," he said. "I do not know much, but I know enough to see that you are in deadly danger. I can no more leave you here than I could leave a drowning child in the sea. Quick! Get your maid and pack some things and we'll be gone."

She stood before him, an abashed, obstinate child.

"I won't go... I hate you... You have seen—oh, leave me, if you have any pity."

"You come with me."

"I won't!" Her lips were a thin line, and the shut jaws made a square of the resolute little face.

"Then I shall carry you off. I'm very sorry, Miss Arabin, but I'm going to save you in spite of yourself."

Vernon had his hand stretched out to the silver handbell to summon Élise, when he found himself looking at a small pistol. He caught her wrist, expecting it to go off, but nothing happened. It dropped into his hand, and he saw that it was unloaded.

He rang the bell.

"All the more reason why you should come with me if you are so badly armed."

The girl stood stiff and silent, her eyes and cheeks burning, as Élise entered.

"Pack for your mistress," he told the maid. "Bring as little baggage as possible, for there isn't much room." The woman hurried off gladly to do his bidding.

"Please don't make a scene," he said. "You will have to come in the end, and some day you will forgive me."

"I will not come," she said, "but I will show you something."

Life seemed to have been restored to her tense body, as she hurried him out of the room, along a corridor, and up a flight of stairs to a window which looked seaward.

The last wreath of fog had disappeared, and the half-moon of bay lay blue and sparkling. Down at the jetty were men and boats, but out on the water there was no sign of the anchored yacht.

"What does that mean?" Vernon cried.

"It means that your boat has gone. When the air cleared the people saw it, and have driven your man away... It means that you, like me, are a prisoner!"

CHAPTER 15

As Vernon looked at the flushed girl, whose voice as she spoke had at least as much consternation in it as triumph, he experienced a sudden dislocation of mind. Something fell from him—the elderliness, the preoccupation, the stiff dogma of his recent years. He recaptured the spirit which had open arms for novelty. He felt an eagerness to be up and doing—what, he was not clear—but something difficult and high-handed. The vanishing of his dream had left the chambers of his mind swept and garnished, and youth does not tolerate empty rooms.

Also, though I do not think that he had yet begun to fall in love with Koré, he understood the quality of one whom aforesometimes he had disliked both as individual and type. This pale girl, dressed like a young woman in a Scotch shooting lodge, was facing terror with a stiff lip. There was nothing raffish or second-rate about her now. She might make light of her danger in her words, but her eyes betrayed her.

It was about this danger that he was still undecided. You see, he had not, like me, seen the people of the island, felt the strain of their expectancy, or looked on the secret spaces of the Dancing Floor. He had come out of the storm to hear a tale told in the fog and darkness by an excited woman. That was all—that and the hideous rooms at which he had had a passing glance. The atmosphere of the place, which I had found so unnerving, had not yet begun to affect him.

“My fellow will come back,” he said, after scanning the empty seas. “He has his faults, but he is plucky and faithful.”

“You do not understand,” the girl said. “He would be one against a thousand. He may be as brave as a lion, but they won’t let him anchor, and if they did they would never let you and me join him. I have told you we are prisoners—close prisoners.”

“You must tell me a great deal more. You see, you can’t refuse my help now, for we are in the same boat. Do you mind if we go back to where we breakfasted, for I left my pipe there.”

She turned without a word and led him back to her sitting-room, passing a woe-begone Élise who, with her arms full of clothes, was told that her services were now needless. The windows of the room looked on a garden which had been suffered to run wild but which still showed a wealth of spring blossom. Beyond was a shallow terrace and then the darkness of trees. A man’s head seemed to move behind a cypress hedge. The girl nodded towards it. “One of my gaolers,” she said.

She stood looking out of the window with her eyes averted from Vernon, and seemed to be forcing herself to speak.

“You have guessed right about my family,” she said. “And about this house. I am cleaning it slowly—I must do it myself, Élise and I, for I do not want strangers to know... This room was as bad as the other two till I whitewashed the walls. The old furniture I am storing till I have time to destroy it. I think I will burn it, for it has hideous associations for me. I would have had the whole house in order this spring if my foolish people had not lost their heads.”

A “tawdry girl,” that was how Vernon had spoken of her to me. He withdrew the word now. “Tawdry” was the last adjective he would use about this strange child, fighting alone to get rid of a burden of ancient evil. He had thought her a modish, artificial being, a moth hatched out of the latest freak of fashion. Now she seemed to him a thousand years removed from the feverish world which he had thought her natural setting. Her appeal was her extreme candour and simplicity, her utter, savage, unconsidering courage.

“Let us take the family for granted,” Vernon said gently. “I can’t expect you to talk about that. I assume that there was that in your predecessor’s doings which gave these islanders a legitimate grievance. What I want to know is what they are up to now. Tell me very carefully everything that has happened since you came here a week ago.”

She had little to tell him. She had been allowed to enter the House by the ordinary road from the village, and after that the gates had been barred. When she had attempted to go for a walk she had been turned back by men with rifles—she did not tell Vernon how the rifles had been procured. The hillmen had joined with the people of the coast—you could always tell a hillman by his dress—though the two used to be hereditary enemies. That made her angry and also uneasy; so did the curious methodical ways of the siege. They were not attempting to enter the House—she doubted if any one of them would dare to cross the threshold—they were only there to prevent her leaving it. She herself, not the looting of the House, must be their object. Mitri was permitted to go to the village, but he did not go often, for he came back terrified and could not or would not explain his terrors. No communication had been held with the watchers, and no message had come from them. She had tried repeatedly to find out their intentions, but the sentinels would not speak, and she could make nothing of Mitri. No, she was not allowed into the demesne. There were sentries there right up to the house wall—sentries night and day.

Vernon asked her about supplies. She had brought a store with her which was not yet exhausted, but the people sent up food every morning. Mitri found it laid on the threshold of the main door. Curious food—barley cakes, and honey, and cheese, and eggs, and dried figs. She couldn’t imagine where they got it from, for the people had been starving in the winter. Milk, too—plenty of milk, which was another unexpected thing.

Water—that was the oddest business of all. The House had a fine well in the stableyard on the east side. This had been sealed up and its use forbidden to Mitri. But morning and night buckets of fresh water were brought to the door—whence, she did not know. “It rather restricts our bathing arrangements,” she said.

She told the story lightly, with a ready laugh, as if she were once more mistress of herself. Mistress of her voice she certainly was, but she could not command her eyes. It was these that counteracted the debonair tones and kept tragedy in

the atmosphere.

Vernon, as I have said, had not the reason which I had for feeling the gravity of the business. But he was a scholar, and there were details in Koré's account which startled him.

"Tell me about the food again. Cheese and honey and barley cakes, dried figs and eggs—nothing more?"

"Nothing more. And not a great deal of that. Not more than enough to feed one person for twenty-four hours. We have to supplement it from the stores we brought."

"I see... It is meant for you personally—not for your household. And the water? You don't know what spring it comes from?"

She shook her head. "There are many springs in Plakos. But why does our commissariat interest you?"

"Because it reminds me of something I have read somewhere. Cheese and honey and barley cakes—that is ritual food. Sacramental, if you like. And the water. Probably brought from some sacred well. I don't much like it. Tell me about the people here, Miss Arabin. Are they very backward and superstitious?"

"I suppose you might call them that. They are a fine race to look at, and claim to be pure Greek—at least the coast folk. The hillmen are said to be mongrels, but they are handsome mongrels and fought bravely in the war. But I don't know them well, for I left when I was a child, and since my father died I have only seen the people of Kynaetho."

"Kynaetho?" Vernon cried out sharply, for the word was like a bell to ring up the curtain of memory.

"Yes, Kynaetho. That is the village at the gate."

Now he had the clue. Kynaetho was the place mentioned in the manuscript fragment which he had translated for me. It was at Kynaetho that the strange rite was performed of the Koré and the Kouros. The details were engraven on his memory, for they had profoundly impressed him, and he had turned them over repeatedly in his mind. He had thought he had discovered the record of a new ritual form; rather it appeared that he had stumbled upon the living rite itself.

"I begin—to understand," he said slowly. "I want you to let me speak to Mitri. Alone, if you please. I have done this work before in the war, and I can get more out of that kind of fellow if I am alone with him. Then I shall prospect the land."

He found Mitri in his lair in the ancient kitchen. With the old man there was no trouble, for when he found that his interlocutor spoke Greek fluently he overflowed in confidences.

"They will burn this House," he said finally. "They have piled fagots on the north and east sides where the wind blows. And the time will be Easter eve."

"And your mistress?"

Mitri shrugged his shoulders. "There is no hope for her, I tell you. She had a chance of flight and missed it, though I pled with her. She will burn with the House unless—"

He looked at Vernon timidly, as if he feared to reveal something.

"Unless—?" said Vernon.

"There is a rumour in Kynaetho of something else. In that accursed village they have preserved tales of the old days, and they say that on the night of Good Friday there will be *panegyria* on the Dancing Floor. There will be a race with torches, and he who wins will be called King. To him it will fall to slay my mistress in order that the Ancient Ones may appear and bless the people."

"I see," said Vernon. "Do you believe in that rubbish?"

Mitri crossed himself, and called the Panagia to witness that he was a Christian and, after God and the Saints, loved his mistress.

"That is well. I trust you, Mitri; and I will show you how you can save her. You are allowed to leave the House?"

"Every second day only. I went yesterday, and cannot go again till to-morrow. I have a daughter married in the village, whom I am permitted to visit."

"Very well. We are still two days from Good Friday. Go down to the village to-morrow and find out all about the plans for Good Friday evening. Lie as much as you like. Say you hate your mistress and will desert her whenever you are bidden. Pretend you're on the other side. Get their confidence... A madness has afflicted this island, and you are the only sane Christian left in it. If these ruffians hurt your mistress, the Government—both in Athens and in London—will send soldiers and hang many. After that there will be no more Kynaetho. We have got to prevent the people making fools of themselves. Your mistress is English and I am English, and that is why I stay here. You do exactly as I tell you and we'll win through."

It was essential to encourage Mitri, for the old man was patently torn between superstitious fear and fidelity to Koré, and only a robust scepticism and a lively hope would enable him to keep his tail up and do his part. Vernon accordingly protested a confidence which he was very far from feeling. It was arranged that Mitri should go to Kynaetho next morning after breakfast and spend the day there.

After that, guided by the old man, Vernon made a circuit of the House. From the top windows he was able to follow the

lie of the land—the postern gates to the shore, the nest of stables and outbuildings on the east, with access to the shallow glen running up from the jetty, the main entrance and the drive from Kynaetho, the wooded demesne ending at the cliffs, and the orchards and olive-yards between the cliffs and the causeway. The patrols came right up to the House wall, and on various sides Vernon had a glimpse of them. But he failed to get what he specially sought, a prospect of any part of the adjoining coast-line beyond the little bay. He believed that his yacht was somewhere hidden there, out of sight of the peasants. He was convinced that the Epirote would obey orders and wait for him, and would not go one yard farther away than was strictly necessary. But he was at a loss to know how to find him, if he were penned up in this shuttered mausoleum.

He returned to find Koré sewing by the window of the breakfast room. He entered quietly and had a momentary glimpse of her before she was conscious of his presence. She was looking straight before her with vacant eyes, her face in profile against the window, a figure of infinite appeal. Vernon had a moment of acute compunction. What he had once thought and spoken of this poor child seemed to him now to have been senseless brutality. He had called her tawdry and vulgar and shrill, he had thought her the ugly product of the ugly after-the-war world. But there she sat like a muse of meditation, as fine and delicate as a sword-blade. And she had a sword's steel, too, for had she not faced unknown peril for a scruple?

"What does Mitri say?" she asked in a voice which had a forced briskness in it.

"I shall know more to-morrow night, but I have learned something. You are safe for the better part of three days—till some time on Good Friday evening. That is one thing. The other is that your scheme of wearing down the hostility of your people has failed. Your islanders have gone stark mad. The business is far too solemn for me to speak smooth things. They have resurrected an old pagan rite of sacrifice. *Sacrifice*, do you understand? This House will be burned, and if they have their will you will die."

"I was beginning to guess as much. I don't want to die, for it means defeat. But I don't think I am afraid to die. You see—life is rather difficult—and not very satisfactory. But tell me more."

Vernon gave her a sketch of the ritual of Kynaetho. "It was your mentioning the name that brought it back to me. I have always been interested in Greek religion, and by an amazing chance I came on this only a month or so ago. Leithen—the lawyer—you know him, I think—gave me a bit of mediaeval Greek manuscript to translate, and part of it had this rite."

"Leithen!" she cried. "Sir Edward? Then he found it among the papers I lent him. Why didn't he tell me about it?"

"I can't imagine."

"Perhaps he thought I wouldn't have believed it. I wouldn't a month ago. Perhaps he thought he could prevent me coming here. I think he did his best. I had to go off without saying goodbye to him, and he was my greatest friend."

"He happens to be also my closest friend. If you had known about this—this crazy ritual, would you have come?"

She smiled. "I don't know. I'm very obstinate, and I can't bear to be bullied. These people are trying to bully me... But of course I didn't know how bad it was... And I didn't know that I was going to land you in this mess. That is what weighs on my mind."

"But you didn't invite me here. You told me to clear out."

"My servants invited you, and therefore I am responsible... Oh, Colonel Milburne, you must understand what I feel. I haven't had an easy life, for I seem to have been always fighting, but I didn't mind it as long as it was my own fight. I felt I had to stick it out, for it was the penalty I paid for being an Arabin. But whatever paying was to be done I wanted to do it myself... Otherwise, don't you see, it makes the guilt of my family so much heavier... And now I have let you in for it, and that is hell—simply hell!"

Vernon had suddenly an emotion which he had never known before—the exhilaration with which he had for years anticipated the culmination of his dream, but different in kind, nobler, less self-regarding. He felt keyed up to any enterprise, and singularly confident. There was tenderness in his mood, too, which was a thing he had rarely felt—tenderness towards this gallant child.

"Listen to me, Miss Arabin. I have two things to say to you. One is that I glory in being here. I wouldn't be elsewhere for the world. It is a delight and a privilege. The other is that we are going to win out."

"But how?"

"I don't know yet. We will find a way. I am as certain of it as that I am standing here. God doesn't mean a thing like this to be a blind *cul-de-sac*."

"You believe in God? I wish I did. I think I only believe in the Devil."

"Then you believe in God. If evil is a living thing, good must be living as well—more indeed, or the world would smash... Look here, we've two days to put in together. There is nothing we can do for the present, so we must find some way to keep our nerves quiet. Let's pretend we're in an ordinary English country house and kept indoors by rain."

So the two of them made plans to pass the time, while the clear spring sunlight outside turned Vernon's pretence into foolishness. They played piquet, and sometimes he read to her—chiefly Peter Beckford. The florid eighteenth-century prose, the tags of Augustan poetry, the high stilts, the gusto, carried their thoughts to the orderly world of home. I have no wish to speculate about the secrets of a friend, but I fancy that the slow hours spent together brought understanding. Koré

must have told him things which she had kept back from me, for the near prospect of death breaks down many barriers. I think, too, that he may have told her the story of his boyish dream—he must have, for it bore directly on the case. With his sense of predestination he would draw from it a special confidence, and she would be made to share it. He had undergone a long preparation for something which had ended in mist, but the preparation might point to success in a great reality...

Late the following afternoon old Mitri returned. Vernon saw him first alone, and got from him the details of the next evening's ceremonial. There was to be a race among the young men on the Dancing Floor as soon as the moon rose, and the victor would be called the King. Some of the news which Mitri had gathered was unexpected, some incomprehensible, but in the main it agreed with his own version. The victor would choose a victim—a male victim, clearly, for the female victim was already chosen. The two would enter the House, and on the next night—the eve of this grim Easter—the sacrifice would be accomplished. Beyond that Mitri could say nothing except that the people looked for a mighty miracle; but the manuscript had told what the miracle would be.

“Who will be the runners?” Vernon asked. “The fleetest among the young men, both of the village and the hills.”

It was characteristic of Vernon's fatalism that he had not troubled to make even the rudiments of a plan till he had heard Mitri's tidings. Now the thing began to unfold itself. The next step at any rate was clearly ordained.

“Will everybody be known to each other?” he said.

“Faith, no. Kynaetho till now has had few dealings with the hill folk, and the villages in the hills are generally at strife with each other. Tomorrow night there will be many strangers, and no questions will be asked, for all will be allies in this devilry.”

“Do I speak like a Greek?”

“You speak like a Greek, but like one from another island.”

“And I look like an islander?”

Mitri grinned. “There are few as well-looking. But if your face were darkened, you would pass. There is a place, a little remote place in the hills, Akte by name, where the folk are said to have white skins like you, Signor.”

“Well, attend, Mitri. I am a man from Akte who has been at the wars, and has just returned. That will account for my foreign speech.”

“The Signor jests. He has a stout heart that can jest—”

“I'm not jesting. I'm going to compete in the race to-morrow night. What is more, I'm going to win. I've been a bit of a runner in my time, and I'm in hard training.”

A faint spark appeared in the old man's eye.

“The Signor will no doubt win if he runs. And if he ever reaches the Dancing Floor he will not be troubled with questions. But how will he reach the Dancing Floor?”

“I intend to get out of the House early tomorrow morning. There are several things I want to do before the race. Have you any rags with which I can imitate the dress of a hillman?”

Mitri considered. Shirt and breeches he had, but no boots. A cap might be improvised, but boots?

“Remember I have only just returned to Akte, and have brought the fashion of the war with me. So I can make shift with home-made puttees. Anything else?”

“The men around the House will not let you pass.”

“They'll have to. I'm one of themselves, and you've got to coach me in local customs. You have twelve hours before you in which to turn me into a respectable citizen of Akte. If any awkward questions are asked I propose to be truculent. A soldier is going to stand no nonsense from civilians, you know.”

Mitri considered again. “It will be best to go by the main road to Kynaetho.”

“No, I'm going by the causeway. I want to see what lies beyond it to the west.”

“The cliffs are there, and there is no road.”

“I will find one.”

Mitri shook his head. He had apparently little belief in the scheme, but an hour later, after Vernon had given Koré a sketch of his intentions, he arrived with an armful of strange garments. Élise, at her mistress's request, had collected oddments of fabrics, and brought part of the contents of the linen-cupboard.

“We are about,” Vernon told a mystified Koré, “to prepare for private theatricals. Puttees are my most urgent need, and that thin skirt of yours will be the very thing.”

Since Koré still looked puzzled, he added: “We're cast for parts in a rather sensational drama. I'm beginning to think that the only way to prevent it being a tragedy is to turn it into a costume-play.”

CHAPTER 16

Very early next morning, before the blue darkness had paled into dawn, Vernon swung his legs out of an upper window of the House, crawled along the broad parapet, and began to descend by a water-pipe in an angle between the main building and the eastern wing. This brought him to the roof of one of the outbuildings, from which it was possible for an active man to reach the road which ran upward from the jetty. He had been carefully prepared by Mitri for his part. The loose white shirt and the short mountain tunic were in order. Mitri's breeches had proved too scanty, but Élise had widened them, and the vacant space about his middle was filled with a dirty red cummerbund, made of one of Mitri's sashes, in which were stuck a long knife and his pistol. A pair of Mitri's home-made shoes of soft untanned hide were supplemented by home-made puttees. He had no hat; he had stained his face, hands and arms beyond their natural brown with juice from Mitri's store of pickled walnuts, and—under the critical eye of Koré—had rubbed dirt under his eyes and into his finger-nails till he looked the image of a handsome, swaggering, half-washed soldier. More important, he had been coached by Mitri in the speech of the hills, the gossip which might have penetrated to the remote Akte, and the mannerisms of the hillmen, which were unpleasingly familiar to the dwellers by the sea.

All this care would have been useless had Vernon not been in the mood to carry off any enterprise. He felt the reckless audacity of a boy, an exhilaration which was almost intoxication, and the source of which he did not pause to consider. Above all he felt complete confidence. Somehow, somewhere, he would break the malign spell and set Koré beyond the reach of her enemies.

He reached ground fifty yards south of the jetty, and turned at once in the direction of the sea. At the beginning of the causeway he met a man.

"Whither away, brother?" came the question, accompanied by the lift of a rifle.

Vernon gave the hillman's greeting. He loomed up tall and formidable in the half-darkness.

"I go beyond the causeway to the olive-yards," he said carelessly, as if he condescended in answering. "By whose orders?"

"We of Akte do not take orders. I go at the request of the Elders."

"You are of Akte?" said the man curiously. He was very willing to talk, being bored with his long night-watch. "There are none of Akte among us, so far as I have seen. The men of Akte live in the moon, says the proverb. But ... " this after peering at Vernon's garb—"these clothes were never made in the hills."

"I am new back from the war, and have not seen Akte these three years. But I cannot linger, friend."

"Nay, bide a little. It is not yet day. Let us talk of Akte. My father once went there for cattle... Or let us speak of the war. My uncle was in the old war, and my young nephew was... If you will not bide, give me tobacco."

Vernon gave him a cigarette. "These are what we smoked in Smyrna," he said. "They are noble stuff."

Half-way along the causeway a second guard proved more truculent. He questioned the orders of the Elders, till Vernon played the man from Akte and the old soldier, and threatened to fling him into the sea. The last sentry was fortunately asleep. Vernon scrambled over the fence of the olive-yards, and as the sun rose above the horizon was striding with long steps through the weedy undergrowth.

His object was not like mine when I travelled that road—to get inside the demesne; he wanted to keep out of it, and to explore the bit of coast under it, since it seemed from the map to be the likeliest place to find his boat. The Epirote, he was convinced, would obey his instructions faithfully, and when driven away from his old anchorage would not go a yard more than was necessary. So, after being stopped as I had been by the wall which ran to the cliffs, he stuck to the shore. He picked his way under the skirts of the great headland till the rock sank sheer into deep water. There was nothing for it now but to swim, so he made a bundle of his shirt and jacket and bound them with the cummerbund on his shoulders, took his pistol in his teeth and slipped into the cold green sea. Mitri's breeches were a nuisance, but he was a strong swimmer, and in five minutes was at the point of the headland.

He found a ledge of rock which enabled him to pull up his shoulders and reconnoitre the hidden bay. There, to his joy, was the yacht, snugly anchored half-way across. There was no sign of life on board, for doubtless the Epirote was below cooking his breakfast. Vernon had no desire to make himself conspicuous by shouting, for the demesne and the watchers were too near, so he dropped back into the water and struck out for the boat. Ten minutes later he was standing dripping on the deck, and the Epirote was welcoming him with maledictions on Plakos.

He stripped off his wet clothes, and put on his old aquascutum till they should be dried. Then he breakfasted heartily, while Black George gave an account of his stewardship. When Vernon did not return he had not concerned himself greatly, for the affairs of his master were no business of his. But in the morning, when the fog began to lift, men had put off from shore in a boat and had demanded the reason of his presence. The interview had been stormy, for he had declined to explain, holding that if his master chose to land secretly by night, and rude fellows appeared with the daylight, it would be wise to tell the latter nothing. His interviewers had been more communicative. They had been very excited and had tried to alarm him with foolish tales of witches. But it was clear that they had meant mischief, for all were armed, and when at the point of several rifle barrels they had ordered him to depart, it seemed to him the part of a wise man to obey. He had feigned fear and deep stupidity, and had upped sail and done their bidding. Then, looking for a refuge, he had seen the great curtain of cliff and had found this little bay. Here he hoped he was secure, for there was no passage along the shore,

and the people of Plakos did not seem during these days to be sailing the seas. He could be observed, of course, from the cliff tops, but these were shrouded in wood and looked unfrequented.

"Did I not well, Signor?" he asked anxiously.

"You did well. Have you seen no one?"

"No islander. Last night two men came about midnight. One was a crippled Greek and the other man, I judge, English."

Vernon woke to the liveliest interest, but Black George told a halting tale. "He swam out and wakened me, and at first, fearing trouble, I would have brained him. Since he could not speak my tongue, I rowed ashore with him and saw the Greek... He was an Englishman, beyond doubt, and a Signor, so I gave him food."

"What did he want with you?"

"Simply that I should stay here. He had a story of some lady to whom the devils of this island meant mischief, and he begged me to wait in case the lady should seek to escape."

No cross-examination of Vernon's could make Black George amplify the tale. He had not understood clearly, he said, for the English Signor could not speak his tongue, and the Greek who interpreted was obviously a fool. But he had promised to remain, which was indeed his duty to his master. No. He had spoken no single word of his master. He had not said he was an Englishman. He had said nothing.

Vernon puzzled over the matter but could make nothing of it. He did not credit the story of an Englishman in Plakos who knew of Koré's plight, and came to the conclusion that Black George had misunderstood his visitor's talk. He had the day before him, and his first act was to row ashore to the other point of the bay—the place from which Janni and I had first espied the yacht. There he sat for a little and smoked, and it was one of his cigarette ends that I found the same afternoon. A scramble round the headland showed him the strip of beach below the Dancing Floor, but it occurred to him that there was no need to go pioneering along the coast—that he had a yacht and could be landed wherever he pleased. So he returned to Black George, and the two hoisted sail and made for open sea.

The day was spent running with the light northwest wind behind them well to the south of Plakos, and then tacking back till about sunset they stood off the north-east shore. It was a day of brilliant sun, tempered by cool airs, with the hills of the island rising sharp and blue into the pale spring sky. Vernon found to his delight that he had no trepidation about the work of the coming night. He had brought with him the copy he had made of his translation of Koré's manuscript, and studied it as a man studies a map, without any sense of its strangeness. The madmen of Plakos were about to revive an ancient ritual, where the victor in a race would be entrusted with certain barbarous duties. He proposed to be the victor, and so to defeat the folly. The House would be burnt, and in the confusion he would escape with Koré to the yacht, and leave the unhallowed isle for ever. The girl's honour would be satisfied, for she would have stuck it out to the last. Once he had convinced himself that she would be safe, he let his mind lie fallow. He dreamed and smoked on the hot deck in the bright weather, as much at his ease as if the evening were to bring no more than supper and sleep.

In the early twilight the yacht's dinghy put him ashore on a lonely bit of coast east of the village. Black George was ordered to return to his former anchorage and wait there; if on the following night he saw a lantern raised three times on the cliff above, he was to come round to the olive-yards at the far end of the causeway. At this stage Vernon's plan was for a simple escape in the confusion of the fire. He hoped that the postern gate at the jetty would be practicable; if not he would find some way of reaching the olive-yards from the demesne. The whole affair was viewed by him as a straightforward enterprise—provided he could win the confounded race.

But with his landing on Plakos in the spring gloaming his mood began to change. I have failed in my portrayal of Vernon if I have made you think of him as unimaginative and insensitive. He had unexpected blind patches in his vision and odd callosities in his skin, but for all that he was highly strung and had an immense capacity for emotion, though he chose mostly to sit on the safety valve. Above all he was a scholar. All his life he had been creating imaginative pictures of things, or living among the creations of other men. He had not walked a mile in that twilight till he felt the solemnity of it oppressing his mind.

I think it was chiefly the sight of the multitude moving towards the Dancing Floor, all silent, so that the only sound was the tread of feet. He had been in doubt before as to where exactly the place was, but the road was blazed for him like the roads to Epsom on Derby Day. Men, women, children, babes-in-arms, they were streaming past the closes at the foot of the glade, past the graveyard, up the aisle of the Dancing Floor. It was his first sight of it—not as I had seen it solitary under the moon, but surging with a stream of hushed humanity. It had another kind of magic, but one as potent as that which had laid its spell on me. I had seen the temple in its loneliness; he saw it thronged with worshippers.

No one greeted him or even noticed him; he would probably have passed unregarded if he had been wearing his ordinary clothes. The heavy preoccupation of the people made them utterly incurious. He saw men dressed as he was, and he noted that the multitude moved to left and right as if by instinct, leaving the central arena vacant. Dusk had fallen, and on the crown of the ridge on his right he saw dimly what he knew to be the trees of the demesne. He saw, too, that a cluster seemed to be forming at the lower end of the arena, apart from the others, and he guessed that these were the competitors in the race. He made his way towards them, and found that he had guessed rightly. It was a knot of young men, who were now stripping their clothes, till they stood naked except for the sashes twisted around their middle. Most were barefoot, but one or two had raw-hide brogues. Vernon followed their example, till he stood up in his short linen drawers. He

retained Mitri's shoes, for he feared the flints of the hillside. There were others in the group, older men whom he took to be the Elders of whom Mitri had spoken, and there was one man who seemed to be in special authority and who wore a loose white cassock.

It was now nearly dark, and suddenly, like the marks delimiting a course, torches broke into flame. These points of angry light in the crowded silence seemed to complete the spell. Vernon's assurance had fled and left behind it an unwilling awe and an acute nervousness. All his learning, all his laborious scholarship quickened from mere mental furniture into heat and light. His imagination as well as his nerves were on fire. I can only guess at the thoughts which must have crowded his mind. He saw the ritual, which so far had been for him an antiquarian remnant, leap into a living passion. He saw what he had regarded coolly as a barbaric survival, a matter for brutish peasants, become suddenly a vital concern of his own. Above all, he felt the formidableness of the peril to Koré. She had dared far more than she knew, far more than he had guessed; she was facing the heavy menace of a thousand ages, the devils not of a few thousand peasants, but of a whole forgotten world... And in that moment he has told me that another thing became clear to him—she had become for him something altogether rare and precious.

The old man in the white ephod was speaking. It was a tale which had obviously been told before to the same audience, for he reminded them of former instructions. Vernon forced himself to concentrate on it an attention which was half paralysed by that mood of novel emotion which had come upon him. Some of it he failed to grasp, but the main points were clear—the race twice round the arena outside the ring of torches, the duty of the victor to take the last torch and plunge it in the sacred spring. The man spoke as if reciting a lesson, and Vernon heard it like a lesson once known and forgotten. Reminiscences of what he had found in classical byways hammered on his mind, and with recollection came a greater awe. It was only the thought of Koré that enabled him to keep his wits. Without that, he told me, he would have sunk into the lethargy of the worshippers, obedient, absorbed in expectancy.

Then came the start, and the race which Janni and I watched from our hiding-place in the shadows under the wall. He got off the mark clumsily, and at first his limbs seemed heavy as lead. But the movement revived him and woke his old racing instinct. Though he had not run for years, he was in hard training, and towards the close of the first round his skill had come back to him and he was in the third place, going well within his powers. In the second round he felt that the thing was in his hands. He lay close to the first man, passed him before the final straight, and then forged ahead so that in the last hundred yards he was gaining ground with every stride. He seized the torch at the winning-post and raced to where in the centre of the upper glade a white figure stood alone. With the tossing of the flame into the well he straightened his body and looked round, a man restored to his old vigour and ready for swift action.

His account of the next stage was confused, for his mind was on Koré, and he was going through a violent transformation of outlook. The old man was no longer repeating a rehearsed lesson, but speaking violently like one in a moment of crisis. He addressed Vernon as "You of the hills," and told him that God had placed the fate of Kynaetho in his hands—which God he did not particularize. But from his excited stammering something emerged that chilled Vernon's blood... He was to wait in the House till moonrise of the next night. The signal was to be the firing of the place. With the first flames he was to perform the deed to which he had been called. "Choose which way you please," said the old man, "provided that they die." Then he would leave the House by the main door and join the young men without. "They will be gathered there till they come who will come." The door would be closed behind him till it was opened by the fire... "They who will come are Immortals."

The man's voice was high-pitched with passion, and his figure, solitary in the bright moonshine in that ring of silent folk, had something in it of the awful and the sacramental. But Vernon's thoughts were not on it, but on the news which meant the downfall of his plans. His mind worked now normally and sanely; he was again a man of the modern world. The young men—of course they would be there—the Kouretes to greet the Kouros. He might have known it, if he had only thought. But how was Koré to escape from those frenzied guardians? He had imagined that with the fire the vigilance of the watch would be relaxed and that it would be easy to join Black George and the boat. But with the fire there was to be a thronging of the hierophants towards the House, and what was inside would be kept inside till the place was a heap of ashes.

The man was speaking again. He had made some signal, for three figures had approached the well. "The woman is within," he said, "and it is for you to choose the man. Your choice is free among the people of Plakos, but we have one here, a young man, a Greek, but a stranger. He would doubtless be acceptable."

The half-clad Maris cut an odd figure as, in the grip of two stalwart peasants, he was led forward for inspection. His face was white and set, and his eyes were furious. "No willing victim this," thought Vernon, "but so much the better, for he and I are in the same boat, and I must make him an ally." From the way he carried himself he saw that Maris had been drilled, and he considered that a soldier might be useful. "I choose this man," he said.

A jar was given him, and he filled it from the spring and emptied it on Maris's head and shoulders. His own clothes were also brought, but he contented himself with Mitri's sash, of which he made a girdle and into which he stuck his own pistol and Mitri's knife. "I have no need of the rest," he said, for he was beginning to enter into the spirit of the part. Then he knelt while the old man laid a hand on his head and pronounced some consecration. "Come," he said to Maris, and the two moved up the slope of the Dancing Floor towards the breach in the wall.

He had almost forgotten his anxiety in the wonder of the scene. He seemed to be set on a stage in a great golden amphitheatre, and Maris and the guards who accompanied him were no more than stage properties. All human life had for the moment gone, and he was faced with primordial elements—the scented shell of earth, the immense arch of the sky and

the riding moon, and, as he climbed the slope, an infinity of shining waters. The magic weighed on him, a new magic, for the ruthlessness of man was submerged in the deeper ruthlessness of nature... And then, as he passed the fringe of the spectators and caught a glimpse of pallid strained faces, he got his bearings again. It was man he had to cope with, crazy, fallible, tormented man. He felt the pity and innocence of it behind the guilt, and in an instant he regained confidence... Maris was stumbling along, walking painfully like one unaccustomed to going on bare feet, casting fierce, startled glances about him. As they approached the breach in the wall Vernon managed to whisper to him to cheer up, for no ill would befall him. "I am your friend," he said; "together we will make an end of this folly," and the man's face lightened.

It was this look on Maris's face which I saw from my hiding-place and which made me forbid Janni's pistol shot.

CHAPTER 17

The great doors clanged behind them, and Vernon, who had been given the key by the guards, turned it in the lock. In spite of the reassuring word he had spoken to Maris he thought that his companion might attack him, so he steered wide of him and in the inky darkness fell over a basket of logs. The mishap wrung from him a very English expletive. Then he shouted on Mitri to bring a light.

He heard Maris's excited voice. "Who are you? Who in God's name are you? Are you English?"

"Of course I am English. Confound it, I believe I have cracked my shin. Mitri, you idiot, where are you?"

The old man appeared from a corridor with a lantern shaking in his hand. He had no words, but stared at the two as if he were looking on men risen from the dead.

"Where's your mistress? In her sitting-room? For God's sake, get me some clothes—my old ones, and bring something for this gentleman to put on. Any old thing will do. Get us some food, too, for we're starving. Quick, man. Leave the lantern here."

By the slender light, set on a table in the great stone hall, the two men regarded each other.

"You want to know who I am," said Vernon. "I'm an Englishman who came here three nights ago in a yacht. I happened to have met Miss Arabin before. I found out what the people of Plakos were up to, and it seemed to me that the best thing I could do was to win the race to-night. I needn't tell you about that, for you saw it... Now for yourself. I gather that you also are unpopular in this island?"

Maris gave a short sketch of his career, and Vernon convinced himself by a few questions that he spoke the truth, for the Greek had served alongside the British at Salonika.

"I came here to protect the lady," Maris concluded.

"Who sent you?"

"Mr. Ertzberger. I had a companion, an English colonel, who is also in your Parliament, and a great milord. Leithen is his name."

"God bless my soul! Leithen! Oh, impossible! Quick! Tell me more. Where is he now?"

"That I do not know. Yesterday evening we separated, each seeking to find some way of entering this House. I blundered badly, and was taken by the guards on the seaward front. My friend must also have failed, or he would be here, but I do not think he has been taken."

The knowledge that I was somewhere in the island gave Vernon, as he told me, a sudden acute sense of comfort. I must have been the visitor to the yacht. He cross-examined Maris, who knew nothing of the boat's existence, and Maris agreed that the stranger who had gone aboard must have been myself. "The Greek who was with him," he said, "was doubtless my corporal, Janni, the one man in my batch of fools who kept his head."

Mitri returned with Vernon's clothes, and an ancient dressing-gown for Maris. He also brought a bowl of milk and some cakes and cheese. Questions trembled on his lips, but Vernon waved him off. "Go and tell your mistress that we will come to her in a quarter of an hour. And have a bed made ready for this gentleman."

As Vernon dressed he had a look at his companion, now grotesquely robed in a gown too large for him, and dirty and scratched from his adventures. It was the mercy of Providence that had given him such a colleague, for he liked the man's bold, hard-bitten face and honest eyes. Here was a practical fellow, and he wanted something exceedingly prosaic and practical to counteract the awe which still hovered about his mind. He fought to keep at a distance the memory of the silence and the torches and the shining spaces of the Dancing Floor. This man did not look susceptible.

"I need not tell you that we are in the devil of a tight place, Captain Maris. Do you realize precisely the meaning of the performance we have just witnessed?"

Maris nodded. "Since yesterday. It has been most pointedly explained to me. I am one victim for the sacrifice, and the lady of this house is the other, and you are the priest."

"We have the better part of twenty-four hours' grace. After that?"

"After that this House will be burned. You may go forth, if you have the nerve to play the part. The lady and I—no. We are supposed to die when the fire begins, but if we do not die by your hand we will die in the flames."

"There is no way of escape?"

"None," said Maris cheerfully. "But with your help I think we will do some mischief first. God's curse on the swine!"

"And the lady?"

Maris shrugged his shoulders.

"Till this evening," said Vernon, "I thought I had a plan. I was pretty certain I could win the race, and I proposed to reason with the male victim who came back with me, or club him on the head. I thought that when the fire began there

would be confusion and that the people would keep outside the wall. My boat is lying below the cliffs, and I hoped to carry the lady there. But now I know that that is impossible. There will be a concourse of the young men outside the door at the moment of the burning, and the House will be watched more closely than ever. Do you know what the people expect?"

Maris spat contemptuously. "I heard some talk of the coming of Gods. The devil take all priests and their lying tales."

"They await the coming of Gods. You are not a classical scholar, Captain Maris, so you cannot realize, perhaps, just what that means. We are dealing with stark madness. These peasants are keyed up to a tremendous expectation. A belief has come to life, a belief far older than Christianity. They expect salvation from the coming of two Gods, a youth and a maiden. If their hope is disappointed, they will be worse madmen than before. To-morrow night nothing will go out from this place, unless it be Gods."

"That is true. The lady and I will without doubt die at the threshold, and you also, my friend. What arms have we?"

"I have this revolver with six cartridges. The lady has a toy pistol, but, I think, no ammunition. The men without are armed with rifles."

"Ugly odds. It is infamous that honest folk and soldiers should perish at the hands of the half-witted."

"What about Leithen? He is outside and has come here expressly to save the lady."

Maris shook his head. "He can do nothing. They have set up a cordon, a barrage, which he cannot penetrate. There is no hope in the island, for every man and woman is under the Devil's spell. Also the telegraph has been cut these three days."

"Do you see any chance?"

Maris cogitated. "We have twenty-four hours. Some way of escape may be found by an active man at the risk of a bullet or two. We might reach your boat."

"But the lady?"

"Why, no. Things look dark for the poor lady. We came here to protect her, and it seems as if we can do no more than die with her... I would like to speak with that old man about clothes. A soldier does not feel at his bravest when he is barefoot and unclad save for pants and a ragged shirt. I refuse to go to Paradise in this dressing-gown."

Maris's cheerful fortitude was balm to Vernon's mind, for it seemed to strip the aura of mystery from the situation, and leave it a straight gamble of life and death. If Koré was to be saved it must be through Maris, for he himself was cast for another part.

"Come and let me present you to the lady," he said. "We must have some plan to sleep on."

Koré was in her sitting-room, and as she rose to meet them he saw that her face was very white.

"I heard nothing," she said hoarsely, "though Mitri says that there are thousands in the glade beyond the wall. But I saw a red glow from the upper windows."

"That was the torches which lined the stadium. I have been running a race, Miss Arabin, and have been lucky enough to win. Therefore we have still twenty-four hours of peace. May I present Captain Maris of the Greek Army? He asks me to apologize for his clothes."

The Greek bowed gallantly and kissed her hand.

"Captain Maris came here to protect you. He came with a friend of ours, Sir Edward Leithen."

"Sir Edward Leithen?" the girl cried. "He is here?"

"He is in the island, but he is unable to join us in the House. Captain Maris tried, and was unfortunately captured. He was handed over to me as the victor of the race, and that is why he is here. But Sir Edward must be still scouting around the outposts, and it is pretty certain that he won't find a way in. I'm afraid we must leave him out of account... Now I want you to listen to me very carefully, for I've a good deal to say to you. I'm going to be perfectly candid, for you're brave enough to hear the worst."

Vernon constructed three cigarettes out of his pipe tobacco and tissue paper from the illustrations in Peter Beckford. Koré did not light hers, but sat waiting with her hands on her knees.

"They think you a witch, because of the habits of your family. That you have long known. In the past they have burned witches in these islands, and Plakos remembers it. But it remembers another thing—the ancient ritual I told you of, and that memory which has been sleeping for centuries has come to violent life. Perhaps it would not have mastered them if the mind of the people had not been full of witch-burning. That, you see, gave them one victim already chosen, and in Captain Maris, who is of their own race and also a stranger, they have found the other."

"I see all that," the girl said slowly. "Of course I did not know when I left London—I couldn't have guessed—I thought it was a simple business which only needed a bold front, and I was too vain to take advice ... Oh, forgive me. My vanity has brought two innocent people into my miserable troubles..."

"I told you yesterday that we were going to win. You must trust me, Miss Arabin. And for Heaven's sake, don't imagine that I blame you. I think you are the bravest thing God ever made. I wouldn't be elsewhere for worlds."

Her eyes searched his face closely, and then turned to Maris, who instantly adopted an air of bold insouciance.

"You are good men... But what can you do? They will watch us like rats till the fire begins, and then—if we are not dead—they will kill us... They will let no one go from this House—except their Gods."

These were the very words Vernon had used to Maris, and since they so wholly expressed his own belief, he had to repudiate them with a vehement confidence.

"No," he said, "you forget that there are two things on our side. One is that, as the winner of the race, I am one of the people of Plakos. I can safely go out at the last moment and join their young men. I speak their tongue, and I understand this ritual better than they do themselves. Surely I can find some way of driving them farther from the House so that in the confusion Maris can get you and your maid off unobserved. Mitri too—"

"Mitri," she broke in, "has permission from our enemies to go when he pleases. But he refuses to leave us."

"Well, Mitri also. The second thing is that I have found my boat and got in touch with my man. He is lying in the bay below the cliffs, and I have arranged that on a certain signal he will meet you under the olive-yards. There is a gate in the wall there of which Mitri no doubt has the key. Once aboard, you are as safe as in London."

"And you?"

"Oh. I will take my chance. I am a hillman from Akte and can keep up the part till I find some way of getting off."

"Impossible!" she cried. "When they find that their Gods have failed them they will certainly kill you. Perhaps it is because I was born here, but though I have only heard of this ritual from you, I feel somehow as if I had always known it. And I know that if the one sacrifice fails, there will be another."

She rang the little silver bell for Mitri. "Show this gentleman his room," she looked towards Maris. "You have already had food? Goodnight, Captain Maris. You must have had a wearing day, and I order you to bed."

When they were alone she turned to Vernon. "Your plan will not work. I can make a picture of what will happen tomorrow night—I seem to see every detail clear, as if I had been through it all before—and your plan is hopeless. You cannot draw them away from the House. They will be watching like demented wolves... And if you did and we escaped, what on earth would become of you?"

"I should be one of them—a sharer in their disappointment—probably forgotten."

"Not you. You are their high-priest, and an angry people always turns on their priest."

"There might be a bit of a row, but I daresay I could hold my own."

"Against thousands—mad thousands? You would be torn in pieces even though they still believed you were a hillman from Akte."

"I'll take the risk. It is no good making difficulties, Miss Arabin. I admit that the case is pretty desperate, but my plan has at any rate a chance."

"The case is utterly desperate, and that is why your plan is no good. Desperate cases need more desperate remedies."

"Well, what do you suggest?"

She smiled. "You are very tired, and so am I. We have a day and a night left us, and we can talk in the morning... I told you when you first came here that I refused to run away. Well, I—don't—think—I have changed my mind..."

* * * * *

The difficulty of telling this part of the story (said Leithen) is that it must be largely guess-work. The main facts I know, but the affair had become so strange and intimate that neither Koré nor Vernon would speak of it, while Maris was only vaguely aware of what was happening. It must have been some time on the Friday morning that the two met again. I can picture Vernon racking his brains to supplement his fragile plan, turning sleeplessly in his bed, hunting out Maris in the early morn to go wearily over the slender chances. Koré, I imagine, slept dreamlessly. She had reached her decision, and to her strong and simple soul to be resolved was to be at peace. Vernon was a fine fellow—I have known few finer—but there were lumpish elements in him, while the girl was all pure spirit.

But I can reconstruct the meeting of the two in the bare little sitting-room—without Maris—for that much Vernon has told me. I can see Vernon's anxious face, and the girl's eyes bright with that innocent arrogance which once in my haste I had thought ill-breeding.

"I am not going to run away from my people," she said. "I am going to meet them."

Vernon asked her meaning, and she replied:

"I said yesterday that no one would be permitted to leave the House, unless in the eyes of the watchers they were Gods. Well, the Gods will not fail them... Listen to me. I have tried to purify this place, but there can be only one purification, and that is by fire. It had to come, and it seems to me right that it should come from the hands of those who have suffered. After that I go out as a free woman—and to a free woman nothing is impossible."

I think that for a little he may not have understood her. His mind, you see, had been busy among small particulars, and

the simplicity of her plan would not at once be comprehended. Then there came for him that moment of liberation, when the world clarifies and what have been barrier mountains become only details in a wide prospect. The extreme of boldness is seen to be the true discretion, and with that mood comes a sharp uplift of spirit.

"You are right," he cried. "We will give them their Gods."

"Gods?" She stopped him. "But I must go alone. You have no part in this trial. But if I win all this household will be safe. Most of these people have never seen me, and Kynaetho knows me only as a girl in old country clothes from whom they kept their eyes averted. I can dress for a different part, and they will see some one who will be as new to them as if the Panagia had come down from Heaven. But you—"

"They will not be content with one divinity," he broke in. "They await a double epiphany, remember—the Koré and the Kouros. That is the point of the occasion. We must be faithful to the letter of the rite. After all, they know less of me than of you. They saw me win a race, a figure very much like the others in the moonlight... To those who may recognize me I am an unknown hillman of Akte. Why should not the Kouros have revealed himself the day before, and be also the Basileus?"

She looked at him curiously as if seeing him for the first time as a bodily presence. I can fancy that for the first time she may have recognized his beauty and strength.

"But you are not like me," she urged. "You have not an old burden to get rid of. I am shaking off the incubus of my youth, and going free, like the Gods. What you call the epiphany is not only for Plakos but for myself, and nothing matters, not even death. I can play the part, but can you? To me it is going to be the beginning of life, but to you it can only be an adventure. Chivalry is not enough."

"To me also it is the beginning of life," he answered. Then he returned to the tale of his boyhood's dream. "When it vanished in the storm a few nights ago I hated it, for I felt that it had stolen years from my life. But now I know that nothing is wasted. The door of the last of the dream-rooms has opened, and you have come in. And we are going to begin life—together."

A strange pair of lovers, between whom no word of love had yet been spoken! By very different roads both had reached a complete assurance, and with it came exhilaration and ease of mind. Maris during the long spring day might roam about restlessly, and Mitri and Élise fall to their several prayers, but Vernon and Koré had no doubts. While I, outside the wall, was at the mercy of old magics, a mere piece of driftwood tossed upon undreamed-of tides, the two in the House had almost forgotten Plakos. It had become to them no more than a background for their own overmastering private concerns. The only problem was for their own hearts; for Koré to shake off for good the burden of her past and vindicate her fiery purity, that virginity of the spirit which could not be smirched by man or matter; for Vernon to open the door at which he had waited all his life and redeem the long preparation of his youth. They had followed each their own paths of destiny, and now these paths had met and must run together. That was the kind of thing that could not be questioned, could not even be thought about; it had to be accepted, like the rising sun. I do not think that they appreciated their danger, as I did, for they had not been, like me, down in the shadows. They were happy in their half-knowledge, and in that blessed preoccupation which casts out fear.

But some time in the afternoon he drew for the girl a picture of the ancient rite, and he must have been inspired, for, as she once recounted it to me, he seems to have made his book learning like the tale of an eye-witness.

"Why do you tell me this?" she asked.

"Because if we are to play our part we must understand that there is beauty as well as terror in this worship."

"You speak as if you were a believer."

He laughed. "There is truth in every religion that the heart of man ever conceived. It is because of that that we shall win."

But I think his confidence was less complete than hers. I judge from what Maris told me that, though Vernon was what the Scotch call "fey" during those last hours, he retained something of his old careful prevision. As the twilight fell he took Maris aside and gave him his pistol. "Mitri has orders as soon as he gets out of the House to take a lantern to the cliffs and make the signal for my boat. He has a key, and will open the door in the olive-yard wall. Miss Arabin and I are staking everything on a mighty gamble. If it succeeds, I think that the people will be in a stupor and we shall have an opportunity to join you. But if it fails—well, they will tear us to pieces. You must be close to us and await events. If the worst happens, one of these bullets is for the lady. Swear to me on your honour as a soldier."

CHAPTER 18

I take up the tale now (said Leithen) at the point where I fell in with Maris in the avenue which led to the gap in the wall. As I have told you, I had stumbled through the undergrowth with the blazing House making the place an inferno of blood-red aisles and purple thickets. Above the roar of the flames I heard the noise of panic-driven feet, of men plunging in haste — two indeed I had met, who seemed to be in the extremity of fear. For myself I was pretty nearly at the end of my tether. I was doddering with fatigue, and desperate with anxiety, and the only notion in my head was to use the dregs of my strength to do something violent. I was utterly in the dark, too. I did not know but that Koré might be already beyond my help, for that crimson grove seemed to reek of death.

And then I blundered into Maris, saw something in his face which gave me a surge of hope, and with his hand on my arm turned my eyes up the avenue.

The back part of the House and the outbuildings were by this time one roaring gust of flame, but the front was still untouched, and the fan of fire behind it gave it the concave darkness of a shell—a purple dark which might at any moment burst into light. The glow beyond the façade was reflected farther down the avenue, which was as bright as day, but the House end was shadowed, and the two figures which I saw seemed to be emerging from a belt of blackness between two zones of raw gold. I therefore saw them first as two dim white forms, which, as they moved, caught tints of flame...

Put it down to fatigue, if you like, or to natural stupidity, but I did not recognize them. Besides, you see, I knew nothing of Vernon's presence there. My breath stopped, and I felt my heart leap to my throat. What I saw seemed not of the earth—immortals, whether from Heaven or Hell, coming out of the shadows and the fire in white garments, beings that no elements could destroy. In that moment the most panicky of the guards now fleeing from the demesne was no more abject believer than I.

And then another fugitive barged into me, and Maris caught him by the arm and cuffed his ears. I saw that it was Janni, but the sight meant nothing to me. The corporal seemed to be whimpering with terror, and Maris talked fiercely to him, but I did not listen. He quieted him, and then he took us both by an arm and hurried us with him towards the gap. It was what I wanted to do. I dared not look again on that burning pageant.

The next I knew I was beyond the wall on the edge of the Dancing Floor. I do not know how I got there, for my legs seemed to have no power in them, and I fancy that Maris dragged us both. The scared guards must have preceded us, for behind was emptiness, save for the presences in the avenue. The thick trees partly blanketed the fire, but the light from the burning roof fell beyond them and lit up redly the scarp on which we stood. A rival light, too, was coming into being. The rising moon had already flooded the far hills, and its calm radiance was sweeping over the hollow packed with the waiting multitude.

At first I saw only the near fringes of the people— upturned faces in the uncanny light of the fire. But as I looked, the unfeatured darkness beyond changed also into faces— faces spectral in the soft moonshine. I seemed to be standing between two worlds, one crimson with terror and the other golden with a stranger spell, but both far removed from the kindly works of men.

Maris had pulled us aside out of the line of the breach in the wall, where the avenue made a path for the glow of the fire. We were in full view of the people, but they had no eyes for us, for their gaze was concentrated on the breach. The fugitive guards had by this time been absorbed, and their panic had not communicated itself to the great multitude. For a second I forgot my own fears in the amazing sight before me... The crowded Dancing Floor was silent; in face of that deep stillness the crackle and roar of the fire seemed no more than the beating of waves on a far-away coast. Though the moon made the hills yellow as corn, it left the upturned faces pale. I was looking down on a sea of white faces—featureless to me, masks of strained expectation. I felt the influence from them beat upon me like a wind. The fierce concentration of mingled hope and fear— wild hope, wilder fear—surged up to me, and clutched at my nerves and fired my brain. For a second I was as exalted as the craziest of them. Fragments of the dithyramb which Vernon had translated came unbidden to my lips—"Io, Kouros most great... Come, O come, and bring with thee—holy hours of thy most holy Spring."

The spell of the waiting people made me turn, as they had turned, to the gap in the wall. Through it, to the point where the glow of the conflagration mingled with the yellow moonlight, came the two figures.

I think I would have dropped on my knees, but that Maris fetched me a clout on the back, and his exultant voice cried in my ear. "Bravo," he cried. "By the Mother of God, they win! That is a great little lady!"

There was something in the familiarity, the friendly roughness of the voice which broke the spell. I suddenly looked with seeing eyes, and I saw Koré.

She was dressed in white, the very gown which had roused Vernon's ire at my cousin's dance the summer before. A preposterous garment I had thought it, the vagary of an indecent fashion. But now—ah now! It seemed the fitting robe for youth and innocence—divine youth, heavenly innocence—clothing but scarcely veiling the young Grace who walked like Persephone among the spring meadows. *Vera incessu patuit Dea*. It was not Koré I was looking at, but *the* Koré, the immortal maiden, who brings to the earth its annual redemption.

I was a sane man once more, and filled with another kind of exaltation. I have never felt so sharp a sense of joy. God had not failed us. I knew that Koré was now not only safe but triumphant.

And then I recognized Vernon.

I did not trouble to think by what mad chance he had come there. It seemed wholly right that he should be there. He was dressed like the runner of the day before, but at the moment I did not connect the two. What I was looking at was an incarnation of something that mankind has always worshipped—youth rejoicing to run its race, that youth which is the security of this world's continuance and the earnest of Paradise.

I recognized my friends, and yet I did not recognize them, for they were transfigured. In a flash of insight I understood that it was not the Koré and the Vernon that I had known, but new creations. They were not acting a part, but living it. They, too, were believers; they had found their own epiphany, for they had found themselves and each other. Each other! How I knew it I do not know, but I realized that it was two lovers that stood on the brink of the Dancing Floor. And I felt a great glow of peace and happiness.

With that I could face the multitude once more. And then I saw the supreme miracle.

People talk about the psychology of a crowd, how it is different in kind from the moods of the men who compose it. I daresay that is true, but if you have each individual strained to the extreme of tension with a single hope, the mood of the whole is the same as that of the parts, only multiplied a thousandfold. And if the nerve of a crowd goes there is a vast cracking, just as the rending of a tree-trunk is greater than the breaking of a twig.

For a second—not more—the two figures stood on the edge of the Dancing Floor in the sight of the upturned eyes. I do not think that Koré and Vernon saw anything—they had their own inward vision. I do not know what the people saw in the presences that moved out of the darkness above them.

But this I saw. Over the multitude passed a tremor like a wind in a field of wheat. Instead of a shout of triumph there was a low murmur as of a thousand sighs. And then there came a surge, men and women stumbling in terror. First the fringes opened and thinned, and in another second, as it seemed to me, the whole mass was in precipitate movement. And then it became panic—naked, veritable panic. The silence was broken by hoarse cries of fear. I saw men running like hares on the slopes of the Dancing Floor. I saw women dragging their children as if fleeing from a pestilence... In a twinkling I was looking down on an empty glade with the Spring of the White Cypress black and solitary in the moonlight.

I did not doubt what had happened. The people of Plakos had gone after strange gods, but it was only for a short season that they could shake themselves free from the bonds of a creed which they had held for a thousand years. The resurgence of ancient faiths had obscured but had not destroyed the religion into which they had been born. Their spells had been too successful. They had raised the Devil and now fled from him in the blindest terror. They had sought the outlands, had felt their biting winds, and had a glimpse of their awful denizens, and they longed with the passion of children for their old homely shelters. The priest of Kynaetho would presently have his fill of stricken penitents.

Maris was laughing. I daresay it was only a relief from nervous strain, but it seemed to me an impiety. I turned on him angrily. "There's a boat somewhere. See that everybody is aboard—the whole household. And bring it round to the harbour where we first landed."

"Not to the olive-yards?" he asked.

"No, you fool. To the harbour. Plakos is now as safe for us as the streets of Athens."

Koré and Vernon stood hand in hand like people in a dream. I think they were already dimly aware of what had happened, and were slowly coming back to the ordinary world. The virtue was going out of them, and with the ebbing of their exaltation came an immense fatigue. I never saw human faces so pale.

Vernon was the first to recover. He put his arm round Koré's waist, for without it she would have fallen, but he himself was none too steady on his feet. He recognized me.

"Ned," he said, in a stammering voice, like a sleep-walker's. "I heard you were here. It was good of you, old man... What do you think... now... the boat..."

"Come along," I cried, and I took an arm of each. "The sooner you are on board the better. You want to sleep for a week." I started them off along the edge of the Dancing Floor.

"Not that way," he gasped. "Too risky..."

"There is no danger anywhere in this blessed island. Come along. You want food and clothes. It's getting on for midnight, and you're both only half-dressed."

They were like two children pulled out of bed and too drowsy to walk, and I had my work cut out getting them along the ridge. The Dancing Floor was empty, and when we entered the road which led from Kynaetho to the main gate of the House there was also solitude. Indeed, we had to pass through a segment of the village itself, and the place was silent as the grave. I knew where the people were—in and around the church, grovelling in the dust for their sins.

Our going was so slow that by the time we looked down on the harbour the boat was already there. I stopped for a moment and glanced back, for far behind me I heard voices. There was a glow as from torches to the south where the church stood, and a murmur which presently swelled into an excited clamour. Suddenly a bell began to ring, and it seemed as if the noise became antiphonal, voices speaking and others replying. At that distance I could make out nothing, but I knew what the voices said. It was "Christ is risen—He is risen indeed."

The moon had set before we put to sea. My last recollection of Plakos is looking back and seeing the House flaming like a pharos on its headland. Then, as we beat outward with the wind, the fire became a mere point of brightness seen at a great distance in the vault of night.

I had no wish or power to sleep. Koré and Vernon, wrapped each in a heap of cloaks, lay in the bows. It was the quietest place, but there was no need of precautions, for they slept like the drugged. Élise, whose nerves had broken down, was in Vernon's berth, Black George had the helm, and old Mitri and Janni snored beside him.

I sat amidships and smoked. When the moon went down a host of stars came out, pale and very remote as they always seem in a spring sky. The wind was light and the water slid smoothly past; I knew roughly our bearings, but I had a sense of being in another world, and on seas never before sailed by man. The last week had been for me a time of acute anxiety and violent bodily exertion, but a sponge seemed to have passed over the memory of it. Something altogether different filled my mind. I had with my own eyes seen Fate take a hand in the game and move the pieces on the board. The two sleepers in the bows had trusted their destiny and had not been betrayed.

I thought with contrition of my cynicism about Vernon's dream. No doubt it had been a will-o'-the-wisp, but it had been true in purpose, for it had made him wait, alert and aware, on something which had been prepared for him, and if that something was far different from his forecast the long expectation had made him ready to seize it. How otherwise could he, with his decorous ancestry and his prudent soul, have become an adventurer?... And Koré? She had stood grimly to the duty which she conceived Fate to have laid upon her, and Fate, after piling the odds against her, had relented. Perhaps that is the meaning of courage. It wrestles with circumstance, like Jacob with the angel, till it compels its antagonist to bless it.

I remembered a phrase which Vernon had once used about "the mailed virgin." It fitted this girl, and I began to realize the meaning of virginity. True purity, I thought, whether in woman or man, was something far more than the narrow sex thing which was the common notion of it. It meant keeping oneself, as the Bible says, altogether unspotted from the world, free from all tyranny and stain, whether of flesh or spirit, defying the universe to touch even the outworks of the sanctuary which is one's soul. It must be defiant, not the inert fragile crystal, but the supple shining sword. Virginity meant nothing unless it was mailed, and I wondered whether we were not coming to a better understanding of it. The modern girl, with all her harshness, had the gallantry of a free woman. She was a crude Artemis, but her feet were on the hills. Was the blushing, sheltered maid of our grandmother's day no more than an untempted Aphrodite?

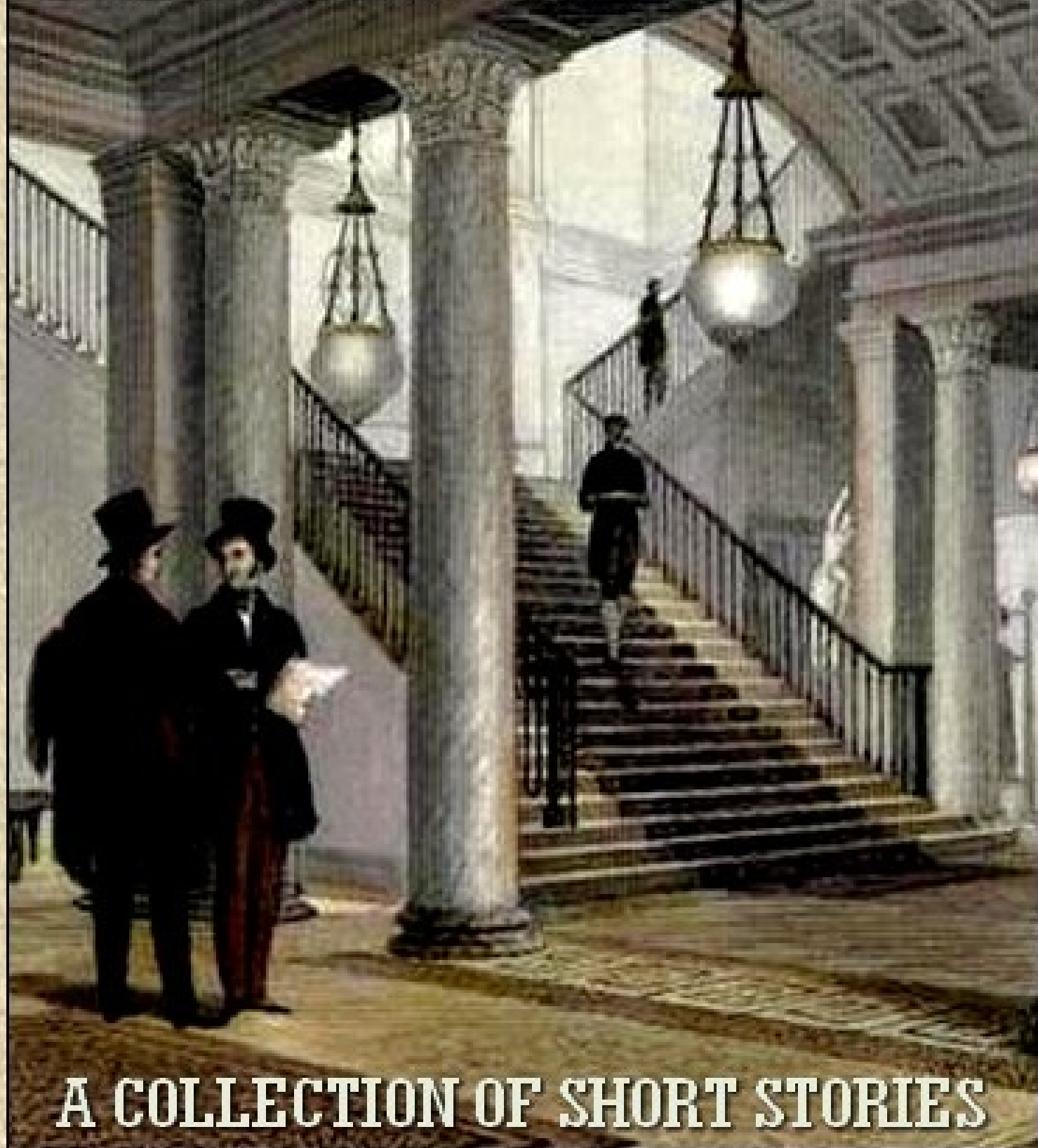
These were queer reflections, I know, for a man like me, but they gave me contentment, as if I had somehow made my peace with life. For a long time I listened to the ripple of the water and watched the sky lighten to dim grey, and the east flush with sunrise. It had become very cold and I was getting sleepy, so I hunted about for a mattress to make myself a bed. But a thought made me pause. How would these two, who had come together out of the night, shake down on the conventional roads of marriage? To the end of time the desire of a woman should be to her husband. Would Koré's eyes, accustomed to look so masterfully at life, ever turn to Vernon in the surrender of wifely affection? As I looked at the two in the bows I wondered.

Then something happened which reassured me. The girl stirred uneasily as if in a bad dream, turned to where Vernon lay, and flung out her hand. Both were sound asleep, but in some secret way the impulse must have been communicated to Vernon, for he moved on his side, and brought an arm, which had been lying loosely on the rug which covered him, athwart Koré's in a gesture of protection.

After that both seemed to be at peace, while the yawl ran towards the mainland hills, now green as a fern in the spring dawn.

THE END

JOHN BUCHAN THE RUNAGATES CLUB



A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

THE GREEN WILDEBEEST

SIR RICHARD HANNAY'S STORY

First published in *The Pall Mall Magazine*, September, 1927

We carry with us the wonders we seek without us; there is all Africa and her prodigies in us.—Sir Thomas Browne: *Religio Medici*.

We were talking about the persistence of race qualities—how you might bury a strain for generations under fresh graftings but the aboriginal sap would some day stir. The obvious instance was the Jew, and Pugh had also something to say about the surprises of a tincture of hill blood in the Behari. Peckwether, the historian, was inclined to doubt. The old stock, he held, could disappear absolutely as if by a chemical change, and the end be as remote from the beginnings as—to use his phrase—a ripe Gorgonzola from a bucket of new milk.

“I don’t believe you’re ever quite safe,” said Sandy Arbuthnot.

“You mean that an eminent banker may get up one morning with a strong wish to cut himself shaving in honour of Baal?”

“Maybe. But the tradition is more likely to be negative. There are some things that for no particular reason he won’t like, some things that specially frighten him. Take my own case. I haven’t a scrap of real superstition in me, but I hate crossing a river at night. I fancy a lot of my blackguard ancestors got scuppered at moonlight fords. I believe we’re all stuffed full of atavistic fears, and you can’t tell how or when a man will crack till you know his breeding.”

“I think that’s about the truth of it,” said Hannay, and after the discussion had rambled on for a while he told us this tale.

Just after the Boer War (he said) I was on a prospecting job in the north-eastern Transvaal. I was a mining engineer, with copper as my speciality, and I had always a notion that copper might be found in big quantities in the Zoutpansberg foothills. There was of course Messina at the west end, but my thoughts turned rather to the north-east corner, where the berg breaks down to the crook of the Limpopo. I was a young man then, fresh from two years’ campaigning with the Imperial Light Horse, and I was thirsty for better jobs than trying to drive elusive burghers up against barbed wire and blockhouses. When I started out with my mules from Pietersburg on the dusty road to the hills, I think I felt happier than ever before in my life.

I had only one white companion, a boy of twenty-two called Andrew Du Preez. Andrew, not Andries, for he was named after the Reverend Andrew Murray, who had been a great Pope among the devout Afrikanders. He came of a rich Free State farming family, but his particular branch had been settled for two generations in the Wakkerstroom region along the upper Pongola. The father was a splendid old fellow with a head like Moses, and he and all the uncles had been on commando, and most of them had had a spell in Bermuda or Ceylon. The boy was a bit of a freak in that stock. He had been precociously intelligent, and had gone to a good school in the Cape and afterwards to a technical college in Johannesburg. He was as modern a product as the others were survivals, with none of the family religion or family politics, very keen on science, determined to push his way on the Rand—which was the Mecca of all enterprising Afrikanders—and not very sorry that the War should have found him in a place from which it was manifestly impossible to join the family banner. In October ‘99 he was on his first job in a new mining area in Rhodesia, and as he hadn’t much health he was wise enough to stick there till peace came.

I had known him before, and when I ran across him on the Rand I asked him to come with me, and he jumped at the offer. He had just returned from the Wakkerstroom farm, to which the rest of his clan had been repatriated, and didn’t relish the prospect of living in a tin-roofed shanty with a father who read the Bible most of the day to find out why exactly he had merited such misfortunes. Andrew was a hard young sceptic, in whom the family piety produced acute exasperation... He was a good-looking boy, always rather smartly dressed, and at first sight you would have taken him for a young American, because of his heavy hairless chin, his dull complexion, and the way he peppered his ordinary speech with technical and business phrases. There was a touch of the Mongol in his face, which was broad, with high cheek bones, eyes slightly slanted, short thick nose and rather full lips. I remembered that I had seen the same thing before in young Boers, and I thought I knew the reason. The Du Preez family had lived for generations close up to the Kaffir borders, and somewhere had got a dash of the tar-brush.

We had a light wagon with a team of eight mules, and a Cape- cart drawn by four others; five boys went with us, two of them Shangaans, and three Basutos from Malietsie’s location north of Pietersburg. Our road was over the Wood Bush, and then north-east across the two Letabas to the Pufuri river. The countryside was amazingly empty. Beyer’s commandos had skirmished among the hills, but the war had never reached the plains; at the same time it had put a stop to all hunting and prospecting and had scattered most of the native tribes. The place had become in effect a sanctuary, and I saw more varieties of game than I had ever seen before south of the Zambesi, so that I wished I were on a hunting trip instead of on a business job. Lions were plentiful, and every night we had to build a scherm for our mules and light great fires, beside which we listened to their eerie serenades.

It was early December, and in the Wood Bush it was the weather of an English June. Even in the foothills, among the wormwood and wild bananas, it was pleasant enough, but when we got out into the plains it was as hot as Tophet. As far as the eye could reach the bushveld rolled its scrub like the scrawled foliage a child draws on a slate, with here and there a baobab swimming unsteadily in the glare. For long stretches we were away from water, and ceased to see big game—only Kaffir queens and tick-birds, and now and then a wild ostrich. Then on the sixth day out from Pietersburg we raised a blue

line of mountains on the north, which I knew to be the eastern extension of the Zoutpansberg. I had never travelled this country before, and had never met a man who had, so we steered by compass, and by one of the old bad maps of the Transvaal Government. That night we crossed the Pufuri, and next day the landscape began to change. The ground rose, so that we had a sight of the distant Lebombo hills to the east, and mopani bushes began to appear—a sure sign of a healthier country.

That afternoon we were only a mile or two from the hills. They were the usual type of berg which you find everywhere from Natal to the Zambesi—cut sheer, with an overhang in many places, but much broken up by kloofs and fissures. What puzzled me was the absence of streams. The ground was as baked as the plains, all covered with aloe and cactus and thorn, with never a sign of water. But for my purpose the place looked promising. There was that unpleasant metallic green that you find in a copper country, so that everything seemed to have been steeped in a mineral dye—even the brace of doves which I shot for luncheon.

We turned east along the foot of the cliffs, and presently saw a curious feature. A promontory ran out from the berg, connected by a narrow isthmus with the main massif. I suppose the superficial area of the top might have been a square mile or so; the little peninsula was deeply cut into by ravines, and in the ravines tall timber was growing. Also we came to well-grassed slopes, dotted with mimosa and syringa bushes. This must mean water at last, for I had never found yellowwoods and stinkwoods growing far from a stream. Here was our outspan for the night, and when presently we rounded a corner and looked down into a green cup I thought I had rarely seen a more habitable place. The sight of fresh green herbage always intoxicated me, after the dust and heat and the ugly greys and umbers of the bushveld. There was a biggish kraal in the bottom, and a lot of goats and leggy Kaffir sheep on the slopes. Children were bringing in the cows for the milking, smoke was going up from the cooking fires, and there was a cheerful evening hum in the air. I expected a stream, but could see no sign of one: the cup seemed to be as dry as a hollow of the Sussex Downs. Also, though there were patches of mealies and Kaffir corn, I could see no irrigated land. But water must be there, and after we had fixed a spot for our outspan beside a clump of olivewoods, I took Andrew and one of our boys and strolled down to make inquiries.

I daresay many of the inhabitants of that kraal had never seen a white man before, for our arrival made a bit of a sensation. I noticed that there were very few young men about the place, but an inordinate number of old women. The first sight of us scattered them like plovers, and we had to wait for half an hour, smoking patiently in the evening sun, before we could get into talk with them. Once the ice was broken, however, things went well. They were a decent peaceable folk, very shy and scared and hesitating, but with no guile in them. Our presents of brass and copper wire and a few tins of preserved meat made a tremendous impression. We bought a sheep from them at a ridiculously small price, and they threw in a basket of green mealies. But when we raised the water question we struck a snag.

There was water, good water, they said, but it was not in any pan or stream. They got it morning and evening from up there—and they pointed to the fringe of a wood under the cliffs where I thought I saw the roof of a biggish rondavel. They got it from their Father; they were Shangaans, and the word they used was not the ordinary word for chief, but the name for a great priest and medicine-man.

I wanted my dinner, so I forbore to inquire further. I produced some more Kaffir truck, and begged them to present it with my compliments to their Father, and to ask for water for two white strangers, five of their own race, and twelve mules. They seemed to welcome the proposition, and a string of them promptly set off uphill with their big calabashes. As we walked back I said something foolish to Andrew about having struck a Kaffir Moses who could draw water from the rock. The lad was in a bad temper. “We have struck an infernal rascal who has made a corner in the water supply and bleeds these poor devils. He’s the kind of grafter I would like to interview with a sjambok.”

In an hour we had all the water we wanted. It stood in a row of calabashes, and beside it the presents I had sent to the provider. The villagers had deposited it and then vanished, and our boys who had helped them to carry it were curiously quiet and solemnised. I was informed that the Father sent the water as a gift to the strangers without payment. I tried to cross-examine one of our Shangaans, but he would tell me nothing except that the water had come from a sacred place into which no man could penetrate. He also muttered something about a wildebeest which I couldn’t understand. Now the Kaffir is the most superstitious of God’s creatures. All the way from Pietersburg we had been troubled by the vivid imaginations of our outfit. They wouldn’t sleep in one place because of a woman without a head who haunted it; they dared not go a yard along a particular road after dark because of a spook that travelled it in the shape of a rolling ball of fire. Usually their memories were as short as their fancies were quick, and five minutes after their protest they would be laughing like baboons. But that night they seemed to have been really impressed by something. They did not chatter or sing over their supper, but gossiped in undertones, and slept as near Andrew and myself as they dared.

Next morning the same array of gourds stood before our outspan, and there was enough water for me to have a tub in my collapsible bath. I don’t think I ever felt anything colder.

I had decided to take a holiday and go shooting. Andrew would stay in camp and tinker up one of the wheels of the mule-wagon which had suffered from the bush roads. He announced his intention of taking a walk later and interviewing the water-merchant.

“For Heaven’s sake, be careful,” I said. “Most likely he’s a priest of sorts, and if you’re not civil to him we’ll have to quit this country. I make a point of respecting the gods of the heathen.”

“All you English do,” he replied tartly. “That’s why you make such a damned mess of handling Kaffirs... But this fellow is a business man with a pretty notion of cornering public utilities. I’m going to make his acquaintance.”

I had a pleasant day in that hot scented wilderness. First I tried the low ground, but found nothing there but some old spoor of kudu, and a paauw which I shot. Then I tried the skirts of the berg to the east of the village, and found that the

kloofs, which from below looked climbable, had all somewhere a confounded overhang which checked me. I saw no way of getting to the top of the plateau, so I spent the afternoon in exploring the tumbled glacis. There was no trace of copper here, for the rock was a reddish granite, but it was a jolly flowery place, with green dells among the crags, and an amazing variety of birds. But I was glad that I had brought a water-bottle, for I found no water; it was there all right, but it was underground. I stalked a bushbuck ram and missed him, but I got one of the little buck like chamois which the Dutch call klipspringer. With it and the paauw strung round my neck I sauntered back leisurely to supper.

As soon as I came in sight of the village I saw that something had played the deuce with it. There was a great hubbub going on, and all the folk were collected at the end farthest away from our camp. The camp itself looked very silent. I could see the hobbled mules, but I could see nothing of any of our outfit. I thought it best in these circumstances to make an inconspicuous arrival, so I bore away to my left, crossed the hollow lower down where it was thick with scrub, and came in on the outspan from the south. It was very silent. The cooking fires had been allowed to go out, though the boys should have been getting ready the evening meal, and there seemed to be not a single black face on the premises. Very uneasy, I made for our sleeping tent, and found Andrew lying on his bed, smoking.

"What on earth has happened?" I demanded. "Where are Coos and Klemboy and ... "

"Quit," he said shortly. "They've all quit."

He looked sulky and tired and rather white in the face, and there seemed to be more the matter with him than ill temper. He would lay down his pipe, and press his hand on his forehead like a man with a bad headache. Also he never lifted his eyes to mine. I daresay I was a bit harsh, for I was hungry, and there were moments when I thought he was going to cry. However at last I got a sort of story out of him.

He had finished his job on the wagon wheel in the morning, and after luncheon had gone for a walk to the wood above the village at the foot of the cliffs. He wanted to see where the water came from and to have a word with the man who controlled it. Andrew, as I have told you, was a hard young realist and, by way of reaction from his family, a determined foe of superstition, and he disliked the notion of this priest and his mumbo-jumbo. Well, it seemed that he reached the priest's headquarters—it was the big rondavel we had seen from below, and there was a kind of stockade stretching on both sides, very strongly fenced, so that the only entrance was through the rondavel. He had found the priest at home, and had, according to his account, spoken to him civilly and had tried to investigate the water problem. But the old man would have nothing to say to him, and peremptorily refused his request to be allowed to enter the enclosure. By and by Andrew lost his temper, and forced his way in. The priest resisted and there was a scuffle; I daresay Andrew used his sjambok, for a backveld Dutchman can never keep his hands off a Kaffir.

I didn't like the story, but it was no use being angry with a lad who looked like a sick dog.

"What is inside? Did you find the water?" I asked.

"I hadn't time. It's a thick wood and full of beasts. I tell you I was scared out of my senses and had to run for my life."

"Leopards?" I asked. I had heard of native chiefs keeping tame leopards.

"Leopards be damned. I'd have faced leopards. I saw a wildebeest as big as a house—an old brute, grey in the nozzle and the rest of it green—green, I tell you. I took a pot shot at it and ran... When I came out the whole blasted kraal was howling. The old devil must have roused them. I legged it for home... No, they didn't follow, but in half an hour all our outfit had cut their stick... didn't wait to pick up their duds... Oh, hell, I can't talk. Leave me alone."

I had laughed in spite of myself. A wildebeest is not ornamental at the best, but a green one must be a good recipe for the horrors. All the same I felt very little like laughing. Andrew had offended the village and its priest, played havoc with the brittle nerves of our own boys, and generally made the place too hot to hold us. He had struck some kind of native magic, which had frightened him to the bone for all his scepticism. The best thing I could do seemed to be to try and patch up a peace with the water merchant. So I made a fire and put on a kettle to boil, stayed my hunger with a handful of biscuits, and started out for the rondavel. But first I saw that my revolver was loaded, for I fancied that there might be trouble. It was a calm bright evening, but up from the hollow where the kraal lay there rose a buzz like angry wasps.

No one interfered with me; indeed, I met no one till I presented myself at the rondavel door. It was a big empty place, joined to the stockades on both sides, and opposite the door was another which opened on to a dull green shade. I never saw a scherm so stoutly built. There was a palisade of tall pointed poles, and between them a thick wall of wait-a-bit thorns interlaced with a scarlet-flowered creeper. It would have taken a man with an axe half a day to cut a road through. The only feasible entrance was by the rondavel.

An old man was squatted on an earthen floor, which had been so pounded and beaten that it looked like dark polished stone. His age might have been anything above seventy from the whiteness of his beard, but there seemed a good deal of bodily strength left in him, for the long arms which rested on his knees were muscular. His face was not the squat face of the ordinary Kaffir, but high-boned and regular, like some types of well-bred Zulu. Now that I think of it, there was probably Arab blood in him. He lifted his head at the sound of my steps, and by the way he looked at me I knew that he was blind.

There he sat without a word, every line of his body full of dejection and tragedy. I had suddenly a horrible feeling of sacrilege. That that young fool Andrew should have lifted his hand upon an old man and a blind man and outraged some harmless tabu seemed to me an abominable thing. I felt that some holiness had been violated, something ancient and innocent cruelly insulted. At that moment there was nothing in the world I wanted so much as to make restitution.

I spoke to him, using the Shangaan word which means both priest and king. I told him that I had been away hunting and had returned to find that my companion had made bad mischief. I said that Andrew was very young, and that his error

had been only the foolishness and hot-headedness of youth. I said—and my voice must have shown him that I meant it—that I was cut to the heart by what had happened, that I bowed my head in the dust in contrition, and that I asked nothing better than to be allowed to make atonement... Of course I didn't offer money. I would as soon have thought of offering a tip to the Pope.

He never lifted his head, so I said it all over again, and the second time it was genuine pleading. I had never spoken like that to a Kaffir before, but I could not think of that old figure as a Kaffir, but as the keeper of some ancient mystery which a rude hand had outraged.

He spoke at last. "There can be no atonement," he said. "Wrong has been done, and on the wrong-doer must fall the penalty."

The words were wholly without menace; rather he spoke as if he were an unwilling prophet of evil. He was there to declare the law, which he could not alter if he wanted.

I apologised, I protested, I pled, I fairly grovelled; I implored him to tell me if there was no way in which the trouble could be mended; but if I had offered him a million pounds I don't believe that that old fellow would have changed his tone. He seemed to feel, and he made me feel it too, that a crime had been committed against the law of nature, and that it was nature, not man, that would avenge it. He wasn't in the least unfriendly; indeed, I think he rather liked the serious way I took the business and realised how sorry I was; his slow sentences came out without a trace of bitterness. It was this that impressed me so horribly—he was like an old stone oracle repeating the commands of the God he served.

I could make nothing of him, though I kept at it till the shadows had lengthened outside, and it was almost dark within the rondavel. I wanted to ask him at least to help me to get back my boys, and to make our peace with the village, but I simply could not get the words out. The atmosphere was too solemn to put a practical question like that...

I was turning to go away, when I looked at the door on the far side. Owing to the curious formation of the cliffs the sinking sun had only now caught the high tree-tops, and some ricochet of light made the enclosure brighter than when I first arrived. I felt suddenly an overwhelming desire to go inside.

"Is it permitted, Father," I said, "to pass through that door?"

To my surprise he waved me on. "It is permitted," he said, "for you have a clean heart." Then he added a curious thing. "What was there is there no more. It has gone to the fulfilling of the law."

It was with a good deal of trepidation that I entered that uncanny enceinte. I remembered Andrew's terror, and I kept my hand on my revolver, for I had a notion that there might be some queer fauna inside. There was light in the upper air, but below it was a kind of olive-green dusk. I was afraid of snakes, also of tiger-cats, and there was Andrew's green wildebeest!

The place was only a couple of acres in extent, and though I walked very cautiously I soon had made the circuit of it. The scherm continued in a half-moon on each side till it met the sheer wall of the cliffs. The undergrowth was not very thick, and out of it grew tall straight trees, so that the wood seemed like some old pagan grove. When one looked up the mulberry sunset sky showed in patches between the feathery tops, but where I walked it was very dark.

There was not a sign of life in it, not a bird or beast, not the crack of a twig or a stir in the bushes; all was as quiet and dead as a crypt. Having made the circuit I struck diagonally across, and presently came on what I had been looking for— a pool of water. The spring was nearly circular, with a diameter of perhaps six yards, and what amazed me was that it was surrounded by a parapet of hewn stone. In the centre of the grove there was a little more light, and I could see that that stonework had never been made by Kaffir hands. Evening is the time when water comes to its own; it sleeps in the day but it has its own strange life in the darkness. I dipped my hand in it and it was as cold as ice. There was no bubbling in it, but there seemed to be a slow rhythmical movement, as if fresh currents were always welling out of the deeps and always returning. I have no doubt that it would have been crystal clear if there had been any light, but, as I saw it, it was a surface of darkest jade, opaque, impenetrable, swaying to some magic impulse from the heart of the earth.

It is difficult to explain just the effect it had on me. I had been solemnised before, but this grove and fountain gave me the abject shapeless fear of a child. I felt that somehow I had strayed beyond the reasonable world. The place was clean against nature. It was early summer, so these dark aisles should have been alive with moths and flying ants and all the thousand noises of night. Instead it was utterly silent and lifeless, dead as a stone except for the secret pulsing of the cold waters.

I had had quite enough. It is an absurd thing to confess, but I bolted—shuffled through the undergrowth and back into the rondavel, where the old man still sat like Buddha on the floor.

"You have seen?" he asked.

"I have seen," I said—"but I do not know what I have seen. Father, be merciful to foolish youth."

He repeated again the words that had chilled me before. "What was there has gone to fulfil the law."

I ran all the way back to our outspan, and took some unholy tosses on the road, for I had got it into my head that Andrew was in danger. I don't think I ever believed in his green wildebeest, but he had been positive that the place was full of animals, and I knew for a fact that it was empty. Had some fearsome brute been unloosed on the world?

I found Andrew in our tent, and the kettle I had put on to boil empty and the fire out. The boy was sleeping heavily with a flushed face, and I saw what had happened. He was practically a teetotaller, but he had chosen to swallow a good third of one of our four bottles of whisky. The compulsion must have been pretty strong which drove him to drink.

After that our expedition went from bad to worse. In the morning there was no water to be had, and I didn't see myself

shouldering a calabash and going back to the grove. Also our boys did not return, and not a soul in the kraal would come near us. Indeed, all night they had kept up a most distressing racket, wailing and beating little drums. It was no use staying on, and, for myself, I had a strong desire to get out of the neighbourhood. The experience of the night before had left an aftertaste of disquiet in my mind, and I wanted to flee from I knew not what. Andrew was obviously a sick man. We did not carry clinical thermometers in those days, but he certainly had fever on him.

So we inspanned after breakfast, and a heavy job trekking is when you have to do all the work yourself. I drove the wagon and Andrew the Cape-cart, and I wondered how long he would be able to sit on his seat. My notion was that by going east we might be able to hire fresh boys, and start prospecting in the hill-country above the bend of the Limpopo.

But the word had gone out against us. You know the way in which Kaffirs send news for a hundred miles as quick as the telegraph—by drum-taps or telepathy—explain it any way you like. Well, we struck a big kraal that afternoon, but not a word would they say to us. Indeed, they were actually threatening, and I had to show my revolver and speak pretty stiffly before we got off. It was the same next day, and I grew nervous about our provisions, for we couldn't buy anything—not a chicken or an egg or a mealie-cob. Andrew was a jolly companion. He had relapsed into the primeval lout, and his manners were those of a cave-man. If he had not been patently suffering, I would have found it hard to keep my temper.

Altogether it was a bright look-out, and to crown all on the third morning Andrew went down like a log with the worst bout of malaria I have ever seen. That fairly put the lid on it. I thought it was going to be black-water, and all my irritation at the boy vanished in my anxiety. There was nothing for it but to give up the expedition and make the best speed possible to the coast. I made for Portuguese territory, and that evening got to the Limpopo. Happily we struck a more civil brand of native, who had not heard of our performances, and I was able to make a bargain with the headman of the village, who undertook to take charge of our outfit till it was sent for, and sold us a big native boat. I hired four lusty fellows as rowers and next morning we started down the river.

We spent a giddy five days before I planted Andrew in hospital at Lourenço Marques. The sickness was not black-water, thank God, but it was a good deal more than ordinary malaria; indeed, I think there was a touch of brain fever in it. Curiously enough I was rather relieved when it came. I had been scared by the boy's behaviour the first two days. I thought that the old priest had actually laid some curse on him; I remembered how the glade and the well had solemnised even me, and I considered that Andrew, with a Kaffir strain somewhere in his ancestry, was probably susceptible to something which left me cold. I had knocked too much about Africa to be a dogmatic sceptic about the mysteries of the heathen. But this fever seemed to explain it. He had been sickening for it; that was why he had behaved so badly to the old man, and had come back babbling about a green wildebeest. I knew that the beginnings of fever often make a man light-headed so that he loses all self-control and gets odd fancies... All the same I didn't quite convince myself. I couldn't get out of my head the picture of the old man and his ominous words, or that empty grove under the sunset.

I did my best for the boy, and before we reached the coast the worst had passed. A bed was made for him in the stern, and I had to watch him by night and day to prevent him going overboard among the crocodiles. He was apt to be violent, for in his madness he thought he was being chased, and sometimes I had all I could do to keep him in the boat. He would scream like a thing demented, and plead, and curse, and I noticed as a queer thing that his ravings were never in Dutch but always in Kaffir—mostly the Sesutu which he had learnt in his childhood. I expected to hear him mention the green wildebeest, but to my comfort he never uttered the name. He gave no clue to what frightened him, but it must have been a full-sized terror, for every nerve in his body seemed to be quivering, and I didn't care to look at his eyes.

The upshot was that I left him in bed in hospital, as weak as a kitten, but with the fever gone and restored to his right mind. He was again the good fellow I had known, very apologetic and grateful. So with an easy conscience I arranged for the retrieving of my outfit and returned to the Rand.

Well, for six months I lost sight of Andrew. I had to go to Namaqualand, and then up to the copper country of Barotseland, which wasn't as easy a trek as it is to-day. I had one letter from him, written from Johannesburg—not a very satisfactory epistle, for I gathered that the boy was very unsettled. He had quarrelled with his family, and he didn't seem to be contented with the job he had got in the goldfields. As I had known him he had been a sort of school-book industrious apprentice, determined to get on in the world, and not in the least afraid of a dull job and uncongenial company. But this letter was full of small grouses. He wanted badly to have a talk with me—thought of chucking his work and making a trip north to see me; and he ended with an underlined request that I should telegraph when I was coming down-country. As it happened I had no chance just then of sending a telegram, and later I forgot about it.

By and by I finished my tour and was at the Falls, where I got a local Rhodesian paper. From it I had news of Andrew with a vengeance. There were columns about a murder in the bushveld—two men had gone out to look for Kruger's treasure and one had shot the other, and to my horror I found that the one who was now lying in Pretoria gaol under sentence of death was my unhappy friend.

You remember the wild yarns after the Boer War about a treasure of gold which Kruger in his flight to the coast had buried somewhere in the Selati country. That, of course, was all nonsense: the wily ex-President had long before seen the main funds safe in a European bank. But I daresay some of the officials had got away with Treasury balances, and there may have been bullion cached in the bushveld. Anyhow every scallywag south of the Zambesi was agog about the business, and there were no end of expeditions which never found a single Transvaal sovereign. Well, it seemed that two months before Andrew and a Dutchman called Smit had started out to try their luck, and somewhere on the Olifants the two had gone out one evening and only one had returned. Smit was found by the native boys with a hole in his head, and it was proved that the bullet came from Andrew's rifle, which he had been carrying when the two set out. After that the story became obscure. Andrew had been very excited when he returned and declared that he had "done it at last," but when

Smit's body was found he denied that he had shot him. But it was clear that Smit had been killed by Andrew's sporting .303, and the natives swore that the men had been constantly quarrelling and that Andrew had always shown a very odd temper. The Crown prosecutor argued that the two believed they had found treasure, and that Andrew had murdered Smit in cold blood to prevent his sharing. The defence seemed to be chiefly the impossibility of a guilty man behaving as Andrew had behaved, and the likelihood of his having fired at a beast in the dark and killed his companion. It sounded to me very thin, and the jury did not believe it, for their verdict was wilful murder.

I knew that it was simply incredible that Andrew could have committed the crime. Men are queer cattle, and I wouldn't have put even murder past certain fairly decent fellows I knew, but this boy was emphatically not one of them. Unless he had gone stark mad I was positive that he could never have taken human life. I knew him intimately, in the way you know a fellow you have lived alone with for months, and that was one of the things I could bank on. All the same it seemed clear that he had shot Smit... I sent the longest telegram I ever sent in my life to a Scotch lawyer in Johannesburg called Dalgleish whom I believed in, telling him to move heaven and earth to get a reprieve. He was to see Andrew and wire me details about his state of mind. I thought then that temporary madness was probably our best line, and I believed myself that that was the explanation. I longed to take the train forthwith to Pretoria, but I was tied by the heels till the rest of my outfit came in. I was tortured by the thought that the hanging might have already taken place, for that wretched newspaper was a week old.

In two days I got Dalgleish's reply. He had seen the condemned man, and had told him that he came from me. He reported that Andrew was curiously peaceful and apathetic, and not very willing to talk about the business except to declare his innocence. Dalgleish thought him not quite right in his mind, but he had been already examined, and the court had rejected the plea of insanity. He sent his love to me and told me not to worry.

I stirred up Dalgleish again, and got a further reply. Andrew admitted that he had fired the rifle, but not at Smit. He had killed something, but what it was he would not say. He did not seem to be in the least keen to save his neck.

When I reached Bulawayo, on my way south, I had a brain-wave, but the thing seemed so preposterous that I could hardly take it seriously. Still I daren't neglect any chance, so I wired again to Dalgleish to try to have the execution postponed, until he got hold of the priest who lived in the berg above the Pufuri. I gave him full directions how to find him. I said that the old man had laid some curse on Andrew, and that that might explain his state of mind. After all demoniacal possession must be equivalent in law to insanity. But by this time I had become rather hopeless. It seemed a futile thing to be wiring this rigmarole when every hour was bringing the gallows nearer.

I left the railroad at Mafeking, for I thought I could save the long circuit by De Aar by trekking across country. I would have done better to stick to the train, for everything went wrong with me. I had a breakdown at the drift of the Selous river and had to wait a day in Rustenburg, and I had trouble again at Commando Nek, so that it was the evening of the third day before I reached Pretoria... As I feared, it was all over. They told me in the hotel that Andrew had been hanged that morning.

I went back to Johannesburg to see Dalgleish with a cold horror at my heart and complete mystification in my head. The Devil had taken an active hand in things and caused a hideous miscarriage of justice. If there had been anybody I could blame I would have felt better, but the fault seemed to lie only with the crookedness of fate... Dalgleish could tell me little. Smit had been the ordinary scallywag, not much of a fellow and no great loss to the world; the puzzle was why Andrew wanted to go with him. The boy in his last days had been utterly apathetic— bore no grudge against anybody—appeared at peace with the world, but didn't seem to want to live. The predikant who visited him daily could make nothing of him. He appeared to be sane enough, but, beyond declaring his innocence, was not inclined to talk, and gave no assistance to those who were trying to get a reprieve... scarcely took any interest in it... He had asked repeatedly for me, and had occupied his last days in writing me a long letter, which was to be delivered unopened into my hand. Dalgleish gave me the thing, seven pages in Andrew's neat caligraphy, and in the evening on his stoep I read it.

It was like a voice speaking to me out of the grave, but it was not the voice I knew. Gone was the enlightened commercially-minded young man, who had shed all superstition, and had a dapper explanation for everything in heaven and earth. It was a crude boy who had written those pages, a boy in whose soul old Calvinistic terrors had been awakened, and terrors older still out of primordial African shadows.

He had committed a great sin—that was the point he insisted upon, and by this sin he had set free something awful to prey on the world... At first it seemed sheer raving mania to me, but as I mused on it I remembered my own feelings in that empty grove. I had been solemnised, and this boy, with that in his blood which was not in mine, had suffered a cataclysmic spiritual experience. He did not dwell on it, but his few sentences were eloquent in their harsh intensity. He had struggled, he had tried to make light of it, to forget it, to despise it; but it rode him like a nightmare. He thought he was going mad. I had been right about that touch of brain fever.

As far as I could make it out, he believed that from that outraged sanctuary something real and living had gone forth, something at any rate of flesh and blood. But this idea may not have come to him till later, when his mind had been for several months in torture, and he had lost the power of sleep. At first, I think, his trouble was only an indefinite haunting, a sense of sin and impending retribution. But in Johannesburg the malaise had taken concrete form. He believed that through his act something awful was at large, with infinite power for evil—evil not only against the wrongdoer himself but against the world. And he believed that it might still be stopped, that it was still in the eastern bush. So crude a fancy showed how his normal intelligence had gone to bits. He had tumbled again into the backveld world of his childhood.

He decided to go and look for it. That was where the tough white strain in him came out. He might have a Kaffir's blind terrors, but he had the frontier Boer's cast-iron courage. If you think of it, it needed a pretty stout heart to set out to

find a thing the thought of which set every nerve quivering. I confess I didn't like to contemplate that lonely, white-faced, tormented boy. I think he knew that tragedy must be the end of it, but he had to face up to that and take the consequences.

He heard of Smit's expedition, and took a half share in it. Perhaps the fact that Smit had a baddish reputation was part of the attraction. He didn't want as companion a man with whom he had anything in common, for he had to think his own thoughts and follow his own course.

Well, you know the end of it. In his letter he said nothing about the journey, except that he had found what he sought. I can readily believe that the two did not agree very well—the one hungry for mythical treasure, the other with a problem which all the gold in Africa could not solve... Somewhere, somehow, down in the Selati bushveld his incubus took bodily form, and he met—or thought he met—the thing which his impiety had released. I suppose we must call it madness. He shot his comrade, and thought he had killed an animal. "If they had looked next morning they would have found the spoor," he wrote. Smit's death didn't seem to trouble him at all—I don't think he quite realised it. The thing that mattered for him was that he had put an end to a terror and in some way made atonement. "Good- bye, and don't worry about me," were the last words, "I am quite content."

I sat a long time thinking, while the sun went down over the Magaliesberg. A gramophone was grinding away on an adjacent stoep, and the noise of the stamps on the Rand came like far- away drums. People at that time used to quote some Latin phrase about a new thing always coming out of Africa. I thought that it was not the new things in Africa that mattered so much as the old things.

I proposed to revisit that berg above the Pufuri and have a word with the priest, but I did not get a chance till the following summer, when I trekked down the Limpopo from Main Drift. I didn't like the job, but I felt bound to have it out with that old man for Andrew's sake. You see, I wanted something more to convince the Wakkerstroom household that the boy had not been guilty, as his father thought, of the sin of Cain.

I came round the corner of the berg one January evening after a day of blistering heat, and looked down on the cup of green pasture. One glance showed me that there was not going to be any explanation with the priest... A bit of the cliff had broken away, and the rock fall had simply blotted out the grove and the rondavel. A huge mass of debris sloped down from half-way up the hill, and buried under it were the tall trees through which I had peered up at the sky. Already it was feathered with thorn-bush and grasses. There were no patches of crops on the sides of the cup, and crumbling mud walls were all that remained of the kraal. The jungle had flowed over the village, and, when I entered it, great moon flowers sprawled on the rubble, looking in the dusk like ghosts of a vanished race.

There was one new feature in the place. The landslip must have released the underground water, for a stream now flowed down the hollow. Beside it, in a meadow full of agapanthus and arum lilies, I found two Australian prospectors. One of them— he had been a Melbourne bank-clerk—had a poetic soul. "Nice little place," he said. "Not littered up with black fellows. If I were on a homesteading job, I reckon I'd squat here."

THE FRYING-PAN AND THE FIRE

THE DUKE OF BURMINSTER'S STORY

From the Bath, in its most exotic form, degenerate patrician youth passed to the coarse delights of the Circus, and thence to that parody of public duties which it was still the fashion of their class to patronise.—Von Letterbeck: Imperial Rome.

Part I. The Frying-Pan

Lamancha had been staying for the week-end at some country house, and had returned full of wrath at the way he had been made to spend his evenings. "I thought I hated bridge," he said, "but I almost longed for it as a change from cracking my brain and my memory to find lines from poets I had forgotten to describe people I didn't know. I don't like games that make me feel a congenital idiot. But there was one that rather amused me. You invented a preposterous situation and the point was to explain naturally how it came about. Drink, lunacy and practical joking were barred as explanations. One problem given was the Bishop of London on a camel, with a string of sea-trout round his neck, playing on a penny whistle on the Hoe at Plymouth. There was a fellow there, a Chancery K.C., who provided a perfectly sensible explanation."

"I have heard of stranger things," said Sandy Arbuthnot, and he winked at Burminster, who flushed and looked uncomfortable. As the rest of our eyes took the same direction the flush deepened on that round cheerful face.

"It's no good, Mike," said Arbuthnot. "We've been waiting months for that story of yours, and this is the place and the hour for it. We'll take no denial."

"Confound you, Sandy, I can't tell it. It's too dashed silly."

"Not a bit of it. It's full of profound philosophical lessons, and it's sheer romance, as somebody has defined the thing—strangeness flowering from the commonplace. So pull up your socks and get going."

"I don't know how to begin," said Burminster.

"Well, I'll start it for you... The scene is the railway-station of Langshiels on the Scottish Borders on a certain day last summer. On the platform are various gentlemen in their best clothes with rosettes in their buttonholes—all strictly sober, it being but the third hour of the afternoon. There are also the rudiments of a brass band. Clearly a distinguished visitor is expected. The train enters the station, and from a third-class carriage descends our only Mike with a muddy face and a scratched nose. He is habited in dirty white cord breeches, shocking old butcher boots, a purple knitted waistcoat, and what I believe is called a morning coat; over all this splendour a ticky ulster—clearly not his own since it does not meet—and on his head an unspeakable bowler hat. He is welcomed by the deputation and departs, attended by the band, to a political meeting in the Town Hall. But first—I quote from the local paper—the Duke, who had arrived in sporting costume, proceeded to the Station Hotel, where he rapidly changed. We want to know the reason of these cantrips."

Burminster took a long pull at his tankard, and looked round the company with more composure.

"It isn't much of a story, but it's true, and, like nearly every scrape I ever got into, Archie Roylance was at the bottom of it. It all started from a discussion I had with Archie. He was staying with me at Larristane, and we got talking about the old Border raiders and the way the face of the countryside had changed and that sort of thing. Archie said that, now the land was as bare as a marble-topped table and there was no cover on the hills to hide a tomtit, a man couldn't ride five miles anywhere between the Cheviots and the Clyde without being seen by a dozen people. I said that there was still plenty of cover if you knew how to use it—that you could hide yourself as well on bent and heather as in a thick wood if you studied the shadows and the lie of the land, same as an aeroplane can hide itself in an empty sky. Well, we argued and argued, and the upshot was that I backed myself to ride an agreed course, without Archie spotting me. There wasn't much money on it—only an even sovereign—but we both worked ourselves up into considerable keenness. That was where I fell down. I might have known that anything Archie was keen about would end in the soup.

"The course we fixed was about fifteen miles long, from Gledfoot bridge over the hills between Gled and Aller and the Blae Moor to the Mains of Blae. That was close to Kirk Aller, and we agreed, if we didn't meet before, to foregather at the Cross Keys and have tea and motor home. Archie was to start from a point about four miles north-east of Gledfoot and cut in on my road at a tangent. I could shape any course I liked, but I couldn't win unless I got to the Mains of Blae before five o'clock without being spotted. The rule about that was that he must get within speaking distance of me—say three hundred yards—before he held me up. All the Larristane horses were at grass, so we couldn't look for pace. I chose an old hunter of mine that was very leery about bogs; Archie picked a young mare that I had hunted the season before and that he had wanted to buy from me. He said that by rights he ought to have the speedier steed, since, if he spotted me, he had more or less to ride me down.

"We thought it was only a pleasant summer day's diversion. I didn't want to give more than a day to it, for I had guests arriving that evening, and on the Wednesday—this was a Monday—I had to take the chair for Deloraine at a big Conservative meeting at Langshiels, and I meant to give a lot of time to preparing a speech. I ought to say that neither of us knew the bit of country beyond its general lines, and we were forbidden to carry maps. The horses were sent on, and at 9.30 a.m. I was at Gledfoot bridge ready to start. I was wearing khaki riding breeches, polo boots, an old shooting coat and a pretty old felt hat. I mention my costume, for later it became important.

"I may as well finish with Archie, for he doesn't come any more into this tale. He hadn't been half an hour in the saddle when he wandered into a bog, and it took him till three in the afternoon to get his horse out. Consequently he chucked in his hand, and went back to Larristane. So all the time I was riding cunning and watching out of my right eye to see him on the skyline he was sweating and blaspheming in a peat moss.

"I started from Gledfoot up the Rinks burn in very good spirits, for I had been studying the big Ordnance map and I believed I had a soft thing. Beyond the Rinks Hope I would cross the ridge to the top of the Skyre burn, which at its head is all split up into deep grassy gullies. I had guessed this from the map, and the people at Gledfoot had confirmed it. By one or other of these gullies I could ride in good cover till I reached a big wood of firs that stretched for a mile down the left bank of the burn. Archie, to cut in on me, had a pretty steep hill to cross, and I calculated that by the time he got on the

skyline I would be in the shelter of one of the gullies or even behind the wood. Not seeing me on the upper Skyre, he would think that I had bustled a bit and would look for me lower down the glen. I would lie doggo and watch for him, and when I saw him properly started I meant to slip up a side burn and get into the parallel glen of the Hollin. Once there I would ride like blazes, and either get to the Blae Moor before him—in which case I would simply canter at ease up to the Mains of Blae—or, if I saw him ahead of me, fetch a circuit among the plantings and come in on the farm from the other side. That was the general lay out, but I had other dodges in hand in case Archie tried to be clever.

“So I tittuped along the hill turf beside the Rinks burn, feeling happy and pretty certain I would win. My horse, considering he was fresh from the grass, behaved very well, and we travelled in good style. My head was full of what I was going to say at Langshiels, and I thought of some rather fine things—‘Our opponents would wreck the old world in order to build a new, but you cannot found any system on chaos, not even Communism’—I rather fancied that. Well, to make a long story short, I got to the Rinks Hope in thirty minutes, and there I found the herd gathering his black-faced lambs.

“Curiously enough I knew the man—Prentice they called him—for he had been one of the young shepherds at Larristane. So I stopped to have a word with him, and watched him at work. He was short-handed for the job, and he had a young collie only half-trained, so I offered to give him a hand and show my form as a mounted stockman. The top of that glen was splendid going, and I volunteered to round up the west hirsle. I considered that I had plenty of time and could spare ten minutes to help a pal.

“It was a dashed difficult job, and it took me a good half-hour, and it was a mercy my horse didn’t get an over-reach among the mossy wellheads. However, I did it, and when I started off again both I and my beast were in a lather of sweat. That must have confused me, and the way I had been making circles round the sheep, for I struck the wrong feeder, and instead of following the one that led to the top of the Skyre burn I kept too much to my left. When I got to the watershed I looked down on a country utterly different from what I had expected. There was no delta of deep gullies, but a broad green cup seamed with stone walls, and below it a short glen which presently ran out into the broader vale of the Aller.

“The visibility was none too good, so I could not make out the further prospect. I ought to have realised that this was not the Skyre burn. But I only concluded that I had misread the map, and besides, there was a big wood lower down which I thought was the one I had remarked. There was no sign of Archie as yet on the high hills to my right, so I decided I had better get off the skyline and make my best speed across that bare green cup.

“It took me a long time, for I had a lot of trouble with the stone dykes. The few gates were all fastened up with wire, and I couldn’t manage to undo them. So I had to scramble over the first dyke, and half pull down the next, and what with one thing and another I wasted a shocking amount of time. When I got to the bottom I found that the burn was the merest trickle, not the strong stream of the Skyre, which is a famous water for trout. But there, just ahead of me, was the big wood, so I decided I must be right after all.

“I had kept my eye lifting to the ridge on the right, and suddenly I saw Archie. I know now that it wasn’t he, but it was a man on a horse and it looked his living image. He was well down the hillside and he was moving fast. He didn’t appear to have seen me, but I realised that he would in a minute, unless I found cover.

“I jogged my beast with the spur, and in three seconds was under cover of the fir-wood. But here I found a track, and it struck me that it was this track which Archie was following, and that he would soon be up with me. The only thing to do seemed to be to get inside the wood. But this was easier said than done, for a great wall with broken bottles on the top ran round that blessed place. I had to do something pretty quick, for I could hear the sound of hoofs behind me, and on the left there was nothing but the benty side of a hill.

“Just then I saw a gate, a massive thing of close-set oak splints, and for a mercy it was open. I pushed through it and slammed it behind me. It shut with a sharp click as if it was a patent self-locking arrangement. A second later I heard the noise of a horse outside and hands trying the gate. Plainly they couldn’t open it. The man I thought was Archie said ‘Damn’ and moved away.

“I had found sanctuary, but the question now was how to get out of it. I dismounted and wrestled with the gate, but it was as firm as a rock. About this time I began to realise that something was wrong, for I couldn’t think why Archie should have wanted to get through the gate if he hadn’t seen me, and, if he had seen me, why he hadn’t shouted, according to our rules. Besides, this wasn’t a wood, it was the grounds of some house, and the map had shown no house in the Skyre glen... The only thing to do was to find somebody to let me out. I didn’t like the notion of riding about in a stranger’s policies, so I knotted my bridle and let my beast graze, while I proceeded on foot to prospect.

“The ground shelved steeply, and almost at once my feet went from under me and I slithered down a bank of raw earth. You see there was no grip in the smooth soles of my polo boots. The next I knew I had banged hard into the back of a little wooden shelter which stood on a sunny mantelpiece of turf above the stream. I picked myself up and limped round the erection, rubbing the dirt from my eyes, and came face to face with a group of people.

“They were all women, except one man, who was reading aloud to them, and they were all lying in long chairs. Pretty girls they seemed to be from the glimpse I had of them, but rather pale, and they all wore bright-coloured cloaks.

“I daresay I looked a bit of a ruffian, for I was very warm and had got rather dirty in slithering down, and had a rent in my breeches. At the sight of me the women gave one collective bleat like a snipe, and gathered up their skirts and ran. I could see their cloaks glimmering as they dodged like woodcock among the rhododendrons.

“The man dropped his book and got up and faced me. He was a young fellow with a cadaverous face and side-whiskers, and he seemed to be in a funk of something, for his lips twitched and his hands shook as if he had fever. I could see that he was struggling to keep calm.

“So you’ve come back, Mr. Brumby,” he said. “I hope you had a g-good time?”

“For a moment I had a horrid suspicion that he knew me, for they used to call me ‘Brummy’ at school. A second look convinced me that we had never met, and I realised that the word he had used was Brumby. I hadn’t a notion what he meant, but the only thing seemed to be to brazen it out. That was where I played the fool. I ought to have explained my mistake there and then, but I still had the notion that Archie was hanging about, and I wanted to dodge him. I dropped into a long chair, and said that I had come back and that it was a pleasant day. Then I got out my pipe.

“Here, you mustn’t do that,” he said. “It isn’t allowed.”

“I put the pipe away, and wondered what lunatic asylum I had wandered into. I wasn’t permitted to wonder long, for up the path from the rhododendrons came two people in a mighty hurry. One was an anxious-faced oldish man dressed like a valet, and the other a middle-aged woman in nurse’s uniform. Both seemed to be excited, and both to be trying to preserve an air of coolness.

“Ah, Schwester,” said the fellow with the whiskers. “Here is Mr. Brumby back again and none the worse.”

“The woman, who had kind eyes and a nice gurgling voice, looked at me reproachfully.

“I hope you haven’t taken any harm, sir,” she said. “We had better go back to the house, and Mr. Grimpus will give you a nice bath and a change, and you’ll lie down a bit before luncheon. You must be very tired, sir. You’d better take Mr. Grimpus’s arm.”

“My head seemed to be spinning, but I thought it best to lie low and do what I was told till I got some light. Silly ass that I was, I was still on the tack of dodging Archie. I could easily have floored Grimpus, and the man with the whiskers wouldn’t have troubled me much, but there was still the glass-topped wall to get over, and there might be heftier people about, grooms and gardeners and the like. Above all, I didn’t want to make any more scenes, for I had already scared a lot of sick ladies into the rhododendrons.

“So I went off quite peaceably with Grimpus and the sister, and presently we came to a house like a small hydropathic, hideously ugly but beautifully placed, with a view south to the Aller valley. There were more nurses in the hall and a porter with a jaw like a prize-fighter. Well, I went up in a lift to the second floor, and there was a bedroom and a balcony, and several trunks, and brushes on the dressing-table lettered H. B. They made me strip and get into a dressing-gown, and then a doctor arrived, a grim fellow with gold spectacles and a soft, bedside manner. He spoke to me soothingly about the beauty of the weather and how the heather would soon be in bloom on the hill; he also felt my pulse and took my blood pressure, and talked for a long time in a corner with the sister. If he said there was anything wrong with me he lied, for I had never felt fitter in my life except for the bewilderment of my brain.

“Then I was taken down in a lift to the basement, and Grimpus started out to give me a bath. My hat! That was a bath! I lay in six inches of scalding water, while a boiling cataract beat on my stomach; then it changed to hot hail and then to gouty that hit like a pickaxe; and then it all turned to ice. But it made me feel uncommonly frisky. After that they took me back to my bedroom and I had a gruelling massage, and what I believe they call violet rays. By this time I was fairly bursting with vim, but I thought it best to be quite passive, and when they told me I must try to sleep before luncheon, I only grinned and put my head on the pillow like a child. When they left me I badly wanted to smoke, but my pipe had gone with my clothes, and I found laid out for me a complete suit of the man Brumby’s flannels.

“As I lay and reflected I began to get my bearings. I knew where I was. It was a place called Craigiedean, about six miles from Kirk Aller, which had been used as a shell-shock hospital during the War and had been kept on as a home for nervous cases. It wasn’t a private asylum, as I had thought at first; it called itself a Kurhaus, and was supposed to be the last thing in science outside Germany. Now and then, however, it got some baddish cases, people who were almost off their rocker, and I fancied that Brumby was one. He was apparently my double, but I didn’t believe in exact doubles, so I guessed that he had just arrived, and hadn’t given the staff time to know him well before he went off on the bend. The horseman whom I had taken for Archie must have been out scouring the hills for him.

“Well, I had dished Archie all right, but I had also dished myself. At any moment the real Brumby might wander back, and then there would be a nice show up. The one thing that terrified me was that my identity should be discovered, for this was more or less my own countryside, and I should look a proper ass if it got about that I had been breaking into a nerve-cure place, frightening women, and getting myself treated like a gentle loony. Then I remembered that my horse was in the wood and might be trusted to keep on grazing along the inside of the wall where nobody went. My best plan seemed to be to wait my chance, slip out of the house, recover my beast and find some way out of the infernal park. The wall couldn’t be everywhere, for after all the place wasn’t an asylum.

“A gong sounded for luncheon, so I nipped up, and got into Brumby’s flannels. They were all right for length, but a bit roomy. My money and the odds and ends from my own pockets were laid out on the dressing-table, but not my pipe and pouch, which I judged had been confiscated.

“I wandered downstairs to a big dining-room, full of little tables, with the most melancholy outfit seated at them that you ever saw in all your days. The usual thing was to have a table to oneself, but sometimes two people shared one—husband and wife, no doubt, or mother and daughter. There were eight males including me, and the rest were females of every age from flappers to grandmothers. Some looked pretty sick, some quite blooming, but all had a watchful air, as if they were holding themselves in and pursuing some strict regime. There was no conversation, and everybody had brought a book or a magazine which they diligently studied. In the centre of each table, beside the salt and pepper, stood a little fleet of medicine bottles. The sister who led me to my place planted down two beside me.

“I soon saw the reason of the literary absorption. The food was simply bestial. I was hungry and thirsty enough to have

eaten two beefsteaks and drunk a quart of beer, and all I got was three rusks, a plate of thin soup, a purée of vegetables and a milk pudding in a teacup. I envied the real Brumby, who at that moment, if he had any sense, was doing himself well in a public-house. I didn't dare to ask for more in case of inviting awkward questions, so I had plenty of leisure to observe the company. Nobody looked at anybody else, for it seemed to be the fashion to pretend you were alone in a wilderness, and even the couples did not talk to each other. I made a cautious preliminary survey to see if there was anyone I knew, but they were all strangers. After a time I felt so lonely that I wanted to howl.

"At last the company began to get up and straggle out. The sister whom I had seen first—the others called her Schwester and she seemed to be rather a boss—appeared with a bright smile and gave me my medicine. I had to take two pills and some horrid drops out of a brown bottle. I pretended to be very docile, and I thought that I'd take the chance to pave the way to getting to my horse. So I said that I felt completely rested, and would like a walk that afternoon. She shook her head.

"No, Mr. Brumby. Dr. Miggle's orders are positive that you rest to-day."

"But I'm feeling really very fit," I protested. "I'm the kind of man who needs a lot of exercise."

"Not yet," she said with a patient smile. "At present your energy is morbid. It comes from an irregular nervous complex, and we must first cure that before you can lead a normal life. Soon you'll be having nice long walks. You promised your wife, you know, to do everything that you were told, and it was very wrong of you to slip out last night and make us all so anxious. Dr. Miggle says that must NEVER happen again." And she wagged a reproving finger.

"So I had a wife to add to my troubles. I began now to be really worried, for not only might Brumby turn up any moment, but his precious spouse, and I didn't see how I was to explain to her what I was doing in her husband's trousers. Also the last sentence disquieted me. Dr. Miggle was determined that I should not bolt again, and he looked a resolute lad. That meant that I would be always under observation, and that at night my bedroom door would be locked.

"I made an errand to go up to my room, while Grimpus waited for me in the hall, and had a look at the window. There was a fine thick Virginia creeper which would make it easy to get to the floor beneath, but it was perfectly impossible to reach the ground, for below was a great chasm of a basement. There was nothing doing that way, unless I went through the room beneath, and that meant another outrage and probably an appalling row.

"I felt very dispirited as I descended the stairs, till I saw a woman coming out of that identical room... Blessed if it wasn't my Aunt Letitia!

"I needn't have been surprised, for she gave herself out as a martyr to nerves, and was always racing about the world looking for a cure. She saw me, took me for Brumby, and hurried away. Evidently Brumby's doings had got about, and there were suspicions of his sanity. The moment was not propitious for following her, since Grimpus was looking at me.

"I was escorted to the terrace by Grimpus, tucked up in a long chair, and told to stay there and bask in the sun. I must not read, but I could sleep if I liked. I never felt less like slumber, for I was getting to be a very good imitation of a mental case. I must get hold of Aunt Letitia. I could see her in her chair at the other end of the terrace, but if I got up and went to her she would take me for that loony Brumby and have a fit.

"I lay cogitating and basking in the sun for about two hours. Then I observed that sisters were bringing out tea or medicines to some of the patients and I thought I saw a chance of a move. I called one of them to me, and in a nice invalidish voice complained that the sun was too hot for me and that I wanted to be moved to the other end where there was more shade. The sister went off to find Grimpus and presently that sportsman appeared.

"I've had enough of this sun-bath," I told him, "and I feel a headache coming. I want you to shift me to the shade of the beeches over there."

"Very good, sir," he said, and helped me to rise, while he picked up chair and rugs. I tottered delicately after him, and indicated a vacant space next to Aunt Letitia. She was dozing, and mercifully did not see me. The chair on my other side was occupied by an old gentleman who was sound asleep.

"I waited for a few minutes and began to wriggle my chair a bit nearer. Then I made a pellet of earth from a crack in the paving stones and jerked it neatly on to her face.

"Hist!" I whispered. "Wake up, Aunt Letty."

"She opened one indignant eye, and turned it on me, and I thought she was going to swoon.

"Aunt Letty," I said in an agonised voice. "For Heaven's sake don't shout. I'm not Brumby. I'm your nephew Michael."

"Her nerves were better than I thought, for she managed to take a pull on herself and listen to me while I muttered my tale. I could see that she hated the whole affair, and had some kind of grievance against me for outraging the sanctity of her pet cure. However, after a bit of parleying, she behaved like a brick.

"You are the head of our family, Michael," she said, "and I am bound to help you out of the position in which your own rashness has placed you. I agree with you that it is essential to have no disclosure of identity. It is the custom here for patients to retire to their rooms at eight-thirty. At nine o'clock I shall have my window open, and if you enter by it you can leave by the door. That is the most I can do for you. Now please be silent, for I am ordered to be very still for an hour before tea."

"You can imagine that after that the time went slowly. Grimpus brought me a cup of tea and a rusk, and I fell asleep and only woke when he came at half-past six to escort me indoors. I would have given pounds for a pipe. Dinner was at seven, and I said that I would not trouble to change, though Brumby's dress-clothes were laid out on the bed. I had the needle badly, for I had a horrid fear that Brumby might turn up before I got away.

"Presently the doctor arrived, and after cooing over me a bit and feeling my pulse, he started out to cross-examine me about my past life. I suppose that was to find out the subconscious complexes which were upsetting my wits. I decided to go jolly carefully, for I suspected that he had either given Brumby the once-over or had got some sort of report about his case. I was right, for the first thing he asked me was about striking my sister at the age of five. Well, I haven't got a sister, but I had to admit to beating Brumby's, and I said the horrible affair still came between me and my sleep. That seemed to puzzle him, for apparently I oughtn't to have been thinking about it; it should have been buried deep in my unconscious self, and worrying me like a thorn in your finger which you can't find. He asked me a lot about my nurse, and I said that she had a brother who went to gaol for sheep stealing. He liked that, and said it was a fruitful line of inquiry. Also he wanted to know about my dreams, and said I should write them down. I said I had dreamed that a mare called Nursemaid won the Oaks, but found there was no such animal running. That cheered him up a bit, and he said that he thought my nurse might be the clue. At that I very nearly gave the show away by laughing, for my nurse was old Alison Hyslop, who is now the housekeeper at Larristane, and if anybody called her a clue she'd have their blood.

"Dinner was no better than luncheon—the same soup and rusks and vegetables, with a bit of ill-nourished chicken added. This time I had to take three kinds of medicine instead of two. I told the sister that I was very tired, and Grimpus took me upstairs at eight o'clock. He said that Dr. Miggle proposed to give me another go of violet rays, but I protested so strongly that I was too sleepy for his ministrations that Grimpus, after going off to consult him, announced that for that evening the rays would be omitted. You see I was afraid that they would put me to bed and remove my clothes, and I didn't see myself trapesing about the country in Brumby's pyjamas.

"As Grimpus left me I heard the key turn in the lock. It was as well that I had made a plan with Aunt Letitia.

"At nine o'clock I got out of my window. It was a fine night, with the sun just setting and a young moon. The Virginia creeper was sound, and in less than a minute I was outside Aunt Letitia's window. She was waiting in a dressing-gown to let me in, and I believe the old soul really enjoyed the escapade. She wanted to give me money for my travels, but I told her that I had plenty. I poked my nose out, saw that the staircase and hall were empty, and quietly closed the door behind me.

"The big hall door was shut, and I could hear the prize-fighting porter moving in his adjacent cubby hole. There was no road that way, so I turned to the drawing-room, which opened on the terrace. But that was all in darkness, and I guessed that the windows were shuttered. There was nothing for it but to try downstairs. I judged that the servants would be at supper, so I went through a green-baize swing-door and down a long flight of stone steps.

"Suddenly I blundered into a brightly lit kitchen. There was no one in it, and beyond was a door which looked as if it might lead to the open air. It actually led to a scullery, where a maid was busy at a tap. She was singing to herself a song called 'When the kye come hame,' so I knew she belonged to the countryside. So did I, and I resolved to play the bold game.

"Hey, lassie,' I said. 'Whaur's the road out o' this hoose? I maun be back in Kirk Aller afore ten.'

"The girl stopped her singing and stared at me. Then in response to my grin she laughed.

"Are ye frae Kirk Aller?' she asked.

"I've gotten a job there,' I said. 'I'm in the Cally station, and I cam' up about a parcel for ane o' the leddies here. But I come frae further up the water, Larristane way.'

"D'ye say sae? I'm frae Gledside mysel'. What gars ye be in sic a hurry. It's a fine nicht and there's a mune.'

"She was a flirtatious damsel, but I had no time for dalliance.

"There's a lassie in Kirk Aller will take the heid off me if I keep her waitin'.'

"She tossed her head and laughed. 'Haste ye then, my mannie. Is it Shanks' powny?'

"Na, na, I've a bicycle ootbye.'

"Well, through the wash-hoose and up the steps and roond by the roddydendrons and ye're in the yaird. Guid nicht to ye.'

"I went up the steps like a lamplighter and dived into the rhododendrons, coming out on the main avenue. It ran long and straight to the lodge gates, and I didn't like the look of it. My first business was to find my horse, and I had thought out more or less the direction. The house stood on the right bank of the burn, and if I kept to my left I would cross the said burn lower down and could then walk up the other side. I did this without trouble. I forded the burn in the meadow, and was soon climbing the pine-wood which clothed the gorge. In less than twenty minutes I had reached the gate in the wall by which I had entered.

"There was no sign of my horse anywhere. I followed the wall on my left till it curved round and crossed the burn, but the beast was not there, and it was too dark to look for hoof-marks. I tried to my right and got back to the level of the park, but had no better luck. If I had had any sense I would have given up the quest, and trusted to getting as far as Gledfoot on my own feet. The horse might be trusted to turn up in his own time. Instead I went blundering on in the half-light of the park, and presently I blundered into trouble.

"Grimpus must have paid another visit to my room, found me gone, seen the open window, and started a hue-and-cry. They would not suspect my Aunt Letitia, and must have thought that I had dropped like a cat into the basement. The pursuit was coming down the avenue, thinking I had made for the lodge gates, and as ill-luck would have it, I had selected that moment to cross the drive, and they spotted me. I remember that out of a corner of one eye I saw the lights of a fly coming up the drive, and I wondered if Brumby had selected this inauspicious moment to return.

"I fled into the park with three fellows after me. Providence never meant me for a long-distance runner, and, besides, I was feeling weak from lack of nourishment. But I was so scared of what would happen if I was caught that I legged it like a

miler, and the blighters certainly didn't gain on me.

"But what I came to was the same weary old wall with the bottle glass on the top of it. I was pretty desperate, and I thought I saw a way. A young horse-chestnut tree grew near the wall and one bough overhung it. I made a jump at the first branch, caught it, and with a bit of trouble swung myself up into the crutch. This took time, and one of the fellows came up and made a grab at my leg, but I let him have Brumby's rubber-soled heel in the jaw.

"I caught the bigger branch and wriggled along it till I was above and beyond the wall. Then the dashed thing broke with my twelve stone, and I descended heavily on what looked like a highroad.

"There was no time to spare, though I was a bit shaken, for the pursuit would not take long to follow me. I started off down that road looking for shelter, and I found it almost at once. There was a big covered horse-van moving ahead of me, with a light showing from the interior. I sprinted after it, mounted the step and stuck my head inside.

"Can I come in?' I panted. 'Hide me for ten minutes and I'll explain.'

"I saw an old, spectacled, whiskered face. It was portentously solemn, but I thought I saw a twinkle in the eye.

"Ay,' said a toothless mouth, 'ye can come in.' A hand grabbed my collar, and I was hauled inside. That must have been just when the first of my pursuers dropped over the wall."

"I had got into a caravan which was a sort of bedroom, and behind the driver's seat was a double curtain. There I made myself inconspicuous while the old man parleyed with the pursuit.

"Hae ye seen a gentleman?" I could hear a panting voice. 'Him that drappit ower the wa'? He was rinnin' hard.'

"What kind of a gentleman?"

"He had on grey claithes—aboot the same height as mysel'.' The speaker was not Grimpus.

"Naeboddy passed me,' was the strictly truthful answer. 'Ye'd better seek the ither side o' the road among the bracken. There's plenty hidy-holes there. Wha's the man?"

"Ane o' the doctor's folk.' I knew, though I could not see, that the man had tapped his forehead significantly. 'Aweel, I'll try back. Guid nicht to ye.'

"I crept out of my refuge and found the old man regarding me solemnly under the swinging lamp.

"I'm one of the auld-fashioned Radicals,' he announced, 'and I'm for the liberty o' the individual. I dinna hold wi' lockin' folks up because a pernicketty doctor says they're no wise. But I'd be glad to be assured, sir, that ye're no a dangerous lunattic. If ye are, Miggle has nae business to be workin' wi' lunattics. His hooose is no an asylum.'

"I'm as sane as you are,' I said, and as shortly as I could I told him my story. I said I was a laird on Gledwater-side—which was true, and that my name was Brown—which wasn't. I told him about my bet with Archie and my ride and its disastrous ending. His face never moved a muscle; probably he didn't believe me, but because of his political principles he wasn't going to give me away.

"Ye can bide the night with me,' he said. 'The morn we'll be busy and ye can gang wherever ye like. It's a free country in spite o' our God-forsaken Government.'

"I blessed him, and asked to whom I was indebted for this hospitality.

"I'm the Great McGowan,' he said. 'The feck o' the pawraphernalia is on ahead. We open the morn in Kirk Aller.'

"He had spoken his name as if it were Mussolini or Dempsey, one which all the world should know. I knew it too, for it had been familiar to me from childhood. You could have seen it any time in the last twenty years flaming upon hoardings up and down the Lowlands—The Great McGowan's Marvellous Multitudinous Menagerie—McGowan's Colossal Circassian Circus—The Only Original McGowan.

"We rumbled on for another half-mile, and then turned from the road into a field. As we bumped over the grass I looked out of the door and saw about twenty big caravans and wagons at anchor. There was a strong smell of horses and of cooking food, and above it I seemed to detect the odour of unclean beasts. We took up our station apart from the rest, and after the proprietor had satisfied himself by a brief inspection that the whole outfit was there, he announced that it was time to retire. Mr. McGowan had apparently dined, and he did not offer me food, which I would have welcomed, but he mixed me a rummer of hot toddy. I wondered if it would disagree with the various medicines I had been compelled to take, and make me very sick in the night. Then he pointed out my bunk, undressed himself as far as his shirt, pulled a nightcap over his venerable head, and in five minutes was asleep. I had had a wearing day, and in spite of the stuffiness of the place it wasn't long before I dropped off also.

"I awoke next morning to find myself alone in the caravan. I opened the window and saw that a fine old racket was going on. The show had started to move, and as the caravans bumped over the turf various specimens inside were beginning to give tongue. It was going to be a gorgeous day and very hot. I was a little bit anxious about my next move, for Kirk Aller was unpleasantly near Craigiedean and Dr. Miggle. In the end I decided that my best plan would be to take the train to Langshiels and there hire a car to Larristane, after sending a telegram to say I was all right, in case my riderless steed should turn up before me. I hadn't any headgear, but I thought I could buy something in Kirk Aller, and trust to luck that nobody from the Kurhaus spotted me in the street. I wanted a bath and a shave and breakfast, but I concluded I had better postpone them till I reached the hotel at Langshiels.

"Presently Mr. McGowan appeared, and I could see by his face that something had upset him. He was wearing an old check dressing-gown, and he had been padding about in his bare feet on the dewy grass.

"Ye telled me a story last night, Mr. Brown,' he began solemnly, 'which I didna altogether believe. I apologise for being a doubting Thomas. I believe every word o't, for I've just had confirmation.'

"I mumbled something about being obliged to him, and he went on.

"Ay, for the pollis were here this morning—seeking you. Yon man at Craigiedean is terrible ill-set against ye, Mr. Brown. The pollisman—his name's Tam Doig, I ken him fine—says they're looking for a man that personated an inmate, and went off wi' some o' the inmate's belongings. I'm quotin' Tam Doig. I gave Tam an evasive answer, and he's off on his bicycle the other road, but—I ask ye as a freend, Mr. Brown—what are precisely the facts o' the case?"

"Good God!' I said. 'It's perfectly true. These clothes I'm wearing belong to the man Brumby, though they've got my own duds in exchange. He must have come back after I left. What an absolutely infernal mess! I suppose they could have me up for theft.'

"Mair like obtaining goods on false pretences, though I think ye have a sound answer. But that's no the point, Mr. Brown. The doctor is set on payin' off scores. Ye've entered his sawnatorium and gone through a' the cantrips he provides, and ye've made a gowk o' him. He wants to make an example o' YOU. Tam Doig was sayin' that he's been bleezin' half the night on the telephone, an' he'll no rest till ye're grippit. Now ye tell me that ye're a laird and a man o' some poseetion, and

I believe ye. It wad be an ill job for you and your freends if ye was to appear before the Shirra.'

"I did some rapid thinking. So far I was safe, for there was nothing about the clothes I had left behind to identify me. I was pretty certain that my horse had long ago made a bee-line for the Larristane stables. If I could only get home without being detected, I might regard the episode as closed.

"Supposing I slip off now,' I said. 'I have a general notion of the land, and I might get over the hills without anybody seeing me.'

"He shook his head. 'Ye wouldn't travel a mile. Your description has been circulated and a' body's lookin' for ye—a man in a grey flannel suit and soft shoes wi' a red face and nae hat. Guid kens what the doctor has said about ye, but the countryside is on the look-out for a dangerous, and maybe lunatic, criminal. There's a reward offered of nae less than twenty pound.'

"Can you not take me with you to Kirk Aller?' I asked despairingly.

"Ay, ye can stop wi' me. But what better wad ye be in Kirk Aller? That's where the Procurator Fiscal bides.'

"Then he put on his spectacles and looked at me solemnly.

"I've taken a fancy to ye, Mr. Brown, and ye can tell the world that. I ask you, are ye acquaint wi' horses?'

"I answered that I had lived among them all my life, and had been in the cavalry before I went into the Air Force.

"I guessed it by your face. Horses have a queer trick o' leavin' their mark on a body. Now, because I like ye, I'll make a proposition to ye that I would make to no other man... I'm without a ring-master. Joseph Japp, who for ten years has had the job with me, is lyin' wi' the influenzy at Berwick. I could make shift with Dublin Davie, but Davie has no more presence than a messan dog, and forbye Joseph's clothes wouldna fit him. When I cast my eyes on ye this mornin' after hearin' Tam Doig's news, I says to mysel', 'Thou art the man.'"

"Of course I jumped at the offer. I was as safe in Kirk Aller, as Joseph Japp's understudy, as I was in my own house. Besides, I liked the notion; it would be a good story to tell Archie. But I said it could only be for one night, and that I must leave to-morrow, and he agreed. 'I want to make a good show for a start in Kirk Aller—forbye, Joseph will be ready to join me at Langshiels,'

"I borrowed the old boy's razor and had a shave and a wash, while he was cooking breakfast. After we had fed he fetched my predecessor's kit. It fitted me well enough, but Lord! I looked a proper blackguard. The cord breeches had been recently cleaned, but the boots were like a pair of dilapidated buckets, and the coat would have made my tailor weep. Mr. McGowan himself put on a frock-coat and a high collar and spruced himself up till he looked exactly like one of those high-up Irish dealers you see at the Horse Show—a cross between a Cabinet Minister and a Methodist parson. He said the ring-master should ride beside the chief exhibit, so we bustled out and I climbed up in front of a wagon which bore a cage containing two very low-spirited lions. I was given a long whip, and told to make myself conspicuous.

"I didn't know Kirk Aller well, so I had no fear of being recognised either as myself or as the pseudo-Brumby. The last time I had been there was when I had motored over from Larristane to dine with the Aller Shooting Club. My present entry was of a more sensational kind. I decided to enjoy myself and to attract all the notice I could, and I certainly succeeded. Indeed, you might say I received an ovation. As it happened it was a public holiday, and the streets were pretty full. We rumbled up the cobbled Westgate, and down the long High Street, with the pavements on both sides lined with people and an attendant mob of several hundred children. The driver was a wizened little fellow in a jockey cap, but I was the principal figure on the box. I gave a fine exhibition with my whip, and when we slowed down I picked out conspicuous figures in the crowd and chaffed them. I thought I had better use Cockney patter, as being more in keeping with my job, and I made a happy blend of the table-talk of my stud-groom and my old batman in the regiment. It was rather a high-class performance and you'd be surprised how it went down. There was one young chap with a tremendous head of hair that I invited to join his friends in the cage, and just then one of the dejected lions let out a growl, and I said that Mamma was calling to her little Percy. And there was an old herd from the hills, who had been looking upon the wine-cup, and who, in a voice like a fog-horn, wanted to know what we fed the beasts on. Him I could not refrain from answering in his own tongue. 'Braxy, my man,' I cried, 'the yowes ye lost when we were fou last Boswell's Fair.' I must have got home somehow, for the crowd roared, and his friends thumped the old chap on the back and shouted: 'That's a guid ane! He had you there, Tam.'

"My triumphant procession came to an end on the Aller Green, where the show was to be held. A canvas palisade had been set up round a big stretch of ground, and the mob of children tailed off at the gate. Inside most of our truck had already arrived. The stadium for the circus had been marked off, and tiers of wooden seats were being hammered together. A big tent had been set up, which was to house the menagerie, and several smaller tents were in process of erection. I noticed that the members of the troupe looked at me curiously till Mr. McGowan arrived and introduced me. 'This is Mr. Brown, a friend of mine,' he said, 'who will take on Joe Japp's job for the night.' And, aside to me, 'Man, I heard ye comin' down the High Street. Ye did fine. Ye've a great natural talent for the profession.' After that we were all very friendly, and the whole company had a snack together in one of the tents—bread and cheese and bottled beer.

"The first thing I did was to make a bundle of Brumby's clothes, which Mr. McGowan promised to send back to Craigiedean when the coast was clear. Then I bribed a small boy to take a telegram to the Post Office—to Archie at Larristane, saying I had been detained and hoped to return next day. After that I took off my coat and worked like a beaver. It was nearly six o'clock before we had everything straight, and the show opened at seven, so we were all a bit the worse for wear when we sat down to high tea. It's a hard job an artiste's, as old McGowan observed.

"I never met a queerer, friendlier, more innocent company, for the proprietor seemed to have set out to collect originals, and most of them had been with him for years. The boss of the menagerie was an ex-sailor, who had a

remarkable way with beasts; he rarely spoke a word, but just grinned and whistled through broken teeth. The clown, who said his name was Sammlle Dleep, came from Paisley, and was fat enough not to need the conventional bolster. Dublin Davie, my second in command, was a small Irishman who had been an ostler, and limped owing to having been with the Dublin Fusiliers at Gallipoli. The clown had a wife who ran the commissariat, when she wasn't appearing in the ring as Zenobia, the Pride of the Sahara. Then there were the Sisters Wido— a young married couple with two children; and the wife of a man who played the clarinet—figured in the bill as Elise the Equestrienne. I had a look at the horses, which were the ordinary skinny, broad-backed, circus ponies. I found out later that they were so well trained that I daresay they could have done their turns in the dark.

"At a quarter to seven we lit the naphtha flares and our orchestra started in. McGowan told me to get inside Japp's dress clothes, and rather unwillingly I obeyed him, for I had got rather to fancy my morning's kit. I found there was only a coat and waistcoat, for I was allowed to retain the top-boots and cords. Happily the shirt was clean, but I had a solitaire with a sham diamond as big as a shilling, and the cut of the coat would have been considered out-of-date by a self-respecting waiter in Soho. I had also a scarlet silk handkerchief to stuff in my bosom, a pair of dirty white kid gloves, and an immense coach whip.

"The menagerie was open, but that night the chief attraction was the circus, and I don't mind saying that about the best bit of the circus was myself. In one of the intervals McGowan insisted on shaking hands and telling me that I was wasted in any other profession than a showman's. The fact is I was rather above myself, and entered into what you might call the spirit of the thing. We had the usual Dick Turpin's ride to York, and an escape of Dakota Dan (one of the Sisters Wido) from Red Indians (the other Wido, Zenobia and Elise, with about a ton of feathers on their heads). The Equestrienne equestered, and the Widos hopped through hoops, and all the while I kept up my patter and spouted all the rot I could remember.

"The clown was magnificent. He had a Paisley accent you could have cut like a knife, but he prided himself on talking aristocratic English. He had a lot of badinage with Zenobia about her life in the desert. One bit I remember. She kept on referring to bulbuls, and asked him if he had ever seen a bull-bull. He said he had, for he supposed it was a male coo-coo. But he was happiest at my expense. I never heard a chap with such a flow of back-chat. A funny thing—but when he wasn't calling me 'Little Pansy-face,' he addressed me as 'Your Grace' and 'Me Lord Dook,' and hoped that the audience would forgive my *négligé* attire, seeing my coronet hadn't come back from the wash.

"Altogether the thing went with a snap from beginning to end, and when old McGowan, all dressed up with a white waistcoat, made a speech at the end and explained about the next performances he got a perfect hurricane of applause. After that we had to tidy up. There was the usual trouble with several procrastinating drunks, who wanted to make a night of it. One of them got into the ring and tried to have a row with me. He was a big loutish fellow with small eyes and red hair, and had the look of a betting tout. He stuck his face close to mine and bellowed at me:

"'I ken ye fine, ye—! I seen ye at Lanerick last back-end... Ye ca'd yoursel' Gentleman Geordie, and ye went off wi' my siller. By God, I'll get it out o' ye, ye—welsher.'

"I told him that he was barking up the wrong tree, and that I was not a bookie and had never been near Lanerick, but he refused to be convinced. The upshot was that Davie and I had to chuck him out, blaspheming like a navvy and swearing that he was coming back with his pals to do me in.

"We were a very contented lot of mountebanks at supper that night. The takings were good and the menagerie also had been popular, and we all felt that we had been rather above our form. McGowan, for whom I was acquiring a profound affection, beamed on us, and produced a couple of bottles of blackstrap to drink the health of the Colossal Circassian Circus. That old fellow was a nonesuch. He kept me up late—for I stopped with him in his caravan—expounding his philosophy of life. It seemed he had been intended for the kirk, but had had too much *joie de vivre* for the pulpit. He was a born tramp, and liked waking up most days in a new place, and he loved his queer outfit and saw the comedy of it. 'For three and thirty years I've travelled the country,' he said, 'and I've been a public benefactor, Mr. Brown. I've put colour into many a dowie life, and I've been a godsend to the bairns. There's no vulgarity in my performances— they're a' as halesome as spring water.' He quoted Burns a bit, and then he got on to politics, for he was a great Radical, and maintained that Scotland was about the only true democracy, because a man was valued precisely for what he was and no more. 'Ye're a laird, Mr. Brown, but ye're a guid fellow, and this night ye've shown yourself to be a man and a brither. What do you and me care for mawgnates? We take no stock in your Andra Carnegies and your Dukes o' Burminster.' And as I dropped off to sleep he was obliging with a verse of 'A man's a man for a' that.'

"I woke in excellent spirits, thinking what a good story I should have to tell when I returned to Larristane. My plan was to get off as soon as possible, take the train to Langshiels, and then hire. I could see that McGowan was sorry to part with me, but he agreed that it was too unhealthy a countryside for me to dally in. There was to be an afternoon performance, so everybody had to hustle, and there was no reason for me to linger. After breakfast I borrowed an old ulster from him, for I had to cover up my finery, and a still older brown bowler to replace the topper I had worn on the preceding day.

"Suddenly we heard a fracas, and the drunk appeared who had worried me the night before. He had forced his way in and was pushing on through an expostulating crowd. When he saw me he made for me with a trail of blasphemy. He was perfectly sober now and looked very ugly.

"'Gie me back my siller,' he roared. 'Gie me back the five- pund note I won at Lanerick when I backed Kettle o' Fish.' If I hadn't warded him off he would have taken me by the throat.

"I protested again that he was mistaken, but I might as well have appealed to a post. He swore with every variety of oath that I was Gentleman Geordie, and that I had levanted with his winnings. As he raved I began to see a possible

explanation of his madness. Some bookmaker, sporting my sort of kit, had swindled him. I had ridden several times in steeplechases at Lanerick and he had seen me and got my face in his head, and mixed me up with the fraudulent bookie.

"It was a confounded nuisance, and but for the principle of the thing I would have been inclined to pay up. As it was we had to fling him out, and he went unwillingly, doing all the damage he could. His parting words were that he and his pals weren't done with me, and that though he had to wait fifty years he would wring my neck.

"After that I thought I had better waste no time, so I said good-bye to McGowan and left the show-ground by the back entrance close to the Aller. I had a general notion of the place, and knew that if I kept down the river I could turn up a lane called the Water Wynd, and get to the station without traversing any of the main streets. I had ascertained that there was a train at 10.30 which would get me to Langshiels at 11.15, so that I could be at Larristane for luncheon.

"I had underrated the persistence of my enemy. He and his pals had picketed all the approaches to the show, and when I turned into the Water Wynd I found a fellow there, who at the sight of me blew a whistle. In a second or two he was joined by three others, among them my persecutor.

"We've gotten ye noo,' he shouted, and made to collar me.

"If you touch me,' I said, 'it's assault, and a case for the police.'

"That's your game, is it?' he cried. 'Na, na, we'll no trouble the pollis. They tell me the Law winna help me to recover a bet, so I'll just trust to my nieves. Will ye pay up, ye—, or take the bloodiest bashin' ye ever seen?'

"I was in an uncommon nasty predicament. There was nobody in the Wynd but some children playing, and the odds were four to one. If I fought I'd get licked. The obvious course of safety was to run up the Wynd towards the High Street, where I might find help. But that would mean a street row and the intervention of the police, a case in court, and the disclosure of who I was. If I broke through and ran back to McGowan I would be no farther forward. What was perfectly clear was that I couldn't make the railway station without landing myself in the worst kind of mess.

"There wasn't much time to think, for the four men were upon me. I hit out at the nearest, saw him go down, and then doubled up the Wynd and into a side alley on the right.

"By the mercy of Providence this wasn't a cul-de-sac, but twisted below the old walls of the burgh, and then became a lane between gardens. The pursuit was fairly hot, and my accursed boots kept slipping on the cobbles and cramped my form. They were almost upon me before I reached the lane, but then I put on a spurt, and was twenty yards ahead when it ended in a wall with a gate. The gate was locked, but the wall was low, and I scrambled over it, and dropped into the rubbish heap of a garden.

"There was no going back, so I barged through some gooseberry bushes, skirted a lawn, squattered over a big square of gravel, and charged through the entrance gates of a suburban villa. My enemies plainly knew a better road, for when I passed the entrance they were only a dozen yards off on my left. That compelled me to turn to the right, the direction away from Kirk Aller. I was now on a highway where I could stretch myself, and it was not long before I shook off the pursuit. They were whiskyfied ruffians and not much good in a hunt. It was a warm morning, but I did not slacken till I had put a good quarter of a mile between us. I saw them come round a turn, lumbering along, cooked to the world, so I judged that I could slow down to an easy trot.

"I was cut off from my lines of communication, and the only thing to do was to rejoin them by a detour. The Aller valley, which the railway to Langshiels followed, gave me a general direction. I remembered that about six miles off there was a station called Rubersdean, and that there was an afternoon train which got to Langshiels about three o'clock. I preferred to pick it up there, for I didn't mean to risk showing my face inside Kirk Aller again.

"By this time I had got heartily sick of my adventures. Being chased like a fox is amusing enough for an hour or two, but it soon palls. I was becoming a regular outlaw—wanted by the police for breaking into a nursing-home and stealing a suit, and very much wanted by various private gentlemen on the charge of bilking. Everybody's hand seemed to be against me, except old McGowan's, and I had had quite enough of it. I wanted nothing so much as to be back at Larristane, and I didn't believe I would tell Archie the story, for I was fed up with the whole business.

"I didn't dare go near a public-house, and the best I could do for luncheon was a bottle of ginger-beer and some biscuits which I bought at a sweetie-shop. To make a long story short, I reached Rubersdean in time, and as there were several people on the platform I waited till the train arrived before showing myself. I got into a third-class carriage at the very end of it.

"The only occupants were a woman and a child, and my appearance must have been pretty bad, for the woman looked as if she wanted to get out when she saw me. But I said it was a fine day and "guid for the crops," and I suppose she was reassured by my Scotch tongue, for she quieted down. The child was very inquisitive, and they discussed me in whispers. 'What's that man, Mamaw?' it asked. 'Never mind, Jimmie.' 'But I want to ken, Mamaw.' 'Wheesht, dearie. He's a crool man. He kills the wee mawpies.' At that the child set up a howl, but I felt rather flattered, for a rabbit-trapper was a respectable profession compared to those with which I had recently been credited.

"At the station before Langshiels they collect the tickets. I had none, so when the man came round I could only offer a Bank of England five-pound note. He looked at it very suspiciously, asked me rudely if I had nothing smaller, consulted the station-master, and finally with a very ill grace got me change out of the latter's office. This hung up the train for a good five minutes, and you could see by their looks that they thought I was a thief. The thing had got so badly on my nerves that I could have wept. I counted the minutes till we reached Langshiels, and I was not cheered by the behaviour of my travelling companion. She was clearly convinced of the worst, and when we came out of a tunnel she was jammed into the farthest corner, clutching her child and her bag, and looking as if she had escaped from death. I can tell you it was a

thankful man that shot out on to the platform at Langshiels ...

“I found myself looking into the absolutely bewildered eyes of Tommy Deloraine... I saw a lot of fellows behind him with rosettes and scared faces, and I saw what looked like a band...

“It took me about a hundredth part of a second to realise that I had dropped out of the frying-pan into the fire. You will scarcely believe it, but since I had rehearsed my speech going up the Rinks burn, the political meeting at Langshiels had gone clean out of my head. I suppose I had tumbled into such an utterly new world that no link remained with the old one. And as my foul luck would have it, I had hit on the very train by which I had told Deloraine I would travel.

“‘For heaven’s sake, Tommy, tell me where I can change,’ I hissed. ‘Lend me some clothes or I’ll murder you.’

* * * * *

“Well, that was the end of it. I got into a suit of Tommy’s at the Station Hotel—luckily he was about my size— and we proceeded with the brass band and the rosetted committee to the Town Hall. I made a dashed good speech, though I say it who shouldn’t, simply because I was past caring what I did. Life had been rather too much for me the last two days.”

Burminster finished his tankard, and a light of reminiscence came into his eye.

“Last week,” he said, “I was passing Buckingham Palace. One of the mallards from St. James’s Park had laid away, and had hatched out a brood somewhere up Constitution Hill. The time had come when she wanted to get the ducklings back to the water. There was a big crowd, and through the midst of it marched two bobbies with the mother-duck between them, while the young ones waddled behind. I caught the look in her eye, and, if you believe me, it was the comicallest mixture of relief and embarrassment, shyness, self-consciousness and desperation.

“I would like to have shaken hands with that bird. I knew exactly how she felt.”

DR. LARTIUS

MR. JOHN PALLISER-YEATES'S STORY

The idols have spoken vanity, and the diviners have seen a lie, and have told false dreams; they comfort in vain; therefore they went their way as a flock.—
Zechariah 10:2.

In the early spring Palliser-Yeates had 'flu, and had it so badly that he was sent to recruit for a fortnight on the Riviera. There, being profoundly bored, he wrote out and sent to us this story. He would not give the name of the chief figure, because he said he was still a serving soldier, and his usefulness, he hoped, was not exhausted. The manuscript arrived opportunely, for some of us had just been trying, without success, to extract from Sandy Arbuthnot the truth of certain of his doings about which rumour had been busy.

I

In the second week of January 1917, a modest brass plate appeared on a certain door in Regent Street, among modistes and hat-makers and vendors of cosmetics. It bore the name of Dr. S. Lartius. On the third floor were the rooms to which the plate was the signpost, a pleasant set, newly decorated with powder-blue wallpapers, curtains of orange velveteen, and sham marqueterie. The milliners' girls who frequented that staircase might have observed, about eleven in the morning, the figure of Dr. Lartius arriving. They did not see him leave, for they had flown to their suburban homes long before the key turned of an evening in the doctor's door.

He was a slim young man of the middle height, who held himself straighter than the usual run of sedentary folk. His face was very pale, and his mop of hair and fluffy beard were black as jet. He wore large tortoiseshell spectacles, and, when he removed them, revealed slightly protuberant and very bright hazel eyes, which contrasted oddly with his pallor. Had such a figure appeared on the stage, the gallery experts, familiar with stage villains, would have unhesitatingly set him down as the anarchist from Moscow about to assassinate the oppressive nobleman and thereby give the hero his chance. But his clothes were far too good for that part. He wore a shiny top-hat and an expensive fur coat, and his neat morning coat, fine linen, unobtrusive black tie and pearl pin suggested the high finance rather than the backstairs of revolution.

It appeared that Dr. Lartius did a flourishing business. Suddenly London had begun to talk about him. First there were the people that matter, the people who are ever on the hunt for a new sensation and must always be in the first flight of any fad. Lady A told the Duchess of B about a wonderful new man who really had Power—no ordinary vulgar spiritualist, but a true Seeker and Thinker. Mr. D, that elderly gossip, carried the story through many circles, and it grew with the telling. The curious began to cultivate Dr. Lartius, and soon the fame of him came to the ears of those who were not curious, only anxious or broken-hearted; and because the last were a great multitude, and were ready to give their all for consolation, there was a busy coming and going all day on Dr. Lartius's staircase.

His way with his clients was interesting. He had no single method of treatment, and varied his manner according to the motives of the inquirer. The merely inquisitive he entertained with toys. "I am no professor of an art," he told them laughingly. "I am a student, groping on the skirts of great mysteries." And to the more intelligent he would propound an illustration. "Take the mathematics of the Fourth Dimension," he would say. "I can show you a few simple mechanical puzzles, which cannot be explained except by the aid of abstruse mathematics, and not always then. But these puzzles tell you nothing about the Fourth Dimension, except that there is a world about us inexplicable on the rule of three dimensions. It is the same with my toys—my crystal ball, my pool of ink, my star-maps, even those superinduced moods of abstraction in which we seem to hear the noise of wings and strange voices. They only tell me that there is more in earth and heaven than is dreamed of in man's philosophy."

But his toys were wonderful. The idle ladies who went there for a thrill were not disappointed. In the dusky room, among the strange rosy lights, their hearts seemed to be always fluttering on the brink of a revelation, and they came away excited and comforted, for Dr. Lartius was an adept at delicate flattery. Fortune-telling in the ordinary sense there was none, but this young man seemed to have an uncanny knowledge of private affairs, which he used so discreetly that even those who had most reason to desire secrecy were never disquieted. For such entertainments he charged fees—high fees, as the fur coat and the pearl pin required. "You wish to be amused," he would say, "and it is right that you should pay me for it."

Even among the idle clients there was a sprinkling of the earnest. With these he had the air of a master towards initiates; they were fellow-pilgrims with him on the Great Road. He would talk to them by the hour, very beautifully, in a soft musical voice. He would warn them against charlatans, those who sought to prostitute a solemn ritual to purposes of vulgar gain. He would unroll for them the history of the great mystics and tell of that secret science known to the old adepts, which had been lost for ages, and was now being recovered piecemeal. These were the most thrilling hours of all, and the fame of Dr. Lartius grew great in the drawing-rooms of the Elect. "And he's such a gentleman, my dear—so well-bred and sympathetic and unworldly and absolutely honest!"

But from others he took no fees. The sad-faced women, mostly in black, who sat in his great velvet chair and asked broken questions, found a very different Dr. Lartius. He was no longer fluent and silver-tongued; sometimes he seemed almost embarrassed. He would repeat most earnestly that he was only a disciple, a seeker, not a master of hidden things. On such occasions the toys were absent, and if some distracted mother sought knowledge that way she was refused. He rarely had anything definite to impart. When Lady H.'s only son was about to exchange from the cavalry to the Foot Guards and his mother wanted to know how the step would affect his chances of survival, she got nothing beyond the

obvious remark that this was an infantry war and he would have a better prospect of seeing fighting. Very rarely, he spoke out. Once to Mrs. K., whose boy was a prisoner, he gave a very full account of life in a German prison-camp, so that, in the absence of letters, her imagination had henceforth something to bite on. Usually his visitors were too embarrassed to be observant, but one or two noted that he was uncommonly well informed about the British Army. He never made a mistake about units, and seemed to know a man's battalion before he was told it. And when mothers poured out details to him—for from the talk of soldiers on leave and epistolary indiscretions a good deal of information circulated about London—he now and then took notes.

Yet, though they got little from him that was explicit, these visitors, as a rule, went away comforted. Perhaps it was his gentle soothing manner. Perhaps, as poor Lady M. said, it was that he seemed so assured of the spiritual life that they felt that their anxieties were only tiny eddies on the edge of a great sea of peace. At any rate, it was the afflicted even more than the idly curious who spoke well of Dr. Lartius.

Sometimes he had masculine clients—fathers of fighting sons, who said they came on their wives' behalf, elderly retired Generals who preferred spiritualism to golf, boys whose nerves were in tatters and wanted the solace which in other ages and lands would have been found in the confessional. With these last Dr. Lartius became a new man. He would take off his spectacles and look them in the face with his prominent lustrous eyes, and talk to them with a ring in his pleasant voice. It was not what he said so much, perhaps, as his manner of saying it, but he seemed to have a singular power over boys just a little bit loose from their moorings. "Queer thing," said one of these, "but one would almost think you had been a soldier yourself." Dr. Lartius had smiled and resumed his spectacles. "I am a soldier, but in a different war. I fight with the sword of the spirit against the hidden things of darkness."

Towards the end of March the brass plate suddenly disappeared. There was a great fluttering in the dovecotes of the Elect when the news went round that there had been trouble with the police. It had been over the toys, of course, and the taking of fees. The matter never came into court, but Dr. Lartius had been warned to clear out, and he obeyed. Many ladies wrote indignant letters to the Home Secretary about persecution, letters which cited ominous precedents from the early history of the Christian Church.

But in April came consolation. The rumour spread that the Seekers were not to lose their guide. Mr. Greatheart would still be available for the comforting of pilgrims. A plate with the name of Dr. S. Lartius reappeared in a quiet street in Mayfair. But for the future there would be no question of fees. It was generally assumed that a few devout women had provided a fund for the sustenance of the prophet.

In May his fame was greater than ever. One evening Lady Samplar, the most ardent of his devotees, spoke of him to a certain General who was a power in the land. The General was popular among the women of her set, but a notorious scoffer. Perhaps this was the secret of his popularity, for each hoped to convert him.

"I want you to see him yourself," she said. "Only once. I believe in him so firmly that I am willing to stake everything on one interview. Promise me you will let me take you. I only want you to see him and talk to him for ten minutes. I want you to realise his unique personality, for if you once FEEL him you will scoff no more."

The General laughed, shrugged his shoulders, but allowed himself to be persuaded. So it came about that one afternoon in early June he accompanied Lady Samplar to the flat in Mayfair. "You must go in alone," she told him in the anteroom. "I have spoken about you to him, and he is expecting you. I will wait for you here."

For half an hour the General was closeted with Dr. Lartius. When he returned to the lady his face was red and wrathful.

"That's the most dangerous fellow in London," he declared. "Look here, Mollie, you and your friends have been playing the fool about that man. He's a German spy, if there ever was one. I caught him out, for I trapped him into speaking German. You say he's a Swiss, but I swear no Swiss ever spoke German just as he speaks it. The man's a Bavarian. I'll take my oath he is!"

It was a very depressed and rather frightened lady who gave him tea a little later in her drawing-room.

"That kind of sweep is far too clever for you innocents," she was told. "There he has been for months pumping you all without your guessing it. You say he's a great comfort to the mourners. I daresay he is, but the poor devils tell him everything that's in their heads. That man has a unique chance of knowing the inside of the British Army. And how has he used his knowledge? That's what I want to know."

"What are you going to do about it?" she quavered.

"I'm going to have him laid by the heels," he said grimly, as he took his departure. "Interned—or put up against a wall, if we can get the evidence. I tell you he's a Boche pure and simple—not that there's much purity and simplicity about him."

The General was as good as his word, but in one matter he was wrong. The credentials of the prophet's Swiss nationality were good enough. There was nothing for it but to deport him as an undesirable, so one fine morning Dr. S. Lartius got his marching orders. He made no complaint, and took a dignified farewell of his friends. But the Faithful were not silent, and the friendship between Lady Samplar and the General died a violent death. The thing got into the papers, Dr. Lartius figured in many unrecognisable portraits in the press, and a bishop preached a sermon in a City church about the worship of false gods.

As Dr. Lartius, closely supervised by the French police, pursued his slow and comfortless journey to the Swiss frontier,

he was cheered by several proofs that his fame had gone abroad and that he was not forgotten. At Paris there were flowers in his dingy hotel bedroom, the gift of an unknown admirer, and a little note of encouragement in odd French. At Dijon he received from a strange lady another note telling him that his friends were awaiting him in Berne. When he crossed the border at Pontarlier there were more flowers and letters. The young man paid little attention to such tributes. He spent the journey in quiet reading and meditation, and when he reached Berne did not seem to expect anyone to greet him, but collected his luggage and drove off unobtrusively to an hotel.

He had not been there an hour when a card was brought to him bearing the name of Ernst Ulrici, Doctor of Philosophy in the University of Bonn.

"Dr. Lartius," said the visitor, a middle-aged man with a peaked grey beard and hair cut en brosse. "It is an honour to make your acquaintance. We have heard of your fine work and your world-moulding discoveries."

The young man bowed gravely. "I am only a seeker," he said. "I make no claim to be a master—yet. I am only a little way on the road to enlightenment."

"We have also heard," said the other, "of how shamelessly the British Government has persecuted learning in your person."

The reply was a smile and a shrug. "I make no complaint. It is natural that my studies should seem foolishness to the children of this world."

Dr. Ulrici pressed him further on the matter of Britain, but could wake no bitterness.

"There is war to-day," he said at last. "You are of German race. Your sympathies are with us?"

"I have no nationality," was the answer. "All men are my brothers. But I would fain see this bloodshed at an end."

"How will it end?" came the question.

"I am no prophet," said Dr. Lartius. "Yet I can tell that Germany will win, but how I can tell I cannot tell."

The conversation lasted long and explored many subjects. The German led it cunningly to small matters, and showed a wide acquaintance with the young man's science. He learned that much of his work had been done with soldiers and soldiers' kin, and that in the process of it he had heard many things not published in the newspapers. But when he hinted, ever so delicately, that he would be glad to buy the knowledge, a flush passed over the other's pale face and his voice sharpened.

"I am no spy," he said. "I do not prostitute my art for hire. It matters nothing to me which side wins, but it matters much that I keep my soul clean."

So Dr. Ulrici tried another tack. He spoke of the mysteries of the craft, and lured the young man into the confession of hopes and ideals. There could be no communion with the dead, he was told, until communion had first been perfected with the spirits of the living. "Let the time come," said Dr. Lartius, "when an unbroken fellowship can be created between souls separated by great tracts of space, and the key has been found. Death is an irrelevant accident. The spirit is untouched by it. Find the trait d'union between spirits still in their fleshly envelope, and it can be continued when that envelope is shed."

"And you have progressed in this affair?" asked Ulrici, with scepticism in his tone.

"A few stages," said the other, and in the ardour of exposition he gave proofs. He had clients, he said, with whom he had established the mystic catena. He could read their thoughts even now, though they were far away, share in their mental changes, absorb the knowledge which they acquired.

"Soldiers?" asked the German.

"Some were soldiers. All were the kin of soldiers."

But Ulrici was still cold. "That is a great marvel," he said, "and not easy to believe."

Dr. Lartius was fired. "I will give you proofs," he said, with unwonted passion in his voice. "You can test them at your leisure. I know things which have not yet come to pass, though no man has spoken to me of them. How do I know them? Because they have come within the cognisance of minds attuned to my own."

For a moment he seemed to hesitate. Then he spoke of certain matters—a little change in the method of artillery barrages, a readjustment in the organisation of the British Air Force, an alteration in certain British commands.

"These may be trivial things," he said. "I do not know. I have no technical skill. But they are still in the future. I offer them to you as proofs of my knowledge."

"So?" said the other. "They are indeed small things, but they will do for a test..."

Then he spoke kindly, considerately, of Dr. Lartius's future.

"I think I will go to Munich," said the young man. "Once I studied at the University there, and I love the bright city. They are a sympathetic people and respect knowledge."

Dr. Ulrici rose to take his leave. "It may be I am able to further your plans, my friend," he said.

Late that night in a big sitting-room in another hotel, furnished somewhat in the style of an official bureau, Ulrici talked earnestly with another man, a heavy, bearded man, who wore the air of a prosperous bagman, but who was addressed with every token of respect.

"This Lartius fellow puzzles me. He is a transparent fanatic, with some odd power in him that sets him above others of his kidney. I fear he will not be as useful to us as we had hoped. If only we had known of him sooner and could have kept him in England."

"He can't go back, I suppose?"

"Impossible, sir. But there is still a chance. He has some wild theory that he has established a link with various people, and so acquires automatically whatever new knowledge they gain. Some of these people are soldiers. He has told me things — little things—that I may test this power of his. I am no believer in the spiritualist mumbo-jumbo, but I have lived long enough not to reject a thing because it is new and strange. About that we shall see. If there is anything in it there will be much. Meantime I keep closely in touch with him."

"What is he going to do?"

"He wants to go to Munich. I am in favour of permitting it, sir. Our good Bavarians are somewhat light in the head, and are always seeking a new thing. They want a little ghostly consolation at present, and this man will give it them. He believes most firmly in our German victory."

The other yawned and flung away the end of his cigar. "The mountebank seems to have some glimmerings of sense," he said.

III

So it came about that in August of the year 1917 Dr. Lartius was settled in comfortable rooms off the Garmischstrasse in the Bavarian capital, and a new plate of gun-metal and oxidised silver, lettered in the best style of art nouveau, advertised his name to the citizens of Munich.

Fortune still attended the young man, for, as in London, he seemed to spring at once into fame. Within a week of his arrival people were talking about him, and in a month his chambers were crowded. Perhaps his friend Ulrici had spoken a word in the right place. It was the great season before Caporetto, and Dr. Lartius spoke heartening things to his clients. Victory was near and the days of glory; but when asked about the date of peace he was coy. Peace would come, but not yet; for the world there was another winter of war.

His methods were the same as those which had captured Lady Samplar and her friends. To the idly curious he showed toys; to the emotional he spoke nobly of the life of the spirit and the locked doors of hidden knowledge which were now almost ajar. Rich ladies, bored with the dullness of the opera season and the scarcity of men, found in him a new interest in life. To the sorrowful he gave the comfort which he had given to his London circle—no more. His personality seemed to exhale hope and sympathy, and mourners, remembering his pleasant voice and compelling eyes, departed with a consolation which they could not define.

That was for the ordinary run of clients; but there were others—fellow-students they professed themselves— to whom he gave stronger meat. He preached his doctrine of the mystic community of thought and knowledge between souls far apart, and now and then he gave proofs such as he had given to Ulrici. It would appear that these proofs stood the test, for his reputation grew prodigiously. He told them little things about forthcoming changes in the Allied armies, and the event always proved him right. They were not things that mattered greatly, but if he could disclose trivialities some day his method might enable him to reveal a mighty secret. So more than one Generalstabschef came to sit with him in his twilight room.

About once a month he used to go back to Berne, and was invariably met at the station by Ulrici. He had been given a very special passport, which took him easily and expeditiously over the frontier, and he had no trouble with station commandants. In these visits he would be closeted with Ulrici for hours. Occasionally he would slip out of his hotel at night for a little, and when Ulrici heard of it he shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "He is young," he would say with a leer. "Even a prophet must have his amusements." But he was wrong, for Dr. Lartius had not the foibles he suspected.

The winter passed slowly, and the faces in the Munich streets grew daily more pinched and wan, clothing more shabby and boots more down at heel. But there was always comfort for seekers in the room in the Garmischstrasse. Whoever lost faith it was not Dr. Lartius. Peace was coming, and his hearers judged that he had forgotten his scientific detachment from all patriotisms and was becoming a good German.

Then in February of the New Year came the rumour of the great advance preparing in the West. The High Command had promised speedy and final victory in return for a little more endurance. Dr. Lartius seemed to have the first news of it. "It is Peace," he said, "Peace before winter"; and his phrase was repeated everywhere and became a popular watchword. So, when the news came at the end of March of the retreat of the French and English to the gates of Amiens, the hungry people smiled to each other and said, "He is right, as always. It is Peace." Few now cared much about victory, except the high officers and the very rich, but on Peace all were determined.

April passed into May, and ere the month was out came glorious tidings. Ludendorff had reached the Marne, and was within range of Paris. About this time his closest disciples marked a change in Dr. Lartius. He seemed to retire into himself, and to be struggling with some vast revelation. His language was less intelligible, but far more impressive. Ulrici came up from Berne to see him, for he had stopped for some months his visits to Switzerland. There were those who said his health was breaking, others that he was now, in very truth, looking inside the veil. This latter was the general view, and the fame of the young man became a superstition.

"You tell us little now about our enemies," Ulrici complained.

"Mystica catena rupta est," Dr. Lartius quoted sadly. "My friends are your enemies, and they are suffering. Their hearts and nerves are breaking. Therefore the link is thin and I cannot feel their thoughts. That is why I am so sad, for against my will the sorrow of my friends clouds me."

Ulrici laughed in his gross way. "Then the best omen for us is that you fall into melancholia? When you cut your throat we shall know that we have won."

Yet Ulrici was not quite happy. The young prophet was in danger of becoming a Frankenstein's monster, which he could not control. For his popular fame was now a thing to marvel at. It had gone abroad through Germany, and to all the fighting fronts, and the phrase linked to it was that of "Peace before winter." Peace had become a conviction, an obsession. Ulrici and his friends would have preferred the word to be "Victory."

In the early days of July a distinguished visitor came from Berlin to the Garmischstrasse. He was an Erster Generalstabsoffizier, high in the confidence of the Supreme Command. He sat in the shaded room and asked an urgent question.

"I am not a Delphian oracle," said Dr. Lartius, "and I do not prophesy. But this much I can tell you. The hearts of your enemies have become like water, and they have few reserves left. I am not a soldier, so you can judge better than I. You say you are ready to strike with a crushing force. If you leave your enemies leisure they will increase and their hearts may recover."

"That is my view," said the soldier. "You have done much for the German people in the past, sir. Have you no word now to encourage them?"

"There will be peace before winter. This much I can tell, but how I know I cannot tell."

"But on what terms?"

"That depends upon your armies," was the oracular reply.

The staff officer had been gazing intently at the speaker. Now he rose and switched on the electric light.

"Will you oblige me by taking off your glasses, sir?" he asked, and there was the sharpness of command in his voice.

Dr. Lartius removed his spectacles, and for some seconds the two men looked at each other.

"I thank you," said the soldier at last. "For a moment I thought we had met before. You reminded me of a man I knew long ago. I was mistaken."

After that it was noted by all that the melancholy of Dr. Lartius increased. His voice was saddened, and dejection wrapped him like a cloud. Those of the inner circle affected to see in this a good omen. "He is en rapport with his English friends," they said. "He cannot help himself, and their despair is revealed in him. The poor Lartius! He is suffering for the sins of our enemies." But the great public saw only the depression, and as August matured, and bad news filtered through the land, it gave their spirits an extra push downhill.

In those weeks only one word came from the Garmischstrasse. It was "Peace—peace before winter." The phrase became the universal formula whispered wherever people spoke their minds. It ran like lightning through the camps and along the fronts, and in every workshop and tavern. It became a passion, a battle-cry. The Wise Doctor of Munich had said it. Peace before winter—Peace at all costs—only Peace.

In September Ulrici was in communication with a certain bureau in Berlin. "The man is honest enough, but he is mad. He has served his purpose. It is time to suppress him." Berlin agreed, and one morning Ulrici departed from Berne.

But when he reached the Garmischstrasse he found the flamboyant plate unscrewed from the door and the pleasant rooms deserted.

For a day or two before Dr. Lartius had been behaving oddly. He gave out that he was ill, and could not receive, but he was very busy indoors with his papers. Then late one evening, after a conversation on the telephone with the railway people, he left his rooms, with no luggage but a small dressing-case, and took the night train for Innsbruck. His admirable passport franked him anywhere. From Innsbruck he travelled to the Swiss frontier, and when he crossed it, in the darkness of the September evening and in an empty carriage, he made a toilet which included the shaving of his silky black beard. He was whistling softly and seemed to have recovered his spirits. At Berne he did not seek his usual hotel, but went to an unfrequented place in a back street, where, apparently, he was well known. There he met during the course of the day various people, and their conversation was not in the German tongue.

That night he again took train, but it was westward to Lausanne and the French border.

IV

In the early days of November, when the Allies were approaching Maubeuge and Sedan, and the German plenipotentiaries were trying to dodge the barrage and get speech with Foch, two British officers were sitting in a little room at Versailles. One was the General we have already met, the quondam friend of Lady Samplar. The other was a slim young man who wore the badges of a lieutenant-colonel and the gorget patches of the staff. He had a pale face shaven clean, black hair cut very short, and curious, bright, protuberant hazel eyes. He must have seen some service, for he had two rows of medal ribbons on his breast.

"Unarm, Eros," quoted the General, looking at the last slip on a pile of telegrams. "'The long day's task is done.' It has been a grim business, and, Tommy, my lad, I think you had the most difficult patch of the lot to hoe... It was largely due to you that the Boche made his blunder on 15th July, and stretched his neck far enough to let Foch hit him."

The young man grinned. "I wouldn't like to go through it again, sir. But it didn't seem so bad when I was at it, though it is horrible to look back on. The worst part was the loneliness."

"You must have often had bad moments."

“Not so many. I only remember two as particularly gruesome. One was when I heard you slanging me to Lady Samplar, and I suddenly felt hopelessly cut off from my kind... The other was in July, when von Mudra came down from Berlin to see me. He dashed nearly spotted me, for he was at the Embassy when I was in Constantinople.”

The General lifted a flamboyant plate whereon the name of Dr. S. Lartius was inscribed in letters of oxidised silver. “You’ve brought away your souvenir all right. I suppose you’ll have it framed as a trophy for your ancestral hall. By the way, what did the letter S stand for?”

“When I was asked,” said the young man, “I said ‘Sigismund.’ But I really meant it for ‘Spurius’—the chap, you remember, who held the bridge with Horatius.”

THE WIND IN THE PORTICO

HENRY NIGHTINGALE'S STORY

A dry wind of the high places... not to fan nor to cleanse, even a full wind from those places shall come unto me.—*Jeremiah 4:11-12*.

Nightingale was a hard man to draw. His doings with the Bedawin had become a legend, but he would as soon have talked about them as claimed to have won the War. He was a slim dark fellow about thirty-five years of age, very short-sighted, and wearing such high-powered double glasses that it was impossible to tell the colour of his eyes. This weakness made him stoop a little and peer, so that he was the strangest figure to picture in a burnous leading an army of desert tribesmen. I fancy his power came partly from his oddness, for his followers thought that the hand of Allah had been laid on him, and partly from his quick imagination and his flawless courage. After the War he had gone back to his Cambridge fellowship, declaring that, thank God, that chapter in his life was over.

As I say, he never mentioned the deeds which had made him famous. He knew his own business, and probably realised that to keep his mental balance he had to drop the curtain on what must have been the most nerve-racking four years ever spent by man. We respected his decision and kept off Arabia. It was a remark of Hannay's that drew from him the following story. Hannay was talking about his Cotswold house, which was on the Fosse Way, and saying that it always puzzled him how so elaborate a civilisation as Roman Britain could have been destroyed utterly and left no mark on the national history beyond a few roads and ruins and place-names. Peckwether, the historian, demurred, and had a good deal to say about how much the Roman tradition was woven into the Saxon culture. "Rome only sleeps," he said; "she never dies."

Nightingale nodded. "Sometimes she dreams in her sleep and talks. Once she scared me out of my senses."

After a good deal of pressing he produced this story. He was not much of a talker, so he wrote it out and read it to us.

There is a place in Shropshire which I do not propose to visit again. It lies between Ludlow and the hills, in a shallow valley full of woods. Its name is St. Sant, a village with a big house and park adjoining, on a stream called the Vaun, about five miles from the little town of Faxeter. They have queer names in those parts, and other things queerer than the names.

I was motoring from Wales to Cambridge at the close of the long vacation. All this happened before the War, when I had just got my fellowship and was settling down to academic work. It was a fine night in early October, with a full moon, and I intended to push on to Ludlow for supper and bed. The time was about half-past eight, the road was empty and good going, and I was trundling pleasantly along when something went wrong with my headlights. It was a small thing, and I stopped to remedy it beyond a village and just at the lodge-gates of a house.

On the opposite side of the road a carrier's cart had drawn up, and two men, who looked like indoor servants, were lifting some packages from it on to a big barrow. The moon was up, so I didn't need the feeble light of the carrier's lamp to see what they were doing. I suppose I wanted to stretch my legs for a moment, for when I had finished my job I strolled over to them. They did not hear me coming, and the carrier on his perch seemed to be asleep.

The packages were the ordinary consignments from some big shop in town. But I noticed that the two men handled them very gingerly, and that, as each was laid in the barrow, they clipped off the shop label and affixed one of their own. The new labels were odd things, large and square, with some address written on them in very black capital letters. There was nothing in that, but the men's faces puzzled me. For they seemed to do their job in a fever, longing to get it over and yet in a sweat lest they should make some mistake. Their commonplace task seemed to be for them a matter of tremendous importance. I moved so as to get a view of their faces, and I saw that they were white and strained. The two were of the butler or valet class, both elderly, and I could have sworn that they were labouring under something like fear.

I shuffled my feet to let them know of my presence and remarked that it was a fine night. They started as if they had been robbing a corpse. One of them mumbled something in reply, but the other caught a package which was slipping, and in a tone of violent alarm growled to his mate to be careful. I had a notion that they were handling explosives.

I had no time to waste, so I pushed on. That night, in my room at Ludlow, I had the curiosity to look up my map and identify the place where I had seen the men. The village was St. Sant, and it appeared that the gate I had stopped at belonged to a considerable demesne called Vauncastle. That was my first visit.

At that time I was busy on a critical edition of Theocritus, for which I was making a new collation of the manuscripts. There was a variant of the Medicean Codex in England, which nobody had seen since Gaisford, and after a good deal of trouble I found that it was in the library of a man called Dubellay. I wrote to him at his London club, and got a reply to my surprise from Vauncastle Hall, Faxeter. It was an odd letter, for you could see that he longed to tell me to go to the devil, but couldn't quite reconcile it with his conscience. We exchanged several letters, and the upshot was that he gave me permission to examine his manuscript. He did not ask me to stay, but mentioned that there was a comfortable little inn in St. Sant.

My second visit began on the 27th of December, after I had been home for Christmas. We had had a week of severe frost, and then it had thawed a little; but it remained bitterly cold, with leaden skies that threatened snow. I drove from Faxeter, and as we ascended the valley I remember thinking that it was a curiously sad country. The hills were too low to be impressive, and their outlines were mostly blurred with woods; but the tops showed clear, funny little knolls of grey bent that suggested a volcanic origin. It might have been one of those backgrounds you find in Italian primitives, with all the light and colour left out. When I got a glimpse of the Vaun in the bleached meadows it looked like the "wan water" of the Border ballads. The woods, too, had not the friendly bareness of English copses in wintertime. They remained dark and

cloudy, as if they were hiding secrets. Before I reached St. Sant, I decided that the landscape was not only sad, but ominous.

I was fortunate in my inn. In the single street of one-storied cottages it rose like a lighthouse, with a cheery glow from behind the red curtains of the bar parlour. The inside proved as good as the outside. I found a bedroom with a bright fire, and I dined in a wainscoted room full of preposterous old pictures of lanky hounds and hollow-backed horses. I had been rather depressed on my journey, but my spirits were raised by this comfort, and when the house produced a most respectable bottle of port I had the landlord in to drink a glass. He was an ancient man who had been a gamekeeper, with a much younger wife, who was responsible for the management. I was curious to hear something about the owner of my manuscript, but I got little from the landlord. He had been with the old squire, and had never served the present one. I heard of Dubellays in plenty—the landlord's master, who had hunted his own hounds for forty years, the Major his brother, who had fallen at Abu Klea; Parson Jack, who had had the living till he died, and of all kinds of collaterals. The "Deblays" had been a high-spirited, open-handed stock, and much liked in the place. But of the present master of the Hall he could or would tell me nothing. The Squire was a "great scholar," but I gathered that he followed no sport and was not a convivial soul like his predecessors. He had spent a mint of money on the house, but not many people went there. He, the landlord, had never been inside the grounds in the new master's time, though in the old days there had been hunt breakfasts on the lawn for the whole countryside, and mighty tenantry dinners. I went to bed with a clear picture in my mind of the man I was to interview on the morrow. A scholarly and autocratic recluse, who collected treasures and beautified his dwelling and probably lived in his library. I rather looked forward to meeting him, for the bonhomous sporting squire was not much in my line.

After breakfast next morning I made my way to the Hall. It was the same leaden weather, and when I entered the gates the air seemed to grow bitterer and the skies darker. The place was muffled in great trees which even in their winter bareness made a pall about it. There was a long avenue of ancient sycamores, through which one caught only rare glimpses of the frozen park. I took my bearings, and realised that I was walking nearly due south, and was gradually descending. The house must be in a hollow. Presently the trees thinned, I passed through an iron gate, came out on a big untended lawn, untidily studded with laurels and rhododendrons, and there before me was the house front.

I had expected something beautiful—an old Tudor or Queen Anne façade or a dignified Georgian portico. I was disappointed, for the front was simply mean. It was low and irregular, more like the back parts of a house, and I guessed that at some time or another the building had been turned round, and the old kitchen door made the chief entrance. I was confirmed in my conclusion by observing that the roofs rose in tiers, like one of those recessed New York sky-scrapers, so that the present back parts of the building were of an impressive height.

The oddity of the place interested me, and still more its dilapidation. What on earth could the owner have spent his money on? Everything—lawn, flower-beds, paths—was neglected. There was a new stone doorway, but the walls badly needed pointing, the window woodwork had not been painted for ages, and there were several broken panes. The bell did not ring, so I was reduced to hammering on the knocker, and it must have been ten minutes before the door opened. A pale butler, one of the men I had seen at the carrier's cart the October before, stood blinking in the entrance.

He led me in without question, when I gave my name, so I was evidently expected. The hall was my second surprise. What had become of my picture of the collector? The place was small and poky, and furnished as barely as the lobby of a farm-house. The only thing I approved was its warmth. Unlike most English country houses there seemed to be excellent heating arrangements.

I was taken into a little dark room with one window that looked out on a shrubbery, while the man went to fetch his master. My chief feeling was of gratitude that I had not been asked to stay, for the inn was paradise compared with this sepulchre. I was examining the prints on the wall, when I heard my name spoken and turned round to greet Mr. Dubellay.

He was my third surprise. I had made a portrait in my mind of a fastidious old scholar, with eye-glasses on a black cord, and a finical welk-ind-ish manner. Instead I found a man still in early middle age, a heavy fellow dressed in the roughest country tweeds. He was as untidy as his demesne, for he had not shaved that morning, his flannel collar was badly frayed, and his fingernails would have been the better for a scrubbing brush. His face was hard to describe. It was high-coloured, but the colour was not healthy; it was friendly, but it was also wary; above all, it was UNQUIET. He gave me the impression of a man whose nerves were all wrong, and who was perpetually on his guard.

He said a few civil words, and thrust a badly tied brown paper parcel at me.

"That's your manuscript," he said jauntily.

I was staggered. I had expected to be permitted to collate the codex in his library, and in the last few minutes had realised that the prospect was distasteful. But here was this casual owner offering me the priceless thing to take away.

I stammered my thanks, and added that it was very good of him to trust a stranger with such a treasure.

"Only as far as the inn," he said. "I wouldn't like to send it by post. But there's no harm in your working at it at the inn. There should be confidence among scholars." And he gave an odd cackle of a laugh.

"I greatly prefer your plan," I said. "But I thought you would insist on my working at it here."

"No, indeed," he said earnestly. "I shouldn't think of such a thing... Wouldn't do at all... An insult to our freemasonry... That's how I should regard it."

We had a few minutes' further talk. I learned that he had inherited under the entail from a cousin, and had been just over ten years at Vaunceastle. Before that he had been a London solicitor. He asked me a question or two about Cambridge—wished he had been at the University—much hampered in his work by a defective education. I was a Greek scholar?—

Latin, too, he presumed. Wonderful people the Romans... He spoke quite freely, but all the time his queer restless eyes were darting about, and I had a strong impression that he would have liked to say something to me very different from these commonplaces—that he was longing to broach some subject but was held back by shyness or fear. He had such an odd appraising way of looking at me.

I left without his having asked me to a meal, for which I was not sorry, for I did not like the atmosphere of the place. I took a short cut over the ragged lawn, and turned at the top of the slope to look back. The house was in reality a huge pile, and I saw that I had been right and that the main building was all at the back. Was it, I wondered, like the Alhambra, which behind a front like a factory concealed a treasure-house? I saw, too, that the woodland hollow was more spacious than I had fancied. The house, as at present arranged, faced due north, and behind the south front was an open space in which I guessed that a lake might lie. Far beyond I could see in the December dimness the lift of high dark hills.

That evening the snow came in earnest, and fell continuously for the better part of two days. I banked up the fire in my bedroom and spent a happy time with the codex. I had brought only my working books with me and the inn boasted no library, so when I wanted to relax I went down to the tap-room, or gossiped with the landlady in the bar parlour. The yokels who congregated in the former were pleasant fellows, but, like all the folk on the Marches, they did not talk readily to a stranger and I heard little from them of the Hall. The old squire had reared every year three thousand pheasants, but the present squire would not allow a gun to be fired on his land and there were only a few wild birds left. For the same reason the woods were thick with vermin. This they told me when I professed an interest in shooting. But of Mr. Dubellay they would not speak, declaring that they never saw him. I daresay they gossiped wildly about him, and their public reticence struck me as having in it a touch of fear.

The landlady, who came from a different part of the shire, was more communicative. She had not known the former Dubellays and so had no standard of comparison, but she was inclined to regard the present squire as not quite right in the head. "They do say," she would begin, but she, too, suffered from some inhibition, and what promised to be sensational would tail off into the commonplace. One thing apparently puzzled the neighbourhood above others, and that was his rearrangement of the house. "They do say," she said in an awed voice, "that he have built a great church." She had never visited it—no one in the parish had, for Squire Dubellay did not allow intruders—but from Lyne Hill you could see it through a gap in the woods. "He's no good Christian," she told me, "and him and Vicar has quarrelled this many a day. But they do say as he worships summat there." I learned that there were no women servants in the house, only the men he had brought from London. "Poor benighted souls, they must live in a sad hobble," and the buxom lady shrugged her shoulders and giggled.

On the last day of December I decided that I needed exercise and must go for a long stride. The snow had ceased that morning, and the dull skies had changed to a clear blue. It was still very cold, but the sun was shining, the snow was firm and crisp underfoot, and I proposed to survey the country. So after luncheon I put on thick boots and gaiters, and made for Lyne Hill. This meant a considerable circuit, for the place lay south of the Vauncastle park. From it I hoped to get a view of the other side of the house.

I was not disappointed. There was a rift in the thick woodlands, and below me, two miles off, I suddenly saw a strange building, like a classical temple. Only the entablature and the tops of the pillars showed above the trees, but they stood out vivid and dark against the background of snow. The spectacle in that lonely place was so startling that for a little I could only stare. I remember that I glanced behind me to the snowy line of the Welsh mountains, and felt that I might have been looking at a winter view of the Apennines two thousand years ago.

My curiosity was now alert, and I determined to get a nearer view of this marvel. I left the track and ploughed through the snowy fields down to the skirts of the woods. After that my troubles began. I found myself in a very good imitation of a primeval forest, where the undergrowth had been unchecked and the rides uncut for years. I sank into deep pits, I was savagely torn by briars and brambles, but I struggled on, keeping a line as best I could. At last the trees stopped. Before me was a flat expanse which I knew must be a lake, and beyond rose the temple.

It ran the whole length of the house, and from where I stood it was hard to believe that there were buildings at its back where men dwelt. It was a fine piece of work—the first glance told me that—admirably proportioned, classical, yet not following exactly any of the classical models. One could imagine a great echoing interior dim with the smoke of sacrifice, and it was only by reflecting that I realised that the peristyle could not be continued down the two sides, that there was no interior, and that what I was looking at was only a portico.

The thing was at once impressive and preposterous. What madness had been in Dubellay when he embellished his house with such a grandiose garden front? The sun was setting and the shadow of the wooded hills darkened the interior, so I could not even make out the back wall of the porch. I wanted a nearer view, so I embarked on the frozen lake.

Then I had an odd experience. I was not tired, the snow lay level and firm, but I was conscious of extreme weariness. The biting air had become warm and oppressive. I had to drag boots that seemed to weigh tons across that lake. The place was utterly silent in the stricture of the frost, and from the pile in front no sign of life came.

I reached the other side at last and found myself in a frozen shallow of bulrushes and skeleton willow-herbs. They were taller than my head, and to see the house I had to look upward through their snowy traceries. It was perhaps eighty feet above me and a hundred yards distant, and, since I was below it, the delicate pillars seemed to spring to a great height. But it was still dusky, and the only detail I could see was on the ceiling, which seemed either to be carved or painted with deeply-shaded monochrome figures.

Suddenly the dying sun came slanting through the gap in the hills, and for an instant the whole portico to its farthest recesses was washed in clear gold and scarlet. That was wonderful enough, but there was something more. The air was

utterly still with not the faintest breath of wind—so still that when I had lit a cigarette half an hour before the flame of the match had burned steadily upward like a candle in a room. As I stood among the sedges not a single frost crystal stirred... But there was a wind blowing in the portico.

I could see it lifting feathers of snow from the base of the pillars and fluffing the cornices. The floor had already been swept clean, but tiny flakes drifted on to it from the exposed edges. The interior was filled with a furious movement, though a yard from it was frozen peace. I felt nothing of the action of the wind, but I knew that it was hot, hot as the breath of a furnace.

I had only one thought, dread of being overtaken by night near that place. I turned and ran. Ran with labouring steps across the lake, panting and stifling with a deadly hot oppression, ran blindly by a sort of instinct in the direction of the village. I did not stop till I had wrestled through the big wood, and come out on some rough pasture above the highway. Then I dropped on the ground, and felt again the comforting chill of the December air.

The adventure left me in an uncomfortable mood. I was ashamed of myself for playing the fool, and at the same time hopelessly puzzled, for the oftener I went over in my mind the incidents of that afternoon the more I was at a loss for an explanation. One feeling was uppermost, that I did not like this place and wanted to be out of it. I had already broken the back of my task, and by shutting myself up for two days I completed it; that is to say, I made my collation as far as I had advanced myself in my commentary on the text. I did not want to go back to the Hall, so I wrote a civil note to Dubellay, expressing my gratitude and saying that I was sending up the manuscript by the landlord's son, as I scrupled to trouble him with another visit.

I got a reply at once, saying that Mr. Dubellay would like to give himself the pleasure of dining with me at the inn before I went, and would receive the manuscript in person.

It was the last night of my stay in St. Sant, so I ordered the best dinner the place could provide, and a magnum of claret, of which I discovered a bin in the cellar. Dubellay appeared promptly at eight o'clock, arriving to my surprise in a car. He had tidied himself up and put on a dinner jacket, and he looked exactly like the city solicitors you see dining in the Junior Carlton.

He was in excellent spirits, and his eyes had lost their air of being on guard. He seemed to have reached some conclusion about me, or decided that I was harmless. More, he seemed to be burning to talk to me. After my adventure I was prepared to find fear in him, the fear I had seen in the faces of the men- servants. But there was none; instead there was excitement, overpowering excitement.

He neglected the courses in his verbosity. His coming to dinner had considerably startled the inn, and instead of a maid the landlady herself waited on us. She seemed to want to get the meal over, and hustled the biscuits and the port on to the table as soon as she decently could. Then Dubellay became confidential.

He was an enthusiast, it appeared, an enthusiast with a single hobby. All his life he had pottered among antiquities, and when he succeeded to Vauncastle he had the leisure and money to indulge himself. The place, it seemed, had been famous in Roman Britain—Vauni Castra—and Faxeter was a corruption of the same. "Who was Vaunus?" I asked. He grinned, and told me to wait.

There had been an old temple up in the high woods. There had always been a local legend about it, and the place was supposed to be haunted. Well, he had had the site excavated and he had found—Here he became the cautious solicitor, and explained to me the law of treasure trove. As long as the objects found were not intrinsically valuable, not gold or jewels, the finder was entitled to keep them. He had done so—had not published the results of his excavations in the proceedings of any learned society—did not want to be bothered by tourists. I was different, for I was a scholar.

What had he found? It was really rather hard to follow his babbling talk, but I gathered that he had found certain carvings and sacrificial implements. And—he sunk his voice— most important of all, an altar, an altar of Vaunus, the tutelary deity of the vale. When he mentioned this word his face took on a new look—not of fear but of secrecy, a kind of secret excitement. I have seen the same look on the face of a street- preaching Salvationist.

Vaunus had been a British god of the hills, whom the Romans in their liberal way appear to have identified with Apollo. He gave me a long confused account of him, from which it appeared that Mr. Dubellay was not an exact scholar. Some of his derivations of place-names were absurd—like St. Sant from Sancta Sanctorum—and in quoting a line of Ausonius he made two false quantities. He seemed to hope that I could tell him something more about Vaunus, but I said that my subject was Greek, and that I was deeply ignorant about Roman Britain. I mentioned several books, and found that he had never heard of Haverfield.

One word he used, "hypocaust," which suddenly gave me a clue. He must have heated the temple, as he heated his house, by some very efficient system of hot air. I know little about science, but I imagined that the artificial heat of the portico, as contrasted with the cold outside, might create an air current. At any rate that explanation satisfied me, and my afternoon's adventure lost its uncanniness. The reaction made me feel friendly towards him, and I listened to his talk with sympathy, but I decided not to mention that I had visited his temple.

He told me about it himself in the most open way. "I couldn't leave the altar on the hillside," he said. "I had to make a place for it, so I turned the old front of the house into a sort of temple. I got the best advice, but architects are ignorant people, and I often wished I had been a better scholar. Still the place satisfies me."

"I hope it satisfies Vaunus," I said jocularly.

"I think so," he replied quite seriously, and then his thoughts seemed to go wandering, and for a minute or so he looked through me with a queer abstraction in his eyes.

"What do you do with it now you've got it?" I asked.

He didn't reply, but smiled to himself.

"I don't know if you remember a passage in Sidonius Apollinaris," I said, "a formula for consecrating pagan altars to Christian uses. You begin by sacrificing a white cock or something suitable, and tell Apollo with all friendliness that the old dedication is off for the present. Then you have a Christian invocation—"

He nearly jumped out of his chair.

"That wouldn't do—wouldn't do at all!... Oh Lord, no!... Couldn't think of it for one moment!"

It was as if I had offended his ears by some horrid blasphemy, and the odd thing was that he never recovered his composure. He tried, for he had good manners, but his ease and friendliness had gone. We talked stiffly for another half-hour about trifles, and then he rose to leave. I returned him his manuscript neatly parcelled up, and expanded in thanks, but he scarcely seemed to heed me. He stuck the thing in his pocket, and departed with the same air of shocked absorption.

After he had gone I sat before the fire and reviewed the situation. I was satisfied with my hypocaut theory, and had no more perturbation in my memory about my afternoon's adventure. Yet a slight flavour of unpleasantness hung about it, and I felt that I did not quite like Dubellay. I set him down as a crank who had tangled himself up with a half-witted hobby, like an old maid with her cats, and I was not sorry to be leaving the place.

My third and last visit to St. Sant was in the following June—the midsummer of 1914. I had all but finished my Theocritus, but I needed another day or two with the Vauncastle manuscript, and, as I wanted to clear the whole thing off before I went to Italy in July, I wrote to Dubellay and asked if I might have another sight of it. The thing was a bore, but it had to be faced, and I fancied that the valley would be a pleasant place in that hot summer.

I got a reply at once, inviting, almost begging me to come, and insisting that I should stay at the Hall. I couldn't very well refuse, though I would have preferred the inn. He wired about my train, and wired again saying he would meet me. This time I seemed to be a particularly welcome guest.

I reached Faxeter in the evening, and was met by a car from a Faxeter garage. The driver was a talkative young man, and, as the car was a closed one, I sat beside him for the sake of fresh air. The term had tired me, and I was glad to get out of stuffy Cambridge, but I cannot say that I found it much cooler as we ascended the Vaun valley. The woods were in their summer magnificence but a little dulled and tarnished by the heat, the river was shrunk to a trickle, and the curious hill-tops were so scorched by the sun that they seemed almost yellow above the green of the trees. Once again I had the feeling of a landscape fantastically un-English.

"Squire Dubellay's been in a great way about your coming, sir," the driver informed me. "Sent down three times to the boss to make sure it was all right. He's got a car of his own, too, a nice little Daimler, but he don't seem to use it much. Haven't seen him about in it for a month of Sundays."

As we turned in at the Hall gates he looked curiously about him. "Never been here before, though I've been in most gentlemen's parks for fifty miles round. Rum old-fashioned spot, isn't it, sir?"

If it had seemed a shuttered sanctuary in midwinter, in that June twilight it was more than ever a place enclosed and guarded. There was almost an autumn smell of decay, a dry decay like touchwood. We seemed to be descending through layers of ever-thickening woods. When at last we turned through the iron gate I saw that the lawns had reached a further stage of neglect, for they were as shaggy as a hayfield.

The white-faced butler let me in, and there, waiting at his back, was Dubellay. But he was not the man whom I had seen in December. He was dressed in an old baggy suit of flannels, and his unwholesome red face was painfully drawn and sunken. There were dark pouches under his eyes, and these eyes were no longer excited, but dull and pained. Yes, and there was more than pain in them—there was fear. I wondered if his hobby were becoming too much for him.

He greeted me like a long-lost brother. Considering that I scarcely knew him, I was a little embarrassed by his warmth. "Bless you for coming, my dear fellow," he cried. "You want a wash and then we'll have dinner. Don't bother to change, unless you want to. I never do." He led me to my bedroom, which was clean enough but small and shabby like a servant's room. I guessed that he had gutted the house to build his absurd temple.

We dined in a fair-sized room which was a kind of library. It was lined with old books, but they did not look as if they had been there long; rather it seemed like a lumber room in which a fine collection had been stored. Once no doubt they had lived in a dignified Georgian chamber. There was nothing else, none of the antiques which I had expected.

"You have come just in time," he told me. "I fairly jumped when I got your letter, for I had been thinking of running up to Cambridge to insist on your coming down here. I hope you're in no hurry to leave."

"As it happens," I said, "I **am** rather pressed for time, for I hope to go abroad next week. I ought to finish my work here in a couple of days. I can't tell you how much I'm in your debt for your kindness."

"Two days," he said. "That will get us over midsummer. That should be enough." I hadn't a notion what he meant.

I told him that I was looking forward to examining his collection. He opened his eyes. "Your discoveries, I mean," I said, "the altar of Vaunus..."

As I spoke the words his face suddenly contorted in a spasm of what looked like terror. He choked and then recovered himself. "Yes, yes," he said rapidly. "You shall see it—you shall see everything—but not now—not to-night. Tomorrow—in broad daylight—that's the time."

After that the evening became a bad dream. Small talk deserted him, and he could only reply with an effort to my

commonplaces. I caught him often looking at me furtively, as if he were sizing me up and wondering how far he could go with me. The thing fairly got on my nerves, and to crown all it was abominably stuffy. The windows of the room gave on a little paved court with a background of laurels, and I might have been in Seven Dials for all the air there was.

When coffee was served I could stand it no longer. "What about smoking in the temple?" I said. "It should be cool there with the air from the lake."

I might have been proposing the assassination of his mother. He simply gibbered at me. "No, no," he stammered. "My God, no!" It was half an hour before he could properly collect himself. A servant lit two oil lamps, and we sat on in the frowsty room.

"You said something when we last met," he ventured at last, after many a sidelong glance at me. "Something about a ritual for re-dedicating an altar."

I remembered my remark about Sidonius Apollinaris.

"Could you show me the passage? There is a good classical library here, collected by my great-grandfather. Unfortunately my scholarship is not equal to using it properly."

I got up and hunted along the shelves, and presently found a copy of Sidonius, the Plantin edition of 1609. I turned up the passage, and roughly translated it for him. He listened hungrily and made me repeat it twice.

"He says a cock," he hesitated. "Is that essential?"

"I don't think so. I fancy any of the recognised ritual stuff would do."

"I am glad," he said simply. "I am afraid of blood."

"Good God, man," I cried out, "are you taking my nonsense seriously? I was only chaffing. Let old Vaunus stick to his altar!"

He looked at me like a puzzled and rather offended dog.

"Sidonius was in earnest..."

"Well, I'm not," I said rudely. "We're in the twentieth century and not in the third. Isn't it about time we went to bed?"

He made no objection, and found me a candle in the hall. As I undressed I wondered into what kind of lunatic asylum I had strayed. I felt the strongest distaste for the place, and longed to go straight off to the inn; only I couldn't make use of a man's manuscripts and insult his hospitality. It was fairly clear to me that Dubellay was mad. He had ridden his hobby to the death of his wits and was now in its bondage. Good Lord! he had talked of his precious Vaunus as a votary talks of a god. I believed he had come to worship some figment of his half-educated fancy.

I think I must have slept for a couple of hours. Then I woke dripping with perspiration, for the place was simply an oven. My window was as wide open as it would go, and, though it was a warm night, when I stuck my head out the air was fresh. The heat came from indoors. The room was on the first floor near the entrance and I was looking on to the overgrown lawns. The night was very dark and utterly still, but I could have sworn that I heard wind. The trees were as motionless as marble, but somewhere close at hand I heard a strong gust blowing. Also, though there was no moon, there was somewhere near me a steady glow of light; I could see the reflection of it round the end of the house. That meant that it came from the temple. What kind of saturnalia was Dubellay conducting at such an hour?

When I drew in my head I felt that if I was to get any sleep something must be done. There could be no question about it; some fool had turned on the steam heat, for the room was a furnace. My temper was rising. There was no bell to be found, so I lit my candle and set out to find a servant.

I tried a cast downstairs and discovered the room where we had dined. Then I explored a passage at right angles, which brought me up against a great oak door. The light showed me that it was a new door, and that there was no apparent way of opening it. I guessed that it led into the temple, and, though it fitted close and there seemed to be no key-hole, I could hear through it a sound like a rushing wind... Next I opened a door on my right and found myself in a big store cupboard. It had a funny, exotic, spicy smell, and, arranged very neatly on the floor and shelves, was a number of small sacks and coffers. Each bore a label, a square of stout paper with very black lettering. I read "Pro servitio Vauni."

I had seen them before, for my memory betrayed me if they were not the very labels that Dubellay's servants had been attaching to the packages from the carrier's cart that evening in the past autumn. The discovery made my suspicions an unpleasant certainty. Dubellay evidently meant the labels to read "For the service of Vaunus." He was no scholar, for it was an impossible use of the word "servitium," but he was very patently a madman.

However, it was my immediate business to find some way to sleep, so I continued my quest for a servant. I followed another corridor, and discovered a second staircase. At the top of it I saw an open door and looked in. It must have been Dubellay's, for his flannels were tumbled untidily on a chair, but Dubellay himself was not there and the bed had not been slept in.

I suppose my irritation was greater than my alarm— though I must say I was getting a little scared—for I still pursued the evasive servant. There was another stair which apparently led to attics, and in going up it I slipped and made a great clatter. When I looked up the butler in his nightgown was staring down at me, and if ever a mortal face held fear it was his. When he saw who it was he seemed to recover a little.

"Look here," I said, "for God's sake turn off that infernal hot air. I can't get a wink of sleep. What idiot set it going?"

He looked at me owlishly, but he managed to find his tongue.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "but there is no heating apparatus in this house."

There was nothing more to be said. I returned to my bedroom and it seemed to me that it had grown cooler. As I leaned out of the window, too, the mysterious wind seemed to have died away, and the glow no longer showed from beyond the corner of the house. I got into bed and slept heavily till I was roused by the appearance of my shaving water about half-past nine. There was no bathroom, so I bathed in a tin pannikin.

It was a hazy morning which promised a day of blistering heat. When I went down to breakfast I found Dubellay in the dining-room. In the daylight he looked a very sick man, but he seemed to have taken a pull on himself, for his manner was considerably less nervy than the night before. Indeed, he appeared almost normal, and I might have reconsidered my view but for the look in his eyes.

I told him that I proposed to sit tight all day over the manuscript, and get the thing finished. He nodded. "That's all right. I've a lot to do myself, and I won't disturb you."

"But first," I said, "you promised to show me your discoveries."

He looked at the window where the sun was shining on the laurels and on a segment of the paved court.

"The light is good," he said—an odd remark. "Let us go there now. There are times and seasons for the temple."

He led me down the passage I had explored the previous night. The door opened not by a key but by some lever in the wall. I found myself looking suddenly at a bath of sunshine with the lake below as blue as a turquoise.

It is not easy to describe my impressions of that place. It was unbelievably light and airy, as brilliant as an Italian colonnade in midsummer. The proportions must have been good, for the columns soared and swam, and the roof (which looked like cedar) floated as delicately as a flower on its stalk. The stone was some local limestone, which on the floor took a polish like marble. All around was a vista of sparkling water and summer woods and far blue mountains. It should have been as wholesome as the top of a hill.

And yet I had scarcely entered before I knew that it was a prison. I am not an imaginative man, and I believe my nerves are fairly good, but I could scarcely put one foot before the other, so strong was my distaste. I felt shut off from the world, as if I were in a dungeon or on an ice-floe. And I felt, too, that though far enough from humanity, we were not alone.

On the inner wall there were three carvings. Two were imperfect friezes sculptured in low-relief, dealing apparently with the same subject. It was a ritual procession, priests bearing branches, the ordinary dendrophori business. The faces were only half-human, and that was from no lack of skill, for the artist had been a master. The striking thing was that the branches and the hair of the hierophants were being tossed by a violent wind, and the expression of each was of a being in the last stage of endurance, shaken to the core by terror and pain.

Between the friezes was a great roundel of a Gorgon's head. It was not a female head, such as you commonly find, but a male head, with the viperous hair sprouting from chin and lip. It had once been coloured, and fragments of a green pigment remained in the locks. It was an awful thing, the ultimate horror of fear, the last dementia of cruelty made manifest in stone. I hurriedly averted my eyes and looked at the altar.

That stood at the west end on a pediment with three steps. It was a beautiful piece of work, scarcely harmed by the centuries, with two words inscribed on its face—APOLL. VAUN. It was made of some foreign marble, and the hollow top was dark with ancient sacrifices. Not so ancient either, for I could have sworn that I saw there the mark of recent flame.

I do not suppose I was more than five minutes in the place. I wanted to get out, and Dubellay wanted to get me out. We did not speak a word till we were back in the library.

"For God's sake give it up!" I said. "You're playing with fire, Mr. Dubellay. You're driving yourself into Bedlam. Send these damned things to a museum and leave this place. Now, now, I tell you. You have no time to lose. Come down with me to the inn straight off and shut up this house."

He looked at me with his lip quivering like a child about to cry.

"I will. I promise you I will... But not yet... After to- night... To-morrow I'll do whatever you tell me... You won't leave me?"

"I won't leave you, but what earthly good am I to you if you won't take my advice?"

"Sidonius..." he began.

"Oh, damn Sidonius! I wish I had never mentioned him. The whole thing is arrant nonsense, but it's killing you. You've got it on the brain. Don't you know you're a sick man?"

"I'm not feeling very grand. It's so warm to-day. I think I'll lie down."

It was no good arguing with him, for he had the appalling obstinacy of very weak things. I went off to my work in a shocking bad temper.

The day was what it had promised to be, blisteringly hot. Before midday the sun was hidden by a coppery haze, and there was not the faintest stirring of wind. Dubellay did not appear at luncheon—it was not a meal he ever ate, the butler told me. I slogged away all the afternoon, and had pretty well finished my job by six o'clock. That would enable me to leave next morning, and I hoped to be able to persuade my host to come with me.

The conclusion of my task put me into a better humour, and I went for a walk before dinner. It was a very close evening, for the heat haze had not lifted; the woods were as silent as a grave, not a bird spoke, and when I came out of the cover to the burnt pastures the sheep seemed too languid to graze. During my walk I prospected the environs of the house, and saw that it would be very hard to get access to the temple except by a long circuit. On one side was a mass of outbuildings, and then a high wall, and on the other the very closest and highest quickset hedge I have ever seen, which

ended in a wood with savage spikes on its containing wall. I returned to my room, had a cold bath in the exiguous tub, and changed.

Dubellay was not at dinner. The butler said that his master was feeling unwell and had gone to bed. The news pleased me, for bed was the best place for him. After that I settled myself down to a lonely evening in the library. I browsed among the shelves and found a number of rare editions which served to pass the time. I noticed that the copy of Sidonius was absent from its place.

I think it was about ten o'clock when I went to bed, for I was unaccountably tired. I remember wondering whether I oughtn't to go and visit Dubellay, but decided that it was better to leave him alone. I still reproach myself for that decision. I know now I ought to have taken him by force and haled him to the inn.

Suddenly I came out of heavy sleep with a start. A human cry seemed to be ringing in the corridors of my brain. I held my breath and listened. It came again, a horrid scream of panic and torture.

I was out of bed in a second, and only stopped to get my feet into slippers. The cry must have come from the temple. I tore downstairs expecting to hear the noise of an alarmed household. But there was no sound, and the awful cry was not repeated.

The door in the corridor was shut, as I expected. Behind it pandemonium seemed to be loose, for there was a howling like a tempest—and something more, a crackling like fire. I made for the front door, slipped off the chain, and found myself in the still, moonless night. Still, except for the rending gale that seemed to be raging in the house I had left.

From what I had seen on my evening's walk I knew that my one chance to get to the temple was by way of the quickset hedge. I thought I might manage to force a way between the end of it and the wall. I did it, at the cost of much of my raiment and my skin. Beyond was another rough lawn set with tangled shrubberies, and then a precipitous slope to the level of the lake. I scrambled along the sedgy margin, not daring to lift my eyes till I was on the temple steps.

The place was brighter than day with a roaring blast of fire. The very air seemed to be incandescent and to have become a flaming ether. And yet there were no flames—only a burning brightness. I could not enter, for the waft from it struck my face like a scorching hand and I felt my hair singe ...

I am short-sighted, as you know, and I may have been mistaken, but this is what I think I saw. From the altar a great tongue of flame seemed to shoot upwards and lick the roof, and from its pediment ran flaming streams. In front of it lay a body—Dubellay's—a naked body, already charred and black. There was nothing else, except that the Gorgon's head in the wall seemed to glow like a sun in hell.

I suppose I must have tried to enter. All I know is that I found myself staggering back, rather badly burned. I covered my eyes, and as I looked through my fingers I seemed to see the flames flowing under the wall, where there may have been lockers, or possibly another entrance. Then the great oak door suddenly shrivelled like gauze, and with a roar the fiery river poured into the house.

I ducked myself in the lake to ease the pain, and then ran back as hard as I could by the way I had come. Dubellay, poor devil, was beyond my aid. After that I am not very clear what happened. I know that the house burned like a haystack. I found one of the men-servants on the lawn, and I think I helped to get the other down from his room by one of the rain-pipes. By the time the neighbours arrived the house was ashes, and I was pretty well mother-naked. They took me to the inn and put me to bed, and I remained there till after the inquest. The coroner's jury were puzzled, but they found it simply death by misadventure; a lot of country houses were burned that summer. There was nothing found of Dubellay; nothing remained of the house except a few blackened pillars; the altar and the sculptures were so cracked and scarred that no museum wanted them. The place has not been rebuilt, and for all I know they are there to-day. I am not going back to look for them.

Nightingale finished his story and looked round his audience.

"Don't ask me for an explanation," he said, "for I haven't any. You may believe if you like that the god Vaunus inhabited the temple which Dubellay built for him, and, when his votary grew scared and tried Sidonius's receipt for shifting the dedication, became angry and slew him with his flaming wind. That wind seems to have been a perquisite of Vaunus. We know more about him now, for last year they dug up a temple of his in Wales."

"Lightning," some one suggested.

"It was a quiet night, with no thunderstorm," said Nightingale.

"Isn't the countryside volcanic?" Peckwether asked. "What about pockets of natural gas or something of the kind?"

"Possibly. You may please yourself in your explanation. I'm afraid I can't help you. All I know is that I don't propose to visit that valley again!"

"What became of your Theocritus?"

"Burned, like everything else. However, that didn't worry me much. Six weeks later came the War, and I had other things to think about."

“DIVUS” JOHNSTON

LORD LAMANCHA'S STORY

In deorum numerum relatus est non ore modo decernentium sed et persuasione vulgi.— Suetonius.

We were discussing the vagaries of ambition, and decided that most of the old prizes that humanity contended for had had their gilt rubbed off. Kingdoms, for example, which younger sons used to set out to conquer. It was agreed that nowadays there was a great deal of drudgery and very little fun in being a king.

“Besides, it can't be done,” Leithen put in. “The Sarawak case. Sovereignty over territory can only be acquired by a British subject on behalf of His Majesty.”

There was far more real power, someone argued, in the profession of prophet. Mass-persuasion was never such a force as to-day. Sandy Arbuthnot, who had known Gandhi and admired him, gave us a picture of that strange popular leader—ascetic, genius, dreamer, child. “For a little,” he said, “Gandhi had more absolute sway over a bigger lump of humanity than anybody except Lenin.”

“I once knew Lenin,” said Fulleylove, the traveller, and we all turned to him.

“It must have been more than twenty years ago,” he explained. “I was working at the British Museum and lived in lodgings in Bloomsbury, and he had a room at the top of the house. Ilyitch was the name we knew him by. He was a little, beetle-browed chap, with a pale face and the most amazing sleepy black eyes, which would suddenly twinkle and blaze as some thought passed through his mind. He was very pleasant and good-humoured, and would spend hours playing with the landlady's children. I remember I once took him down with me for a day into the country, and he was the merriest little grig... Did I realise how big he was? No, I cannot say I did. He was the ordinary Marxist, and he wanted to resurrect Russia by hydraulics and electrification. He seemed to be a funny compound of visionary and terre-à-terre scientist. But I realised that he could lay a spell on his countrymen. I have been to Russian meetings with him—I talk Russian, you know—and it was astounding the way he could make his audience look at him like hungry sheep. He gave me the impression of utter courage and candour, and a kind of demoniac simplicity... No, I never met him again, but oddly enough I was in Moscow during his funeral. Russian geographers were interesting themselves in the line of the old silk-route to Cathay, and I was there by request to advise them. I had not a very comfortable time, but everybody was very civil to me. So I saw Lenin's funeral, and unless you saw that you can have no notion of his power. A great black bier like an altar, and hundreds and thousands of people weeping and worshipping—yes, worshipping.”

“The successful prophet becomes a kind of god,” said Lamancha. “Have you ever known a god, Sandy?... No more have I. But there is one living to-day somewhere in Scotland. Johnston is his name. I once met a very particular friend of his. I will tell you the story, and you can believe it or not as you like.”

I had this narrative—he said—from my friend Mr. Peter Thomson of “Jessieville,” Maxwell Avenue, Strathbungo, whom I believe to be a man incapable of mendacity, or, indeed, of imagination. He is a prosperous and retired ship's captain, dwelling in the suburbs of Glasgow, who plays two rounds of golf every day of the week, and goes twice every Sunday to a pink, new church. You may often see his ample figure, splendidly habited in broadcloth and finished off with one of those square felt hats which are the Scottish emblem of respectability, moving sedately by Mrs. Thomson's side down the avenue of “Balmorals” and “Bellevues” where dwell the aristocracy of Strathbungo. It was not there that I met him, however, but in a Clyde steamboat going round the Mull, where I spent a comfortless night on my way to a Highland fishing. It was blowing what he called “a wee bit o' wind,” and I could not face the odorous bunks which opened on the dining-room. Seated abaft the funnel, in an atmosphere of ham-and-eggs, bilge and fresh western breezes, he revealed his heart to me, and this I found in it.

“About the age of forty”—said Mr. Thomson—“I was captain of the steamer Archibald McKelvie, 1,700 tons burthen, belonging to Brock, Rattray, and Linklater, of Greenock. We were principally engaged in the China trade, but made odd trips into the Malay Archipelago and once or twice to Australia. She was a handy bit boat, and I'll not deny that I had many mercies vouchsafed to me when I was her skipper. I raked in a bit of salvage now and then, and my trading commission, paid regularly into the British Linen Bank at Maryhill, was mounting up to a fairish sum. I had no objection to Eastern parts, for I had a good constitution and had outgrown the daftnesses of youth. The berth suited me well, I had a decent lot for ship's company, and I would gladly have looked forward to spending the rest of my days by the Archibald McKelvie.

“Providence, however, thought otherwise, for He was preparing a judgment against that ship like the kind you read about in books. We were five days out from Singapore, shaping our course for the Philippines, where the Americans were then fighting, when we ran into a queer lown sea. Not a breath of air came out of the sky; if you kindled a match the flame wouldna leap, but smouldered like touchwood; and every man's body ran with sweat like a mill-lade. I kenned fine we were in for the terrors of hell, but I hadna any kind of notion how terrible hell could be. First came a wind that whipped away my funnel, like a potato-peeling. We ran before it, and it was like the swee-gee we used to play at when we were laddies. One moment the muckle sea would get up on its hinder end and look at you, and the next you were looking at it as if you were on the top of Ben Lomond looking down on Luss. Presently I saw land in a gap of the waters, a land with great blood-red mountains, and, thinks I to myself, if we keep up the pace this boat of mine will not be hindered from ending two or three miles inland in somebody's kailyard. I was just wondering how we would get the Archibald McKelvie back to her native element when she saved me the trouble; for she ran dunt on some kind of a rock, and went straight to the bottom.

“I was the only man saved alive, and if you ask me how it happened I don't know. I felt myself choking in a whirlpool;

then I was flung through the air and brought down with a smack into deep waters; then I was in the air again, and this time I landed amongst sand and tree-trunks and got a bash on the head which dozed my senses.

“When I came to it was morning, and the storm had abated. I was lying about half-way up a beach of fine white sand, for the wave that had carried me landwards in its flow had brought me some of the road back in its ebb. All round me was a sort of free- coup—trees knocked to matchwood, dead fish, and birds and beasts, and some boards which I jaloused came from the Archibald McKelvie. I had a big bump on my head, but otherwise I was well and clear in my wits, though empty in the stomach and very dowie in the heart. For I knew something about the islands, of which I supposed this to be one. They were either barren wastes, with neither food nor water, or else they were inhabited by the bloodiest cannibals of the archipelago. It looked as if my choice lay between having nothing to eat and being eaten myself.

“I got up, and, after returning thanks to my Maker, went for a walk in the woods. They were full of queer painted birds, and it was an awful job climbing in and out of the fallen trees. By and by I came into an open bit with a burn where I slookened my thirst. It cheered me up, and I was just beginning to think that this was not such a bad island, and looking to see if I could find anything in the nature of cocoanuts, when I heard a whistle like a steam-siren. It was some sort of signal, for the next I knew I was in the grip of a dozen savages, my arms and feet were lashed together, and I was being carried swiftly through the forest.

“It was a rough journey, and the discomfort of that heathen handling kept me from reflecting upon my desperate position. After nearly three hours we stopped, and I saw that we had come to a city. The streets were not much to look at, and the houses were mud and thatch, but on a hillock in the middle stood a muckle temple not unlike a Chinese pagoda. There was a man blowing a horn, and a lot of folk shouting, but I paid no attention, for I was sore troubled with the cramp in my left leg. They took me into one of the huts and made signs that I was to have it for my lodging. They brought me water to wash, and a very respectable dinner, which included a hen and a vegetable not unlike greens. Then they left me to myself, and I lay down and slept for a round of the clock.

“I was three days in that hut. I had plenty to eat and the folk were very civil, but they wouldna let me outbye and there was no window to look out of. I couldna make up my mind what they wanted with me. I was a prisoner, but they did not behave as if they bore any malice, and I might have thought I was an honoured guest, but for the guards at the door. Time hung heavy on my hands, for I had nothing to read and no light to read by. I said over all the chapters of the Bible and all the Scots songs I could remember, and I tried to make a poem about my adventures, but I stuck at the fifth line, for I couldna find a rhyme to McKelvie.

“On the fourth morning I was awakened by the most deafening din. I saw through the door that the streets were full of folk in holiday clothes, most of them with flowers in their hair and carrying palm branches in their hands. It was like something out of a Bible picture book. After I had my breakfast four lads in long white gowns arrived, and in spite of all my protests they made a bonny spectacle of me. They took off my clothes, me blushing with shame, and rubbed me with a kind of oil that smelt of cinnamon. Then they shaved my chin, and painted on my forehead a mark like a freemason’s. Then they put on me a kind of white nightgown with a red sash round the middle, and they wouldna be hindered from clapping on my head a great wreath of hothouse flowers, as if I was a funeral.

“And then like a thunder-clap I realised my horrible position. **I was a funeral.** I was to be offered up as a sacrifice to some heathen god—an awful fate for a Free-kirk elder in the prime of life.

“I was so paralytic with terror that I never tried to resist. Indeed, it would have done me little good, for outside there were, maybe, two hundred savages, armed and drilled like soldiers. I was put into a sort of palanquin, and my bearers started at a trot with me up the hill to the temple, the whole population of the city running alongside, and singing songs about their god. I was sick with fear, and I durstna look up, for I did not know what awesome sight awaited me.

“At last I got my courage back. ‘Peter,’ I says to myself, ‘be a man. Remember your sainted Covenanting forefathers. You have been chosen to testify for your religion, though it’s no likely that yon savages will understand what you say.’ So I shut my jaw and resolved before I died to make a declaration of my religious principles, and to loosen some of the heathens’ teeth with my fists.

“We stopped at the temple door and I was led through a court and into a muckle great place like a barn, with bats flying about the ceiling. Here there were nearly three thousand heathens sitting on their hunkers. They sang a hymn when they saw me, and I was just getting ready for action when my bearers carried me into another place, which I took to be the Holy of Holies. It was about half the size of the first, and at the end of it was a great curtain of leopards’ skins hanging from roof to floor. My bearers set me in the middle of the room, and then rolled about on their stomachs in adoration before the curtain. After a bit they finished their prayers and crawled out backwards, and I was left alone in that fearsome place.

“It was the worst experience of my life. I believed that behind the skins there was a horrible idol, and that at any moment a priest with a knife would slip in to cut my throat. You may crack about courage, but I tell you that a man who can wait without a quiver on his murderers in the middle of a gloomy kirk is more than human. I am not ashamed to confess that the sweat ran over my brow, and my teeth were knocking in my head.

“But nothing happened. Nothing, except that as I sat there I began to notice a most remarkable smell. At first I thought the place was on fire. Then I thought it was the kind of stink called incense that they make in Popish kirks, for I once wandered into a cathedral in Santiago. But neither guess was right, and then I put my thumb on the proper description. It was nothing but the smell of the third-class carriages on the Coatbridge train on a Saturday night after a football match—the smell of plug tobacco smoked in clay pipes that were no just very clean. My eyes were getting accustomed to the light, and I found the place no that dark; and as I looked round to see what caused the smell, I spied something like smoke coming from beyond the top of the curtain.

"I noticed another thing. There was a hole in the curtain, about six feet from the floor, and at that hole as I watched I saw an eye. My heart stood still, for, thinks I, that'll be the priest of Baal who presently will stick a knife into me. It was long ere I could screw up courage to look again, but I did it. And then I saw that the eye was not that of a savage, which would be black and blood-shot. It was a blue eye, and, as I looked, it winked at me.

"And then a voice spoke out from behind the curtain, and this was what it said. It said, 'God-sake, Peter, is that you? And how did ye leave them a' at Maryhill?'

"And from behind the curtain walked a muckle man, dressed in a pink blanket, a great red-headed man, with a clay pipe in his mouth. It was the god of the savages, and who do ye think it was? A man Johnston, who used to bide in the same close as me in Glasgow..."

Mr. Thomson's emotion overcame him, and he accepted a stiff drink from my flask. Wiping away a tear, which may have been of sentiment or of mirth, he continued:

"You may imagine that I was joyful and surprised to see him, and he, so to speak, fell on my neck like the father of the Prodigal Son. He hadna seen a Scotch face for four years. He raked up one or two high priests and gave instructions, and soon I was comfortably lodged in a part of the temple close to his own rooms. Eh, man, it was a noble sight to see Johnston and the priests. He was a big, red-haired fellow, six feet four, and as strong as a stot, with a voice like a north-easter, and yon natives fair crawled like caterpillars in his presence. I never saw a man with such a natural talent for being a god. You would have thought he had been bred to the job all his days, and yet I minded him keeping a grocer's shop in the Dalmarnock Road.

"That night he told me his story. It seemed that he had got a post at Shanghai in a trading house, and was coming out to it in one of those God-forgotten German tramps that defile the China seas. Like me, he fell in with a hurricane, and, like me, his ship was doomed. He was a powerful swimmer, and managed to keep afloat until he found some drifting wreckage, and after the wind had gone down he paddled ashore. There he was captured by the savages, and taken, like me, to their city. They were going to sacrifice him, but one chief, wiser than the rest, called attention to his size and strength, and pointed out that they were at war with their neighbours, and that a big man would be of more use in the fighting line than on an altar in the temple.

"So off went Johnston to the wars. He was a bonny fighter, and very soon they made him captain of the royal bodyguard, and a fortnight later the general commanding-in-chief over the whole army. He said he had never enjoyed himself so much in his life, and when he got back from his battles the whole population of the city used to meet him with songs and flowers. Then an old priest found an ancient prophecy about a Red God who would come out of the sea and lead the people to victory. Very soon there was a strong party for making Johnston a god, and when, with the help of a few sticks of trade dynamite, he had blown up the capital of the other side and brought back his army in triumph with a prisoner apiece, popular feeling could not be restrained. Johnston was hailed as divine. He hadna much grip of the language, and couldna explain the situation, so he thought it best to submit.

"Mind you,' he said to me, 'I've been a good god to these poor blind ignorant folk.' He had stopped the worst of their habits and put down human sacrifices, and got a sort of town council appointed to keep the city clean, and he had made the army the most efficient thing ever heard of in the islands. And now he was preparing to leave. This was what they expected, for the prophecy had said that the Red God, after being the saviour of his people, would depart as he had come across the sea. So, under his directions, they had built him a kind of boat with which he hoped to reach Singapore. He had got together a considerable fortune, too, chiefly in rubies, for as a god he had plenty of opportunities of acquiring wealth honestly. He said there was a sort of greengrocer's and butcher's shop before his altar every morning, and he got one of the priests, who had some business notions, to sell off the goods for him.

"There was just one thing that bothered Mr. Johnston. He was a good Christian man and had been an elder in a kirk in the Cowcaddens, and he was much in doubt whether he had not committed a mortal sin in accepting the worship of these heathen islanders. Often I argued it out with him, but I did not seem able to comfort him rightly. 'Ye see,' he used to say to me, 'if I have broken anything, it's the spirit and no the letter of the commandment. I havena set up a graven image, for ye canna call me a graven image.'

"I mind that I quoted to him the conduct of Naaman, who was allowed to bow in the house of Rimmon, but he would not have it. 'No, no,' he cried, 'that has nothing to do with the point. It's no a question of my bowing in the house of Rimmon. I'm auld Rimmon himself.'

"That's a strange story, Mr. Thomson," I said. "Is it true?"

"True as death. But you havena heard the end of it. We got away, and by-and-by we reached Singapore, and in course of time our native land. Johnston, he was a very rich man now, and I didna go without my portion; so the loss of the Archibald McKelvie turned out the best piece of luck in my life. I bought a share in Brock's Line, but nothing would content Johnston but that he must be a gentleman. He got a big estate in Annandale, where all the Johnstons came from long ago, and one way and another he has spent an awful siller on it. Land will swallow up money quicker than the sea."

"And what about his conscience?" I asked.

"It's keeping quieter," said Mr. Thomson. "He takes a great interest in Foreign Missions, to which he subscribes largely, and they tell me that he has given the funds to build several new kirks. Oh yes, and he's just been adopted as a prospective Liberal candidate. I had a letter from him no further back than yesterday. It's about his political career, as he calls it. He told me, what didna need telling, that I must never mention a word about his past. 'If discretion was necessary before,' he says, 'it's far more necessary now, for how could the Party of Progress have any confidence in a man if they heard he had once been a god?'"

THE LOATHLY OPPOSITE

OLIVER PUGH'S STORY

*How loathly opposite I stood
To his unnatural purpose.—King Lear.*

Burminster had been to a Guildhall dinner the night before, which had been attended by many—to him— unfamiliar celebrities. He had seen for the first time in the flesh people whom he had long known by reputation, and he declared that in every case the picture he had formed of them had been cruelly shattered. An eminent poet, he said, had looked like a starting-price bookmaker, and a financier of world-wide fame had been exactly like the music-master at his preparatory school. Wherefore Burminster made the profound deduction that things were never what they seemed.

“That’s only because you have a feeble imagination,” said Sandy Arbuthnot. “If you had really understood Timson’s poetry you would have realised that it went with close-cropped red hair and a fat body, and you should have known that Macintyre (this was the financier) had the music-and-metaphysics type of mind. That’s why he puzzles the City so. If you understand a man’s work well enough you can guess pretty accurately what he’ll look like. I don’t mean the colour of his eyes and his hair, but the general atmosphere of him.”

It was Sandy’s agreeable habit to fling an occasional paradox at the table with the view of starting an argument. This time he stirred up Pugh, who had come to the War Office from the Indian Staff Corps. Pugh had been a great figure in Secret Service work in the East, but he did not look the part, for he had the air of a polo-playing cavalry subaltern. The skin was stretched as tight over his cheek-bones as over the knuckles of a clenched fist, and was so dark that it had the appearance of beaten bronze. He had black hair, rather beady black eyes, and the hooky nose which in the Celt often goes with that colouring. He was himself a very good refutation of Sandy’s theory.

“I don’t agree,” Pugh said. “At least not as a general principle. One piece of humanity whose work I studied with the microscope for two aching years upset all my notions when I came to meet it.”

Then he told us this story.

“When I was brought to England in November ‘17 and given a ‘hush’ department on three floors of an eighteenth-century house in a back street, I had a good deal to learn about my business. That I learned it in reasonable time was due to the extraordinarily fine staff that I found provided for me. Not one of them was a regular soldier. They were all educated men— they had to be in that job—but they came out of every sort of environment. One of the best was a Shetland laird, another was an Admiralty Court K.C., and I had besides a metallurgical chemist, a golf champion, a leader-writer, a popular dramatist, several actuaries, and an East-end curate. None of them thought of anything but his job, and at the end of the War, when some ass proposed to make them O.B.E.’s, there was a very fair imitation of a riot. A more loyal crowd never existed, and they accepted me as their chief as unquestioningly as if I had been with them since 1914.

“To the War in the ordinary sense they scarcely gave a thought. You found the same thing in a lot of other behind-the-lines departments, and I daresay it was a good thing—it kept their nerves quiet and their minds concentrated. After all our business was only to decode and decypher German messages; we had nothing to do with the use which was made of them. It was a curious little nest, and when the Armistice came my people were flabbergasted—they hadn’t realised that their job was bound up with the War.

“The one who most interested me was my second-in-command, Philip Channell. He was a man of forty-three, about five-foot-four in height, weighing, I fancy, under nine stone, and almost as blind as an owl. He was good enough at papers with his double glasses, but he could hardly recognise you three yards off. He had been a professor at some Midland college—mathematics or physics, I think—and as soon as the War began he had tried to enlist. Of course they wouldn’t have him—he was about E5 in any physical classification, besides being well over age—but he would take no refusal, and presently he worried his way into the Government service. Fortunately he found a job which he could do superlatively well, for I do not believe there was a man alive with more natural genius for cryptography.

“I don’t know if any of you have ever given your mind to that heart-breaking subject. Anyhow you know that secret writing falls under two heads—codes and cyphers, and that codes are combinations of words and cyphers of numerals. I remember how one used to be told that no code or cypher which was practically useful was really undiscoverable, and in a sense that is true, especially of codes. A system of communication which is in constant use must obviously not be too intricate, and a working code, if you get long enough for the job, can generally be read. That is why a code is periodically changed by the users. There are rules in worrying out the permutations and combinations of letters in most codes, for human ingenuity seems to run in certain channels, and a man who has been a long time at the business gets surprisingly clever at it. You begin by finding out a little bit, and then empirically building up the rules of decoding, till in a week or two you get the whole thing. Then, when you are happily engaged in reading enemy messages, the code is changed suddenly, and you have to start again from the beginning... You can make a code, of course, that it is simply impossible to read except by accident—the key to which is a page of some book, for example—but fortunately that kind is not of much general use.

“Well, we got on pretty well with the codes, and read the intercepted enemy messages, cables and wireless, with considerable ease and precision. It was mostly diplomatic stuff, and not very important. The more valuable stuff was in cypher, and that was another pair of shoes. With a code you can build up the interpretation by degrees, but with a cypher you either know it or you don’t—there are no half-way houses. A cypher, since it deals with numbers, is a horrible field for mathematical ingenuity. Once you have written out the letters of a message in numerals there are many means by which

you can lock it and double- lock it. The two main devices, as you know, are transposition and substitution, and there is no limit to the ways one or other or both can be used. There is nothing to prevent a cypher having a double meaning, produced by two different methods, and, as a practical question, you have to decide which meaning is intended. By way of an extra complication, too, the message, when decyphered, may turn out to be itself in a difficult code. I can tell you our job wasn't exactly a rest cure."

Burminster, looking puzzled, inquired as to the locking of cyphers.

"It would take too long to explain. Roughly, you write out a message horizontally in numerals; then you pour it into vertical columns, the number and order of which are determined by a keyword; then you write out the contents of the columns horizontally, following the lines across. To unlock it you have to have the key word, so as to put it back into the vertical columns, and then into the original horizontal form."

Burminster cried out like one in pain. "It can't be done. Don't tell me that any human brain could solve such an acrostic."

"It was frequently done," said Pugh.

"By you?"

"Lord bless you, not by me. I can't do a simple cross-word puzzle. By my people."

"Give me the trenches," said Burminster in a hollow voice. "Give me the trenches any day. Do you seriously mean to tell me that you could sit down before a muddle of numbers and travel back the way they had been muddled to an original that made sense?"

"I couldn't, but Channell could—in most cases. You see, we didn't begin entirely in the dark. We already knew the kind of intricacies that the enemy favoured, and the way we worked was by trying a variety of clues till we lit on the right one."

"Well, I'm blessed! Go on about your man Channell."

"This isn't Channell's story," said Pugh. "He only comes into it accidentally... There was one cypher which always defeated us, a cypher used between the German General Staff and their forces in the East. It was a locked cypher, and Channell had given more time to it than to any dozen of the others, for it put him on his mettle. But he confessed himself absolutely beaten. He wouldn't admit that it was insoluble, but he declared that he would need a bit of real luck to solve it. I asked him what kind of luck, and he said a mistake and a repetition. That, he said, might give him a chance of establishing equations.

"We called this particular cypher 'P.Y.' and we hated it poisonously. We felt like pygmies battering at the base of a high stone tower. Dislike of the thing soon became dislike of the man who had conceived it. Channell and I used to—I won't say amuse, for it was too dashed serious—but torment ourselves by trying to picture the fellow who owned the brain that was responsible for P.Y. We had a pretty complete dossier of the German Intelligence Staff, but of course we couldn't know who was responsible for this particular cypher. We knew no more than his code name, Reinmar, with which he signed the simpler messages to the East, and Channell, who was a romantic little chap for all his science, had got it into his head that it was a woman. He used to describe her to me as if he had seen her—a she- devil, young, beautiful, with a much-painted white face, and eyes like a cobra's. I fancy he read a rather low class of novel in his off-time.

"My picture was different. At first I thought of the histrionic type of scientist, the 'ruthless brain' type, with a high forehead and a jaw puckered like a chimpanzee. But that didn't seem to work, and I settled on a picture of a first-class Generalstaboffizier, as handsome as Falkenhayn, trained to the last decimal, absolutely passionless, with a mind that worked with the relentless precision of a fine machine. We all of us at the time suffered from the boggy of this kind of German, and, when things were going badly, as in March '18, I couldn't sleep for hating him. The infernal fellow was so water-tight and armour-plated, a Goliath who scorned the pebbles from our feeble slings.

"Well, to make a long story short, there came a moment in September '18 when P.Y. was about the most important thing in the world. It mattered enormously what Germany was doing in Syria, and we knew that it was all in P.Y. Every morning a pile of the intercepted German wireless messages lay on Channell's table, which were as meaningless to him as a child's scrawl. I was prodded by my chiefs and in turn I prodded Channell. We had a week to find the key to the cypher, after which things must go on without us, and if we had failed to make anything of it in eighteen months of quiet work, it didn't seem likely that we would succeed in seven feverish days. Channell nearly went off his head with overwork and anxiety. I used to visit his dingy little room and find him fairly grizzled and shrunken with fatigue.

"This isn't a story about him, though there is a good story which I may tell you another time. As a matter of fact we won on the post. P.Y. made a mistake. One morning we got a long message dated en clair, then a very short message, and then a third message almost the same as the first. The second must mean 'Your message of to-day's date unintelligible, please repeat,' the regular formula. This gave us a translation of a bit of the cypher. Even that would not have brought it out, and for twelve hours Channell was on the verge of lunacy, till it occurred to him that Reinmar might have signed the long message with his name, as we used to do sometimes in cases of extreme urgency. He was right, and, within three hours of the last moment Operations could give us, we had the whole thing pat. As I have said, that is a story worth telling, but it is not this one.

"We both finished the War too tired to think of much except that the darned thing was over. But Reinmar had been so long our unseen but constantly pictured opponent that we kept up a certain interest in him. We would like to have seen how he took the licking, for he must have known that we had licked him. Mostly when you lick a man at a game you rather like him, but I didn't like Reinmar. In fact I made him a sort of compost of everything I had ever disliked in a German. Channell stuck to his she-devil theory, but I was pretty certain that he was a youngish man with an intellectual arrogance

which his country's débâcle would in no way lessen. He would never acknowledge defeat. It was highly improbable that I should ever find out who he was, but I felt that if I did, and met him face to face, my dislike would be abundantly justified.

"As you know, for a year or two after the Armistice I was a pretty sick man. Most of us were. We hadn't the fillip of getting back to civilised comforts, like the men in the trenches. We had always been comfortable enough in body, but our minds were fagged out, and there is no easy cure for that. My digestion went nobly to pieces, and I endured a miserable space of lying in bed and living on milk and olive-oil. After that I went back to work, but the darned thing always returned, and every leech had a different regime to advise. I tried them all—dry meals, a snack every two hours, lemon juice, sour milk, starvation, knocking off tobacco—but nothing got me more than half-way out of the trough. I was a burden to myself and a nuisance to others, dragging my wing through life, with a constant pain in my tummy.

"More than one doctor advised an operation, but I was chary about that, for I had seen several of my friends operated on for the same mischief and left as sick as before. Then a man told me about a German fellow called Christoph, who was said to be very good at handling my trouble. The best hand at diagnosis in the world, my informant said—no fads—treated every case on its merits—a really original mind. Dr. Christoph had a modest kurhaus at a place called Rosensee in the Sächsischen Schweiz. By this time I was getting pretty desperate, so I packed a bag and set off for Rosensee.

"It was a quiet little town at the mouth of a narrow valley, tucked in under wooded hills, a clean fresh place with open channels of running water in the streets. There was a big church with an onion spire, a Catholic seminary, and a small tanning industry. The kurhaus was halfway up a hill, and I felt better as soon as I saw my bedroom, with its bare scrubbed floors and its wide verandah looking up into a forest glade. I felt still better when I saw Dr. Christoph. He was a small man with a grizzled beard, a high forehead, and a limp, rather like what I imagine the Apostle Paul must have been. He looked wise, as wise as an old owl. His English was atrocious, but even when he found that I talked German fairly well he didn't expand in speech. He would deliver no opinion of any kind until he had had me at least a week under observation; but somehow I felt comforted, for I concluded that a first-class brain had got to work on me.

"The other patients were mostly Germans with a sprinkling of Spaniards, but to my delight I found Channell. He also had been having a thin time since we parted. Nerves were his trouble—general nervous debility and perpetual insomnia, and his college had given him six months' leave of absence to try to get well. The poor chap was as lean as a sparrow, and he had the large dull eyes and the dry lips of the sleepless. He had arrived a week before me, and like me was under observation. But his vetting was different from mine, for he was a mental case, and Dr. Christoph used to devote hours to trying to unriddle his nervous tangles. 'He is a good man for a German,' said Channell, 'but he is on the wrong tack. There's nothing wrong with my mind. I wish he'd stick to violet rays and massage, instead of asking me silly questions about my great-grandmother.'

"Channell and I used to go for invalidish walks in the woods, and we naturally talked about the years we had worked together. He was living mainly in the past, for the War had been the great thing in his life, and his professorial duties seemed trivial by comparison. As we tramped among the withered bracken and heather his mind was always harking back to the dingy little room where he had smoked cheap cigarettes and worked fourteen hours out of the twenty-four. In particular he was as eagerly curious about our old antagonist, Reinmar, as he had been in 1918. He was more positive than ever that she was a woman, and I believe that one of the reasons that had induced him to try a cure in Germany was a vague hope that he might get on her track. I had almost forgotten about the thing, and I was amused by Channell in the part of the untiring sleuth-hound.

"You won't find her in the Kurhaus,' I said. 'Perhaps she is in some old schloss in the neighbourhood, waiting for you like the Sleeping Beauty.'

"I'm serious,' he said plaintively. 'It is purely a matter of intellectual curiosity, but I confess I would give a great deal to see her face to face. After I leave here, I thought of going to Berlin to make some inquiries. But I'm handicapped, for I know nobody and I have no credentials. Why don't you, who have a large acquaintance and far more authority, take the thing up?'

"I told him that my interest in the matter had flagged and that I wasn't keen on digging into the past, but I promised to give him a line to our Military Attaché if he thought of going to Berlin. I rather discouraged him from letting his mind dwell too much on events in the War. I said that he ought to try to bolt the door on all that had contributed to his present breakdown.

"That is not Dr. Christoph's opinion,' he said emphatically. 'He encourages me to talk about it. You see, with me it is a purely intellectual interest. I have no emotion in the matter. I feel quite friendly towards Reinmar, whoever she may be. It is, if you like, a piece of romance. I haven't had so many romantic events in my life that I want to forget this.'

"Have you told Dr. Christoph about Reinmar?' I asked.

"Yes,' he said, 'and he was mildly interested. You know the way he looks at you with his solemn grey eyes. I doubt if he quite understood what I meant, for a little provincial doctor, even though he is a genius in his own line, is not likely to know much about the ways of the Great General Staff ... I had to tell him, for I have to tell him all my dreams, and lately I have taken to dreaming about Reinmar.'

"What's she like?' I asked.

"Oh, a most remarkable figure. Very beautiful, but uncanny. She has long fair hair down to her knees.'

"Of course I laughed. 'You're mixing her up with the Valkyries,' I said. 'Lord, it would be an awkward business if you met that she-dragon in the flesh.'

"But he was quite solemn about it, and declared that his waking picture of her was not in the least like his dreams. He

rather agreed with my nonsense about the old schloss. He thought that she was probably some penniless grandee, living solitary in a moated grange, with nothing now to exercise her marvellous brain on, and eating her heart out with regret and shame. He drew so attractive a character of her that I began to think that Channell was in love with a being of his own creation, till he ended with, 'But all the same she's utterly damnable. She must be, you know.'

"After a fortnight I began to feel a different man. Dr. Christoph thought that he had got on the track of the mischief, and certainly, with his deep massage and a few simple drugs, I had more internal comfort than I had known for three years. He was so pleased with my progress that he refused to treat me as an invalid. He encouraged me to take long walks into the hills, and presently he arranged for me to go out roebuck-shooting with some of the local junkers.

"I used to start before daybreak on the chilly November mornings and drive to the top of one of the ridges, where I would meet a collection of sportsmen and beaters, shepherded by a fellow in a green uniform. We lined out along the ridge, and the beaters, assisted by a marvellous collection of dogs, including the sporting dachshund, drove the roe towards us. It wasn't very cleverly managed, for the deer generally broke back, and it was chilly waiting in the first hours with a powdering of snow on the ground and the fir boughs heavy with frost crystals. But later, when the sun grew stronger, it was a very pleasant mode of spending a day. There was not much of a bag, but whenever a roe or a capercaillie fell all the guns would assemble and drink little glasses of kirschwasser. I had been lent a rifle, one of those appalling contraptions which are double-barrelled shot-guns and rifles in one, and to transpose from one form to the other requires a mathematical calculation. The rifle had a hair trigger too, and when I first used it I was nearly the death of a respectable Saxon peasant.

"We all ate our midday meal together and in the evening, before going home, we had coffee and cakes in one or other of the farms. The party was an odd mixture, big farmers and small squires, an hotel-keeper or two, a local doctor, and a couple of lawyers from the town. At first they were a little shy of me, but presently they thawed, and after the first day we were good friends. They spoke quite frankly about the War, in which every one of them had had a share, and with a great deal of dignity and good sense.

"I learned to walk in Sikkim, and the little Saxon hills seemed to me inconsiderable. But they were too much for most of the guns, and instead of going straight up or down a slope they always chose a circuit, which gave them an easy gradient. One evening, when we were separating as usual, the beaters taking a short cut and the guns a circuit, I felt that I wanted exercise, so I raced the beaters downhill, beat them soundly, and had the better part of an hour to wait for my companions, before we adjourned to the farm for refreshment. The beaters must have talked about my pace, for as we walked away one of the guns, a lawyer called Meissen, asked me why I was visiting Rosensee at a time of year when few foreigners came. I said I was staying with Dr. Christoph.

"Is he then a private friend of yours?' he asked.

"I told him No, that I had come to his kurhaus for treatment, being sick. His eyes expressed polite scepticism. He was not prepared to regard as an invalid a man who went down a hill like an avalanche.

"But, as we walked in the frosty dusk, he was led to speak of Dr. Christoph, of whom he had no personal knowledge, and I learned how little honour a prophet may have in his own country. Rosensee scarcely knew him, except as a doctor who had an inexplicable attraction for foreign patients. Meissen was curious about his methods and the exact diseases in which he specialised. 'Perhaps he may yet save me a journey to Homburg?' he laughed. 'It is well to have a skilled physician at one's doorstep. The doctor is something of a hermit, and except for his patients does not appear to welcome his kind. Yet he is a good man, beyond doubt, and there are those who say that in the War he was a hero.'

"This surprised me, for I could not imagine Dr. Christoph in any fighting capacity, apart from the fact that he must have been too old. I thought that Meissen might refer to work in the base hospitals. But he was positive; Dr. Christoph had been in the trenches; the limping leg was a war wound.

"I had had very little talk with the doctor, owing to my case being free from nervous complications. He would say a word to me morning and evening about my diet, and pass the time of day when we met, but it was not till the very eve of my departure that we had anything like a real conversation. He sent a message that he wanted to see me for not less than one hour, and he arrived with a batch of notes from which he delivered a kind of lecture on my case. Then I realised what an immense amount of care and solid thought he had expended on me. He had decided that his diagnosis was right—my rapid improvement suggested that—but it was necessary for some time to observe a simple regime, and to keep an eye on certain symptoms. So he took a sheet of note-paper from the table and in his small precise hand wrote down for me a few plain commandments.

"There was something about him, the honest eyes, the mouth which looked as if it had been often compressed in suffering, the air of grave good-will, which I found curiously attractive. I wished that I had been a mental case like Channell, and had had more of his society. I detained him in talk, and he seemed not unwilling. By and by we drifted to the War and it turned out that Meissen was right.

"Dr. Christoph had gone as medical officer in November '14 to the Ypres Salient with a Saxon regiment, and had spent the winter there. In '15 he had been in Champagne, and in the early months of '16 at Verdun, till he was invalided with rheumatic fever. That is to say, he had had about seventeen months of consecutive fighting in the worst areas with scarcely a holiday. A pretty good record for a frail little middle-aged man!

"His family was then at Stuttgart, his wife and one little boy. He took a long time to recover from the fever, and after that was put on home duty. 'Till the War was almost over,' he said, 'almost over, but not quite. There was just time for me to go back to the front and get my foolish leg hurt.' I must tell you that whenever he mentioned his war experience it was with a comical deprecating smile, as if he agreed with anyone who might think that gravity like his should have remained

in bed.

"I assumed that this home duty was medical, until he said something about getting rusty in his professional work. Then it appeared that it had been some job connected with Intelligence. 'I am reputed to have a little talent for mathematics,' he said. 'No. I am no mathematical scholar, but, if you understand me, I have a certain mathematical aptitude. My mind has always moved happily among numbers. Therefore I was set to construct and to interpret cyphers, a strange interlude in the noise of war. I sat in a little room and excluded the world, and for a little I was happy.'

"He went on to speak of the enclave of peace in which he had found himself, and as I listened to his gentle monotonous voice, I had a sudden inspiration.

"I took a sheet of note-paper from the stand, scribbled the word Reinmar on it, and shoved it towards him. I had a notion, you see, that I might surprise him into helping Channell's researches.

"But it was I who got the big surprise. He stopped thunderstruck, as soon as his eye caught the word, blushed scarlet over every inch of face and bald forehead, seemed to have difficulty in swallowing, and then gasped. 'How did you know?'

"I hadn't known, and now that I did, the knowledge left me speechless. This was the loathly opposite for which Channell and I had nursed our hatred. When I came out of my stupefaction I found that he had recovered his balance and was speaking slowly and distinctly, as if he were making a formal confession.

"You were among my opponents... that interests me deeply... I often wondered... You beat me in the end. You are aware of that?'

"I nodded. 'Only because you made a slip,' I said.

"Yes, I made a slip. I was to blame—very gravely to blame, for I let my private grief cloud my mind.'

"He seemed to hesitate, as if he were loath to stir something very tragic in his memory.

"I think I will tell you,' he said at last. 'I have often wished—it is a childish wish—to justify my failure to those who profited by it. My chiefs understood, of course, but my opponents could not. In that month when I failed I was in deep sorrow. I had a little son—his name was Reinmar—you remember that I took that name for my code signature?'

"His eyes were looking beyond me into some vision of the past.

"He was, as you say, my mascot. He was all my family, and I adored him. But in those days food was not plentiful. We were no worse off than many million Germans, but the child was frail. In the last summer of the War he developed phthisis due to malnutrition, and in September he died. Then I failed my country, for with him some virtue seemed to depart from my mind. You see, my work was, so to speak, his also, as my name was his, and when he left me he took my power with him... So I stumbled. The rest is known to you.'

"He sat staring beyond me, so small and lonely, that I could have howled. I remember putting my hand on his shoulder, and stammering some platitude about being sorry. We sat quite still for a minute or two, and then I remembered Channell. Channell must have poured his views of Reinmar into Dr. Christoph's ear. I asked him if Channell knew.

"A flicker of a smile crossed his face.

"Indeed no. And I will exact from you a promise never to breathe to him what I have told you. He is my patient, and I must first consider his case. At present he thinks that Reinmar is a wicked and beautiful lady whom he may some day meet. That is romance, and it is good for him to think so... If he were told the truth, he would be pitiful, and in Herr Channell's condition it is important that he should not be vexed with such emotions as pity.'"

SING A SONG OF SIXPENCE

SIR EDWARD LEITHEN'S STORY

The effect of night, of any flowing water, of lighted cities, of the peep of day, of ships, of the open ocean, calls up in the mind an army of anonymous desires and pleasures. Something, we feel, should happen; we know not what, yet we proceed in quest of it.—R. L. Stevenson.

Leithen's face had that sharp chiselling of the jaw and that compression of the lips which seem to follow upon high legal success. Also an overdose of German gas in 1918 had given his skin a habitual pallor, so that he looked not unhealthy, but notably urban. As a matter of fact he was one of the hardest men I have ever known, but a chance observer might have guessed from his complexion that he rarely left the pavements.

Burminster, who had come back from a month in the grass countries with a face like a deep-sea mariner's, commented on this one evening.

"How do you manage always to look the complete Cit, Ned?" he asked. "You're as much a Londoner as a Parisian is a Parisian, if you know what I mean."

Leithen said that he was not ashamed of it, and he embarked on a eulogy of the metropolis. In London you met sooner or later everybody you had ever known; you could lay your hand on any knowledge you wanted; you could pull strings that controlled the innermost Sahara and the topmost Pamirs. Romance lay in wait for you at every street corner. It was the true City of the Caliphs.

"That is what they say," said Sandy Arbuthnot sadly, "but I never found it so. I yawn my head off in London. Nothing amusing ever finds me out—I have to go and search for it, and it usually costs the deuce of a lot."

"I once stumbled upon a pretty generous allowance of romance," said Leithen, "and it cost me precisely sixpence."

Then he told us this story.

It happened a good many years ago, just when I was beginning to get on at the Bar. I spent busy days in court and chambers, but I was young and had a young man's appetite for society, so I used to dine out most nights and go to more balls than were good for me. It was pleasant after a heavy day to dive into a different kind of life. My rooms at the time were in Down Street, the same house as my present one, only two floors higher up.

On a certain night in February I was dining in Bryanston Square with the Nantleys. Mollie Nantley was an old friend, and used to fit me as an unattached bachelor into her big dinners. She was a young hostess and full of ambition, and one met an odd assortment of people at her house. Mostly political, of course, but a sprinkling of art and letters, and any visiting lion that happened to be passing through. Mollie was a very innocent lion-hunter, but she had a partiality for the breed.

I don't remember much about the dinner, except that the principal guest had failed her. Mollie was loud in her lamentations. He was a South American President who had engineered a very pretty coup d'état the year before, and was now in England on some business concerning the finances of his state. You may remember his name—Ramon Pelem—he made rather a stir in the world for a year or two. I had read about him in the papers, and had looked forward to meeting him, for he had won his way to power by extraordinary boldness and courage, and he was quite young. There was a story that he was partly English and that his grandfather's name had been Pelham. I don't know what truth there was in that, but he knew England well and Englishmen liked him.

Well, he had cried off on the telephone an hour before, and Mollie was grievously disappointed. Her other guests bore the loss with more fortitude, for I expect they thought he was a brand of cigar.

In those days dinners began earlier and dances later than they do to-day. I meant to leave soon, go back to my rooms and read briefs, and then look in at Lady Samplar's dance between eleven and twelve. So at nine-thirty I took my leave.

Jervis, the old butler, who had been my ally from boyhood, was standing on the threshold, and in the square there was a considerable crowd now thinning away. I asked what the trouble was.

"There's been an arrest, Mr. Edward," he said in an awestruck voice. "It 'appened when I was serving coffee in the dining-room, but our Albert saw it all. Two foreigners, he said—proper rascals by their look—were took away by the police just outside this very door. The constables was very nippy and collared them before they could use their pistols—but they 'ad pistols on them and no mistake. Albert says he saw the weapons."

"Did they propose to burgle you?" I asked.

"I cannot say, Mr. Edward. But I shall give instructions for a very careful lock-up to-night."

There were no cabs about, so I decided to walk on and pick one up. When I got into Great Cumberland Place it began to rain sharply, and I was just about to call a prowling hansom, when I put my hand into my pocket. I found that I had no more than one solitary sixpence.

I could of course have paid when I got to my flat. But as the rain seemed to be slacking off, I preferred to walk. Mollie's dining-room had been stuffy, I had been in court all day, and I wanted some fresh air.

You know how in little things, when you have decided on a course, you are curiously reluctant to change it. Before I got to the Marble Arch it had begun to pour in downright earnest. But I still stumped on. Only I entered the Park, for even in February there is a certain amount of cover from the trees.

I passed one or two hurried pedestrians, but the place was almost empty. The occasional lamps made only spots of light in a dripping darkness, and it struck me that this was a curious patch of gloom and loneliness to be so near to

crowded streets, for with the rain had come a fine mist. I pitied the poor devils to whom it was the only home. There was one of them on a seat which I passed. The collar of his thin shabby overcoat was turned up, and his shameful old felt hat was turned down, so that only a few square inches of pale face were visible. His toes stuck out of his boots, and he seemed sunk in a sodden misery.

I passed him and then turned back. Casual charity is an easy dope for the conscience, and I indulge in it too often. When I approached him he seemed to stiffen, and his hands moved in his pockets.

"A rotten night," I said. "Is sixpence any good to you?" And I held out my solitary coin. He lifted his face, and I started. For the eyes that looked at me were not those of a waster. They were bright, penetrating, authoritative—and they were young. I was conscious that they took in more of me than mine did of him.

"Thank you very much," he said, as he took the coin, and the voice was that of a cultivated man. "But I'm afraid I need rather more than sixpence."

"How much?" I asked. This was clearly an original.

"To be accurate, five million pounds."

He was certainly mad, but I was fascinated by this wisp of humanity. I wished that he would show more of his face.

"Till your ship comes home," I said, "you want a bed, and you'd be the better of a change. Sixpence is all I have on me. But if you come to my rooms I'll give you the price of a night's lodging, and I think I might find you some old clothes."

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"Close by—in Down Street." I gave the number.

He seemed to reflect, and then he shot a glance on either side into the gloom behind the road. It may have been fancy, but I thought that I saw something stir in the darkness.

"What are you?" he asked.

I was getting abominably wet, and yet I submitted to be cross-examined by this waif.

"I am a lawyer," I said.

He looked at me again, very intently.

"Have you a telephone?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Right," he said. "You seem a good fellow and I'll take you at your word. I'll follow you... Don't look back, please. It's important... I'll be in Down Street as soon as you... Marchons."

It sounds preposterous, but I did exactly as I was bid. I never looked back, but I kept my ears open for the sound of following footsteps. I thought I heard them, and then they seemed to die away. I turned out of the Park at Grosvenor Gate and went down Park Lane. When I reached the house which contained my flat, I looked up and down the street, but it was empty except for a waiting four-wheeler. But just as I turned in I caught a glimpse of someone running at the Hertford Street end. The runner came to a sudden halt, and I saw that it was not the man I had left.

To my surprise I found the waif on the landing outside my flat. I was about to tell him to stop outside, but as soon as I unlocked the door he brushed past me and entered. My man, who did not sleep on the premises, had left the light burning in the little hall.

"Lock the door," he said in a tone of authority. "Forgive me taking charge, but I assure you it is important."

Then to my amazement he peeled off the sopping overcoat, and kicked off his disreputable shoes. They were odd shoes, for what looked like his toes sticking out was really part of the make-up. He stood up before me in underclothes and socks, and I noticed that his underclothing seemed to be of the finest material.

"Now for your telephone," he said.

I was getting angry at these liberties.

"Who the devil are you?" I demanded.

"I am President Pelem," he said, with all the dignity in the world. "And you?"

"I?—oh, I am the German Emperor."

He laughed. "You know you invited me here," he said. "You've brought this on yourself." Then he stared at me. "Hullo, I've seen you before. You're Leithen. I saw you play at Lord's. I was twelfth man for Harrow that year... Now for the telephone."

There was something about the fellow, something defiant and debonair and young, that stopped all further protest on my part. He might or might not be President Pelem, but he was certainly not a wastrel. Besides he seemed curiously keyed up, as if the occasion were desperately important, and he infected me with the same feeling. I said no more, but led the way into my sitting-room. He flung himself on the telephone, gave a number, was instantly connected, and began a conversation in monosyllables.

It was a queer jumble that I overheard. Bryanston Square was mentioned, and the Park, and the number of my house was given—to somebody. There was a string of foreign names—Pedro and Alejandro and Manuel and Alcaza—and short breathless inquiries. Then I heard—"a good fellow—looks as if he might be useful in a row," and I wondered if he was referring to me. Some rapid Spanish followed, and then, "Come round at once—they will be here before you. Have policemen below, but don't let them come up. We should be able to manage alone. Oh, and tell Burton to ring up here as

soon as he has news.” And he gave my telephone number.

I put some coals on the fire, changed into a tweed jacket, and lit a pipe. I fetched a dressing-gown from my bedroom and flung it on the sofa. “You’d better put that on,” I said when he had finished.

He shook his head.

“I would rather be unencumbered,” he said. “But I should dearly love a cigarette... and a liqueur brandy, if you have such a thing. That Park of yours is infernally chilly.”

I supplied his needs, and he stretched himself in an arm-chair, with his stockinged feet to the fire.

“You have been very good-humoured, Leithen,” he said. “Valdez—that’s my aide-de-camp—will be here presently, and he will probably be preceded by other guests. But I think I have time for the short explanation which is your due. You believe what I told you?”

I nodded.

“Good. Well, I came to London three weeks ago to raise a loan. That was a matter of life or death for my big stupid country. I have succeeded. This afternoon the agreement was signed. I think I mentioned the amount to you—five million sterling.”

He smiled happily and blew a smoke-ring into the air.

“I must tell you that I have enemies. Among my happy people there are many rascals, and I had to deal harshly with them. ‘So foul a sky clears not without a storm’—that’s Shakespeare, isn’t it? I learned it at school. You see, I had Holy Church behind me, and therefore I had against me all the gentry who call themselves liberators. Red Masons, anarchists, communists, that sort of crew. A good many are now reposing beneath the sod, but some of the worst remain. In particular, six followed me to England with instructions that I must not return.

“I don’t mind telling you, Leithen, that I have had a peculiarly rotten time the last three weeks. It was most important that nothing should happen to me till the loan was settled, so I had to lead the sheltered life. It went against the grain, I assure you, for I prefer the offensive to the defensive. The English police were very amiable, and I never stirred without a cordon, your people and my own. The Six wanted to kill me, and as it is pretty easy to kill anybody if you don’t mind being killed yourself, we had to take rather elaborate precautions. As it was, I was twice nearly done in. Once my carriage broke down mysteriously, and a crowd collected, and if I hadn’t had the luck to board a passing cab, I should have had a knife in my ribs. The second was at a public dinner—something not quite right about the cayenne pepper served with the oysters. One of my staff is still seriously ill.”

He stretched his arms.

“Well, that first stage is over. They can’t wreck the loan, whatever happens to me. Now I am free to adopt different tactics and take the offensive. I have no fear of the Six in my own country. There I can take precautions, and they will find it difficult to cross the frontier or to live for six hours thereafter if they succeed. But here you are a free people, and protection is not so easy. I do not wish to leave England just yet—I have done my work and have earned a little play. I know your land and love it, and I look forward to seeing something of my friends. Also I want to attend the Grand National. Therefore, it is necessary that my enemies should be confined for a little, while I take my holiday. So for this evening I made a plan. I took the offensive. I deliberately put myself in their danger.”

He turned his dancing eyes towards me, and I have rarely had such an impression of wild and mirthful audacity.

“We have an excellent intelligence system,” he went on, “and the Six have been assiduously shadowed. But as I have told you, no precautions avail against the fanatic, and I do not wish to be killed on my little holiday. So I resolved to draw their fire—to expose myself as ground bait, so to speak, that I might have the chance of netting them. The Six usually hunt in couples, so it was necessary to have three separate acts in the play, if all were to be gathered in. The first—”

“Was in Bryanston Square,” I put in, “outside Lady Nantley’s house?”

“True. How did you know?”

“I have just been dining there, and heard that you were expected. I saw the crowd in the square as I came away.”

“It seems to have gone off quite nicely. We took pains to let it be known where I was dining. The Six, who mistrust me, delegated only two of their number for the job. They never put all their eggs in one basket. The two gentlemen were induced to make a scene, and, since they proved to be heavily armed, were taken into custody and may get a six months’ sentence. Very prettily managed, but unfortunately it was the two that matter least—the ones we call Little Pedro and Alejandro the Scholar. Impatient, blundering children, both of them. That leaves four.”

The telephone bell rang, and he made a long arm for the receiver. The news he got seemed to be good, for he turned a smiling face to me.

“I should have said two. My little enterprise in the Park has proved a brilliant success... But I must explain. I was to be the bait for my enemies, so I showed myself to the remaining four. That was really rather a clever piece of business. They lost me at the Marble Arch and they did not recognise me as the scarecrow sitting on the seat in the rain. But they knew I had gone to earth there, and they stuck to the scent like terriers. Presently they would have found me, and there would have been shooting. Some of my own people were in the shadow between the road and the railings.”

“When I saw you, were your enemies near?” I asked.

“Two were on the opposite side of the road. One was standing under the lamp-post at the gate. I don’t know where the fourth was at that moment. But all had passed me more than once... By the way, you very nearly got yourself shot, you

know. When you asked me if sixpence was any good to me... That happens to be their password. I take great credit to myself for seeing instantly that you were harmless."

"Why did you leave the Park if you had your trap so well laid?" I asked.

"Because it meant dealing with all four together at once, and I do them the honour of being rather nervous about them. They are very quick with their guns. I wanted a chance to break up the covey, and your arrival gave it me. When I went off two followed, as I thought they would. My car was in Park Lane, and gave me a lift; and one of them saw me in it. I puzzled them a little, but by now they must be certain. You see, my car has been waiting for some minutes outside this house."

"What about the other two?" I asked.

"Burton has just telephoned that they have been gathered in. Quite an exciting little scrap. To your police it must have seemed a bad case of highway robbery—two ruffianly looking fellows hold up a peaceful elderly gentleman returning from dinner. The odds were not quite like that, but the men I had on the job are old soldiers of the Indian wars and can move softly... I only wish I knew which two they have got. Burton was not sure. Alcaza is one, but I can't be certain about the other. I hope it is not the Irishman."

My bell rang very loud and steadily.

"In a few seconds I shall have solved that problem," he said gaily. "I am afraid I must trouble you to open the door, Leithen."

"Is it your aide-de-camp?"

"No. I instructed Valdez to knock. It is the residuum of the Six. Now, listen to me, my friend. These two, whoever they are, have come here to kill me, and I don't mean to be killed... My first plan was to have Valdez here—and others—so that my two enemies should walk into a trap. But I changed my mind before I telephoned. They are very clever men and by this time they will be very wary. So I have thought of something else."

The bell rang again and a third time insistently.

"Take these," and he held out a pair of cruel little bluish revolvers. "When you open the door, you will say that the President is at home and, in token of his confidence, offers them these. 'Une espèce d'Irlandais, Messieurs. Vous commences trop tard, et vous finissez trop tôt.' Then bring them here. Quick now. I hope Corbally is one of them."

I did exactly as I was told. I cannot say that I had any liking for the task, but I was a good deal under the spell of that calm young man, and I was resigned to my flat being made a rendezvous for desperadoes. I had locked and chained and bolted the door, so it took me a few moments to open it.

I found myself looking at emptiness.

"Who is it?" I called. "Who rang?"

I was answered from behind me. It was the quickest thing I have ever seen, for they must have slipped through in the moment when my eyes were dazzled by the change from the dim light of the hall to the glare of the landing. That gave me some notion of the men we had to deal with.

"Here," said the voice. I turned and saw two men in waterproofs and felt hats, who kept their hands in their pockets and had a fraction of an eye on the two pistols I swung by the muzzles.

"M. le President will be glad to see you, gentlemen," I said. I held out the revolvers, which they seemed to grasp and flick into their pockets with a single movement. Then I repeated slowly the piece of rudeness in French.

One of the men laughed. "Ramon does not forget," he said. He was a young man with sandy hair and hot blue eyes and an odd break in his long drooping nose. The other was a wiry little fellow, with a grizzled beard and what looked like a stiff leg.

I had no guess at my friend's plan, and was concerned to do precisely as I was told. I opened the door of my sitting-room, and noticed that the President was stretched on my sofa facing the door. He was smoking and was still in his underclothes. When the two men behind me saw that he was patently unarmed they slipped into the room with a quick cat-like movement, and took their stand with their backs against the door.

"Hullo, Corbally," said the President pleasantly. "And you, Manuel. You're looking younger than when I saw you last. Have a cigarette?" and he nodded towards my box on the table behind him. Both shook their heads.

"I'm glad you have come. You have probably seen the news of the loan in the evening papers. That should give you a holiday, as it gives me one. No further need for the hectic oversight of each other, which is so wearing and takes up so much time."

"No," said the man called Manuel, and there was something very grim about his quiet tones. "We shall take steps to prevent any need for that in the future."

"Tut, tut—that is your old self, Manuel. You are too fond of melodrama to be an artist. You are a priest at heart."

The man snarled. "There will be no priest at your death-bed." Then to his companion. "Let us get this farce over."

The President paid not the slightest attention but looked steadily at the Irishman. "You used to be a sportsman, Mike. Have you come to share Manuel's taste for potting the sitting rabbit?"

"We are not sportsmen, we are executioners of justice," said Manuel.

The President laughed merrily. "Superb! The best Roman manner." He still kept his eyes on Corbally.

"Damn you, what's your game, Ramon?" the Irishman asked. His freckled face had become very red.

"Simply to propose a short armistice. I want a holiday. If you must know, I want to go to the National."

"So do I."

"Well, let's call a truce. Say for two months or till I leave England—whichever period shall be the shorter. After that you can get busy again."

The one he had named Manuel broke into a spluttering torrent of Spanish, and for a little they all talked that language. It sounded like a commination service on the President, to which he good-humouredly replied. I had never seen this class of ruffian before, to whom murder was as simple as shooting a partridge, and I noted curiously the lean hands, the restless wary eyes, and the ugly lips of the type. So far as I could make out, the President seemed to be getting on well with the Irishman but to be having trouble with Manuel.

"Have ye really and truly nothing on ye?" Corbally asked.

The President stretched his arms and revealed his slim figure in its close-fitting pants and vest.

"Nor him there?" and he nodded towards me.

"He is a lawyer; he doesn't use guns."

"Then I'm damned if I touch ye. Two months it is. What's your fancy for Liverpool?"

This was too much for Manuel. I saw in what seemed to be one movement his hand slip from his pocket, Corbally's arm swing in a circle, and a plaster bust of Julius Cæsar tumble off the top of my bookcase. Then I heard the report.

"Ye nasty little man," said Corbally as he pressed him to his bosom in a bear's hug.

"You are a traitor," Manuel shouted. "How will we face the others? What will Alejandro say and Alcaza—?"

"I think I can explain," said the President pleasantly. "They won't know for quite a time, and then only if you tell them. You two gentlemen are all that remain for the moment of your patriotic company. The other four have been the victims of the English police—two in Bryanston Square, and two in the Park close to the Marble Arch."

"Ye don't say!" said Corbally with admiration in his voice. "Faith, that's smart work!"

"They too will have a little holiday. A few months to meditate on politics, while you and I go to the Grand National."

Suddenly there was a sharp rat-tat at my door. It was like the knocking in Macbeth for dramatic effect. Corbally had one pistol at my ear in an instant, while a second covered the President.

"It's all right," said the latter, never moving a muscle. "It's General Valdez, whom I think you know. That was another argument which I was coming to if I hadn't had the good fortune to appeal to Mr. Corbally's higher nature. I know you have sworn to kill me, but I take it that the killer wants to have a sporting chance of escape. Well, there wouldn't have been the faintest shadow of a chance here. Valdez is at the door, and the English police are below. You are brave men, I know, but even brave men dislike the cold gallows."

The knocker fell again. "Let him in, Leithen," I was told, "or he will be damaging your valuable door. He has not the northern phlegm of you and me and Mr. Corbally."

A tall man in an ulster, which looked as if it covered a uniform, stood on the threshold. Someone had obscured the lights on the landing so that the staircase was dark, but I could see in the gloom other figures. "President Pelem," he began...

"The President is here," I said. "Quite well and in great form. He is entertaining two other guests."

The General marched to my sitting-room. I was behind him and did not see his face, but I can believe that it showed surprise when he recognised the guests. Manuel stood sulkily defiant, his hands in his waterproof pockets, but Corbally's light eyes were laughing.

"I think you know each other," said the President graciously.

"My God!" Valdez seemed to choke at the sight. "These swine!... Excellency, I have—"

"You have nothing of the kind. These are friends of mine for the next two months, and Mr. Corbally and I are going to the Grand National together. Will you have the goodness to conduct them downstairs and explain to the inspector of police below that all has gone well and that I am perfectly satisfied, and that he will hear from me in the morning?... One moment. What about a stirrup-cup? Leithen, does your establishment run to a whisky and soda all round?"

It did. We all had a drink, and I believe I clinked glasses with Manuel.

* * * * *

I looked in at Lady Samplar's dance as I had meant to. Presently I saw a resplendent figure arrive—the President, with the ribbon of the Gold Star of Bolivar across his chest. He was no more the larkly undergraduate, but the responsible statesman, the father of his country. There was a considerable crowd in his vicinity when I got near him and he was making his apologies to Mollie Nantley. She saw me and insisted on introducing me. "I so much wanted you two to meet. I had hoped it would be at my dinner—but anyhow I have managed it." I think she was a little surprised when the President took my hand in both of his. "I saw Mr. Leithen play at Lord's in '97," he said. "I was twelfth man for Harrow that year. It is delightful to make his acquaintance, I shall never forget this meeting."

"How English he is!" Mollie whispered to me as we made our way out of the crowd.

They got him next year. They were bound to, for in that kind of business you can have no real protection. But he managed to set his country on its feet before he went down... No, it was neither Manuel nor Corbally. I think it was Alejandro the Scholar.

SHIP TO TARSHISH

RALPH COLLATT'S STORY

Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh... But Jonah... found a ship into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.—*Jonah 1:1-3*.

The talk one evening turned on the metaphysics of courage. It is a subject which most men are a little shy of discussing. They will heartily applaud a friend's pluck, but it is curious how rarely they will label a man a coward. Perhaps the reason is that we are all odd mixtures of strength and weakness, brave in certain things, timid in others; and since each is apt to remember his private funks more vividly than the things about which he is bold, we are chary about dogmatising.

Lamancha propounded the thesis that everybody had a yellow streak in them. We all, he said, at times shirk unpleasant duties, and invent an honourable explanation, which we know to be a lie.

Sandy Arbutnot observed that the most temerarious deeds were often done by people who had begun byfunking, and then, in the shame of the rebound, did a good deal more than those who had no qualms. "The man who says I go not, and afterwards repents and goes, generally travels the devil of a long way."

"Like Jonah," said Lamancha, "who didn't like the job allotted him, and took ship to Tarshish to get away from it, and then repented and went like a raging lion to Nineveh."

Collatt, who had been a sailor and one of the Q-boat heroes in the War, demurred. "I wonder if Nineveh was as unpleasant as the whale's belly," he said. Then he told us a story in illustration, not as one would have expected, out of his wild sea memories, but from his experience in the City, where he was now a bill-broker.

I got to know Jim Hallward first when he had just come down from the University. He was a tall, slim, fair-haired lad, with a soft voice and the kind of manners which make the ordinary man feel a lout. Eton and Christ Church had polished him till he fairly glistened. His clothes were sober works of art, and he was the cleanest thing you ever saw—always seemed to have just shaved and bathed after a couple of hours' hard exercise. We all liked him, for he was a companionable soul and had no frills, but in the City he was about as useless as a lily in a quickset hedge. Somebody called him an "apolaustic epicene," which sounded accurate, though I don't know what the words mean. He used to come down to business about eleven o'clock and leave at four—earlier in summer, when he played polo at Hurlingham.

This lotus-eating existence lasted for two years. His father was the head of Hallwards, the merchant-bankers who had been in existence since before the Napoleonic wars. It was an old-fashioned private firm with a tremendous reputation, but for some years it had been dropping a little out of the front rank. It had very few of the big issues, and, though reckoned as solid as the Bank of England, it had hardly kept pace with new developments. But just about the time Jim came down from Oxford his father seemed to get a new lease of life. Hallwards suddenly became ultra-progressive, took in a new manager from one of the big joint-stock banks, and launched out into business which before it would not have touched with the end of a barge-pole. I fancy the old man wanted to pull up the firm before he died, so as to leave a good thing to his only child.

In this new activity Jim can't have been of much use. His other engagements did not leave him a great deal of time to master the complicated affairs of a house like Hallwards. He spoke of his City connection with a certain distaste. The set he had got into were mostly eldest sons with political ambitions, and if Jim had any serious inclination it was towards Parliament, which he proposed to enter in a year or two. For the rest he played polo, and hunted, and did a little steeple-chasing, and danced assiduously. Dancing was about the only thing he did really well, for he was only a moderate horseman and his politics were not to be taken seriously. So he was the complete flâneur, agreeable, popular, beautifully mannered, highly ornamental, and the most useless creature on earth. You see, he had slacked at school, and had just scraped through college, and had never done a real piece of work in his life.

In the autumn of 192-, whispers began to circulate about Hallwards. It seemed that they were doing a very risky class of business, and people shrugged their shoulders. But no one was prepared for the almighty crash which came at the beginning of the New Year. The firm had been trying to get control of a colonial railway, and for this purpose was quietly buying up the ordinary stock. But an American group, with unlimited capital, was out on the same tack, and the result was that the price was forced up, and Hallwards were foolish enough to go on buying. They borrowed up to the limit of their capacity, and called a halt too late. If the thing had been known in time the City might have made an effort to keep the famous old firm on its legs, but it all came like a thunderclap. Hallwards went down, the American group got their railway stock at a knock-out price, and old Mr. Hallward, who had been ailing for some months, had a stroke of paralysis and died.

I was desperately sorry for Jim. The foundations of his world were upset, and he hadn't a notion what to do about it. You see, he didn't know the rudiments of the business, and couldn't be made to understand it. He went about in a dream, with staring, unseeing eyes, like a puzzled child. At first he screwed himself up to a sort of effort. He had many friends who would help, he thought, and he made various suggestions, all of a bottomless futility. Very soon he found that his Mayfair popularity was no sort of asset to him. He must have realised that people were beginning to turn a colder eye on a pauper than on an eligible young man, and his overtures were probably met with curt refusals. Anyhow, in a week he had given up hope. He felt himself a criminal and behaved as such. He saw nobody but his solicitors, and when he met a friend in the street he turned and ran. A perfectly unreasonable sense of disgrace took possession of him, and there was a moment when I was afraid he might put an end to himself.

This went on for the better part of a month, while I and one or two others were trying to save something from the

smash. We put up a fund and bought some of the wreckage, with the idea of getting together a little company to nurse it. It was important to do something, for though Jim was an only child and his mother was dead, there were various elderly female relatives who had their incomes from Hallwards. The firm had been much respected and old Hallward had been popular, and Jim had no enemies. There is a good deal of camaraderie in the City, and a lot of us were willing to combine and keep Jim going. We were all ready to help him, if he would only sit down and put his back into the job.

But that was just what Jim would not do. He had got a horror of the City, and felt a pariah whenever he met anybody who knew about the crash. He had eyes like a hunted hare's, and one couldn't get any sense out of him. I don't think he minded the change in his comforts—the end of polo and hunting and politics, and the prospect of cheap lodgings and long office hours. I believe he welcomed all that as a kind of atonement. It was the disgrace of the thing that came between him and his sleep. He knew only enough of the City to have picked up a wrong notion of its standards, and imagined that everybody was pointing a finger at him as a fool, and possibly a crook.

It was very little use reasoning with him. I pointed out that the right thing for him to do was to shoulder the burden and retrieve his father's credit. He laughed bitterly.

"Much good I'd be at that," he said. "You know I'm a baby in business, though you're too polite to tell me so."

"You can have a try," I said. "We'll all lend you a hand."

It was no use. References to his father and the firm's ancient prestige and his old great-aunts only made him shiver. You could see that his misery made him blind to argument. Then I began to lose my temper. I told him that it was his duty as a man to face the music. I asked him what else he proposed to do.

He said he meant to go to Canada and start life anew. He would probably change his name. I got out of patience with his silliness.

"You're offered a chance here to make good," I told him. "In Canada you'll have to find your chance, and how in God's name are you going to do it? You haven't been bred the right way to succeed in the Dominions. You'll probably starve."

"Quite likely," was his dismal answer. "I'll make my book for that. I don't mind anything so long as I'm in a place where nobody knows me."

"Remember, you are running away," I said, "running away from what I consider your plain duty. You can't expect to win out if you begin by funking."

"I know—I know," he wailed. "I am a coward."

I said no more, for when a man is willing to admit that he is a coward his nerves have got the better of his reason.

Well, the upshot was that Jim sailed for Canada with a little short of two hundred pounds in his pocket—what was left of his last allowance. He could have had plenty of introductions, but he wouldn't take them. He seemed to be determined to bury himself, and I daresay, too, he got a morbid satisfaction out of discomfort. He had still the absurd notion of disgrace, and felt that any handicap he laid on himself was a kind of atonement.

He reached Montreal in the filthy weeks when the spring thaw begins—the worst sample of weather to be found on the globe. Jim had not procured any special outfit, and he landed with a kit consisting of two smart tweed suits, a suit of flannels, riding breeches and knickerbockers—the remnants of his London wardrobe. It wasn't quite the rig for a poor man to go looking for a job in. He had travelled steerage, and, as might have been expected from one in his condition, had not made friends, but he had struck up a tepid acquaintanceship with an Irishman who was employed in a lumber business. The fellow was friendly, and was struck by Jim's obvious air of education and good-breeding, so, when he heard that he wanted work, he suggested that a clerkship might be got in his firm.

Jim applied, and was taken on as the clerk in charge of timber-cutting rights in Eastern Quebec. The work was purely mechanical, and simply meant keeping a record of numbered lots, checking them off on the map, and filling in the details in the register as they came to hand. But it required accuracy and strict attention, and Jim had little of either. Besides, he wrote the vile fist which is the special privilege of our public schools. He held down the job for a fortnight and then was fired.

He had found cheap lodgings in a boarding-house down east, and trudged the two miles in the slush to his office. His fellow-lodgers were willing enough to be friendly—clerks and shop-boys and typists and newspaper reporters most of them. Jim wasn't a snob, but he was rapidly becoming a hermit, for all his nerves were exposed and he shrank from his fellows. His shyness was considered English swank, and the others invented nicknames for him and sniggered when he appeared. Luckily he was too miserable to pay much attention. He had no interest in their games, their visits to the movies and to cheap dance-halls, and their precocious sweetheating. He could not get the hang of their knowing commercial jargon. They set him down as a snob, and he shrank from them as barbarians.

But there was one lodger, a sub-editor on a paper which I shall call the Evening Hawk, who saw a little farther than the rest. He realised that Jim was an educated man—a "scholar" he called it, and he managed to get part of his confidence. So when Jim lost his lumber job he was offered a billet on the Hawk. There was no superfluity of men of his type in local journalism, and the editor thought it might give tone to his paper to have someone on the staff who could write decent English and keep them from making howlers about Europe. The Hawk was a lively, up-to-date production, very much Americanised in its traditions and its literary style, but it had just acquired some political influence and it hankered after more.

But Jim was no sort of success in journalism. He was tried out in a variety of jobs—as reporter, special correspondent, sub-editor—but he failed to give satisfaction in any. To begin with he had no news-sense. Not many things interested him

in his present frame of mind, and he had no notion what would interest the Hawk's readers. He couldn't compose snappy headlines, and it made him sick to try. His writing was no doubt a great deal more correct than that of his colleagues, but it was dull as ditch-water. To add to everything else he was desperately casual. It was not that he meant to be slack, but that he had no stimulus to make him concentrate his attention, and he was about the worst sub-editor, I fancy, in the history of the press.

Summer came, and sleet and icy winds gave place to dust and heat. Jim tramped the grilling streets, one vast ache of home-sickness. He had to stick to his tweeds, for his flannel suit had got lost in his journeys between boarding-houses, and, as he mopped his brow in the airless newspaper rooms smelling of printers' ink and shaken by the great presses, he thought of green lawns at Hurlingham, and cool backwaters of the Isis, and clipped yew hedges in old gardens, and a pleasant club window overlooking St. James's Street. He hungered for fresh air, but when on a Sunday morning he went for a long walk, he found no pleasure in the adjacent countryside. It all seemed dusty and tousled and unhomey. He wasn't complaining, for it seemed to him part of a rightful expiation, but he was very lonely and miserable.

I have said that he had landed with a couple of hundred pounds, and this he had managed to keep pretty well intact. One day at a quick-luncheon counter he got into talk with a man called McNee, a Manitoban who had fought in the War, and knew something about horses. McNee, like Jim, did not take happily to town life, and was very sick of his job with an automobile company, and looking about for a better. There was not much in common between the two men, except a dislike of Montreal, for I picture McNee as a rough diamond, an active enterprising fellow meant by Providence for a backwoodsman. He had heard of a big dam somewhere down in the Gaspé district, which was being constructed in connection with a pulp scheme. He knew one of the foremen, and believed that money might be made by anyone who could put up a little capital and run a store in the construction camp. He told Jim that it was a fine wild country with plenty of game in the woods, and that, besides making money easily, a storekeeper could have a white man's life. But every bit of a thousand dollars capital would be needed, and he could only lay his hands on a couple of hundred. To Jim in his stuffy lodging-house the scheme offered a blessed escape. He wanted to make money, he wanted fresh air and trees and running water, for your Englishman, though town-bred, always hankers after the country. So he gave up his job on the Hawk, just when it was about to give him up, and started out with McNee.

The place was his first disappointment. It was an ugly clearing in an interminable forest of dull spruces, which ran without a break to New Brunswick. However far you walked there was nothing to see except the low muffled hills and the monotonous green of the firs. The partners were given a big shack for their store, and made their sleeping quarters in one end of it. For stock they had laid in a quantity of tinned goods, tobacco, shirts and socks and boots, and a variety of musical instruments. But they found that most of their stuff was unmarketable, since the men were well fed and clothed by the company, and after a week their store had become a rough kind of café, selling hot-dogs and ice-cream and soft drinks. McNee was immensely proud of it and ornamented the walls with "ideal faces" from the American magazines. He was a born restaurant keeper, if he had got his chance, but unfortunately there was not much profit in coco-cola and gingerade.

In about a fortnight the place became half eating-house, half club, where the workmen gathered of an evening to play cards. McNee was in his element, but Jim was no more use than a sick pup. He didn't understand the lingo, and his shyness and absorption made him as unpopular as in the Montreal boarding-houses. He saw his little capital slipping away, and there was no compensation in the way of a pleasant life. He tried to imitate McNee's air of hearty bonhomie, and miserably failed. His partner was a good fellow, and stood up for him when an irate navvy consigned him to perdition as a "God-darned London dude," and Jim's own good temper and sense of only getting what he deserved did something to protect him. But he soon realised that he was a ghastly failure, and this knowledge prevented him expostulating with the other for his obvious shortcomings. For McNee soon became too much of a social success. Gaspé was not "dry," and there was more than soft drinks consumed in the store, especially by the joint-proprietor and his friend the foreman. Also McNee was a bit of a gambler and was perpetually borrowing small sums from capital to meet his losses.

Now and then Jim took a holiday, and tramped all of a long summer day. The country around being only partially surveyed, there was no map to be had, and he repeatedly lost himself. Once he struck a lumber camp and was given pork and beans by cheerful French-Canadians whose patois he could not follow. Once he had almost a happy day, when he saw his first moose. But generally he came back from stifling encounters with cedar swamps and bois brûlé, weary but unrefreshed. He was not in the frame of mind to get much comfort out of the Canadian wilds, for he was always sore with longing for a different kind of landscape.

The river on which the camp lay was the famous Maouchi, and twelve miles down on the St. Lawrence shore was a big fishing-lodge owned by a rich New Yorker. Jim used to see members of the party—young men in marvellous knickerbockers and young women in jumpers like Joseph's coat, and he hid himself at the sight of them. Occasionally a big roadster would pass the store, conveying fishermen to some of the upper lakes. Once, when he was feeling specially dispirited after a long hot day, a car stopped at the door, and two people descended. They came into the store, and the young man asked for lemonade, declaring that their tongues were hanging out of their mouths. Happily McNee was there to serve them, while Jim sheltered behind the curtain of the sleeping-room. He knew them both. One was a subaltern in the cavalry with whom he had played bridge in the club, the other was a girl whom he had danced with. Their workmanlike English clothes, their quiet clear English voices gave him a bad dose of homesickness. They were returning, he reflected, to hot baths and cool clean clothes and delicate food and civilised talk... For a moment he sickened at the sour stale effluvia of the eating-house, and the rank smell of the pork which McNee had been frying. Then he cursed himself for a fool and a child.

In the fall the work on the dam was shut down, and the store was closed. The partners couldn't remove their

unsaleable goods, so the whole stock was sold at junk prices among the nearest villages. Jim found himself with about three hundred dollars in the world, and the long Canadian winter to get through. The fall on the other side of the Atlantic is the pick of the year, and the beauty of the flaming hillsides did a little to revive his spirits. McNee wanted to get back to Manitoba, where he had heard of a job, and Jim decided that he would try Toronto, which was supposed to be rather more healthy for Englishmen than the other cities. So the two travelled west together, and Jim insisted on paying McNee's fare to Winnipeg, thereby leaving himself a hundred and fifty dollars or so on which to face the world.

Toronto is the friendliest place on earth for the man who knows how to make himself at home there. There were plenty to help him if he had looked for them, for nowhere will you find more warm-hearted people to the square mile. But Jim's shyness and prickliness put him outside the pale. He made no effort to advertise the few assets he had, he was desperately uncommunicative, and his self-absorption was not unnaturally taken for "side." Also he made the mistake of letting himself get a little too far down in the social scale. His clothes had become very shabby, and his boots were bad; when the first snows came in November he bought himself a thick overcoat, and that left him no money to supplement the rest of his wardrobe, so that by Christmas he was a very good imitation of a tramp.

He tried journalism first, but as he gave no information about himself except that he had been for a few weeks on the Montreal Hawk, he had some difficulty in getting a job. At last he got work on a weekly rag simply because he had some notion of grammar. It lasted exactly a fortnight. Then he tried tutoring, and spent some of his last dollars on advertising; he had several nibbles, but always fell down at the interviews. One kind of parent jibbed at his superior manners, another at his inferior clothes. After that he jolted from one temporary job to another—a book-cannasser, an extra hand in a dry-goods-store in the Christmas week, where the counter hid the deficiencies of his raiment, a temporary clerk during a municipal election, a packer in a fancy-stationery business, and finally a porter in a third-class hotel. His employment was not continuous, and between jobs he must have nearly starved. He had begun in the ordinary cheap boarding-house, but, before he found quarters in the attic of the hotel he worked at, he had sunk to a pretty squalid kind of doss-house.

The physical discomfort was bad enough. He tramped the streets ill-clad and half-fed, and saw prosperous people in furs, and cheerful young parties, and fire-lit, book-lined rooms. But the spiritual trouble was worse. Sometimes, when things were very bad, he was fortunate enough to have his thoughts narrowed down to the obtaining of food and warmth. But at other times he would be tormented by a feeling that his misfortunes were deserved, and that Fate with a heavy hand was belabouring him because he was a coward. His trouble was no longer the idiotic sense of guilt about his father's bankruptcy; it was a much more rational penitence, for he was beginning to realise that I had been right, and that he had behaved badly in running away from a plain duty. At first he choked down the thought, but all that miserable winter it grew upon him. His disasters were a direct visitation of the Almighty on one who had shown the white feather. He came to have an almost mystical feeling about it. He felt that he was branded like Cain, so that everybody knew that he had funked, and yet he realised that a rotten morbid pride ironically prevented him from retracing his steps.

The second spring found him thin from bad feeding and with a nasty cough. He had the sense to see that a summer in that hotel would be the end of him, so, although he was in the depths of hopelessness, the instinct of self-preservation drove him to make a move. He wanted to get into the country, but it was impossible to get work on a farm from Toronto, and he had no money to pay for railway fares. In the end he was taken on as a navvy on a bit of railway construction work in the wilds of northern Ontario. He was given the price of his ticket and ten dollars advance on his wages to get an outfit, and one day late in April he found himself dumped at a railhead on a blue lake, with firs, firs, as far as the eye could reach. But it was spring-time, the mating wildfowl were calling, the land was greening, and Jim drew long breaths of sweet air and felt that he was not going to die just yet.

But the camp was a roughish place, and he had no McNee to protect him. There was every kind of roughneck and deadbeat there, and Jim was a bad mixer. He was an obvious softy and new chum and a natural butt, and, since he was being tortured all the time by his conscience, his good nature and humble-mindedness were not so proof as they had been in Gaspé. His poor physical condition made him a bad workman, and he came in for a good deal of abuse as a slacker from the huskies who wrought beside him. The section boss was an Irishman called Malone with a tongue like a whip-lash, and he found plenty of opportunities for practising his gift on Jim. But he was a just man, and after a bit of rough-tonguing he saw that Jim was very white about the gills and told him to show his hands. Not being accustomed to the pick, these were one mass of sores. Malone cross-examined him, found that he had been at college, and took him off construction and put him in charge of stores.

There he had an easier life, but he was more than ever the butt of the mess shack and the sleeping quarters. His crime was not only speaking with an English accent and looking like Little Willie, but being supposed to be a favourite of the boss. By and by the ragging became unbearable, and after his mug of coffee had been three times struck out of his hand at one meal, Jim lost his temper and hit out. In the fight which followed he was ridiculously out-classed. He had been fairly good at games, but he had never boxed since his private school, and it is well for Jim's kind of man to think twice before he takes on a fellow who has all his life earned his living by his muscles. But he stood up pluckily, and took a good deal of punishment before he was knocked out, and he showed no ill-will afterwards. The incident considerably improved his position. Malone, who heard of it, asked him where in God's name he had been brought up that he couldn't use his hands better, but didn't appear ill-pleased. The fight had another consequence. It gave him just a suspicion of self-confidence, and helped him on his way to the decision to which he was slowly being compelled.

A week later he was sent a hundred miles into the forest to take supplies to an advance survey party. It was something of a compliment that Malone should have picked him for the job, but Jim did not realise that. His brain was beating like a pendulum on his private trouble—that he had run away, that all his misfortunes were the punishment for his cowardice,

and that, though he confessed his fault, he could not make his shrinking flesh go back. He saw England as an Eden indeed, but with angels and flaming swords at every gate. He pictured the lifted eyebrows and the shrugged shoulders as he crept into a clerk's job, with not only his father's shame on his head, but the added disgrace of his own flight. It had seemed impossible a year ago to stay on in London, but now it was a thousandfold more impossible to go home.

Yet the thought gave him no peace by day or night. He had six men in his outfit, two of them half-breeds, and the journey was partly by canoe—with heavy portages—and partly on foot with the stores in pack loads. It rained in torrents, the river was in flood, and the first day they made a bare twenty miles. The half-breeds were tough old customers, but the other four were not much to bank on, and on the third day, when they had to hump their packs and foot it on a bad trail through swampy woods in a cloud of flies, they decided that they had had enough. There was a new gold area just opened not so far away, and they announced that they intended to help themselves to what they wanted from the stores and then make a bee-line for the mines. They were an ugly type of tough, and had physically the upper hand of Jim and his half-breeds.

It was a nasty situation, and it shook Jim out of his private vexations. He spoke them fair, and proposed to make camp and rest for a day to talk it out. Privately he sent one of the half-breeds ahead to the survey-party for help, while he kept his ruffians in play. Happily he had some whisky with him and he had them drinking and playing cards, which took him well into the afternoon. Then they discovered the half-breed's absence, and wouldn't believe Jim's yarn that he had gone off to find fresh meat. His only chance was to bluff high, and, since he didn't much care what happened to him, he succeeded. He went to bed that night with a tough beside him who had announced his intention of putting a bullet through his head if there was any dirty work. Sometime after midnight his messenger arrived with help, and fortunately his bedside-companion's bullet went wide. The stores, a bit depleted, were safely delivered, and when Jim got back to his base he received a solid cursing from his boss for his defective stewardship. But Malone concluded with one of his rare compliments. "You'll train on, sonny," he said. "There's guts in you for all your goo-goo face."

That episode put an end to Jim's indecision. His time in Canada had been one long chapter of black disasters, and he was confident that they were sent to him as a punishment. His last adventure had somehow screwed up his manhood. He hated Canada like poison, but the thought of going back to England made him green with apprehension. Yet he was clear that he must do it or never have a moment's peace. So he wrote to me and told me that for a year he had been considering things, and had come to the conclusion that he had behaved like a cad. He was coming back to get into any kind of harness I directed, and would I advance him thirty pounds for his journey?

Now the little company we had put together to nurse the wreckage of Hallwards had been doing rather well. One or two things had unexpectedly turned up trumps. There was enough money to keep the maiden aunts going, and it looked as if there would be a good deal presently for Jim. He had gone off leaving no address, so I had had no means of communicating with him. I cabled him a hundred pounds, and told him to come along.

One afternoon near the end of June he turned up in my office. He had crossed the Atlantic steerage, and his clothes were those of a docker who has been months out of work. The first thing he did was to plank eighty pounds on my desk. "You sent me too much," he said. "I don't want to owe more than is necessary. You can stop the twenty quid out of my wages."

At first sight I thought him very little changed in face. He was incredibly lean and tanned and his hair wanted cutting, but he had the same shy, hunted eyes as the boy who had bolted a year before. He did not seem to have won any self-confidence, except that the set of his mouth was a little firmer.

"I want to start work at once," he said. "I've come home to make atonement."

It took me a long time to make him understand the position of affairs—that he could count even now on a respectable income, and that, if he put his back into it, Hallwards might once again become a power in the City. "I was only waiting for you to come back," I said, "to revive the old name. Hallwards has a better sound than the Anglo-Orient Company."

"But I can't touch a penny," he said. "What about the people who suffered through the bankruptcy?"

"There were very few," I told him. "None of the widow-and- orphan business. The banks were amply secured. The chief sufferers were your aunts and yourself, and that's going to be all right now."

He listened with wide eyes, and slowly bewilderment gave place to relief, and relief to rapture. "The first thing you've got to do," I said, "is to go to your tailor and get some clothes. You'd better put up at an hotel till you can find a flat. I'll see about your club membership. If you want to play polo I'll lend you a couple of ponies. Come and dine with me to- night and tell me your story."

"My God!" he murmured. "Do you realise that for a year I've been on my uppers? That's my story."

The rest of that summer Jim walked about in a happy mystification. Once he was decently dressed, I could see that Canada had improved him. He was better-looking, tougher, manlier; his shyness was now wariness and he had got a new and sounder code of values. He worked like a beaver in the office, and, though he was curiously slow and obtuse about some things, I began to see that he had his father's brains, and something, too, that old Hallward had never had, a sensitive, subtle imagination. For the rest he enjoyed himself. He came in for the end of the polo season, and he was welcomed back to his old set as if nothing had happened.

Then I ceased to see much of him. I had been overworking badly and needed a long holiday, so I went off to a Scotch deer- forest in the middle of August and did not return till the beginning of October. Jim stuck tight to the office; he said that he had had all the holidays he wanted for a year or two.

On the second day after my return he came into my room and said that he wanted to speak to me privately. He wished,

he said, that nothing should be done about the restoring the name of Hallwards. He would like the Anglo-Orient to go on just as it was before he returned, and he did not want the directorship which had been arranged.

"Why in the world?" I asked in amazement.

"Because I am going away. And I may be away for quite a time."

When I found words, and that took some time, I asked if he had grown tired of England.

"Bless you, no! I love it better than any place on earth. The autumn scents are beginning, and London is snuggling down for its blessed cosy winter, and the hunting will soon be starting, and last Sunday I heard the old cock pheasants shouting—"

"Where are you going? Canada?"

He nodded.

"Have you fallen in love with it?"

"I hate it worse than hell," he said solemnly, and proceeded to say things which in the interest of Imperial good feeling I refrain from repeating.

"Then you must be mad!"

"No," he said, "I'm quite sane. It's very simple, and I've thought it all out. You know I ran away from my duty eighteen months ago. Well, I was punished for it. I was a howling failure in Canada... I haven't told you half... I pretty well starved... I couldn't hold down any job... I was simply a waif and a laughing stock. And I loathed it—my God, how I loathed it! But I couldn't come back—the very thought of facing London gave me a sick pain. It took me a year to screw up my courage to do what I knew was my manifest duty. Well, I turned up, as you know."

"Then that's all right, isn't it?" I observed obtusely. "You find London better than you thought?"

"I find it Paradise," and he smiled sadly. "But it's a Paradise I haven't deserved. You see, I made a failure in Canada and I can't let it go at that. I hate the very name of the place and most of the people in it... Oh, I daresay there is nothing wrong with it, but one always hates a place where one has been a fool... I have got to go back and make good. I shall take two hundred pounds, just what I had when I first started out."

I only stared, and he went on:

"I funk'd once, and that may be forgiven. But a man who funks twice is a coward. I funk Canada like the devil, and that is why I am going back. There was a man there—only one man—who said I had guts. I'm going to prove to that whole damned Dominion that I have guts, but principally I've got to prove it to myself... After that I'll come back to you, and we'll talk business."

I could say nothing: indeed I didn't want to say anything. Jim was showing a kind of courage several grades ahead of old Jonah's. He had returned to Nineveh and found that it had no terrors, and was now going back to Tarshish, whales and all.

SKULE SKERRY

ANTHONY HURRELL'S STORY

Who's there, besides foul weather?— King Lear.

Mr. Anthony Hurrell was a small man, thin to the point of emaciation, but erect as a ramrod and wiry as a cairn terrier. There was no grey in his hair, and his pale far-sighted eyes had the alertness of youth, but his lean face was so wrinkled by weather that in certain lights it looked almost venerable, and young men, who at first sight had imagined him their contemporary, presently dropped into the "sir" reserved for indisputable seniors. His actual age was, I believe, somewhere in the forties. He had inherited a small property in Northumberland, where he had accumulated a collection of the rarer wildfowl, but much of his life had been spent in places so remote that his friends could with difficulty find them on the map. He had written a dozen ornithological monographs, was joint editor of the chief modern treatise on British birds, and had been the first man to visit the tundras of the Yenisei. He spoke little and that with an agreeable hesitation, but his ready smile, his quick interest, and the impression he gave of having a fathomless knowledge of strange modes of life, made him a popular and intriguing figure among his friends. Of his doings in the War he told us nothing; what we knew of them—and they were sensational enough in all conscience—we learned elsewhere. It was Nightingale's story which drew him from his customary silence. At the dinner following that event he made certain comments on current explanations of the supernatural. "I remember once," he began, and before we knew he had surprised us by embarking on a tale.

He had scarcely begun before he stopped. "I'm boring you," he said deprecatingly. "There's nothing much in the story... You see, it all happened, so to speak, inside my head... I don't want to seem an egotist ... "

"Don't be an ass, Tony," said Lamancha. "Every adventure takes place chiefly inside the head of somebody. Go on. We're all attention."

"It happened a good many years ago," Hurrell continued, "when I was quite a young man. I wasn't the cold scientist then that I fancy I am to-day. I took up birds in the first instance chiefly because they fired what imagination I possess. They fascinated me, for they seemed of all created things the nearest to pure spirit—those little beings with a normal temperature of 125°. Think of it. The goldcrest, with a stomach no bigger than a bean, flies across the North Sea! The curlew sandpiper, which breeds so far north that only about three people have ever seen its nest, goes to Tasmania for its holidays! So I always went bird-hunting with a queer sense of expectation and a bit of a tremor, as if I was walking very near the boundaries of the things we are not allowed to know. I felt this especially in the migration season. The small atoms, coming God knows whence and going God knows whither, were sheer mystery—they belonged to a world built in different dimensions from ours. I don't know what I expected, but I was always waiting for something, as much in a flutter as a girl at her first ball. You must realise that mood of mine to understand what follows.

"One year I went to the Norland Islands for the spring migration. Plenty of people do the same, but I had the notion to do something a little different. I had a theory that migrants go north and south on a fairly narrow road. They have their corridors in the air as clearly defined as a highway, and keep an inherited memory of these corridors, like the stout conservatives they are. So I didn't go to the Blue Banks or to Noop or to Hermaness or any of the obvious places, where birds might be expected to make their first landfall.

"At that time I was pretty well read in the sagas, and had taught myself Icelandic for the purpose. Now it is written in the Saga of Earl Skuli, which is part of the Jarla Saga or Saga of the Earls, that Skuli, when he was carving out his earldom in the Scots islands, had much to do with a place called the Isle of the Birds. It is mentioned repeatedly, and the saga-man has a lot to say about the amazing multitude of birds there. It couldn't have been an ordinary gullery, for the Northmen saw too many of these to think them worth mentioning. I got it into my head that it must have been one of the alighting places of the migrants, and was probably as busy a spot to-day as in the eleventh century. The saga said it was near Halmarsness, and that is on the west side of the island of Una, so to Una I decided to go. I fairly got that Isle of Birds on the brain. From the map it might be any one of a dozen skerries under the shadow of Halmarsness.

"I remember that I spent a good many hours in the British Museum before I started, hunting up the scanty records of those parts. I found—I think it was in Adam of Bremen—that a succession of holy men had lived on the isle, and that a chapel had been built there and endowed by Earl Rognvald, which came to an end in the time of Malise of Strathearn. There was a bare mention of the place, but the chronicler had one curious note. 'Insula Avium,' ran the text, 'quæ est ultima insula et proximo, Abyssu.' I wondered what on earth he meant. The place was not ultimate in any geographical sense, neither the farthest north nor the farthest west of the Norlands. And what was the 'abyss'? In monkish Latin the word generally means Hell—Bunyan's Bottomless Pit—and sometimes the grave; but neither meaning seemed to have much to do with an ordinary sea skerry.

"I arrived at Una about eight o'clock in a May evening, having been put across from Voss in a flit-boat. It was a quiet evening, the sky without clouds but so pale as to be almost grey, the sea grey also but with a certain iridescence in it, and the low lines of the land a combination of hard greys and umbers, cut into by the harder white of the lighthouse. I can never find words to describe that curious quality of light that you get up in the North. Sometimes it is like looking at the world out of deep water—Farquharson used to call it 'milky,' and one saw what he meant. Generally it is a sort of essence of light, cold and pure and distilled, as if it were reflected from snow. There is no colour in it, and it makes thin shadows. Some people find it horribly depressing—Farquharson said it reminded him of a churchyard in the early morning where all

his friends were buried—but personally I found it tonic and comforting. But it made me feel very near the edge of the world.

“There was no inn, so I put up at the post-office, which was on a causeway between a freshwater loch and a sea loch, so that from the doorstep you could catch brown trout on one side and sea-trout on the other. Next morning I set off for Halmarsness, which lay five miles to the west over a flat moorland all puddled with tiny lochans. There seemed to be nearly as much water as land. Presently I came to a bigger loch under the lift of ground which was Halmarsness. There was a gap in the ridge through which I looked straight out to the Atlantic, and there in the middle distance was what I knew instinctively to be my island.

“It was perhaps a quarter of a mile long, low for the most part, but rising in the north to a grassy knoll beyond the reach of any tides. In parts it narrowed to a few yards’ width, and the lower levels must often have been awash. But it was an island, not a reef, and I thought I could make out the remains of the monkish cell. I climbed Halmarsness, and there, with nesting skuas swooping angrily about my head, I got a better view. It was certainly my island, for the rest of the archipelago were inconsiderable skerries, and I realised that it might well be a resting-place for migrants, for the mainland cliffs were too thronged with piratical skuas and other jealous fowl to be comfortable for weary travellers.

“I sat for a long time on the headland looking down from the three hundred feet of basalt to the island half a mile off—the last bit of solid earth between me and Greenland. The sea was calm for Norland waters, but there was a snowy edging of surf to the skerries which told of a tide rip. Two miles farther south I could see the entrance to the famous Roost of Una, where, when tide and wind collide, there is a wall like a house, so that a small steamer cannot pass it. The only sign of human habitation was a little grey farm in the lowlands toward the Roost, but the place was full of the evidence of man—a herd of Norland ponies, each tagged with its owner’s name—grazing sheep of the piebald Norland breed—a broken barbed-wire fence that drooped over the edge of the cliff. I was only an hour’s walk from a telegraph office, and a village which got its newspapers not more than three days late. It was a fine spring noon, and in the empty bright land there was scarcely a shadow... All the same, as I looked down at the island I did not wonder that it had been selected for attention by the sagaman and had been reputed holy. For it had an air of concealing something, though it was as bare as a billiard-table. It was an intruder, an irrelevance in the picture, planted there by some celestial caprice. I decided forthwith to make my camp on it, and the decision, inconsequently enough, seemed to me to be something of a venture.

“That was the view taken by John Ronaldson, when I talked to him after dinner. John was the post-mistress’s son, more fisherman than crofter, like all Norlanders, a skilful sailor and an adept at the dipping lug, and noted for his knowledge of the western coast. He had difficulty in understanding my plan, and when he identified my island he protested.

“‘Not Skule Skerry!’ he cried. ‘What would take ye there, man? Ye’ll get a’ the birds ye want on Halmarsness and a far better bield. Ye’ll be blawn away on the skerry, if the wund rises.’

“I explained to him my reasons as well as I could, and I answered his fears about a gale by pointing out that the island was sheltered by the cliffs from the prevailing winds, and could be scoured only from the south, south-west, or west, quarters from which the wind rarely blew in May. ‘It’ll be cauld,’ he said, ‘and wat.’ I pointed out that I had a tent and was accustomed to camping. ‘Ye’ll starve’—I expounded my proposed methods of commissariat. ‘It’ll be an ill job getting ye on and off—but after cross-examination he admitted that ordinarily the tides were not difficult, and that I could get a row-boat to a beach below the farm I had seen—its name was Sgurrae. Yet when I had said all this he still raised objections, till I asked him flatly what was the matter with Skule Skerry.

“‘Naebod gangs there,’ he said gruffly.

“‘Why should they?’ I asked. ‘I’m only going to watch the birds.’

“But the fact that it was never visited seemed to stick in his throat and he grumbled out something that surprised me. ‘It has an ill name,’ he said. But when I pressed him he admitted that there was no record of shipwreck or disaster to account for the ill name. He repeated the words ‘Skule Skerry’ as if they displeased him. ‘Folk dinna gang near it. It has aye had an ill name. My grandfather used to say that the place wasna canny.’

“Now your Norlander has nothing of the Celt in him, and is as different from the Hebridean as a Northumbrian from a Cornishman. They are a fine, upstanding, hard-headed race, almost pure Scandinavian in blood, but they have as little poetry in them as a Manchester radical. I should have put them down as utterly free from superstition, and, in all my many visits to the islands I have never yet come across a folk-tale—hardly even a historical legend. Yet here was John Ronaldson, with his weather-beaten face and stiff chin and shrewd blue eyes, declaring that an innocent-looking island ‘wasna canny,’ and showing the most remarkable disinclination to go near it.

“Of course all this only made me keener. Besides, it was called Skule Skerry, and the name could only come from Earl Skuli; so it was linked up authentically with the oddments of information I had collected in the British Museum—the Jarla Saga and Adam of Bremen and all the rest of it. John finally agreed to take me over next morning in his boat, and I spent the rest of the day in collecting my kit. I had a small E.P. tent, and a Wolseley valise and half a dozen rugs, and, since I had brought a big box of tinned stuffs from the Stores, all I needed was flour and meal and some simple groceries. I learned that there was a well on the island, and that I could count on sufficient driftwood for my fire, but to make certain I took a sack of coals and another of peats. So I set off next day in John’s boat, ran with the wind through the Roost of Una when the tide was right, tacked up the coast, and came to the skerry early in the afternoon.

“You could see that John hated the place. We ran into a cove on the east side, and he splashed ashore as if he expected to have his landing opposed, looking all the time sharply about him. When he carried my stuff to a hollow under the knoll

which gave a certain amount of shelter, his head was always twisting round. To me the place seemed to be the last word in forgotten peace. The swell lipped gently on the reefs and the little pebbled beaches, and only the babble of gulls from Halmarsness broke the stillness.

"John was clearly anxious to get away, but he did his duty by me. He helped me to get the tent up, found a convenient place for my boxes, pointed out the well and filled my water bucket, and made a zareba of stones to protect my camp on the Atlantic side. We had brought a small dinghy along with us, and this was to be left with me, so that when I wanted I could row across to the beach at Sgurrae. As his last service he fixed an old pail between two boulders on the summit of the knoll, and filled it with oily waste, so that it could be turned into a beacon.

"Ye'll maybe want to come off,' he said, 'and the boat will maybe no be there. Kindle your flare, and they'll see it at Sgurrae and get the word to me, and I'll come for ye though the Muckle Black Silkie himsel' was hunkerin' on the skerry.'

"Then he looked up and sniffed the air. 'I dinna like the set of the sky,' he declared. 'It's a bad weatherhead. There'll be mair wund than I like in the next four and twenty hours.'

"So saying, he hoisted his sail and presently was a speck on the water towards the Roost. There was no need for him to hurry, for the tide was now wrong, and before he could pass the Roost he would have three hours to wait on this side of the Mull. But the man, usually so deliberate and imperturbable, had been in a fever to be gone.

"His departure left me in a curious mood of happy loneliness and pleasurable expectation. I was left solitary with the seas and the birds. I laughed to think that I had found a streak of superstition in the granite John. He and his Muckle Black Silkie! I knew the old legend of the North which tells how the Finns, the ghouls that live in the deeps of the ocean, can on occasion don a seal's skin and come to land to play havoc with mortals. But diablerie and this isle of mine were worlds apart. I looked at it as the sun dropped, drowsing in the opal-coloured tides, under a sky in which pale clouds made streamers like a spectral aurora borealis, and I thought that I had stumbled upon one of those places where Nature seems to invite one to her secrets. As the light died the sky was flecked as with the roots and branches of some great nebular tree. That would be the 'weatherhead' of which John Ronaldson had spoken.

"I set my fire going, cooked my supper, and made everything snug for the night. I had been right in my guess about the migrants. It must have been about ten o'clock when they began to arrive—after my fire had died out and I was smoking my last pipe before getting into my sleeping-bag. A host of fieldfares settled gently on the south part of the skerry. A faint light lingered till after midnight, but it was not easy to distinguish the little creatures, for they were aware of my presence and did not alight within a dozen yards of me. But I made out bramblings and buntings and what I thought was the Greenland wheatear; also jack snipe and sanderling; and I believed from their cries that the curlew sandpiper and the whimbrel were there. I went to sleep in a state of high excitement, promising myself a fruitful time on the morrow.

"I slept badly, as one often does one's first night in the open. Several times I woke with a start under the impression that I was in a boat rowing swiftly with the tide. And every time I woke I heard the flutter of myriad birds, as if a velvet curtain was being slowly switched along an oak floor. At last I fell into deeper sleep, and when I opened my eyes it was full day.

"The first thing that struck me was that it had got suddenly colder. The sky was stormily red in the east, and masses of woolly clouds were banking in the north. I lit my fire with numbed fingers and hastily made tea. I could see the nimbus of sea-fowl over Halmarsness, but there was only one bird left on my skerry. I was certain from its forked tail that it was a Sabine's gull, but before I got my glass out it was disappearing into the haze towards the north. The sight cheered and excited me, and I cooked my breakfast in pretty good spirits.

"That was literally the last bird that came near me, barring the ordinary shearwaters and gulls and cormorants that nested round about Halmarsness. (There was not one single nest of any sort on the island. I had heard of that happening before in places which were regular halting grounds for migrants.) The travellers must have had an inkling of the coming weather and were waiting somewhere well to the south. For about 9 o'clock it began to blow. Great God, how it blew! You must go to the Norlands if you want to know what wind can be. It is like being on a mountain-top, for there is no high ground to act as a wind-break. There was no rain, but the surf broke in showers and every foot of the skerry was drenched with it. In a trice Halmarsness was hidden, and I seemed to be in the centre of a maelstrom, choked with scud and buffeted on every side by swirling waters.

"Down came my tent at once. I wrestled with the crazy canvas and got a black eye from a pole, but I managed to drag the ruins into the shelter of the zareba which John had built, and tumble some of the bigger boulders on it. There it lay, flapping like a sick albatross. The water got into my food boxes, and soaked my fuel, as well as every inch of my clothing... I had looked forward to a peaceful day of watching and meditation, when I could write up my notes; and instead I spent a morning like a Rugger scrum. I might have enjoyed it, if I hadn't been so wet and cold, and could have got a better lunch than some clammy mouthfuls out of a tin. One talks glibly about being 'blown off' a place, generally an idle exaggeration—but that day I came very near the reality. There were times when I had to hang on for dear life to one of the bigger stones to avoid being trundled into the yeasty seas.

"About two o'clock the volume of the storm began to decline, and then for the first time I thought about the boat. With a horrid sinking of the heart I scrambled to the cove where we had beached it. It had been drawn up high and dry, and its painter secured to a substantial boulder. But now there was not a sign of it except a ragged rope-end round the stone. The tide had mounted to its level, and tide and wind had smashed the rotten painter. By this time what was left of it would be tossing in the Roost.

"This was a pretty state of affairs. John was due to visit me next day, but I had a cold twenty-four hours ahead of me.

There was of course the flare he had left me, but I was not inclined to use this. It looked like throwing up the sponge and confessing that my expedition had been a farce. I felt miserable, but obstinate, and, since the weather was clearly mending, I determined to put the best face on the business, so I went back to the wreckage of my camp, and tried to tidy up. There was still far too much wind to do anything with the tent, but the worst of the spindrift had ceased, and I was able to put out my bedding and some of my provender to dry. I got a dry jersey out of my pack, and, as I was wearing fisherman's boots and oilskins, I managed to get some slight return of comfort. Also at last I succeeded in lighting a pipe. I found a corner under the knoll which gave me a modicum of shelter, and I settled myself to pass the time with tobacco and my own thoughts.

"About three o'clock the wind died away completely. That I did not like, for a dead lull in the Norlands is often the precursor of a new gale. Indeed, I never remembered a time when some wind did not blow, and I had heard that when such a thing happened people came out of their houses to ask what the matter was. But now we had the dearest sort of calm. The sea was still wild and broken, the tides raced by like a mill-stream, and a brume was gathering which shut out Halmarsness—shut out every prospect except a narrow circuit of grey water. The cessation of the racket of the gale made the place seem uncannily quiet. The present tumult of the sea, in comparison with the noise of the morning, seemed no more than a mutter and an echo.

"As I sat there I became conscious of an odd sensation. I seemed to be more alone, more cut off, not only from my fellows but from the habitable earth, than I had ever been before. It was like being in a small boat in mid-Atlantic—but worse, if you understand me, for that would have been loneliness in the midst of a waste which was nevertheless surrounded and traversed by the works of man, whereas now I felt that I was clean outside man's ken. I had come somehow to the edge of that world where life is, and was very close to the world which has only death in it.

"At first I do not think there was much fear in the sensation—chiefly strangeness, but the kind of strangeness which awes without exciting. I tried to shake off the mood, and got up to stretch myself. There was not much room for exercise, and as I moved with stiff legs along the reefs I slipped into the water, so that I got my arms wet. It was cold beyond belief—the very quintessence of deathly Arctic ice, so cold that it seemed to sear and bleach the skin.

"From that moment I date the most unpleasant experience of my life. I became suddenly the prey of a black depression, shot with the red lights of terror. But it was not a numb terror, for my brain was acutely alive... I had the sense to try to make tea, but my fuel was still too damp, and the best I could do was to pour half the contents of my brandy flask into a cup and swallow the stuff. That did not properly warm my chilled body, but—since I am a very temperate man—it speeded up my thoughts instead of calming them. I felt myself on the brink of a childish panic.

"One thing I thought I saw clearly—the meaning of Skule Skerry. By some alchemy of nature, at which I could only guess, it was on the track by which the North exercised its spell, a cableway for the magnetism of that cruel frozen Uttermost, which man might penetrate but could never subdue or understand. Though the latitude was only 61°, there were folds of tucks in space, and this isle was the edge of the world. Birds knew it, and the old Northmen, who were primitive beings like the birds, knew it. That was why an inconsiderable skerry had been given the name of a conquering Jarl. The old Church knew it, and had planted a chapel to exorcise the demons of darkness. I wondered what sights the hermit, whose cell had been on the very spot where I was cowering, had seen in the winter dusks.

"It may have been partly the brandy acting on an empty stomach, and partly the extreme cold, but my brain, in spite of my efforts to think rationally, began to run like a dynamo. It is difficult to explain my mood, but I seemed to be two persons—one a reasonable modern man trying to keep sane and scornfully rejecting the fancies which the other, a cast-back to something elemental, was furiously spinning. But it was the second that had the upper hand... I felt myself loosed from my moorings, a mere waif on uncharted seas. What is the German phrase? *Urdummheit*—Primal Idiocy? That is what was the matter with me. I had fallen out of civilisation into the Outlands and was feeling their spell... I could not think, but I could remember, and what I had read of the Norse voyagers came back to me with horrid persistence. They had known the outland terrors—the Sea Walls at the world's end, the Curdled Ocean with its strange beasts. Those men did not sail north as we did, in steamers, with modern food and modern instruments, huddled into crews and expeditions. They had gone out almost alone, in brittle galleys, and they had known what we could never know.

"And then, I had a shattering revelation. I had been groping for a word and I suddenly got it. It was Adam of Bremen's 'proxima Abysso.' This island was next door to the Abyss, and the Abyss was that blanched world of the North which was the negation of life.

"That unfortunate recollection was the last straw. I remember that I forced myself to get up and try again to kindle a fire. But the wood was still too damp, and I realised with consternation that I had very few matches left, several boxes having been ruined that morning. As I staggered about I saw the flare which John had left for me, and had almost lit it. But some dregs of manhood prevented me—I could not own defeat in that babyish way—I must wait till John Ronaldson came for me next morning. Instead I had another mouthful of brandy, and tried to eat some of my sodden biscuits. But I could scarcely swallow; this infernal cold, instead of rousing hunger, had given me only a raging thirst.

"I forced myself to sit down again with my face to the land. You see, every moment I was becoming more childish. I had the notion—I cannot call it a thought—that down the avenue from the North something terrible and strange might come. My nervous state must have been pretty bad, for though I was cold and empty and weary I was scarcely conscious of physical discomfort. My heart was fluttering like a scared boy's; and all the time the other part of me was standing aside and telling me not to be a damned fool... I think that if I had heard the rustle of a flock of migrants I might have pulled myself together, but not a blessed bird had come near me all day. I had fallen into a world that killed life, a sort of Valley of the Shadow of Death.

"The brume spoiled the long northern twilight, and presently it was almost dark. At first I thought that this was going to help me, and I got hold of several of my half-dry rugs, and made a sleeping-place. But I could not sleep, even if my teeth had stopped chattering, for a new and perfectly idiotic idea possessed me. It came from a recollection of John Ronaldson's parting words. What had he said about the Black Silkie—the Finn who came out of the deep and hunkered on this skerry? Raving mania! But on this lost island in the darkening night, with icy tides lapping about me, was any horror beyond belief?

"Still, the sheer idiocy of the idea compelled a reaction. I took hold of my wits with both hands and cursed myself for a fool. I could even reason about my folly. I knew what was wrong with me. I was suffering from PANIC—a physical affection produced by natural causes, explicable, though as yet not fully explained. Two friends of mine had once been afflicted with it; one in a lonely glen in the Jotunheim, so that he ran for ten miles over stony hills till he found a saeter and human companionship: the other in a Bavarian forest, where both he and his guide tore for hours through the thicket till they dropped like logs beside a highroad. This reflection enabled me to take a pull on myself and to think a little ahead. If my troubles were physical then there would be no shame in looking for the speediest cure. Without further delay I must leave this God-forgotten place.

"The flare was all right, for it had been set on the highest point of the island, and John had covered it with a peat. With one of my few remaining matches I lit the oily waste, and a great smoky flame leapt to heaven.

"If the half-dark had been eery, this sudden brightness was eerier. For a moment the glare gave me confidence, but as I looked at the circle of moving water evilly lit up all my terrors returned... How long would it take John to reach me? They would see it at once at Sgurra-voe—they would be on the look-out for it—John would not waste time, for he had tried to dissuade me from coming—an hour—two hours at the most...'

"I found I could not take my eyes from the waters. They seemed to flow from the north in a strong stream, black as the heart of the elder ice, irresistible as fate, cruel as hell. There seemed to be uncouth shapes swimming in them, which were more than the flickering shadows from the flare ... Something portentous might at any moment come down that river of death ... Someone...

"And then my knees gave under me and my heart shrank like a pea, for I saw that the someone had come.

"He drew himself heavily out of the sea, wallowed for a second, and then raised his head and, from a distance of five yards, looked me blindly in the face. The flare was fast dying down, but even so at that short range it cast a strong light, and the eyes of the awful being seemed to be dazed by it. I saw a great dark head like a bull's—an old face wrinkled as if in pain—a gleam of enormous broken teeth—a dripping beard—all formed on other lines than God has made mortal creatures. And on the right of the throat was a huge scarlet gash. The thing seemed to be moaning, and then from it came a sound—whether of anguish or wrath I cannot tell—but it seemed to be the cry of a tortured fiend.

"That was enough for me. I pitched forward in a swoon, hitting my head on a stone, and in that condition three hours later John Ronaldson found me.

"They put me to bed at Sgurra-voe with hot earthenware bottles, and the doctor from Voss next day patched up my head and gave me a sleeping draught. He declared that there was little the matter with me except shock from exposure, and promised to set me on my feet in a week.

"For three days I was as miserable as a man could be, and did my best to work myself into a fever. I had said not a word about my experience, and left my rescuers to believe that my only troubles were cold and hunger, and that I had lit the flare because I had lost the boat. But during these days I was in a critical state. I knew that there was nothing wrong with my body, but I was gravely concerned about my mind.

"For this was my difficulty. If that awful thing was a mere figment of my brain then I had better be certified at once as a lunatic. No sane man could get into such a state as to see such portents with the certainty with which I had seen that creature come out of the night. If, on the other hand, the thing was a real presence, then I had looked on something outside natural law, and my intellectual world was broken in pieces. I was a scientist, and a scientist cannot admit the supernatural. If with my eyes I had beheld the monster in which Adam of Bremen believed, which holy men had exorcised, which even the shrewd Norlanders shuddered at as the Black Silkie, then I must burn my books and revise my creed. I might take to poetry or theosophy, but I would never be much good again at science.

"On the third afternoon I was trying to doze, and with shut eyes fighting off the pictures which tormented my brain. John Ronaldson and the farmer of Sgurra-voe were talking at the kitchen door. The latter asked some question, and John replied—

"Aye, it was a wall-ross and nae mistake. It cam ashore at Gloop Ness and Sandy Fraser hae gotten the skin of it. It was deid when he found it, but no long deid. The puir beast would drift south on some floe, and it was sair hurt, for Sandy said it had a hole in its throat ye could put your nieve in. There hasna been a wall-ross come to Una since my grandfather's day.'

"I turned my face to the wall and composed myself to sleep. For now I knew that I was sane, and need not forswear science."

“TENDEBANT MANUS”

SIR ARTHUR WARCLIFF'S STORY

*Send not on your soul before
To dive from that beguiling shore,
And let not yet the swimmer leave
His clothes upon the sands of eve.—A. E. Housman.*

One night we were discussing Souldern, who had died a week before and whose memorial service had been held that morning in St. Margaret's. He had come on amazingly in Parliament, one of those sudden rises which were common in the immediate post-war years, when the older reputations were being questioned and the younger men were too busy making a livelihood to have time for hobbies. His speeches, his membership of a commission where he had shown both originality and courage, and his reputed refusal, on very honourable grounds, of a place in the Cabinet, had given him in the popular mind a flavour of mystery and distinction. The papers had devoted a good deal of space to him, and there was a general feeling that his death—the result of a motor smash—was a bigger loss to the country than his actual achievement warranted.

“I never met him,” Palliser-Yeates said. “But I was at school with his minor. You remember Reggie Souldern, Charles? An uncommon good fellow—makings of a fine soldier, too—disappeared with most of his battalion in March '18, and was never heard of again. Body committed to the pleasant land of France but exact spot unknown—rather like a burial at sea.”

“I knew George Souldern well enough,” said Lamancha, whom he addressed. “I sat in the House with him for two years before the War. That is to say, I knew as much of him as anybody did, but there was very little you could lay hold of. He used to be a fussy, ineffective chap, very fertile in ideas which he never thought out, and always starting hares that he wouldn't hunt. But just lately he seems to have had a call, and he looked as if he might have a career. Rotten luck that a sharp corner and a lout of a motor-cyclist should have put an end to it.”

He turned to his neighbour. “Wasn't he a relation of yours, Sir Arthur?”

The man addressed was the oldest member of the Club and by far the most distinguished. Sir Arthur Warcliff had been a figure of note when most of us were in our cradles. He began life in the Sappers, and before he was thirty had been in command of a troublesome little Somaliland expedition; then he had governed a variety of places with such success that he was seriously spoken of for India. In the War he would have liked to have returned back to soldiering, but they used him as the Cabinet handy-man, and he had all the worst diplomatic and administrative jobs to tackle. You see, he was a master of detail and had to translate the generalities of policy into action. He had never, as the jargon goes, got his personality over the footlights, so he was only a name to the public—but a tremendous name, of which every party spoke respectfully. He had retired now, and lived alone with his motherless boy. Usually, for all his sixty-five years, he seemed a contemporary, for he was curiously young at heart, but every now and then we looked at his wise, worn face, realised what he had been and was, and sat at his feet.

“Yes,” he said in reply to Lamancha. “George Souldern was my wife's cousin, and I knew him well for the last twenty years. Since the War I knew him better, and in the past eighteen months I was, I think, his only intimate friend.”

“Was he a really big man?” Sandy Arbuthnot asked. “I don't take much stock in his profession—but I thought—just for a moment—in that Irish row—that I got a glimpse of something rather out of the ordinary.”

“He had first-class brains.”

Sandy laughed. “That doesn't get you very far,” he said. The phrase ‘first-class brains’ had acquired at the time a flavour of comedy.

“No. It doesn't. If you had asked me the question six years ago I should have said that George was a brilliant failure. Immensely clever in his way, really well educated—which very few of us are—laborious as a beaver, but futile. The hare that is always being passed by every kind of tortoise. He had everything in his favour, but nothing ever came out as he wanted it. I only knew him after he came down from Oxford, but I believe that at the University he was a nonpareil.”

“I was up with him,” said Peckwether, the historian. “Oh, yes, he was a big enough figure there. He was head of Winchester, and senior scholar of Balliol, and took two Firsts and several University prizes in his stride. He must have sat up all night, for he never appeared to work—you see, it was his pose to do things easily—a variety of the Grand Manner. He was a most disquieting undergraduate. In his political speeches he had the air of having just left a Cabinet meeting.”

“Was he popular?” someone asked.

“Not a bit,” said Peckwether. “And for all his successes we didn't believe in him. He was too worldly-wise—what we used to call ‘banausic’—too bent on getting on. We felt that he had all his goods in the shop window, and that there was no margin to him.”

Sir Arthur smiled. “A young man's contemporaries are pretty shrewd judges. When I met him first I felt the same thing. He wasn't a prig, and he had a sense of humour, and he had plenty of ordinary decent feeling. But he was the kind of man who could never forget himself and throw his cap over the moon. One couldn't warm to him... But, unlike you, I thought he would succeed. The one thing lacking was money, and within two years he had remedied that. He married a rich wife; the lady died, but the fortune remained. I believe it was an honest love match, and for a long time he was heartbroken, and when he recovered he buried himself in work. You would have said that something was bound to happen.

Young, rich, healthy, incredibly industrious, able, presentable—you would have said that any constituency would have welcomed him, that his party would have jumped at him, that he would have been a prodigious success.

“But he wasn’t. He made a bad candidate, and had to stand three times before he got into the House. And there he made no kind of impression, though he spoke conscientiously and always on matters he knew about. He wrote a book on the meaning of colonial nationalism—fluent, well expressed, sensible, even in parts eloquent, but somehow it wasn’t read. He was always making speeches at public dinners and at the annual meetings of different kinds of associations, but it didn’t seem to signify what he said, and he was scarcely reported. There was no conspiracy of silence to keep him down, for people rather liked him. He simply seemed to have no clear boundary lines and to be imperfectly detached from the surrounding atmosphere. I could never understand why.”

“Lack of personality,” said Lamancha. “I remember feeling that.”

“Yes, but what is personality? He had the things that make it—brains and purpose. One liked him—was impressed by his attainments, but, if you understand me, one wasn’t impressed by the man... It wasn’t ordinary lack of confidence, for on occasion he could be aggressive. It was the lack of a continuity of confidence—in himself and in other things. He didn’t **believe** enough. That was why, as you said, he was always starting hares that he wouldn’t hunt. Some excellent and unanswerable reason would occur to him why he should slack off. He was what I believe you call a good party man and always voted orthodoxly, but, after four years in the House, instead of being a leader he was rapidly becoming a mere cog in the machine. He didn’t seem to be able to make himself count.

“That was his position eight years ago, and it was not far from a tragedy. He was as able as any man in the Cabinet, but he lacked the dæmonic force which even stupid people sometimes possess. I can only describe him in paradoxes. He was at once conceited and shy, inordinately ambitious and miserably conscious that he never got the value of his abilities out of life ... Then came the War.”

“He served, didn’t he?” Leithen asked. “I remember running across him at G.H.Q.”

“You may call it serving, if you mean that he was never out of uniform for four years. But he didn’t fight. I wanted him to. I thought a line battalion might make a man of him, but he shrank from the notion. It wasn’t lack of courage—I satisfied myself of that. But he hadn’t the nerve to sink himself into the ranks of ordinary men. You understand why? It would have meant the realisation of what was the inmost fear of his heart. He had to keep up the delusion that he was some sort of a swell— had to have authority to buttress his tottering vanity.

“So he had a selection of footling staff jobs—liaison with this and that, deputy-assistant to Tom, Dick and Harry, quite futile, but able to command special passes and staff cars. He ranked, I think, as a full colonel, but an Army Service Corps private was more useful than ten of him. And he was as miserable as a man could be. He liked people to think that his trouble was the strain of the War, but the real strain was that there was no strain. He knew that he simply didn’t matter. At least he was candid with himself, and he was sometimes candid with me. He rather hoped, I think, that I would inspan him into something worth doing, but in common honesty I couldn’t, for you see I too had come to disbelieve in him utterly.

“Well, that went on till March 1918, when his brother Reggie was killed in the German push. Ninth Division, wasn’t it?”

Palliser-Yeates nodded. “Ninth. South African Brigade. He went down at Marrières Wood, but he and his lot stuck up the enemy for the best part of a Sunday, and, I solemnly believe, saved our whole front. They were at the critical point, you see, the junction of Gough and Byng. His body was never found.”

“I know,” said Sir Arthur, “and that is just the point of my story.”

He stopped. “I suppose I’m right to tell you this. He left instructions that if anything happened to him I was to have his diary. He can’t have meant me to keep it secret... No, I think he would have liked one or two people to know.”

He looked towards Palliser-Yeates. “You knew Reggie Souldern? How would you describe him?”

“The very best stamp of British regimental officer,” was the emphatic reply.

“Clever?”

“Not a bit. Only average brains, but every ounce of them useful. Always cheery and competent, and a born leader of men. He was due for a brigade when he fell, and if the War had lasted another couple of years he might have had a corps. I never met the other Souldern, but from what you say he must have been the plumb opposite of Reggie.”

“Just so. George had a great opinion of his brother— in addition to the ordinary brotherly love, for there were only the two of them. I thought the news of his death would break him altogether. But it didn’t. He took it with extraordinary calm, and presently it looked as if he were actually more cheerful... You see, they never found the body. He never saw him lying dead, or even the grave where he was buried, and he never met anybody who had. Reggie had been translated mysteriously out of the world, but the melancholy indisputable signs of death were lacking.”

“You mean he thought he was only missing and might turn up some day?”

“No. He **knew** he was dead—the proof was too strong, the presumption was too heavy... But while there was enough to convince his reason, there was too little for his imagination—no white face and stiff body, no wooden cross in the cemetery. He could **picture** him as still alive, and George had a queer sensitive imagination about which most people knew nothing.”

Sir Arthur looked round the table and saw that we were puzzled.

“It is a little difficult to explain... Do you remember a story of the French at Verdun making an attack over ground they had been fighting on for months? They shouted ‘En avant, les morts,’ and they believed that the spirits of the dead responded and redressed the balance. I think it was the last action at Vaux... I don’t suppose the poilu thought the dead

came back to help him, but he pretended they were still combatants, and got a moral support from the fancy... That was something like George Souldern's case. If you had asked him, you would have found that he had no doubt that what was left of Reggie was somewhere in the churned-up wilderness north of Péronne. And there was never any nonsense about visitations or messages from the dead... But the lack of **visible** proofs enabled his imagination to picture Reggie as still alive, and going from strength to strength. He nursed the fancy till it became as real to him as anything in his ordinary life... Reggie was becoming a great man and would soon be the most famous man in the world, and something of Reggie went into him and he shared in Reggie's glory. In March '18 a partnership began for George Souldern with his dead brother, and the dead, who in his imagination was alive and triumphant, lifted him out of the sticky furrow which he had been ploughing since he left Oxford."

We were all silent except Pugh, who said that he had come across the same thing in the East—some Rajput prince, I think.

"How did you know this?" Lamancha asked.

"From the diary. George set down very fully every stage of his new career. But I very nearly guessed the truth for myself. You see, knowing him as I did, I had to admit a sudden and staggering change."

"How soon?"

"The week after the news came. I had been in Paris, and on my return ran across George in the Travellers' and said the ordinary banal words of sympathy. He looked at me queerly, as he thanked me, and if I had not known how deeply attached the brothers were, I would have said that he was exhilarated by his loss. It was almost as if he had been given a drug to strengthen his arteries. He seemed to me suddenly a more substantial fellow, calmer, more at peace with himself. He said an odd thing too. 'Old Reggie has got his chance,' he said, and then, as if pulling himself up, 'I mean, he had the chance he wanted.'

"In June it was clear that something had happened to George Souldern. Do you remember how about that time a wave of dejection passed over all the Allied countries? It was partly the mess in Russia, partly in this country a slight loss of confidence in the Government, which seemed to have got to loggerheads with the soldiers, but mainly the 'drag' that comes in all wars. It was the same in the American Civil War before Gettysburg. Foch was marking time, but he was doing it by retreating pretty fast on the Aisne. Well, our people needed a little cheering up, and our politicians tried their hand at it. There was a debate in Parliament, and far the best speech was George's. The rest were mere platitude and rhetoric, but he came down on the point like a steam-hammer."

"I know," said Lamancha. "I read it in the Times in a field hospital in Palestine."

"In his old days nobody would have paid much attention. He would have been clever and epigrammatic—sound enough, but 'precious.' His speech would have read well, if it had been reported, but it wouldn't have mattered a penn'orth to anybody... Instead he said just the wise, simple, stalwart thing that every honest man had at the back of his head, and he said it with an air which made everybody sit up. For the first time in his life he spoke as one having authority. The press reported him nearly verbatim, for the journalists in the Gallery have a very acute sense of popular values.

"The speech put George, as the phrase goes, on the political map. The Prime Minister spoke to me about him, and there was some talk of employing him on a mission which never materialised. I met him one day in the street and congratulated him, and I remember that I was struck by the new vigour in his personality. He made me come home with him to tea, and to talk to him was like breathing ozone. He asked me one or two questions about numbers, and then he gave me his views on the War. At the time it was fashionable to think that no decision would be reached till the next summer, but George maintained that, if we played our cards right, victory was a mathematical certainty before Christmas. He showed a knowledge of the military situation which would have done credit to any soldier, and he could express himself, which few soldiers can do. His arguments stuck in my head, and I believe I used them in the War Cabinet. I left with a very real respect for one whom I had written off as a failure.

"Well, then came the last battle of the Marne, and Haig's great advance, and all the drama and confusion of the autumn months. I lost sight of George, for I was busy with the peace overtures, and I don't think I even heard of him again till the new year... But the diary tells all about those months. I am giving you the bones of the story, but I am going to burn the diary, for it is too intimate for other eyes... According to it Reggie finished the War as a blazing hero. It was all worked out in detail with maps and diagrams. He had become a corps commander by August, and in October he was the chief fighting figure on the British front, the conduit pipe of Foch's ideas, for he could work out in practice what the great man saw as a vision. It sounds crazy, but it was so convincingly done that I had to rub my eyes and make myself remember that Reggie was lying in a nameless grave on the Somme and not a household word in two hemispheres... George, too, shared in his glory, but just how was not very clear. Anyway, the brothers were in the front of the stage, Reggie the bigger man and George his civilian adviser and opposite number. I can see now how he got his confidence. He was no longer a struggler, but a made man; he had arrived, he was proved, the world required him. Whatever he said or did must be attended to, and, because he believed this, it was."

Lamancha whistled long and low. "But how could his mind work, if he lived among fairy tales?" he asked.

"He didn't," said Sir Arthur. "He lived very much in the real world. But he had all the time his private imaginative preserve, into which his normal mind did not penetrate. He drew his confidence from this preserve, and, having once got it, could carry it also into the real world."

"Wasn't he intolerably conceited?" someone asked.

"No, for the great man was Reggie and he was only a satellite. He was Reggie's prophet, and assured enough on that

side, but there was no personal arrogance. His dead brother had become, so to speak, his familiar spirit, his *dæmon*. The fact is that George was less of an egotist than he had ever been before. His vanity was burned up in a passion of service.

"I saw him frequently during the first half of '19, and had many talks with him. He had been returned to Parliament by a big majority, but he wasn't much in the public eye. He didn't like the way things were going, but at the same time as a good citizen he declined to make things more difficult for the Government. The diary gives his thoughts at that time. He considered that the soldiers should have had the chief share in the settlement of the world—Foch and Haig and Hindenburg—and Reggie. He held that they would have made a cleaner and fairer job of it than the kind of circus that appeared at Versailles. Perhaps he was right—I can't be dogmatic, for I was a performer in the circus.

"That, of course, I didn't know till the other day. But the change in George Souldern was soon manifest to the whole world. There was the Irish business, when he went down to the worst parts of the South and West, and seemed to be simply asking for a bullet in his head. He was half Irish, you know. He wrote and said quite frankly that he didn't care a straw whether Ireland was inside or outside the British Empire, that the only thing which mattered was that she should find a soul, and that she had a long road to travel before she got one. He told her that at present she was one vast perambulating humbug, and that till she got a little discipline and sense of realities she would remain on the level of Hayti. Why some gunman didn't have a shot at him I can't imagine, except that such naked candour and courage was a new thing and had to be respected... Then there was the Unemployment Commission. You remember the majority report— pious generalities and futile compromises, George's dissenting report made him for a month the best abused man in Britain, for he was impartially contemptuous of all sides. To-day— well, I fancy most of us would agree with George, and I observe that he is frequently quoted by the Labour people.

"What struck me about his line of country was that it was like that of a good soldier's. He had the same power of seeing simple facts and of making simple syllogisms, which the clever intellectual—such as George used to be— invariably misses. And there was the soldier's fidelity and sense of service. George plainly had no axe to grind. He had intellectual courage and would back his views as a general backs his strategy, but he kept always a curious personal modesty. I tell you it seemed nothing short of a miracle to one who had known him in the old days.

"I accepted it as the act of God and didn't look for any further explanation. I think that what first set me questioning was his behaviour about Reggie's memorial. The family wanted a stone put up in the churchyard of the family place in Gloucestershire. George absolutely declined. He stuck his toes into the ground and gave nothing but a flat refusal. One might have thought that the brothers had been estranged, but it was common knowledge that they had been like twins and had written to each other every day.

"Then there was the business about a memoir of Reggie. The regiment wanted one, and his Staff College contemporaries. Tollett—you remember him, the man on the Third Army Staff—volunteered to write it, of course with George's assistance. George refused bluntly and said that he felt the strongest distaste for the proposal. Tollett came to me about it, and I had George to luncheon and thrashed it out with him. I found his reasons very difficult to follow, for he objected even to a regimental history being compiled. He admitted that Tollett was as good a man as could be found for the job, but he said he hated the idea. Nobody understood Reggie but himself. Someday, he suggested, he might try to do justice to him in print— but not yet. I put forward all the arguments I could think of, but George was adamant.

"Walking home, I puzzled a good deal about the affair. It couldn't be merely the jealousy of a writer who wanted to reserve a good subject for himself—that wasn't George's character, and he had no literary vanity. Besides, that wouldn't explain his aversion to a prosaic regimental chronicle, and still less his objection to the cenotaph in the Gloucestershire churchyard. I wondered if there was not some quirk in George, some odd obsession about his brother. For a moment I thought that he might have been dabbling in spiritualism and have got some message from Reggie, till I remembered that I had heard him a week before declare his unbridled contempt for such mumbo-jumbo.

"I thought a good deal about it, and the guess I made was that George was living a double life—that in his subconsciousness Reggie was still alive for him. It was only a guess, but it was fairly near the truth, and last year I had it from his own lips.

"We were duck-shooting together on Croftsmoor, the big marsh near his home. That had been Reggie's pet game; he used to be out at all hours in the winter dawns and dusks stalking wildfowl. George never cared for it, or indeed for any field sport. He would take his place at a covert shoot or a grouse drive and was useful enough with a gun, but he would have been the first to disclaim the title of sportsman. But now he was as keen and tireless as Reggie. He kept me out for eight hours in a filthy day of rain wading in trench boots in Gloucestershire mud.

"We did fairly well, and just before sunset the weather improved. The wind had gone into the north, and promised frost, and as we sat on an old broken-backed stone bridge over one of the dykes, waiting for the birds to be collected from the different stands, the western sky was one broad band of palest gold. We were both tired, and the sudden change from blustering rain to a cold stillness, and from grey mist to colour and light, had a strange effect upon my spirits. I felt peaceful and solemnised. I lit a pipe, but let it go out, for my attention was held by the shoreless ocean in the west, against which the scarp of the Welsh hills showed in a dim silhouette. The sharp air, the wild marsh scents, the faint odour of tobacco awoke in me a thousand half-sad and half-sweet recollections.

"I couldn't help it. I said something about Reggie.

"George was sitting on the bridge with his eyes fixed on the sky. I thought he hadn't heard me, till suddenly he repeated 'Reggie. Yes, old Reggie.'

"'This was what he loved,' I said.

“He still loves it,’ was the answer, spoken very low. And then he repeated—to himself as it were:

*“Fight on, fight on,’ said Sir Andrew Barton.
Though I be wounded I am not slain.
I’ll lay me down and bleed awhile
And then I’ll rise and fight again.”*

“He turned his fine-drawn face to me.

“You think Reggie is dead?”

“I didn’t know what to say. ‘Yes,’ I stammered, ‘I suppose—’

“What do you mean by death?” His voice was almost shrill. ‘We know nothing about it. What does it matter if the body is buried in a shell-hole—?’

“He stopped suddenly, as a lamp goes out when you press the switch. I had the impression that those queer shrill words came not from George but from some other who had joined us.

“I believe that the spirit is immortal,’ I began.

“The spirit—’ again the shrill impersonal voice—‘I tell you the whole man lives... He is nearer to me than he ever was... we are never parted... ‘

“Again the light went out. He seemed to gulp, and when he spoke it was in his natural tones.

“I apologise,’ he said, ‘I must seem to you to be talking nonsense... You don’t understand. **You** would understand, if anyone could, but I can’t explain—yet—someday... ‘

“The head-keeper, the beaters and the dogs came out of the reed beds, and at the same time the uncanny glow in the west was shrouded with the film of the coming night. It was almost dark when we turned to walk home, and I was glad of it, for neither of us wished to look at the other’s face.

“I felt at once embarrassed and enlightened. I had been given a glimpse into the cloudy places of a man’s soul, and had surprised his secret. My guess had been right. In George’s subconscious mind Reggie was still alive—nay more, was progressing in achievement as if he had never disappeared in the March battle. It was no question of a disembodied spirit establishing communication with the living—that was a business I knew nothing about, nor George either. It was a question of life, complete life, in a peculiar world, companionship in some spiritual fourth dimension, and from that companionship he was drawing sustenance. He had learned Reggie’s forthrightness and his happy simplicity... I wondered and I trembled. There is a story of an early Victorian statesman who in his leisure moments played at being Emperor of Byzantium. The old Whig kept the two things strictly separate—he was a pious humanitarian in his English life, though he was a ruthless conqueror in the other. But in George’s case the two were mingling. He was going about his daily duties with the power acquired from his secret world; that secret world, in which, with Reggie, he had become a master, was giving him a mastery over our common life... I did not believe it would last. It was against nature that a man could continue to live as a parasite on the dead.

“I am almost at the end of my story. Two months later, George became a figure of national importance. It was he who chiefly broke up the Coalition at the Grafton House meeting, and thereby, I suppose, saved his party. His speech, you remember, clove through subtleties and irrelevances with the simple declaration that he could not work with what he could not trust, and, unless things changed, must go out of public life. That was Reggie’s manner, you know—pure Reggie. Then came the general election and the new Government, and George, very much to people’s surprise, refused Cabinet office. The reason he gave was that on grounds of principle he had taken a chief part in wrecking the late Ministry, and he felt he could not allow himself to benefit personally by his action. We all thought him high-minded, if finical and quixotic, but the ordinary man liked it—it was a welcome change from the old gang of arrivistes. But it was not the real reason. I found that in the diary.”

Sir Arthur stopped, and there was a silence while he seemed to be fumbling for words.

“Here we are walking on the edge of great mysteries,” he continued. “The reason why he refused the Prime Minister’s offer was Reggie... Somehow the vital force in that subconscious world of his was ebbing... I cannot explain how, but Reggie was moving away from what we call realities and was beckoning him to follow... The Grafton House speech was George’s last public utterance. Few people saw him after that, for he rarely attended the House. I saw him several times in Gloucestershire... Was he happy? Yes, I should say utterly happy, but too detached, too peaceful, as if he had done with the cares of this world... I think I guessed what was happening, when he told me that he had consented to the cenotaph in the churchyard. He took a good deal of pains about it, too, and chose an inscription, which his maiden aunts thought irreligious. It was Virgil’s ‘Tendebant manus ripæ ulterioris amore.’... He withdrew his objection to the memoir, too, and Tollett got to work, but he gave him no help—it was as if he had lost interest... It is an odd thing to say, but I have been waiting for the news which was in last week’s paper.”

“You don’t mean that he engineered the motor smash?” Lamancha asked.

“Oh no,” said Sir Arthur gently. “As I said, we are treading on the brink of great mysteries. Say that it was predestined, fore-ordained, decreed by the Master of Assembly... I know that it had to be. If you join hands with the dead they will pull you over the stream.”

THE LAST CRUSADE

FRANCIS MARTENDALE'S STORY

It is often impossible, in these political inquiries, to find any proportion between the apparent force of any moral causes we may assign, and their known operation. We are therefore obliged to deliver up that operation to mere chance; or, more piously (perhaps more rationally, to the occasional interposition and the irresistible hand of the Great Disposer. —Burke.

One evening the talk at dinner turned on the Press. Lamancha was of opinion that the performances of certain popular newspapers in recent years had killed the old power of the anonymous printed word. "They bluffed too high," he said, "and they had their bluff called. All the Delphic oracle business has gone from them. You haven't to-day what you used to have—papers from which the ordinary man docilely imbibes all his views. There may be one or two still, but not more."

Sandy Arbuthnot, who disliked journalism as much as he liked journalists, agreed, but there was a good deal of difference of opinion among the others. Pallister-Yeates thought that the Press had more influence than ever, though it might not be much liked; a man, he said, no longer felt the kind of loyalty towards his newspaper that he felt towards his club and his special brand of cigar, but he was mightily influenced by it all the same. He might read it only for its news, but in the selection of news a paper could wield an uncanny power.

Francis Martendale was the only journalist among us, and he listened with half-closed sleepy eyes. He had been a war correspondent as far back as the days of the South African War, and since then had seen every serious row on the face of the globe. In France he had risen to command a territorial battalion, and that seemed to have satisfied his military interest, for since 1919 he had turned his mind to business. He was part-owner of several provincial papers, and was connected in some way with the great Ladas news agency. He had several characters which he kept rigidly separate. One was a philosopher, for he had translated Henri Poincaré, and published an acute little study of Bergson; another was a yachtsman, and he used to race regularly in the twelve-metre class at Cowes. But these were his relaxations, and five days in the week he spent in an office in the Fleet Street neighbourhood. He was an enthusiast about his hobbies and a cynic about his profession, a not uncommon mixture; so we were surprised when he differed from Lamancha and Sandy and agreed with Pallister-Yeates.

"No doubt the power of the leader-writer has waned," he said. "A paper cannot set a Cabinet trembling because it doesn't like its policy. But it can colour the public mind most damnably by a steady drip of tendencious news."

"Lies?" Sandy asked.

"Not lies—truths judiciously selected—half-truths with no context. Facts—facts all the time. In these days the Press is obliged to stick to facts. But it can make facts into NEWS, which is a very different class of goods. And it can interpret facts—don't forget that. It can report that Burminster fell asleep at a public dinner—which he did—in such a way as to make everybody think that he was drunk—which he wasn't."

"Rather a dirty game?" someone put in.

"Sometimes—often perhaps. But now and then it works out on the side of the angels. Do any of you know Roper Willinck?"

There was a general confession of ignorance.

"Pity. He would scarcely fit in here, but he is rather a great man and superbly good company. There was a little thing that Willinck once did—or rather helped to do, with about a million other people who hadn't a notion what was happening. That's the fun of journalism. You light a match and fling it away, and the fire goes smouldering round the globe, and ten thousand miles off burns down a city. I'll tell you about it if you like, for it rather proves my point."

It all began—said Martendale—with an old Wesleyan parson of the name of Tubb, who lived at a place called Rhenosterspruit on the east side of the Karroo. He had been a missionary, but the place had grown from a small native reserve to an ordinary up-country dorp; the natives were all Christians now, and he had a congregation of store-keepers, and one or two English farmers, and the landlady of the hotel, and the workmen from an adjacent irrigation dam. Mr. Tubb was a man of over seventy, a devoted pastor with a gift of revivalist eloquence, but not generally considered very strong in the head. He was also a bachelor. He had caught a chill and had been a week in bed, but he rose on the Sunday morning to conduct service as usual.

Now about that time the Russian Government had been rather distinguishing themselves. They had had a great function at Easter, run by what they called the Living Church, which had taken the shape of a blasphemous parody of the Christian rites and a procession of howling dervishes who proclaimed that God was dead and Heaven and Hell wound up. Also they had got hold of a Patriarch, a most respected Patriarch, put him on trial for high treason, and condemned him to death. They had postponed the execution, partly by way of a refinement of cruelty, and partly, I suppose, to see just how the world would react; but there seemed not the slightest reason to doubt that they meant to have the old man's blood. There was a great outcry, and the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope had something to say, and various Governments made official representations, but the Bolshies didn't give a hoot. They felt that they needed to indulge in some little bit of extra blackguardism just to show what stout fellows they were.

Well, all this was in the cables from Riga and Warsaw and Helsingfors, and it got into the weekly edition of the Cape Times. There Mr. Tubb read it, as he lay sick in bed, and, having nothing else to worry about, it fretted him terribly. He could not bear to think of those obscene orgies in Moscow, and the story of the Patriarch made him frantic. This, it seemed to him, was a worse persecution than Nero's or Diocletian's, and the Patriarch was a nobler figure than any martyr of the

Roman amphitheatre; and all the while the Christian peoples of the world were doing nothing. So Mr. Tubb got out of bed on that Sunday morning, and, having had no time to prepare a sermon, delivered his soul from the pulpit about the Bolshies and their doings. He said that what was needed was a new crusade, and he called on every Christian man and woman to devote their prayers, their money, and, if necessary, their blood to this supreme cause. Old as he was, he said, he would gladly set off for Moscow that instant and die beside the Patriarch, and count his life well lost in such a testimony of his faith.

I am sure that Mr. Tubb meant every word he said, but he had an unsympathetic audience, who were not interested in Patriarchs; and the hotel-lady slumbered, and the store-keepers fidgeted and the girls giggled and whispered just as usual. There the matter would have dropped, had not a young journalist from Cape Town been spending his holidays at Rhenosterspruit and out of some caprice been present at the service. He was an ambitious lad, and next morning despatched to his paper a brightly written account of Mr. Tubb's challenge. He wrote it with his tongue in his cheek, and headed it, "Peter the Hermit at Rhenosterspruit" with, as a sub-title, "The Last Crusade." His editor cut it savagely, and left out all his satirical touches, so that it read rather bald and crude. Still it got about a quarter of a column.

That week the Ladas representative at Cape Town was rather short of material, and just to fill up his budget of outgoing news put in a short message about Rhenosterspruit. It ran: "On Sunday Tubb Wesleyan Minister Rhenosterspruit summoned congregation in name Christianity release Patriarch and announced intention personally lead crusade Moscow." That was the result of the cutting of the bright young correspondent's article. What he had meant as fantasy and farce was so summarised as to appear naked fact. Ladas in London were none too well pleased with the message. They did not issue it to the British Press, and they cabled to their Cape Town people that, while they welcomed "human interest" stories, they drew the line at that sort of thing. What could it matter to the world what a Wesleyan parson in the Karroo thought about Zinovieff? They wanted news, not nonsense.

Now behold the mysterious workings of the Comic Spirit. Ladas, besides their general service to the Canadian Press, made special services to several Canadian papers. One of these was called, shall we say? the Toronto Watchman. The member of the Ladas staff who had the compiling of the Watchman budget was often hard-pressed, for he had to send news which was not included in the general service. That week he was peculiarly up against it, so he went through the files of the messages that had come in lately and had not already been transmitted to Canada, and in the Cape Town section he found the Rhenosterspruit yarn. He seized on it joyfully, for he did not know of the disfavour with which his chief had regarded it, and he dressed it up nicely for Toronto. The Watchman he knew was a family paper, with a strong religious connection, and this would be meat and drink to it. So he made the story still more matter-of-fact. Mr. Tubb had sounded a call to the Christian Church, and was himself on the eve of setting out against Trotsky like David against Goliath. He left the captions to the Toronto sub-editors, but of his own initiative he mentioned John Knox. That, he reflected comfortably, as he closed up and went off to play golf, would fetch the Presbyterian-minded Watchman.

It did. The Editor of the Watchman, who was an elder of the Kirk and a Liberal Member of Parliament, had been getting very anxious about the ongoings in Russia. He was not very clear what a Patriarch was, but he remembered that various Anglican ecclesiastics had wanted to affiliate the English and Greek Churches, so he concluded that he was some kind of Protestant. He had, like most people, an intense dislike of Moscow and its ways, and he had been deeply shocked by the Easter sacrilege. So he went large on the Ladas message. It was displayed on his chief page, side by side with all the news he could collect about the Patriarch, and he had no less than two leaders on the subject. The first, which he wrote himself, was headed "The Weak Things of the World and the Strong." He said that Mr. Tubb's clarion-call, "the voice of a simple man of God echoing from the lonely veld," might yet prove a turning-point in history, and he quoted Burke about a child and a girl at an inn changing the fate of nations. It might—it should—arouse the conscience of the Christian world, and inaugurate a new crusade, which would lift mankind out of the rut of materialism and open its eyes to the eternal verities. Christianity had been challenged by the miscreants in Russia, and the challenge must be met. I don't think he had any very clear idea what he meant, for he was strongly opposed to anything that suggested war, but it was a fine chance for "uplift" writing. The second leader was called "The Deeper Obligations of Empire," and, with a side glance at Mr. Tubb, declared that unless the British Empire was a spiritual and moral unity it was not worth talking about.

The rest of the Canadian Press did not touch the subject. They had not had the Rhenosterspruit message, and were not going to lift it. But the Watchman had a big circulation, and Mr. Tubb began to have a high, if strictly local, repute. Several prominent clergymen preached sermons on him, and a weekly paper printed a poem in which he was compared to St. Theresa and Joan of Arc.

The thing would have been forgotten in a fortnight, if McGurks had not chosen to take a hand. McGurks, as you probably know, is the biggest newspaper property in the world directed by a single hand. It owns outright well over a hundred papers, and has a controlling interest in perhaps a thousand. Its tone is strictly national, not to say chauvinistic; its young men in Europe at that time were all hundred-per-cent. Americans, and returned to the States a hundred and twenty per cent., to allow for the difference in the exchange. McGurks does not love England, for it began with strong Irish connections, and it has done good work in pointing out to its immense public the predatory character of British Imperialism and the atrocities that fill the shining hours in India and Egypt. As a matter of fact, however, its politics are not very serious. What it likes is a story that can be told in thick black headlines, so that the stupidest of its free-born readers, glancing in his shirt-sleeves at the first page of his Sunday paper, can extract nourishment. Murders, rapes, fires and drownings are its daily bread, and it fairly revels in details—measurements and plans, names and addresses of witnesses, and appalling half-tone blocks. Most unfairly it is called sensational, for the stuff is as dull as a directory.

With regard to Russia, McGurks had steered a wavy course. It had begun in 1917 by flaunting the banner of freedom,

for it disliked all monarchies on principle. In 1919 it wanted America to recognise the Russian Government, and take hold of Russian trade. But a series of rebuffs to its special correspondents changed its view, and by 1922 it had made a speciality of Bolshevik horrors. The year 1923 saw it again on the fence, from which in six months it had tumbled off in a state of anti-Bolshevik hysteria. It was out now to save God's country from foreign microbes, and it ran a good special line of experts who proved that what America needed was a cordon sanitaire to protect her purity from a diseased world. At the time of which I speak it had worked itself up into a fine religious enthusiasm, and had pretty well captured the "hick" public. McGurks was first and foremost a business proposition, and it had decided that crime and piety were the horses to back. I should add that, besides its papers, it ran a news agency, the P.U., which stood for Press Union, but which was commonly and affectionately known as Punk.

McGurks seized upon the story in the Toronto Watchman as a gift from the gods, and its headlines were a joy for ever. All over the States men read "Aged Saint Defies Demoniacs— Says That In God's Name He Will Move Mountains"—"Vengeance From The Veld"—"The First Trumpet Blast"—"Who Is On The Lord's Side—WHO?" I daresay that in the East and beyond the Rockies people were only mildly interested, but in the Middle West and in the South the thing caught like measles. McGurks did not leave its stunts to perish of inanition. As soon as it saw that the public was intrigued it started out to organise that interest. It circularised every parson over big areas, it arranged meetings of protest and sympathy, it opened subscription lists, and, though it refrained from suggesting Government action, it made it clear that it wanted to create such a popular feeling that the Government would be bound to bestir itself. The home towns caught fire, the Bible Belt was moved to its foundations, every Methodist minister rallied to his co-religionist of Rhenosterspruit, the Sunday Schools uplifted their voice, and even the red-blooded he-men of the Rotary Clubs got going. The Holiness Tabernacle of Sarcophagus, Neb., produced twenty volunteers who were ready to join Mr. Tubb in Moscow, and the women started knitting socks for them, just as they did in the War. The First Consecration Church of Jumpersville, Tenn., followed suit, and McGurks made the most of the doings of every chapel in every one-horse township. Punk, too, was busy, and cabled wonderful stories of the new crusade up and down the earth. Old-established papers did not as a rule take the Punk service, so only a part of it was printed, but it all helped to create an atmosphere.

Presently Concord had to take notice. This, as you know, is the foremost American press agency—we call it the C.C.—and it had no more dealings with Punk than the Jews with the Samaritans. It was in close alliance with Ladas, so it cabled testily wanting to know why it had not received the Rhenosterspruit message. Ladas replied that they had considered the story too absurd to waste tolls on, but, since the C.C. was now carrying a lot of stuff about the new crusade, they felt obliged to cable to Cape Town to clear things up. Punk had already got on to that job, and was asking its correspondents for pictures of Rhenosterspruit, interviews with the Reverend Tubb, details about what he wore and ate and drank, news of his mother and his childhood, and his premonitions of future greatness. Half a dozen anxious journalists converged upon Rhenosterspruit.

But they were too late. For Mr. Tubb was dead—choked on a chicken-bone at his last Sunday dinner. They were only in time to attend the funeral in the little, dusty, sun-baked cemetery. Very little was to be had from his congregation, which, as I have said, had been mostly asleep during the famous sermon; but a store-keeper remembered that the minister had not been quite like himself on that occasion and that he had judged from his eyes that he had still a bad cold. McGurks made a great fuss with this scrap of news. The death of Mr. Tubb was featured like the demise of a President or a film star, and there was a moving picture of the old man, conscious that he was near his end (the chicken-bone was never mentioned), summoning his failing strength to one supreme appeal—"his eyes," said McGurks, "now wet with tears for the world's sins, now shining with the reflected radiance of the Better Country."

I fancy that the thing would have suddenly died away, for there was a big prize-fight coming on, and there seemed to be a risk of the acquittal of a nigger who had knifed a bootlegger in Chicago, and an Anti-Kink Queen was on the point of engaging herself to a Dentifrice King, and similar stirring public events were in the offing. But the death of Mr. Tubb kept up the excitement, for it brought in the big guns of the Fundamentalists. It seemed to them that the old man had not died but had been miraculously translated, just like Elijah or William Jennings Bryan after the Dayton trial. It was a Sign, and they were bound to consider what it signified.

This was much heavier metal than the faithful of Sarcophagus and Jumpersville. The agitation was now of national importance; it had attained "normalcy," as you might say, the "normalcy" of the periodic American movement. Conventions were summoned and addressed by divines whose names were known even in New York. Senators and congressmen took a hand, and J. Constantine Buttrick, the silver trumpet of Wisconsin, gave tongue, and was heard by several million wireless outfits. Articles even appeared about it in the intellectual weeklies. Congress wasn't in session, which was fortunate, but Washington began to be uneasy, for volunteers for the crusade were enrolling fast. The C.C. was compelled to carry long despatches, and Ladas had to issue them to the English Press, which usually printed them in obscure corners with the names misspelt. England is always apathetic about American news, and, besides, she had a big strike on her hands at the time. Those of us who get American press-clippings realised that quite a drive was starting to do something to make Moscow respectful to religion, but we believed that it would be dropped before any serious action could be taken. Meanwhile Zinovieff and Trotsky carried on as usual, and we expected any day to hear that the Patriarch had been shot and buried in the prison yard.

Suddenly Fate sent Roper Willinck mooning round to my office. I suppose Willinck is the least known of our great men, for you fellows have never even heard his name. But he IS a great man in his queer way, and I believe his voice carries farther than any living journalist's, though most people do not know who is speaking. He doesn't write much in the Press here, only now and then a paper in the heavy monthlies, but he is the prince of special correspondents, and his "London Letters" in every known tongue are printed from Auckland to Seattle. He seems to have found the common denominator of

style which is calculated to interest the whole human family. On the Continent he is the only English journalist whose name is known to the ordinary reader—rather like Maximilian Harden before the War. In America they reckon him a sort of Pope, and his stuff is syndicated in all the country papers. His enthusiasms make a funny hotch-potch—the League of Nations and the British Empire, racial purism and a sentimental socialism; but he is a devout Catholic, and Russia had become altogether too much for him. That was why I thought he would be interested in McGurks' stunt, of which he had scarcely heard; so he sat down in an armchair and, during the consumption of five caporal cigarettes, studied my clippings.

I have never seen a man so roused. "I see light," he cried, pushing his double glasses up on his forehead. "Martendale, this is a revelation. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings... Master Ridley, Master Ridley, we shall this day kindle a fire which will never be extinguished..."

"Nonsense," I said. "The thing will fizzle out in a solemn protest from Washington to Moscow with which old Trotsky will light his pipe. It has got into the hands of the highbrows, and in a week will be clothed in the jargon of the State Department, and the home towns will wonder what has been biting them."

"We must retrieve it," he said softly. "Get it back to the village green and the prayer-meeting. It was the prayer-meeting, remember, which brought America into the War."

"But how? McGurks has worked that beat to death."

"McGurks!" he cried contemptuously. "The time is past for slobber, my son. What they want is the prophetic, the apocalyptic, and by the bones of Habbakuk they shall have it. I am going to solemnise the remotest parts of the great Republic, and then," he smiled serenely, "I shall interpret that solemnity to the world. First the fact and then the moral—that's the lay-out."

He stuffed my clippings into his pocket and took himself off, and there was that in his eye which foreboded trouble. Someone was going to have to sit up when Willinck looked like that. My hope was that it would be Moscow, but the time was getting terribly short. Any day might bring the news that the Patriarch had gone to his reward.

I heard nothing for several weeks, and then Punk suddenly became active, and carried some extraordinary stuff. It was mostly extracts from respectable papers in the Middle West and the South, reports of meetings which seemed to have worked themselves into hysteria, and rumours of secret gatherings of young men which suggested the Klu-Klux-Klan. Moscow had a Press agency of its own in London, and it began to worry Ladas for more American news. Ladas in turn worried the C.C., but the C.C. was reticent. There was a Movement, we were told, but the Government had it well in hand, and we might disregard the scare-stuff Punk was sending; everything that was important and reliable would be in its own service. I thought I detected Willinck somewhere behind the scenes, and tried to get hold of him, but learned that he was out of town.

One afternoon, however, he dropped in, and I noticed that his high-boned face was leaner than ever, but that his cavernous eyes were happy. "The good work goes cannily on," he said—he was always quoting—and he flung at me a bundle of green clippings.

They were articles of his own in the American Press, chiefly the Sunday editions, and I noticed that he had selected the really influential country papers—one in Tennessee, one in Kentucky, and a batch from the Corn States.

I was staggered by the power of his stuff—Willinck had never to my knowledge written like this before. He didn't rave about Bolshevik crimes—people were sick of that—and he didn't bang the religious drum or thump the harmonium. McGurks had already done that to satiety. He quietly took it for granted that the crusade had begun, and that plain men all over the earth, who weren't looking for trouble, felt obliged to start out and abolish an infamy or never sleep peacefully in their beds again. He assumed that presently from all corners of the Christian world there would be an invading army moving towards Moscow, a thing that Governments could not check, a people's rising as irresistible as the change of the seasons. Assuming this, he told them just exactly what they would see.

I can't do justice to Willinck by merely describing these articles; I ought to have them here to read to you. Noble English they were, and as simple as the Psalms... He pictured the constitution of the army, every kind of tongue and dialect and class, with the same kind of discipline as Cromwell's New Model—Ironsides every one of them, rational, moderate-minded fanatics, the most dangerous kind. It was like Paradise Lost—Michael going out against Belial... And then the description of Russia—a wide grey world, all pale colours and watery lights, broken villages, tattered little towns ruled by a few miscreants with rifles, railway tracks red with rust, ruinous great palaces plastered over with obscene posters, starving hopeless people, children with old vicious faces ... God knows where he got the stuff from—mainly his macabre imagination, but I daresay there was a lot of truth in the details, for he had his own ways of acquiring knowledge.

But the end was the masterpiece. He said that the true rulers were not those whose names appeared in the papers, but one or two secret madmen who sat behind the screen and spun their bloody webs. He described the crusaders breaking through shell after shell, like one of those Chinese boxes which you open only to find another inside till you end with a thing like a pea. There were layers of Jew officials and Lett mercenaries and camouflaging journalists, and always as you went deeper the thing became more inhuman and the air more fetid. At the end you had the demented Mongol—that was a good touch for the Middle West—the incarnation of the back-world of the Orient. Willinck only hinted at this ultimate camarilla, but his hints were gruesome. To one of them he gave the name of Uriel—a kind of worm-eaten archangel of the Pit, but the worst he called Glubet. He must have got the word out of a passage in Catullus which is not read in schools, and he made a shuddering thing of it—the rancid toad-man, living among half-lights and blood, adroit and sleepless as sin, but cracking now and then into idiot laughter.

You may imagine how this took hold of the Bible Belt. I never made out what exactly happened, but I have no doubt

that there were the rudiments of one of those mass movements, before which Governments and newspapers, combines and Press agencies, Wall Street and Lombard Street and common prudence are helpless. You could see it in the messages C.C. sent and its agitated service cables to its people. The Moscow Agency sat on our doorstep and bleated for more news, and all the while Punk was ladling out firewater to every paper that would take it.

"So much for the facts," Willinck said calmly. "Now I proceed to point the moral in the proper quarters!"

If he was good at kindling a fire he was better at explaining just how hot it was and how fast it would spread. I have told you that he was about the only English journalist with a Continental reputation. Well, he proceeded to exploit that reputation in selected papers which he knew would cross the Russian frontier. He was busy in the Finnish and Latvian and Lithuanian Press, he appeared in the chief Polish daily, and in Germany his stuff was printed in one big Berlin paper and—curiously enough—in the whole financial chain. Willinck knew just how and where to strike. The line he took was very simple. He quietly explained what was happening in America and the British Dominions—that the outraged conscience of Christendom had awakened among simple folk, and that nothing on earth could hold it. It was a Puritan crusade, the most deadly kind. From every corner of the globe believers were about to assemble, ready to sacrifice themselves to root out an infamy. This was none of your Denikins and Koltchaks and Czarist emigré affairs; it was the world's Christian democracy, and a business democracy. No flag-waving or shouting, just a cold steady determination to get the job done, with ample money and men and an utter carelessness of what they spent on both. Cautious Governments might try to obstruct, but the people would compel them to toe the line. It was a militant League of Nations, with the Bible in one hand and the latest brand of munition in the other.

We had a feverish time at Ladas in those days. The British Press was too much occupied with the strike to pay full attention, but the Press of every other country was on its hind legs. Presently things began to happen. The extracts from Pravda and Izvestia, which we got from Riga and Warsaw, became every day more like the howling of epileptic wolves. Then came the news that Moscow had ordered a very substantial addition to the Red Army. I telephoned this item to Willinck, and he came round to see me.

"The wind is rising," he said. "The fear of the Lord is descending on the tribes, and that we know is the beginning of wisdom."

I observed that Moscow had certainly got the wind up, but that I didn't see why. "You don't mean to say that you have got them to believe in your precious crusade."

He nodded cheerfully. "Why not? My dear Martendale, you haven't studied the mentality of these gentry as I have. Do you realise that the favourite reading of the Russian peasant used to be Milton? Before the War you could buy a translation of Paradise Lost at every book kiosk in every country fair. These rootless intellectuals have cast off all they could, but at the back of their heads the peasant superstition remains. They are afraid in their bones of a spirit that they think is in Puritanism. That's why this American business worries them so. They think they are a match for Rome, and they wouldn't have minded if the racket had been started by the Knights of Columbus or that kind of show. But they think it comes from the meeting-house, and that scares them cold."

"Hang it all," I said, "they must know the soft thing modern Puritanism is—all slushy hymns and inspirational advertising."

"Happily they don't. And I'm not sure that their ignorance is not wiser than your knowledge, my emancipated friend. I'm inclined to think that something may yet come out of the Bible Christian that will surprise the world... But not this time. I fancy the trick has been done. You might let me know as soon as you hear anything." And he moved off, whistling contentedly through his teeth.

He was right. Three days later we got the news from Warsaw, and the Moscow Agency confirmed it. The Patriarch had been released and sent across the frontier, and was now being coddled and fêted in Poland. I rang up Willinck, and listened to his modest Nunc dimittis over the telephone.

He said he was going to take a holiday and go into the country to sleep. He pointed out for my edification that the weak things of the world—meaning himself—could still confound the strong, and he advised me to reconsider the foundations of my creed in the light of this surprising miracle.

Well, that is my story. We heard no more of the crusade in America, except that the Fundamentalists seemed to have got a second wind from it and started a large-scale heresy hunt. Several English bishops said that the release of the Patriarch was an answer to prayer; our Press pointed out how civilisation, if it spoke with one voice, would be listened to even in Russia; and Labour papers took occasion to enlarge on the fundamental reasonableness and urbanity of the Moscow Government.

Personally I think that Willinck drew the right moral. But the main credit really belonged to something a great deal weaker than he—the aged Tubb, now sleeping under a painted cast-iron gravestone among the dust-devils and meerkats of Rhenosterspruit.

FULL CIRCLE

MARTIN PECKWETHER'S STORY

*Between the Windrush and the Colne
I found a little house of stone—
A little wicked house of stone.*

Peckwether, the historian, whose turn for story-telling came at our last dinner before the summer interregnum, apologised for reading his narrative. He was not good, he said, at impromptu composition. He also congratulated himself on Leithen's absence. "He comes into the story, and I should feel rather embarrassed talking about him to his face. But he has read my manuscripts and approved it, so you have two reliable witnesses to a queerish tale."

In his precise academic voice he read what follows.

The October day was brightening towards late afternoon when Leithen and I climbed the hill above the stream and came in sight of the house. All morning a haze with the sheen of pearl in it had lain on the folds of downland, and the vision of far horizons, which is the glory of Cotswold, had been veiled, so that every valley seemed a place enclosed and set apart. But now a glow had come into the air, and for a little the autumn lawns had the tints of summer. The gold of sunshine was warm on the grasses, and only the riot of colour in the berry-laden edges of the fields and the slender woodlands told of the failing year.

We were looking into a green cup of the hills, and it was all a garden. A little place, bounded by slopes that defined its graciousness with no hint of barrier, so that a dweller there, though his view was but half a mile on any side, would yet have the sense of dwelling on uplands and commanding the world. Round the top edge ran an old wall of stones, beyond which the October bracken flamed to the skyline. Inside were folds of ancient pasture with here and there a thorn-bush, falling to rose gardens, and, on one side, to the smooth sward of a terrace above a tiny lake. At the heart of it stood the house, like a jewel well set. It was a miniature, but by the hand of a master. The style was late seventeenth-century, when an agreeable classic convention had opened up to sunlight and comfort the dark magnificence of the Tudor fashion. The place had the spacious air of a great mansion, and was finished in every detail with a fine scrupulousness. Only when the eye measured its proportions with the woods and the hillside did the mind perceive that it was a small dwelling. The stone of Cotswold takes curiously the colour of the weather. Under thunder-clouds it will be as dark as basalt; on a grey day it is grey like lava; but in sunshine it absorbs the sun. At the moment the little house was pale gold, like honey.

Leithen swung a long leg across the stile.

"Pretty good, isn't it?" he said. "It's pure authentic Sir Christopher Wren. The name is worthy of it, too. It is called Fullcircle."

He told me its story. It had been built after the Restoration by the Carteron family, whose wide domains ran into these hills. The Lord Carteron of the day was a friend of the Merry Monarch, but it was not as a sanctuary for orgies that he built the house. Perhaps he was tired of the gloomy splendour of Minster Carteron, and wanted a home of his own and not of his ancestors' choosing. He had an elegant taste in letters, as we can learn from his neat imitations of Martial, his pretty Bucolics, and the more than respectable Latin hexameters of his *Ars Vivendi*. Being a great nobleman, he had the best skill of the day to construct his hermitage, and here he would retire for months at a time with like-minded friends to a world of books and gardens. He seems to have had no ill-wishers; contemporary memoirs speak of him charitably, and Dryden spared him four lines of encomium. "A selfish old dog," Leithen called him. "He had the good sense to eschew politics and enjoy life. His soul is in that little house. He only did one rash thing in his career—he anticipated the King, his master, by some years in turning Papist."

I asked about its later history.

"After his death it passed to a younger branch of the Carterons. It left them in the eighteenth century, and the Applebys got it. They were a jovial lot of hunting squires, and let the library go to the dogs. Old Colonel Appleby was still alive when I came to Borrowby. Something went wrong in his inside when he was nearly seventy, and the doctors knocked him off liquor. Not that he drank too much, though he did himself well. That finished the poor old boy. He told me that it revealed to him the amazing truth that during a long and, as he hoped, publicly useful life he had never been quite sober. He was a good fellow, and I missed him when he died... The place went to a remote cousin called Giffen."

Leithen's eyes, as they scanned the prospect, seemed amused.

"Julian and Ursula Giffen... I daresay you know the names. They always hunt in couples, and write books about sociology and advanced ethics and psychics—books called either 'The New This or That,' or 'Towards Something or Other.' You know the sort of thing. They're deep in all the pseudo-sciences... Decent souls, but you can guess the type. I came across them in a case I had at the Old Bailey—defending a ruffian who was charged with murder. I hadn't a doubt he deserved hanging on twenty counts, but there wasn't enough evidence to convict him on this one. Dodderidge was at his worst—it was just before they induced him to retire—and his handling of the jury was a masterpiece of misdirection. Of course there was a shindy. The thing was a scandal, and it stirred up all the humanitarians, till the murderer was almost forgotten in the iniquities of old Dodderidge. You must remember the case. It filled the papers for weeks. Well, it was in that connection that I fell in with the Giffens. I got rather to like them, and I've been to see them at their house in Hampstead. Golly, what a place! Not a chair fit to sit down on, and colours that made you want to weep. I never met people

with heads so full of feathers.”

I said something about that being an odd milieu for him.

“Oh, I like human beings—all kinds. It’s my profession to study them, for without that the practice of the law would be a lean affair. There are hordes of people like the Giffens—only not so good, for they really have hearts of gold. They are the rootless stuff in the world to-day—in revolt against everything and everybody with any ancestry. A kind of innocent self-righteousness—wanting to be the people with whom wisdom begins and ends. They are mostly sensitive and tender-hearted, but they wear themselves out in an eternal dissidence. Can’t build, you know, for they object to all tools, but very ready to crab. They scorn any form of Christianity, but they’ll walk miles to patronise some wretched sect that has the merit of being brand-new. ‘Pioneers’ they call themselves—funny little unclad people adventuring into the cold desert with no maps. Giffen once described himself and his friends to me as ‘forward-looking,’ but that, of course, is just what they are not. To tackle the future you must have a firm grip of the past, and for them the past is only a pathological curiosity. They’re up to their necks in the mud of the present... But good, after a fashion; and innocent—sordidly innocent. Fate was in an ironical mood when she saddled them with that wicked little house.”

“Wicked” did not seem to me to be a fair word. It sat honey-coloured among its gardens with the meekness of a dove. The sound of a bicycle on the road behind made us turn round, and Leithen advanced to meet a dismounting rider.

He was a tallish fellow, some forty years old perhaps, with one of those fluffy blond beards that have never been shaved. Short-sighted, of course, and wore glasses. Biscuit-coloured knickerbockers and stockings clad his lean limbs.

Leithen introduced me. “We are walking to Borrowby, and stopped to admire your house. Could we have just a glimpse inside? I want Peckwether to see the staircase.”

Mr. Giffen was very willing. “I’ve been over to Clyston to send a telegram. We have some friends for the week-end who might interest you. Won’t you stay to tea?”

There was a gentle formal courtesy about him, and his voice had the facile intonations of one who loves to talk. He led us through a little gate, and along a shorn green walk among the bracken to a postern which gave entrance to the garden. Here, though it was October, there was still a bright show of roses, and the jet of water from the leaden Cupid dripped noiselessly among fallen petals. And then we stood before the doorway, above which the old Carteron had inscribed a line of Horace.

I have never seen anything quite like the little hall. There were two, indeed, separated by a staircase of a wood that looked like olive. Both were paved with black and white marble, and the inner was oval in shape, with a gallery supported on slender walnut pillars. It was all in miniature, but it had a spaciousness which no mere size could give. Also it seemed to be permeated by the quintessence of sunlight. Its air was of long-descended, confident, equable happiness.

There were voices on the terrace beyond the hall. Giffen led us into a room on the left. “You remember the house in Colonel Appleby’s time, Leithen. This was the chapel. It had always been the chapel. You see the change we have made... I beg your pardon, Mr. Peckwether. You’re not by any chance a Roman Catholic?”

The room had a white panelling, and on two sides deep windows. At one end was a fine Italian shrine of marble, and the floor was mosaic, blue and white, in a quaint Byzantine pattern. There was the same air of sunny cheerfulness as in the rest of the house. No mystery could find a lodgment here. It might have been a chapel for three centuries, but the place was pagan. The Giffens’ changes were no sort of desecration. A green-baize table filled most of the floor, surrounded by chairs like a committee room. On new raw-wood shelves were files of papers and stacks of blue-books and those desiccated works into which reformers of society torture the English tongue. Two typewriters stood on a side-table.

“It is our workroom,” Giffen explained, “where we hold our Sunday moots. Ursula thinks that a week-end is wasted unless it produces some piece of real work. Often a quite valuable committee has its beginning here. We try to make our home a refuge for busy workers, where they need not idle but can work under happy conditions.”

“A college situate in a clearer air,” Leithen quoted. But Giffen did not respond except with a smile; he had probably never heard of Lord Falkland.

A woman entered the room, a woman who might have been pretty if she had taken a little pains. Her reddish hair was drawn tightly back and dressed in a hard knot, and her clothes were horribly incongruous in a remote manor-house. She had bright eager eyes, like a bird, and hands that fluttered nervously. She greeted Leithen with warmth.

“We have settled down marvellously,” she told him. “Julian and I feel as if we had always lived here, and our life has arranged itself so perfectly. My Mothers’ Cottages in the village will soon be ready, and the Club is to be opened next week. Julian and I will carry on the classes ourselves for the first winter. Next year we hope to have a really fine programme... And then it is so pleasant to be able to entertain one’s friends... Won’t you stay to tea? Dr. Swope is here, and Mary Elliston, and Mr. Percy Blaker—you know, the Member of Parliament. Must you hurry off? I’m so sorry... What do you think of our workroom? It was utterly terrible when we first came here—a sort of decayed chapel, like a withered tuberose. We have let the air of heaven into it.”

I observed that I had never seen a house so full of space and light.

“Ah, you notice that? It is a curiously happy place to live in. Sometimes I’m almost afraid to feel so light-hearted. But we look on ourselves as only trustees. It is a trust we have to administer for the common good. You know, it’s a house on which you can lay your own impress. I can imagine places which dominate the dwellers, but Fullcircle is plastic, and we can make it our own just as much as if we had planned and built it. That’s our chief piece of good fortune.”

We took our leave, for we had no desire for the company of Dr. Swope and Mr. Percy Blaker. When we reached the

highway we halted and looked back on the little jewel. Shafts of the westering sun now caught the stone and turned the honey to ripe gold. Thin spires of amethyst smoke rose into the still air. I thought of the well-meaning restless couple inside its walls, and somehow they seemed out of the picture. They simply did not matter. The house was the thing, for I had never met in inanimate stone such an air of gentle masterfulness. It had a personality of its own, clean-cut and secure, like a high-born old dame among the females of profiteers. And Mrs. Giffen claimed to have given it her impress!

That night in the library at Borrowby, Leithen discoursed of the Restoration. Borrowby, of which, by the expenditure of much care and a good deal of money, he had made a civilised dwelling, is a Tudor manor of the Cotswold type, with high-pitched narrow roofs and tall stone chimneys, rising sheer from the meadows with something of the massiveness of a Border keep. He nodded towards the linen-fold panelling and the great carven chimney-piece.

"In this kind of house you have the mystery of the elder England. What was Raleigh's phrase? 'High thoughts and divine contemplations.' The people who built this sort of thing lived close to another world, and they thought bravely of death. It doesn't matter who they were—Crusaders or Elizabethans or Puritans—they had all poetry in them, and the heroic, and a great unworldliness. They had marvellous spirits, and plenty of joys and triumphs; but they had also their hours of black gloom. Their lives were like our weather—storm and sun. One thing they never feared—death. He walked too near them all their days to be a bogey."

"But the Restoration was a sharp break. It brought paganism into England—paganism and the art of life. No people have ever known better the secret of a bland happiness. Look at Fullcircle. There are no dark corners there. The man that built it knew all there was to be known about how to live... The trouble was that they did not know how to die. That was the one shadow on the glass. So they provided for it in the pagan way. They tried magic. They never became true Catholics—they were always pagan to the end, but they smuggled a priest into their lives. He was a kind of insurance premium against unwelcome mystery."

It was not till nearly two years later that I saw the Giffens again. The May-fly season was near its close, and I had snatched a day on a certain limpid Cotswold river. There was another man on the same beat, fishing from the opposite bank, and I watched him with some anxiety, for a duffer would have spoilt my day. To my relief I recognised Giffen. With him it was easy to come to terms, and presently the water was parcelled out between us.

We foregathered for luncheon, and I stood watching while he neatly stalked, rose and landed a trout. I confessed to some surprise—first that Giffen should be a fisherman at all, for it was not in keeping with my old notion of him; and second, that he should cast such a workman-like line. As we lunched together, I observed several changes. He had shaved his fluffy beard, and his face was notably less lean, and had the clear even sunburn of the countryman. His clothes, too, were different. They also were workman-like, and looked as if they belonged to him—no more the uneasy knickerbockers of the Sunday golfer.

"I'm desperately keen," he told me. "You see it's only my second May-fly season, and last year I was no better than a beginner. I wish I had known long ago what good fun fishing was. Isn't this a blessed place?" And he looked up through the canopy of flowering chestnuts to the June sky.

"I'm glad you've taken to sport," I said. "Even if you only come here for the week-ends, sport lets you into the secrets of the countryside."

"Oh, we don't go much to London now," was his answer. "We sold our Hampstead house a year ago. I can't think how I ever could stick that place. Ursula takes the same view... I wouldn't leave Oxfordshire just now for a thousand pounds. Do you smell the hawthorn? Last week this meadow was scented like Paradise. D'you know, Leithen's a queer fellow?"

I asked why.

"He once told me that this countryside in June made him sad. He said it was too perfect a thing for fallen humanity. I call that morbid. Do you see any sense in it?"

I knew what Leithen meant, but it would have taken too long to explain.

"I feel warm and good and happy here," he went on. "I used to talk about living close to nature. Rot! I didn't know what nature meant. Now—" He broke off. "By Jove, there's a kingfisher. That is only the second I've seen this year. They're getting uncommon with us."

"With us"—I liked the phrase. He was becoming a true countryman.

We had a good day—not extravagantly successful, but satisfactory, and he persuaded me to come home with him to Fullcircle for the night, explaining that I could catch an early train next morning at the junction. So we extricated a little two-seater from a thicket of lilacs, and he drove me through four miles of sweet-scented dusk, with nightingales shouting in every thicket. I changed into a suit of his flannels in a bedroom looking out on the little lake where trout were rising, and I remember that I whistled from pure light-heartedness. In that adorable house one seemed to be still breathing the air of the spring meadows.

Dinner was my first big surprise. It was admirable—plain but perfectly cooked, and with that excellence of basic material which is the glory of a well-appointed country house. There was wine too, which, I am certain, was a new thing. Giffen gave me a bottle of sound claret, and afterwards some more than decent port. My second surprise was my hostess. Her clothes, like her husband's, must have changed, for I did not notice what she was wearing, and I had noticed it only too clearly the last time we met. More remarkable still was the difference in her face. For the first time I realised that she was a pretty woman. The contours had softened and rounded, and there was a charming well-being in her eyes very different from the old restlessness. She looked content—ininitely content.

I asked about her Mothers' Cottages. She laughed cheerfully.

"I gave them up after the first year. They didn't mix well with the village people. I'm quite ready to admit my mistake, and it was the wrong kind of charity. The Londoners didn't like it—felt lonesome and sighed for the fried-fish shop; and the village women were shy of them—afraid of infectious complaints, you know. Julian and I have decided that our business is to look after our own people."

It may have been malicious, but I said something about the wonderful scheme of village education.

"Another relic of Cockneyism," laughed the lady; but Giffen looked a trifle shy.

"I gave it up because it didn't seem worth while. What is the use of spoiling a perfectly wholesome scheme of life by introducing unnecessary complications? Medicine is no good unless a man is sick, and these people are not sick. Education is the only cure for certain diseases the modern world has engendered, but if you don't find the disease the remedy is superfluous. The fact is, I hadn't the face to go on with the thing. I wanted to be taught rather than to teach. There's a whole world round me of which I know very little, and my first business is to get to understand it. Any village poacher can teach me more of the things that matter than I have to tell him."

"Besides, we have so much to do," his wife added. "There's the house and the garden, and the home-farm and the property. It isn't large, but it takes a lot of looking after."

The dining-room was long and low-ceilinged, and had a white panelling in bold relief. Through the windows came odours of the garden and a faint tinkle of water. The dusk was deepening, and the engravings in their rosewood frames were dim, but sufficient light remained to reveal the picture above the fire-place. It showed a middle-aged man in the clothes of the later Carolines. The plump tapering fingers of one hand held a book, the other was hidden in the folds of a flowered waistcoat. The long, curled wig framed a delicate face, with something of the grace of youth left to it. There were quizzical lines about the mouth, and the eyes smiled pleasantly yet very wisely. It was the face of a man I should have liked to dine with. He must have been the best of company.

Giffen answered my question.

"That's the Lord Carteron who built the house. No. No relation. Our people were the Applebys, who came in 1753. We've both fallen so deep in love with Fullcircle that we wanted to see the man who conceived it. I had some trouble getting it. It came out of the Minster Carteron sale, and I had to give a Jew dealer twice what he paid for it. It's a jolly thing to live with."

It was indeed a curiously charming picture. I found my eyes straying to it till the dusk obscured the features. It was the face of one wholly at home in a suave world, learned in all the urbanities. A good friend, I thought, the old lord must have been, and a superlative companion. I could imagine neat Horatian tags coming ripely from his lips. Not a strong face, but somehow a dominating one. The portrait of the long-dead gentleman had still the atmosphere of life. Giffen raised his glass of port to him as we rose from the table, as if to salute a comrade.

We moved to the room across the hall, which had once been the Giffens' workroom, the cradle of earnest committees and weighty memoranda. This was my third surprise. Baize-covered table and raw-wood shelves had disappeared. The place was now half smoking-room, half library. On the walls hung a fine collection of coloured sporting prints, and below them were ranged low Hepplewhite bookcases. The lamplight glowed on the ivory walls, and the room, like everything else in the house, was radiant. Above the mantelpiece was a stag's head—a fair eleven-pointer.

Giffen nodded proudly towards it. "I got that last year at Machray. My first stag."

There was a little table with an array of magazines and weekly papers. Some amusement must have been visible in my face as I caught sight of various light-hearted sporting journals, for he laughed apologetically. "You mustn't think that Ursula and I take in that stuff for ourselves. It amuses our guests, you know."

I dared say it did, but I was convinced that the guests were no longer Dr. Swope and Mr. Percy Blaker.

One of my many failings is that I can never enter a room containing books without scanning the titles. Giffen's collection won my hearty approval. There were the very few novelists I can read myself—Miss Austen and Sir Walter and the admirable Marryat; there was a shelf full of memoirs, and a good deal of 17th- and 18th- century poetry; there was a set of the classics in fine editions, Bodonis and Baskervilles and suchlike; there was much county history, and one or two valuable old herbals and itineraries. I was certain that two years before Giffen would have had no use for literature except some muddy Russian oddments, and I am positive that he would not have known the name of Surtees. Yet there stood the tall octavos recording the unedifying careers of Mr. Jorrocks, Mr. Facey Romford, and Mr. Soapy Sponge.

I was a little bewildered as I stretched my legs in a very deep arm-chair. Suddenly I had a strong impression of looking on at a play. My hosts seemed to be automata, moving docilely at the orders of a masterful stage-manager, and yet with no sense of bondage. And as I looked on they faded off the scene, and there was only one personality—that house so serene and secure, smiling at our modern antics, but weaving all the while an iron spell round its lovers. For a second I felt an oppression as of something to be resisted.

But no. There was no oppression. The house was too well-bred and disdainful to seek to captivate. Only those who fell in love with it could know its mastery, for all love exacts a price. It was far more than a thing of stone and lime; it was a creed, an art, a scheme of life—older than any Carteron, older than England. Somewhere far back in time—in Rome, in Attica, or in an Ægean island—there must have been such places; but then they called them temples, and gods dwelt in them.

I was roused by Giffen's voice discoursing of his books. "I've been rubbing up my classics again," he was saying. "Queer

thing, but ever since I left Cambridge I have been out of the mood for them. And I'm shockingly ill-read in English literature. I wish I had more time for reading, for it means a lot to me."

"There is such an embarrassment of riches here," said his wife. "The days are far too short for all there is to do. Even when there is nobody staying in the house I find every hour occupied. It's delicious to be busy over things one really cares for."

"All the same I wish I could do more reading," said Giffen. "I've never wanted to so much before."

"But you come in tired from shooting and sleep sound till dinner," said the lady, laying an affectionate hand on his shoulder.

They were happy people, and I like happiness. Self-absorbed perhaps, but I prefer selfishness in the ordinary way of things. We are most of us selfish dogs, and altruism makes us uncomfortable. But I had somewhere in my mind a shade of uneasiness, for I was the witness of a transformation too swift and violent to be wholly natural. Years, no doubt, turn our eyes inward and abate our heroics, but not a trifle of two or three. Some agency had been at work here, some agency other and more potent than the process of time. The thing fascinated and partly frightened me. For the Giffens—though I scarcely dared to admit it—had deteriorated. They were far pleasanter people. I liked them infinitely better. I hoped to see them often again. I detested the type they used to represent, and shunned it like the plague. They were wise now, and mellow, and most agreeable human beings. But some virtue had gone out of them. An uncomfortable virtue, no doubt, but a virtue, something generous and adventurous. Before their faces had had a sort of wistful kindness. Now they had geniality—which is not the same thing.

What was the agency of this miracle? It was all around me: the ivory panelling, the olive-wood staircase, the lovely pillared hall. I got up to go to bed with a kind of awe on me. As Mrs. Giffen lit my candle, she saw my eyes wandering among the gracious shadows.

"Isn't it wonderful," she said, "to have found a house which fits us like a glove? No! Closer. Fits us as a bearskin fits the bear. It has taken our impress like wax."

Somehow I didn't think that the impress had come from the Giffens' side.

A November afternoon found Leithen and myself jogging homewards from a run with the Heythrop. It had been a wretched day. Twice we had found and lost, and then a deluge had set in which scattered the field. I had taken a hearty toss into a swamp, and got as wet as a man may be, but the steady downpour soon reduced everyone to a like condition. When we turned towards Borrowby the rain ceased, and an icy wind blew out of the east which partially dried our sopping clothes. All the grace had faded from the Cotswold valleys. The streams were brown torrents, the meadows lagoons, the ridges bleak and grey, and a sky of scurrying clouds cast leaden shadows. It was a matter of ten miles to Borrowby: we had long ago emptied our flasks, and I longed for something hot to take the chill out of my bones.

"Let's look in at Fullcircle," said Leithen, as we emerged on the highroad from a muddy lane. "We'll make the Giffens give us tea. You'll find changes there."

I asked what changes, but he only smiled and told me to wait and see.

My mind was busy with surmises as we rode up the avenue. I thought of drink or drugs, and promptly discarded the notion. Fullcircle was above all things decorous and wholesome. Leithen could not mean the change in the Giffens' ways which had so impressed me a year before, for he and I had long ago discussed that. I was still puzzling over his words when we found ourselves in the inner hall, with the Giffens making a hospitable fuss over us. The place was more delectable than ever. Outside was a dark November day, yet the little house seemed to be transfused with sunshine. I do not know by what art the old builders had planned it, but the airy pilasters, the perfect lines of the ceiling, the soft colouring of the wood seemed to lay open the house to a clear sky. Logs burned brightly on the massive steel andirons, and the scent and the fine blue smoke of them strengthened the illusion of summer.

Mrs. Giffen would have had us change into dry things, but Leithen pleaded a waiting dinner at Borrowby. The two of us stood by the fireplace, drinking tea, the warmth drawing out a cloud of vapour from our clothes to mingle with the wood-smoke. Giffen lounged in an armchair, and his wife sat by the tea-table. I was looking for the changes of which Leithen had spoken.

I did not find them in Giffen. He was much as I remembered him on the June night when I had slept here, a trifle fuller in the face perhaps, a little more placid about the mouth and eyes. He looked a man completely content with life. His smile came readily and his easy laugh. Was it my fancy, or had he acquired a look of the picture in the dining-room? I nearly made an errand to go and see it. It seemed to me that his mouth had now something of the portrait's delicate complacency. Lely would have found him a fit subject, though he might have boggled at his lean hands.

But his wife! Ah, there the changes were unmistakable. She was comely now rather than pretty, and the contours of her face had grown heavier. The eagerness had gone from her eyes and left only comfort and good-humour. There was a suspicion, ever so slight, of rouge and powder. She had a string of good pearls—the first time I had seen her wear jewels. The hand that poured out the tea was plump, shapely, and well cared for. I was looking at a most satisfactory mistress of a country house, who would see that nothing was lacking to the part.

She talked more and laughed oftener. Her voice had an airy lightness which would have made the silliest prattle charming.

"We are going to fill the house with young people and give a ball at Christmas," she announced. "This hall is simply clamouring to be danced in. You must come both of you. Promise me. And, Mr. Leithen, it would be very nice if you

brought a party from Borrowby. Young men, please. We are overstocked with girls in these parts... We must do something to make the country cheerful in winter-time."

I observed that no season could make Fullcircle other than cheerful.

"How nice of you!" she cried. "To praise a house is to praise the householders, for a dwelling is just what its inmates make it. Borrowby is you, Mr. Leithen, and Fullcircle us."

"Shall we exchange?" Leithen asked.

She made a mouth. "Borrowby would crush me, but it suits a Gothic survival like you. Do you think you would be happy here?"

"Happy," said Leithen thoughtfully. "Happy? Yes, undoubtedly. But it might be bad for my soul... There's just time for a pipe, Giffen, and then we must be off."

I was filling my pipe as we crossed the outer hall, and was about to enter the smoking-room I so well remembered when Giffen laid a hand on my arm.

"We don't smoke there now," he said hastily.

He opened the door and I looked in... The place had suffered its third metamorphosis. The marble shrine which I had noticed on my first visit had been brought back, and the blue mosaic pavement and the ivory walls were bare. At the eastern end stood a little altar, with above it a copy of a Correggio Madonna.

A faint smell of incense hung in the air and the fragrance of hothouse flowers. It was a chapel, but, I swear, a more pagan place than when it had been workroom or smoking-room.

Giffen gently shut the door. "Perhaps you didn't know, but some months ago my wife became a Catholic. It is a good thing for women, I think. It gives them a regular ritual for their lives. So we restored the chapel. It had always been there in the days of the Carterons and the Applebys."

"And you?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't bother much about these things. But I propose to follow suit. It will please Ursula and do no harm to anybody."

* * * * *

We halted on the brow of the hill and looked back on the garden valley. Leithen's laugh, as he gazed, had more awe than mirth in it.

"That little wicked house! I'm going to hunt up every scrap I can find about old Tom Carteron. He must have been an uncommon clever fellow. He's still alive down there and making people do as he did... In that kind of place you may expel the priest and sweep it and garnish it. But he always returns."

The wrack was lifting before the wind and a shaft of late watery sun fell on the grey walls. It seemed to me that the little house wore an air of gentle triumph.

THE END

THE COURTS OF THE MORNING



by
JOHN BUCHAN

PROLOGUE BY SIR RICHARD HANNAY

I

This story begins, so far as I am concerned, in the August of 192-, when I had for the second time a lease of the forest of Machray. Mary and Peter John and the household had gone north at the end of July, but I was detained for ten days in London over the business of a Rhodesian land company, of which I had recently become chairman. I was putting up at my club, and one morning I was rung up by Ellery Willis of the American Embassy, who had been wiring about me all over the country. He seemed to be in a hurry to see me, so I asked him to luncheon.

I had known Willis in the War, when he had had a field battery with the American 2nd Corps. After that he had been on the Headquarters Staff at Washington, and was now a military attache at the London Embassy. He seemed to have a good many duties besides the study of military affairs, and when I met him he was always discoursing about world politics and the need of England and America getting close to each other. I agreed with him about that, but used to tell him that the best way was not to talk too much, but to send Englishmen and Americans fishing together. He was an ardent, rather solemn young man, but with a quick sense of humour, and Mary said he was the best dancer in London.

He cut at once into business.

"You are a friend of Mr Blenkiron's—John S. Blenkiron," he said. "I want to know if you have heard from him lately?"

"Not for months," I said. "Blenkiron was never a regular correspondent, and the fount has dried up since last December."

He looked grave. "That's bad," he said.

"There's nothing wrong?" I asked anxiously.

"Only that nobody knows what has become of him."

"But that was always the old ruffian's way. He likes to cover his tracks, like Providence, and turn up suddenly when he is not expected. There's a lot of the child in him."

Willis shook his head. "I expect there's more to it this time than that. I'll tell you what we know. He made a dive back into Wall Street last fall, and did some big things in electrolytic zinc. Then he went to Santa Catalina, and returned to New York in the second week of January. On the 27th day of that month he sailed for Panama in a fruit-steamer, having previously shut up his office and wound up his affairs as if he were thinking of his decease. From that day no one has clapped eyes on him. He has nothing in the way of family life, but I needn't tell you that he has plenty of friends, and they are beginning to get anxious. All that we can find out is that last March a little Jew man turned up in New York with an order from Mr Blenkiron for a quarter of a million dollars. It was all right, and the money was handed over, and the shape it took was a draft on Valparaiso to be paid after countersignature by our consul there. We got in touch with the consul, and heard that the money had been collected on Mr Blenkiron's instructions by some fellow with a Spanish name."

"That sounds queer," I said.

"It certainly does. But there's something queerer still. In June Mr Neston of the Treasury got a letter—he had been a business associate of Mr Blenkiron's at one time and they used to go bass-fishing in Minnesota. It didn't come by mail, but was handed in one evening at Mr Neston's private residence. It bore no name, but there could be no doubt it was from Mr Blenkiron. I have seen a copy of it with Mr Neston's commentary, and I can tell you it was great stuff. The writer warned his old friend that there might be trouble brewing in certain parts of the world which he did not specify, and he begged him, as he was a good American, to keep his eyes skinned. He also said that he, the writer, might have to ask some day soon for help, and that he counted on getting it. The funny thing was that the letter was in a kind of cypher. I understand that Mr Blenkiron used to write to his friends in a high-coloured version of our national slang, and that he had a good many private expressions that were Choctaw to those that did not know him. That letter might have been read as the perfectly natural expression of a light-headed American, who had been having too many cocktails and was writing drivel about his health and his habits and the fine weather. But, knowing how to construe it, it made Mr Neston sit up and take notice... There was another thing.

"I have said that the letter had no name, but it was signed all the same. It seems that in any very important and intimate communication Mr Blenkiron used to make a hieroglyphic of his surname and stick J. S. after it in brackets. That was meant to be a kind of S.O.S. to his friends that the thing was mighty important. Well, this letter had the hieroglyphic in three places, scrawled in as if the writer had been playing absent-mindedly with his pen. Mr Neston's conclusion was that Mr Blenkiron had written it in some place where he was not allowed to communicate freely, and might be in considerable danger."

I admitted that it looked like it, and said that if Blenkiron had been captured by bandits and held up to ransom, I could vouch for it, from what I knew of him, that his captors had done the worst day's work of their lives. I asked what his Government was doing about it.

"Nothing official," said Willis, "for we are in this difficulty. We are afraid of spoiling Mr Blenkiron's game, whatever it may be. Washington has a very high respect for his talents, and we should hate to cross him by being officious. All the same, we are anxious, and that is why I have come to you."

He proceeded to give me one of his lectures on international affairs. America, by his way of it, was in a delicate position, in spite of being rich enough to buy up the globe. She was trying to set her house in order, and it was a large-sized job, owing to the melting-pot not properly melting but leaving chunks of undigested matter. That was the real reason why

she could not take a big hand in world-affairs—the League of Nations and so forth; she had too much to do at home, and wanted all her energies for it.

That was the reason, too, why she was so set on prohibition of all kinds—drink, drugs, and aliens. But her hand might be forced, if anything went wrong in the American continent itself, because of her Monroe Doctrine. She didn't want any foreign complications at the moment. They would be very awkward for her, and possibly very dangerous, and she would resolutely keep out of them, unless they occurred, so to speak, opposite her front yard, in which case she would be bound to intervene. Therefore, if anyone wanted to do her the worst kind of turn, he would stir up trouble in some place like South America. Willis believed that Blenkiron had got on the track of something of the kind, and was trying to warn her.

That sounded reasonable enough, but what was not reasonable was Willis's straight request that I should put on my boots and go and look for him. "We can't do anything officially," he repeated. "An American would be suspected where an Englishman would get through. Besides, I believe you are his closest friend."

Of course I at once disabused him of that notion. I knew old Blenkiron too well to be nervous about him; he could no more be badly lost than Ulysses. I saw Willis's point about American politics, but they were no concern of mine. I told him in so many words that my travelling days were over, that I was a landowner and a married man and the father of a son, with all sorts of prior duties. But he was so downcast at my refusal, and so earnest that something should be done, that I promised to put the matter before Sandy Arbuthnot. I proposed in any case to go to Laverlaw for a couple of days on my way to Machray.

II

Laverlaw is a very good imitation of the end of the world. You alight at a wayside station in a Border valley, and drive for eight miles up a tributary glen between high green hills; then, when the stream has grown small and you think that the glen must stop, it suddenly opens into an upland paradise—an amphitheatre of turf and woodland which is the park and in the heart of it an old stone castle. The keep was once a peel-tower, famous in a hundred ballads, and the house which had grown round dated mostly from the sixteen century. I had never been there before, for the old Lord Clanroyden had lived sick and solitary for years, and Sandy had only succeeded in the previous February. When arrived in the early gloaming, with that green cup swimming in amber light and the bell-heather on the high ground smouldering in the sunset, I had to rub my eyes to make sure that the place was not a dream. I thought it the right kind of home for Sandy, a fairy-tale fortress lying secret in the hills from which he could descend to colour the prose of the world.

Sandy met me at the gates and made me get out of the car and walk the rest of the way with him. In his shocking old tweeds, with his lithe figure, his girlish colouring, and his steady, glowing eyes, he fitted well into the fantastic landscape. You could see that he was glad to have me there, and he made me welcome with all his old warmth, but in the half-mile walk I felt a subtle change him. His talk didn't bubble over as it used to, and I had feeling that he was rather making conversation. I wonder if being a peer and a landowner and that sort of thing had sobered him, but I promptly dismissed the idea. I wasn't prepared to believe that external circumstances could have any effect on one who had about as much worldliness as fakir with his begging-bowl.

All the same there was a change, and I was conscious it during the evening. Archie Roylance and his young wife were staying there—like me, for the first time. I am prepared to rank Janet Roylance second only to Mary as the prettiest and most delightful thing in the world, and I knew that she and Sandy were close friends. In the daytime she was always, so to speak, booted and spurred, and seemed to have the alertness and vigour of an active boy; in the evening she used to become the daintiest lit porcelain lady; and those who saw Janet as a Dresden shepherdess in a drawing-room would scarcely believe that it was the same person who that morning had been scampering over the heather. She was in tremendous spirits, and Archie is a cheerful soul, but they found it heavy going with Sandy.

We dined in what had been the hall of the thirteenth-century keep—stone walls, a fireplace like a cave, and Jacobean rafters and panelling. Sandy wore the green coat of some Border club, and sat like a solemn sprite in the great chair at the head of his table, while Janet tried to keep the talk going from the other end. The ancient candelabra, which gave a dim religious light, and the long lines of mailed or periwigged Arbuthnots on the wall made the place too heavy a setting for one whom I had always known as a dweller in tents. I felt somehow as if the old Sandy were being shackled and stifled by this feudal magnificence.

The Roylances, having been married in the winter, had postponed their honeymoon, and Janet was full of plans for bringing it off that autumn. She rather fancied the East. Sandy was discouraging. The East, he said, was simply dusty bric-a-brac, for the spirit had gone out of it, and there were no mysteries left, only half-baked Occidentalism. "Go to Samarkand, and you will get the chatter of Bloomsbury intellectuals. I expect in Lhasa they are discussing Freud."

I suggested South Africa, or a trip up through the Lakes to the Nile. Janet vetoed this, because of Archie's stiff leg; she thought big-game hunting would be bad for him, and she considered with justice that if he were in the neighbourhood of wild beasts he would go after them.

Archie himself was inclined to South America. He said he had always had a romance about that part of the world, and he understood that it was the only place which still held some geographical secrets. Also it appeared that, though a poor linguist, he could talk a sort of Spanish, owing to having spent some time in the Madrid Embassy.

"I've never been there," said Sandy, "and I never want to go. It's too big and badly put together, like a child's mud castle. There's cannibal fish, and every kind of noxious insect, and it's the happy home of poisons, and the people of the future will be concerned with the New World. It might be rather useful to me in politics if I went and had a look round."

Sandy laughed. "Better go to the States. That's the power-house where you press the button."

This gave me the chance to talk about Blenkiron, and I told them what I had heard from Ellery Willis. Archie, who had only seen Blenkiron in the last year of the War, was rather excited; Sandy, who knew him intimately, was apathetic.

"He'll turn up all right. Trust John S. You can't mislay a battered warrior like that. You'd better tell Willis that he is doing a very poor service to Blenkiron by starting a hue-and-cry. The old man won't like it a bit."

"But, I assure you, Willis is very much in earnest. He wanted me to start out right away on a secret expedition, and to quiet him I promised to speak to you."

"Well, you've spoken," said Sandy, "and you can tell him I think it moonshine. Blenkiron will come back to his friends when his job is done, whatever it may be... Unless Archie likes to take the thing on?"

He seemed to want to drop the subject, but Janet broke in: "I always understood that Mr Blenkiron had no relations except the nephew who was killed in the War. But I met a girl last month who was a niece or a cousin of his. She told me she had been staying in the Borders and had been taken to see you at Laverlaw."

Sandy looked up, and I could have sworn that a shade of anxiety passed over his face.

"Her name was Dasent," Janet went on. "I can't remember her Christian name."

"Probably Irene—pronounced Ireen," said Sandy. "I remember her. She came over with the Manorwaters. She seemed to have got a little mixed about Scotland, for she wanted to know why I wasn't wearing a kilt, and I told her because I was neither a Highlander nor a Cockney stock-broker." He spoke sharply, as if the visit had left an unpleasant memory.

"I should like to meet a niece of Blenkiron's," I said "Tell me more about her."

In reply Sandy made a few comments on American young women which were not flattering. I could see what had happened—Sandy at a loose end and a little choked by his new life, and a brisk and ignorant lady who wanted to enthuse about it. They had met "head on," as Americans say.

"You didn't like her?" I asked.

"I didn't think enough about her to dislike her. Ask Janet."

"I only saw her for about an hour," said that lady. "She came to stay with Junius and Agatha at Strathlarrig just when I was leaving. I think I rather liked her. She was from South Carolina, and had a nice, soft, slurring voice. So far as I remember she talked very little. She looked delicious, too-tallish and slim and rather dark, with deep eyes that said all sorts of wonderful things. You must be as blind as a bat, Sandy, if you didn't see that."

"I am. I don't boast of it—indeed I'm rather ashamed of it—but I'm horribly unsusceptible. Once—long ago—when I was at Oxford, I was staying in the West Highlands, and in the evening we sat in a room which looked over the sea into the sunset, and a girl sang old songs. I don't remember whether she was pretty or not—I don't remember her name—but I remember that her singing made me want to fall in love... Since I grew up I've had no time."

Janet was shocked. "But, Sandy dear, you must marry."

He shook his head. "Never! I should make a rotten husband. Besides, Dick and Archie have carried off the only two women I love."

After that he seemed to cheer up. I remember that he took to telling stories of poisons—I suppose the mention of South America set him off on that. He showed us a box with three tiny pellets in it, things which looked like discoloured pearls, and which he said were the most mysterious narcotics in the world, and one of the deadliest poisons. They reminded me of pills I once got from an old Portugee prospector, which I carried about with me for years but never touched, pills to be used if you were lost in the bush, for one was said to put you into a forty-hours sleep and two gave a painless death. Sandy would explain nothing further about them, and locked them away.

What with one thing and another we had rather a jolly evening. But next morning, when the Roylances had gone, I had the same impression of some subtle change. This new Sandy was not the one I had known. We went for a long tramp on the hills, with sandwiches in our pockets, for neither of us seemed inclined to shoulder a gun. It was a crisp morning with a slight frost, and before midday it had become one of those blazing August days when there is not a breath of wind and the heather smells as hot as tamarisks.

We climbed the Lammer Law and did about twenty miles of a circuit along the hill-tops. It was excellent training for Machray, and I would have enjoyed myself had it not been for Sandy.

He talked a great deal and it was all in one strain, and—for a marvel—all about himself. The gist of it was that he was as one born out of due season, and mighty discontented with his lot.

"I can't grow old decently," he said. "Here am I—over forty—and I haven't matured one bit since I left Oxford. I don't want to do the things befitting my age and position. I suppose I ought to be ambitious—make speeches in the House of Lords—become an expert on some rotten subject—take the chair at public dinners—row my weight in the silly old boat—and end by governing some distant Dominion."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because I don't want to. I'd rather eat cold mutton in a cabman's shelter, as Lamancha once observed about political banquets. Good Lord, Dick, I can't begin to tell you how I loathe the little squirrel's cage of the careerists. All that solemn twaddle about trifles! Oh, I daresay it's got to be done by somebody, but not by me. If I touched politics I'd join the Labour Party, not because I think then less futile than the others, but because as yet they haven't got such a larder of loaves and fishes."

"I want a job," he declared a little later. "I was meant by Providence to be in a service, and to do work under discipline—not for what it brought me, but because it has to be done. I'm a bad case of the inferiority complex. When I see one of my shepherds at work, or the hands coming out of a factory, I'm ashamed of myself. The all have their niche, and it is something that matters, whereas I am a cumberer of the ground. If I want to work I've got to make the job for myself, and the one motive is personal vanity. I tell you, I'm in very real danger of losing my self-respect."

It was no good arguing with Sandy in this mood, though there were a great many common-sense things I wanted the say. The danger with anyone so high-strung and imaginative as he is that every now and then come periods of self disgust and despondency.

"You're like Ulysses," I told him. "The fellow in Tennyson's poem, you know. Well, there's a widish world before you, and a pretty unsettled one. Ships sail every day to some part of it."

He shook his head.

"That's the rub. As I've told you, I can't grow up. There's a couple of lines by some poet that describes me accurately: 'He is crazed by the spell of far Arabia, It has stolen his mind away.' Far Arabia—that's my trouble. But the Ulysses business won't do for an ageing child of forty. Besides, what about the mariners? Where are the 'free hearts, free foreheads?' We used to have a rather nice little Round Table, Dick, but it is all broken up now and the wood turned into cigar-boxes for wedding present; Peter is dead, and you and Archie are married, and Leithe and Lamancha are happy parts of the machine."

"There's still Blenkiron."

"He doesn't count. He was a wandering star, that joined us and revolved cheerfully with us for a little, and then shot back to where it belonged... You can't alter it by talking, my dear chap. I'm the old buccaneer marooned on a rock, watching his ancient companions passing in ocean liners."

We had reached the top of the hill above Laverlaw and were looking down into the green cup filled with the afternoon sunlight, in which the house seemed as natural a thing is a stone from the hillside. I observed that it was a very pleasant rock to be marooned on. Sandy stared at the scene, and for a moment did not reply.

"I wish I had been born an Englishman," he said at last. "Then I could have lived for that place, and been quite content to grow old in it. But that has never been our way. Our homes were only a jumping-off ground. We loved them gainfully and were always home-sick for them, but we were very little in them. That is the blight on us—we never had my sense of a continuing city, and our families survived only by accident. It's a miracle that I'm the sixteenth Clanroyden... It's not likely that there will be a seventeenth."

III

Left Laverlaw rather anxious about Sandy, and during our time at Machray I thought a good deal about my friend. He was in an odd, jumpy, unpredictable state of mind, and didn't see what was to be the outcome of it. At Machray I had a piece of news which showed his restlessness. Martendale, the newspaper man, came to stay, and was talking about boats, for his chief hobby is yacht-racing.

"What's Arbuthnot up to now?" he asked. "I saw him at Cowes—at least I'm pretty sure it was he. In an odd get-up, even for him."

I said that I had been staying with Sandy in August and that he had never mentioned Cowes, so I thought he must be mistaken. But Martendale was positive. He had been on the Squadron lawn, looking down on the crowd passing below, and he had seen Sandy, and caught his eye. He knew him slightly, but apparently Sandy had not wanted to be recognised and had simply stared at him. Martendale noticed him later, lunching out of a paper bag with the other trippers on the front. He was dressed like a yacht's hand, rather a shabby yacht's hand, and Martendale said that he thought he had a glimpse of him later with some of the crew of the big Argentine steam yacht, the Santa Barbara, which had been at Cowes that year. "The dago does not make an ornamental sailor," said Martendale, "and if it was Arbuthnot, and I am pretty certain it was, he managed to assimilate himself very well to his background. I only picked him out of the bunch by his clean-cut face. Do you happen to know if he speaks Spanish? They were all jabbering that lingo."

"Probably," I said. "He's one of the best linguists alive. But, all the same, I think you were mistaken. I saw him a fortnight later, and, I can tell you, he isn't in the humour for escapades."

In November, when I ran up to London from Fosse for a few days, I got further news of Sandy which really disquieted me. It appeared that he had gone down to the grass countries to hunt—a fact which in itself surprised me, for, though a fine horseman, he had always professed to hate hunting society. But for some reason or other he kept a couple of horses at Birkham and spent a lot of time there. And he seemed to have got mixed up with a rather raffish lot, for since the War the company in the Shires has not been what you might call select. The story told to me was that at a dinner where much champagne was swallowed Sandy had had a drunken row with a young profiteering lout, which had just about come to blows. He seemed to have behaved rather badly at dinner and worse later, for after having made a scene he had bolted, shown the white feather, and refused to take responsibility for what he had done.

Of course I didn't believe a word of it. In the first place, Sandy was as abstemious as a Moslem; in the second place, he had the temper of a seraph and never quarrelled; and, in the third place, he didn't keep any white feathers in his collection. But the story was repeated everywhere and, I am sorry to say, was believed. You see, Sandy had a great reputation in a vague way, but he hadn't the kind of large devoted acquaintance which could be always trusted to give the lie to a slander.

And I am bound to say that this story was abominably circumstantial. I had it from an eye-witness, quite a decent fellow whose word it was hard to disbelieve. He described a horrid scene—Sandy, rather drunk and deliberately insulting an ill-tempered oaf in the same condition, and then, when it almost came to fisticuffs, finking the consequences, and slipping off early next morning without a word of explanation.

I hotly denied the whole thing, but my denials did not carry very far. Sandy had disappeared again, and his absence gave gossip its chance. The ordinary story was that he had taken to drink or drugs—most people said drugs.

Even those who believed in him began to talk of a bad break-down, and explained that the kind of life he had led was bound some day to exact its penalty. I tried to get hold of him, but my telegrams to Laverlaw brought the answer that his lordship had gone abroad and left no address for letters.

Three days after Christmas I got the shock of my life. I opened *The Times* and found on the foreign page a short telegram from New York which reported the death of Mr John Scantlebury Blenkiron on board his yacht at Honolulu. The message said that he had once been well known as a mining engineer, and that at various times he had made coups in Wall Street.

I took the first train to London and interviewed Ellery Willis at the Embassy. He confirmed the news, for he had had a wire from Washington to the same effect.

“What did he die of?” I demanded. “And what was he doing at Honolulu? And in a yacht? He loathed the sea. He used to say that he would as soon take to yachting for pleasure as make his meals off emetics.”

“He must have been ill some time,” Willis suggested. “That would account for his disappearance. He wanted to be by himself, like a sick animal.”

I simply wouldn’t credit it, and I asked Willis to wire for details. But none came—only a recapitulation of the bare fact. When a week later I got the American papers my scepticism was a little shaken. For there were obituaries with photographs. The writers enlarged on his business career, but said nothing about his incursions into politics, nor did they give any further news of his illness. I was almost convinced, but not quite. The obituaries were full but not full enough, for Blenkiron had been a big figure and one would have expected the press to go large on his career and personality. But the notices all gave me the impression of having been written to order and deliberately keeping wide of the subject. There was nothing in the way of personal reminiscences, no attempt to describe his character or assess his work. The articles were uncommonly like the colourless recitals you find in a biographic dictionary.

I wired about it to Sandy, and got a reply from his butler that he was still abroad, address unknown. I wished that I knew where to find the niece who had visited Laverlaw in the summer, but Janet Roylance, to whom I applied, could tell me nothing. She and Archie were setting off almost at once on their delayed honeymoon, and had chose South America.

I have one other incident to record before I bring the preliminaries to a close. Palliser-Yeates came to stay with us for a week-end in January, and one night, after Mary had gone to bed, we sat talking in the library. He had never known Blenkiron, but he was a friend of Sandy, and to him I unburdened my anxieties. I thought he listened to me with an odd look on his face.

“You don’t believe the stories?” he asked.

“Not one blessed word,” I said. “But the poor old chap has managed to get himself a pretty fly-blown reputation.”

“Perhaps he wanted to,” was the astounding answer.

I stared, and asked him what he meant.

“It’s only a guess,” he said. “But Sandy has for a long time had a unique reputation. Not with the world at large, but with the people who matter in two hemispheres. He was known to be one of the most formidable men in the world. Now, suppose that he was engaged, or about to be engaged, in some very delicate and dangerous business. He would be marked down from the start by certain, people who feared him. So he might wish to be counted out, to be regarded as no longer formidable, and what better way than of have it generally believed that his nerve had gone and that he was all to pieces? If I wanted to create that impression, I would lay the foundation of it in the Shires, where they make a speciality of scandal. If that was his purpose, he has certainly succeeded. By this time the rumour has gone all over Europe in the circles where his name was known.”

I was digesting this startling hypothesis, when Palliser-Yeates told me the following story:

He had been in Paris just before Christmas on some business connected with Argentine banking, and one of his South American colleagues had taken him to dine at a restaurant much in vogue among the rastas. I think it was on the Rive Gauche, not a specially reputable place, but with amazingly good food. The proprietor was from the Argentine, and all the staff were South Americans. Palliser-Yeates noticed one of the waiters, not at his own table but a little way off, and he recognised the man’s face. The hair and skin were darkened, but he was positive that it was Sandy—Sandy in a greasy dress suit and a made-up black tie. When the room filled up and got rather noisy, he made an errand to speak to the conductor of the orchestra, and managed to get a word with this waiter. He cannoned against him in one of the doors and said, “Sorry, Sandy.”

The waiter knew him perfectly, and whispered from behind his pile of dishes, “Don’t give me away, John. It’s damnably serious. And never come here again.” So Palliser-Yeates took himself off, and had scrupulously held his tongue except for telling me. He said that Sandy looked well enough, and seemed to have mastered his job, for you couldn’t detect any difference between him and the rest of the outfit.

When I heard this, I decided to go to Paris myself and have a look at the restaurant, for anxiety about Sandy was

coming between me and my sleep. There was something about Palliser-Yeates's story which took my memory back a dozen years to old Kuprasso's dancing-house in Constantinople and the man who had led the Company of the Rosy Hours. Sandy was on the war-path again, and I was bound to keep an eye on him.

But two days later I had a letter—from Blenkiron. It had a typed address and a Southampton postmark—which was no clue, for it had probably been brought over by passenger in a ship and posted at the port of arrival. The handwriting was Blenkiron's unmistakable scrawl. It ran as follows:

"The papers will say I have gotten across the River. Don't let that worry you. But the Golden Shore at present is important and I may have to stay there quite a time. Therefore keep up the requiems and dirges until further notice."

Also at last I got a reply from Sandy, in answer to my string of letters. It was a telegram from London, so he had left Paris, and it merely contained Abraham Lincoln's words: "You stop still and saw wood."

After that I stopped still. Both Blenkiron and Sand were up to some devilry, and I had an instinct that they were working together. I have set down here my slender personal knowledge of the beginning of the strange event now to be related. The rest comes from the actors themselves.

BOOK I - THE GRAN SECO

I

The open windows, protected by wire blinds as fine-meshed as gauze, allowed the cool airs from the sea to slip in from the dusk. The big restaurant was in a pleasant gloom broken by patches of candlelight from the few occupied tables. The Hotel de la Constitucion stands on a little promontory above the harbour of Olifa, so the noise of the streets comes to it only like the echo of waves from a breakwater. Archie Roylance, looking into the great square of velvet sky now beginning to be patterned by stars, felt as if he were still at sea.

The Vice-Consul interpreted his thoughts.

"You are surprised at the quiet," he said. "That is only because we dine early. In a little there will be many lights and a jigging band and young people dancing. Yet we have good taste in Olifa and are not garish. If you will be my guest on another occasion, I will take you to a club as well quipped as any in Pall Mall, or to a theatre where you will see better acting than in London, and I will give you a supper afterwards which Voisin's could not better. We have civilisation, you see—for what it is worth."

The Vice-Consul, whose name was Alejandro Gedde, was a small man with a neat, dark, clean-shaven face, and high cheek-bones from which his critics deduced Indian blood.

As a matter of fact they came from another ancestry. His grandfather, Alexander Geddes, had come out in his youth from Dundee as a clerk in a merchant's house, had prospered, married a pretty Olifera, begotten a son, and founded a bank which rose in the silver boom to fortune. That son had married a lady of pure Castilian descent, whose beauty was not equal to her lineage, so the grandson of old Geddes had missed both the vigour of the Scot and the suave comeliness of the Olifera. Don Alejandro was an insignificant little man, and he was growing fat. The father had sold his interest in the bank at a high figure, and had thereafter dabbled in politics and horse-breeding; the son, at his death, had promptly got rid of the stud and left the government of his country to get on without him. He had been sent to an English school, and later to the Sorbonne, and had emerged from his education a dilettante and a cosmopolitan. He professed a stout Olifa patriotism, but his private sentiment was for England, and in confidential moments he would speak of his life as exile. Already he had asked Archie a dozen questions about common friends, and had dwelt like an epicure on the recollections of his last visit—the Park on a May morning, an English garden in midsummer, the Solent in August, the October colouring of Scottish hills.

His dinner-jacket had been made in the vicinity of Hanover Square, and he hoped that his black stock and his black-ribboned eyeglass were, if not English, at any rate European.

Archie was looking at the windows. "Out there is the Pacific," he said, "nothing nearer you than China. What is it like the other way?"

"The coastal plain for a hundred miles. Then the foothills and the valleys where the wine is made. A very pretty light claret, I assure you. Then, for many hundreds of miles, the great mountains."

"Have you travelled there much?"

Don Alejandro shook his head. "I do not travel in this land. What is there to see? In the mountains there are nothing but Indians and wild animals and bleak forests and snow. I am content with this city, where, as I have said, there is civilisation."

"A man I met on the boat told me about a place called the Gran Seco. He said it was bound to be soon the greatest copper area in the world."

Don Alejandro laughed. "That ill-favoured spot becomes famous. Five years ago it was scarcely known. To-day many strangers ask me about it. The name is Indian-Spanish. You must understand that a hundred miles north of this city the coastal plain ends, and the Cordilleras swing round so that there is no room between them and the ocean.

"But at the curve the mountains, though high, are not the great peaks. These are far to the east, and you have for a big space a kind of tableland. That is what we call the Gran Seco—the Great Thirst—for it is mostly waterless and desert. But it is very rich in minerals. For long we have known that, and before the War there were many companies at work there. Now there is one great company, in which our Government has a share, and from which Olifa derives much of its wealth. The capital employed is mostly foreign—no, not American—European, but of what country I do not know. The labourers are the people of the hills, and the managers are Europeans of many nationalities. They pass through this city going and coming—through this hotel often—perhaps we may see some of them to-night. They are strange folk who do not mix freely with us of Olifa. I am told they are growing as wealthy as Rockefeller. There are no English among them, I think—Slavs mostly, with some Italians and now and then a German, so I do not come across them in the way of business, and it would appear that they have no time for pleasure... May I ask, Sir Archibald, for what purpose especially you honour us with a visit? I want to know how best I can serve you."

Archie wrinkled his brow. "You are very kind, Don Alejandro. The fact is we're here mainly for the fun of it. This is a sort of belated honeymoon trip. Also, I'd like to know something about the politics of Olifa and South America generally. You see, I'm a Member of Parliament, and I've an idea that this part of the globe may soon become rather important. I have brought several introductions."

Don Alejandro waved his hand deprecatingly.

"That will be readily arranged. Your Minister is on leave, and the Embassy has left you in my hands. Without doubt you will be received by our President. I myself will take you to our Minister for External Affairs, who is my second cousin.

Our Minister of Finance will expound to you our extravagant prosperity. But of politics in the old sense you will find little. We are too rich and too busy. When we were poor we talked government all the day. And we had revolutions—dictatorships tempered by revolutions. My father more than once saved his neck by the good blood of his racing stable. But now we are very tame and virtuous. Our Government is rich enough to be enlightened, and our people, being also rich, do not trouble their heads about theories. Even the peons on the estancias and the vaqueros in the hills are content. Olifa is—how do you say?—a plutocratic democracy—a liberal plutocracy. Once it was a battered little packet-boat, now it is a great liner careless of weather and tides. It has no problems, the fortunate country.”

“Jolly place for a holiday,” said Archie. “Well, we mean to have a good look round. What do you advise?”

Don Alejandro became lyrical. “You can go south for eight hundred miles in an ever-widening plain. There you will see such orange groves as the world cannot match, and nearer the mountains the savannahs which are the riche pasture on earth. I will write to my cousin at Veiro, and he will entertain you at the stud farm which was once my father’s. It will not be like an English Sunday afternoon in the country, where a fat stud groom with a bunch of carrots takes the guests round the stables. It is a wild place between the knees of the hills, but there is some pretty horseflesh there.”

“Can I get up into the mountains?” Archie put in, but Don Alejandro was not to be interrupted.

“You must visit our great cities, for Olifa, though the capital, is not the largest. Cardanio has now four to five hundred thousand souls. That is the port from which of fruits and hides and frozen beef are shipped. And there is Alcorta in the hinterland, which is our little Birmingham. But madame will weary of these commercial glories. She will be happier, I think, among the horses at Veiro, or some pretty hacienda...”

Janet Roylance had paid little heed to the conversation, being engaged in studying the slowly increasing number diners.

“I would like to go into the mountains,” she said. “I saw them from far out at sea, and they looked like the battle-tents of Paradise.”

“A very savage Paradise you would find it, Lady Roylance. None of your green Swiss valleys with snow-peaks arising from meadows. It is all dusty and bare and cruel. Take my advice and be content with our sunny estancias—”

“Look at these chaps, Janet,” said Archie suddenly. “There’s a queer class of lad for you!”

Don Alejandro fixed his eyeglass and regarded four men who had taken their seats at a table a little-way off. It was a curious quartet. There was a tall man with hair so pale that at first sight he looked like an albino; he had a stony face and skin like old parchment, but from his bearing it was clear that he was still young. Two were small and dark and Jewish, and the fourth was a short burly fellow, with the prognathous jaw of a negro but the luminous eyes of a Latin. All were dressed in well-cut evening clothes, and each wore in his buttonhole a yellow flower—to Archie it looked like a carnation. The notable things about them were their extreme pallor and their quiet. They sat almost motionless, speaking very little and showing that they were alive by only the tiniest gestures. A waiter brought them caviare, and poured champagne into their glasses, and as they moved their arms to eat and drink they had an odd suggestion of automata.

Don Alejandro dropped his eyeglass. “From the Gran Seco,” he said. “That is the type Gran Seco. European, I think—the tall man might be a Swede—going from or returning to their place of work. No. I do not know any one of them. Olifa is full of these birds of passage, who linger only for a day. They do not mix with our society. They are civil and inoffensive, but they keep to themselves. Observe the chic of their clothes, and the yellow button-holes. That is the fashion of the copper magnates.”

“They look to me like pretty sick men,” said Archie.

“That, too, is their fashion. Those who go to that uncouth place speedily lose their complexions. It may be the copper fumes or some fever of the hills.”

“I should rather like to go there,” said Archie.

Don Alejandro laughed.

“Ah, you are intrigued. That is like an Englishman. He must be for ever hunting romance. No doubt a visit to the Gran Seco can be accomplished, but it must first be arranged. The railway beyond Santa Ana is not for the public. It is owned by the company, and their permission is necessary to travel on it. Also there must be a permit from the Gobernador of the province, who is also the Company’s president, for the workers in the mines are a brutal race and the rule of the Gran Seco must be like the rule of the a country in war-time... If you wish, I will put the matter in train. But I do not think it is quite the place for a lady. Such cheeks as madame’s are not for the withering airs of the hills.”

“I will follow the Olifero custom,” said Janet. “Your ladies, Don Alejandro, are very fond of pearl powder.”

The restaurant was filling up. It appeared that many Oliferos were dining, for large lustrous women’s eyes looked out of dead-white faces. At the far end of the room, close to the band, a noisy party took their seats at a table. They were all young, and, since they had not troubled to change, their clothes made a startling blotch of colour among the sober black and white of the other guests. All looked as if they had just left a golf-course, the men in knickerbockers of white flannel and both sexes in outrageous jumpers.

“Behold our protectors!” said Don Alejandro with a touch of acid in his tone. “Behold the flower of Yanqui youth! No. I do not know them—for that you must ask my colleague, Senor Wilbur. But I know where they come from. They are from the big Yanqui yacht now in the harbour. It is called the Corinna.”

“Good lord! That was Mike Burminster’s boat. I didn’t know he had sold it.” Archie regarded the party with disfavour.

“I do not know who is the present owner, except that he is a Yanqui. The guests I should judge from their appearance

to have sprung from Hollywood.”

“They were lunching here to-day,” said Janet. “I saw them when Archie was inquiring about his lost kit-bag... There was a girl among them that I thought I must have seen before... I don’t see her here to-night... I rather like the look of them, Don Alejandro. They are fresh, and jolly, and young.”

“Believe me, they will not repay further acquaintance, Lady Roylance.” Don Alejandro was unconsciously imitating his Castilian mother. “They come here in opulent yachts and behave as if Olifa were one of their vulgar joy-cities. That is what they call ‘having a good time.’ Yanqui youth, as I have observed it, is chronically alcoholic and amorous, and its manners are a brilliant copy of the parrot-house.”

The three had their coffee in the spacious arcade which adjoined the restaurant. It was Don Alejandro’s turn to ask questions, and he became for a little the English exile, seeking eagerly for news—who had married whom, what was thought in London of this and that—till Olifa dropped from him like a mantle and he felt himself once more a European. Presently their retreat was invaded by other diners, the band moved thither from the restaurant, and dancing began in a cleared space. The young Americans had not lingered over their meal, and had soon annexed the dancing-floor. Fragments of shrill badinage and endearments were heard in the pauses of the music.

Don Alejandro advised against liqueurs, and commended what he called the Olifa Tokay, which proved to be a light sweet wine of the colour of sloe-gin. Holding his glass to the corona of light in the centre of the patio, he passed from reminiscence to philosophy.

“You are unfortunate pilgrims,” he said. “You come seeking romance and I can only offer the prosaic. No doubt, Sir Archibald, you have been led to believe that we Latin Americans are all desperadoes, and our countries a volcanic territory sputtering with little fires of revolution. You find instead the typical bourgeois republic, as bourgeois as the United States. We do not worry about liberty, for we have learned that wealth is a better and less troublesome thing. In the old days we were always quarrelling with our neighbours, and because we conscripted our youth for our armies there was discontent and presently revolution. Now we are secure, and do not give occasion for discontent.”

“Someone told me that you had a pretty effective army.”

“We have a very effective police. As for our army, it is good, no doubt, but it is small. For what should we use our army? We have no ambition of conquest, and no enemy against whom we need defence.”

“Still, you can’t count on perpetual peace, you know. You are rich, and wealth means rivals.”

“Have we not the League of Nations?” Don Alejandro cried merrily. “Is not Olifa even now a member of the Council? And is there not the Monroe Doctrine, invented by the great-grandfathers of those depraved children who are dancing yonder?”

“Oh, well, if you like to put it that way—”

“I do not like to put it that way. I do not believe in the League of Nations, and I do not love the United States and I regard the Monroe Doctrine as an insult to my race. But what would you have, my dear Sir Archibald? We have chosen prosperity, and the price we pay for it is our pride. Olifa is a well-nourished body without a soul. Life and property are as safe here as in England, and what more can the heart of man desire? We have a stable Government because our people have lost interest in being governed. Therefore I say, do not propose to study our politics, for there is nothing to study. To you in England with a bankrupt Europe at your door and the poison of Communism trickling into your poverty, politics are life and death. To us, in our sheltered Hesperides, they are only a bad dream of the past. There is no mystery left in Olifa...”

As Don Alejandro spoke, the four men from the Gran Seco were moving through the arcade. They held then selves stiffly, but walked as lightly as cats, deftly steering their way among the tables and at the same time keeping close together. They looked neither to right nor left, but as they passed, Janet and Archie had a good view of their waxen faces. The eyes of all—the pale eyes of the tall man, the beady eyes of the Jews, and the fine eyes of the Latin—had the same look of unnatural composure, as if the exterior world did not exist for them and they were all the time looking inward in a profound absorption. They had something of the eerie detachment of sleepwalkers.

Don Alejandro was talking again.

“Be content, my friends, with what we can offer—our beauty and our civilisation. Think of us as a little enclave of colour between the glooms of the great sea and the clouds of the great mountains. Here man has made a paradise for himself, where during his short day of life he can live happily without questioning.”

Archie had been looking at Janet.

“I think we both want to go to the Gran Seco,” he said.

Archie left Janet writing letters and started out next morning to explore the city. The first taste of a foreign town was always to him an intoxication, and, in the hot aromatic sunshine of that month which for Olifa is the sweet of the year, the place seemed a riot of coloured and exultant life. He descended the broad terraced road which by easy gradients led from the hotel to the twisted streets of the old city. Some of the calles were only narrow ravines of shade, where between high windowless walls country mule-carts struggled towards the market-place. Others were unhappily provided with screeching electric tramways, so that the passer-by on foot or on a horse had to mount high on the ill-paved side-walk to avoid destruction. Presently he came into a hot market-place, where around an old Spanish fountain were massed stalls laden with glowing flowers and fruit, and strange unwholesome fishes, and coarse pottery, and garish fabrics, and country-woven straw hats. Through his medley Archie limped happily, testing his Spanish on the vendors, or trying with most inadequate knowledge to disentangle the racial mixture. The town Oliferos were a small race, in which he thought there must be considerable negro blood, but the countryfolk were well-made and up-standing, often with a classic and melancholy dignity in their faces. There were lean, wild-looking people, too, whose speech was not any kind of Spanish, with an odd angle to their foreheads and the shyness of an animal in their small anxious eyes, who squatted in their dark ponchos beside their mules and spoke only to each other. An Indian breed, thought Archie—perhaps from the foothills.

A maze of calles took him to the main Plaza, where a great baroque cathedral raised its sculptured front above a medley of beggars and vendors of holy medals. The square was shamefully paved, the facades of the old Spanish houses were often in disrepair, but the crumbling plaster and the blotched paint blended into something beautiful and haunting. Here it was very quiet, as if the city hushed itself in the environs of the house of God. To Archie it seemed that he was looking upon that ancient Olifa, before the hustling modern world was born, Olifa as it had appeared to the eyes of Captain Cook's sailors when they landed, a city which kept the manners and faith of sixteenth-century Spain.

He entered the church, and found a vast, cavernous darkness like the inside of a mountain, candles twinkling like distant glow-worms, echoes of muttered prayers and the heavy sweetness of incense. After it the Plaza seemed as bright as a mountain-top.

Another labyrinth brought him into a different world. The great Avenida de la Paz is a creation of the last twenty years, and runs straight as a ruler from the villas of the most fashionable suburb to the old harbour of the city. In its making it has swallowed up much ancient derelict architecture, and many nests of squalid huts, but, since it was built with a clear purpose by a good architect, it is in itself a splendid thing, in which Olifa takes a fitting pride. Where Archie struck it, it was still residential, the home of the rank and fashion of the city, with the white mass of the Government buildings and the copper dome of the Parliament House rising beyond it. But as he walked westward it gradually changed. Soon it was all huge blocks of flats and shops, with here and there the arrogant palace of a bank or shipping company.

One of these caught Archie's attention. It was an immense square edifice built of the local marble, with a flight of steps running up to doors like those of the Baptistery in Florence. Two sentries with fixed bayonets were on guard, and at first he thought it a Government office. Then his eye caught a modest inscription above the entrance—Administracion de Gran Seco. The name had stuck in his memory from last night's talk—linked with the sight of the four copper magnates and Don Alejandro's aloofness.

The Gran Seco was a strange and comfortless place, and it was perched far up in the mountains. This gorgeous building was at variance with the atmosphere with which the name was invested for him, and he stared with lively curiosity at its magnificence.

Suddenly the great doors opened and a man came out, escorted by two bowing porters. The sentries saluted, a big limousine drew up, and he was borne away. Archie had a glimpse of a tall figure in dark grey clothes, and, what seemed out of keeping with the weather, a bowler hat.

The face was middle-aged and bearded—a trim black beard like a naval officer's. As he passed, the man had glanced at him, and, even in that short second of time, there was something in those eyes which startled him. They seemed so furiously alive. There was nothing inquisitive in them, but they were searching, all-embracing. Archie felt that this was one who missed nothing and forgot nothing; he had had an impression of supreme competence which was as vivid as an electric shock. No wonder the Gran Seco was a success, he thought, if it had men of that quality in its management.

The broad pavements, the double line of trams, the shop-windows as soberly rich as those of the Rue de la Paix, the high white buildings narrowing in the distance to enfold a blue gleam of the sea, made an impressive picture of wealth and enlightenment. There was a curious absence of colour, for the people he passed seemed all to be wearing dark clothes; they were a quiet people, too, who spoke without the southern vehemence. Emancipation had come to the ladies of Olifa, for there were many abroad, walking delicately on the pavement, or showing their powdered prettiness in motor-cars. Here was none of the riotous life of the old quarter, and Archie had an impression of the city as elaborately civilised and of its richer inhabitants as decorous to the point of inanity. There were no peasants to be seen nor a single beggar; the Avenida de la Paz seemed to be kept as a promenade for big business and cultivated leisure. Archie grinned when he remembered the picture he had formed of Olifa, as a decadent blend of ancient Spain and second-rate modern Europe, with a vast wild hinterland pressing in upon its streets. The reality was as polished and secure as Paris—a reticent Paris, with a dash of Wall Street.

One splash of colour caught his eye. It came from a big touring car, which had drawn up at the pavement's edge and had disgorged its occupants. The driver was a young man strangely clad in starched linen knickerbockers, a golf jumper designed in a willow-plate pattern of blue and white, pale blue stockings, and a wide-brimmed straw hat. He sat negligently

at the wheel, and as Archie stared at him he tilted his hat over his brow. Presently there emerged from the shop two girls and a second youth—the youth in snow white flannels with a scarlet sash, and the girls in clothe the like of which Archie had never seen, but which in his own mind he classed as the kind of thing for a tropical garden party. He noticed, since the extreme shortness of their skirts made their legs their most notable feature, that they had black patent-leather shoes with silver buckles, and wonderful shot-silver stockings.

“You all right, honey?” one of them addressed the driver.

“Fine. Got the candy you want?”

Then an argument arose between the two girls and the other youth, an argument conducted in a dialect unintelligible to Archie, and in voices which forcibly reminded him of the converse of a basket of kittens. The four in that discreet monochrome place were indecently conspicuous, but they were without modesty, and among the stares and whispers of the crowded pavement conducted their private dispute with the freedom of children. The driver at last grew bored.

“Aw, come on, Baby,” he cried. “Get off the side-walk and come aboard. We got to hustle.”

They obeyed him, and the car presently slid into the traffic, the driver’s hat still tilted over his brows. Archie believed that he recognised one of the young women as a member of the party from the American yacht who had been dining in the hotel restaurant the night before. He rather resented their presence in Olifa. These half-witted children of pleasure were out of the picture which he had made for himself; they even conflicted with Olifa’s conception of herself. “The United States,” he told himself, “won’t be too popular in Latin America if it unlooses on the much goods of that type.”

At last the Avenida passed from shops and offices into a broad belt of garden, flanked on one side by the Customs house and on the other by the building which housed the port authorities. Beyond them lay the green waters of the old harbour, and the very spot where the first Conquistadors had landed. The new harbour, where the copper from the Gran Seco was shipped, lay farther south, close of the railway-stations; the old one was now almost unused except for fishing-boats, and as a landing-place for the yachts which berthed in the outer basin behind the great breakwater. To the north was a little plaza, which was all that remained of the first port of Olifa. It was a picturesque half-moon of crumbling stone, and seemed to be mainly composed of cafes and cinema houses.

Archie sniffed the salt breeze from the west, and limped cheerfully along the water-front, for he loved to be near he sea. In the outer basin he saw the funnels and top-gear of the yacht Corinna, on which he had aforetime enjoyed he Duke of Burminster’s hospitality. It annoyed him that his friend should have sold or chartered it to the kind of people he had seen in the motor-car.

A launch from the yacht was even then approaching the landing-stage. Archie could read the name on a sailor’s jersey. Two men were landed, one who looked like a steward, and the other a thick-set fellow in an engineer’s overalls. They separated at once, and the second of the two walked in Archie’s direction. Archie had a bad memory for faces, but there was something in this figure which woke recollection. As they came abreast and their eyes met, both came half unconsciously to a halt. The man seemed to stiffen and his right hand to rise in a salute which he promptly checked. He had a rugged face which might have been hewn out of mahogany, and honest, sullen, blue eyes.

“Hullo,” said Archie, “I’ve seen you before. Now, where on earth...?”

The man gave him no assistance, but stood regarding him in a sulky embarrassment. He sniffed, and in lieu of a handkerchief drew his hand across his nose, and the movement stirred some chord in Archie’s memory.

“I’ve got it. You were with General Hannay. I remember you in that black time before Amiens. Hamilton’s your name, isn’t it? Corporal Hamilton?”

Like an automaton the figure stiffened. “Sirr, that’s my name.” Then it relaxed. It was as if Archie’s words had recalled it for a moment to a military discipline which it hastened to repudiate.

“Do you remember me?”

“Ay. Ye’re Captain Sir Erchibald Roylance.” There was no ‘sirr’ this time.

“Well, this is a queer place to foregather. I think the occasion demands a drink. Let’s try one of these cafes.”

The man seemed unwilling. “I’m a wee bit pressed for time.”

“Nonsense, Hamilton, you can spare five minutes. I want to hear how you’ve been getting on and what landed you here. Hang it, you and I and the General went through some pretty stiff times together. We can’t part on this foreign strand with a how-d’ye-do.”

Archie led the way to a cafe in the crescent of old houses which looked a little cleaner than the rest. “What’ll you have, Hamilton?” he asked when they had found a table. “You probably don’t fancy the native wine. Bottled beer? Or rum? Or can you face aguardiente, which is the local whisky?”

“I’m a teetotaller. I’ll hae a glass o’ syrup.”

“Well, I’m dashed... Certainly—I never drink myself in the morning. Now, about yourself? You’re a Glasgow man, aren’t you? Pretty warm place, Glasgow. Are you and the other soldier-lads keeping the Bolshies in order?”

Hamilton’s mahogany face moved convulsively, and his blue eyes wandered embarrassedly to the door.

“My opinions has underwent a change. I’m thinkin’ of anither kind of war nowadays. I’m for the prolytawriat.”

“The devil you are!” Archie gasped. “So am I, but my opinions are still the same. What exactly do you mean?”

The man’s embarrassment increased. “I’m for the proly—prolytawriat. Us worrkers maun stick thegither and brek our chains. I’ve been fechtin’ for the rights o’ man.”

"Fighting with what?"

"Wi' the pollis. That's the reason I'm out here. I made Govan a wee thing ower het for me."

Archie regarded him with a mystified face, which slowly broke into a smile. "I'm sorry to say that you're a liar, Hamilton."

"I'm tellin' ye God's truth," was the reply without heat.

Embarrassment had gone, and the man seemed to be speaking a part which he had already rehearsed.

"No. You're lying. Very likely you had trouble with the police, but I bet it wasn't over politics. More likely a public-house scrap, or a girl. Why on earth you should want to make yourself out a Bolshie...?"

"My opinions has underwent a change," the man chanted.

"Oh, drat your opinions! You got into some kind of row and cleared out. That's intelligible enough, though I'm sorry to hear it. What's your present job? Are you in the Corinna?"

"Ay, I cam out in her. I'm in the engine-room."

"But you know nothing about ships?"

"I ken something aboot ship's engines. Afore the war I wrocht at Clydebank... And now, if ye'll excuse me I maun be off, for I've a heap o' jobs ashore. Thank ye for your kindness."

"I call this a perfectly rotten affair," said Archie. "You won't stay, you won't drink, and you keep on talking like a parrot about the proletariat. What am I to say to Genera Hannay when I meet him? That you have become a blithering foreign communist?"

"Na, na. Ye maunna say that." The man's sullenness had gone, and there was humour in his eye. "Say that Geordie Hamilton is still obeyin' orders, and daein' his duty up to his lights."

"Whose orders?" Archie asked, but the corporal was already making for the door.

The young man walked back to the hotel in a reflective mood, and at luncheon gave Janet a summary of the event of the morning. He had been storing up his impressions of Olifa for her, and had meant to descant upon the old city and the market and the Cathedral Square, but he found these pictures obscured by his later experiences. "Most extraordinary thing. I ran up against a fellow who used to be Dick Hannay's batman—regular chunky Scots Fusilier and brave as a badger—Hamilton they call him. Well, he had the cheek to tell me that he had changed his views and become a Bolshie and had consequently had to clear out of Glasgow. I swear the chap was lying—could see it in his face—but I'm puzzled why he should want to lie to me... He says he has some kind of engineer's job on the Corinna... More by token, I saw a selection of the Corinna party in a motor-car in the Avenida. Dressed up like nothing on earth, and chattering like jays!"

"We had them here this morning," said Janet. "Pretty little savages with heads like mops. I've christened them the Moplahs."

"Was there a fellow in starched linen bags? He was the prize donkey."

Janet shook her head. "There was only one man with them and he wore white flannels. I can't quite make them at. They behave like demented trippers, and are always pawing and ragging each other, but I came on the young man suddenly when I went to the bureau to ask about postage, and when the clerk couldn't tell me he answered my question. His whole voice and manner seemed to change, and he became startlingly well-bred... I want to explore the Moplahs. And I would rather like to see again the tall girl I had a glimpse of yesterday. I can't get it out of my head that I've seen her before."

On the following evening Janet and Archie dined as Don Alejandro's guests at the Club de Residentes Extranjeros. The club, situated in one of the squares to the north of the Avenida, was a proof of Olifa's wealth and her cosmopolitanism. In the broad cool patio a fountain tinkled, and between it and the adjoining arcades tropical plants in green tubs made the air fragrant. The building was for the most part a copy of an old Spanish town house, but the billiard-room was panelled in oak with a Tudor ceiling, the card-room was Flemish, and the big dining-room Italian Renaissance. The night was freshly warm, with light airs stirring the oleanders, and, from the table which Don Alejandro had selected, the patio was a velvet dusk shot with gold and silver gleams like tiny searchlights.

The only other guest was the American Consul. Mr Roderick Wilbur was a heavy man, with the smooth pale face of eupeptic but sedentary middle-age. His years in Olifa had not mellowed his dry, high-pitched New England voice, or endowed him with a single Latin grace. He looked upon the other diners with the disapproving air of a Scots elder of the kirk surveying a travelling theatrical company, and the humour which now and then entered his eye was like the frosty twinkle of a very distant star.

Don Alejandro was in a vivacious mood. He was the showman of his beloved city, but he was no less a representative of his beloved Europe; he wished the strangers to praise Olifa but to recognise him as a cosmopolitan. Archie and Janet satisfied his patriotism, for, having hired a car that afternoon and driven round the city, they over-flowed in admiration.

"You were right," Janet told him. "There is no mystery in Olifa. It is all as smooth and polished as a cabochon emerald, and, like a cabochon, you can't see far inside it. Your people have the satisfied look of London suburbanites on a Sunday up the river."

"Your police are too good," said Archie. "One doesn't see a single ragamuffin in the main streets. Janet and I prefer the old quarter. Some day, Don Alejandro, we want you to take us round it and tell us who the people are. They look like samples of every South American brand since the Aztecs."

"The Aztecs lived in Mexico," Janet corrected.

"Well, I mean the chaps that were downed by the Conquistadors."

Don Alejandro laughed. "Our old quarter is only a tourist spectacle, like the native city in Tangier. For the true country life you must go to the estancias and the savannahs. I have arranged by telegraph for your visit to my cousin at Veiro."

"And the Gran Seco?"

"That also is in train. But it is more difficult and will take time."

"I said there was no mystery in Olifa," Janet observed, "but I rather think I was wrong. There is the Gran Seco. It seems to be as difficult to get into it as into a munition factory. Have you been there, Mr. Wilbur?"

The American Consul had been devoting serious attention to his food, stopping now and then to regard Janet with benevolent attention.

"Why, yes, Lady Roylance," he said. "I've been up to the Gran Seco just the once since it blossomed out. I've no great call to go there, for Americans don't frequent it to any considerable extent."

"Wilbur hates the place," said Don Alejandro. "He thinks that every commercial undertaking on the globe should belong to his countrymen, and it vexes him that the Gran Seco capital should be European."

"Don't you pay any attention to Mr Gedd," said the big man placidly. "He's always picking on my poor little country. But I can't say I care for that salubrious plateau. I don't like being shepherded at every turn as if I was a crook, and I reckon the Montana sagebrush is more picturesque. Also they haven't much notion up there of laying out a township. They'd be the better of some honest-to-God Americans to look after the plumbing."

"See! He is all for standardising life. What a dull world the United States would make of it!"

"That's so. We prefer dullness to microbes. All the same, there's things about the Gran Seco which you can see with half an eye aren't right. I didn't like the look of the miners. You never in your days saw such a hang-dog, miserable bunch, just like some of our old Indian reservations where big chief Wet Blanket and his wives used to drink themselves silly on cheap bourbon. And how in thunder does Castor get his labour? He's got a mighty graft somewhere, but when I first came here the Gran Seco Indians were a difficult folk to drive. I've heard that in old times the Olifa Government had trouble with them over the conscription."

"They were savages," said Don Alejandro, "and they are savages still. Castor has doubtless the art of dealing with them, for he himself is on the grand scale a savage."

Archie pricked up his ears. "Castor? Who is he?"

"The Gobernador of the province. Also the President of the company."

"I saw a fellow coming out of the Gran Seco head office—a fellow with a black beard, who didn't look as if he missed much."

"That was Senor Castor. You are fortunate, Sir Archibald, for you, a new arrival, have already seen Olifa's great man, and that is a privilege but rarely granted to us Oliferos. He descends upon us and vanishes as suddenly as a river mist."

"Tell me about him," said Janet. "Where does he come from? What is his nationality?"

Don Alejandro shook his head. "I do not know. Mr Wilbur, who is a man of hasty judgments, will say that he is a Jew. He is certainly a European, but not a Spaniard, though he speaks our tongue. I can only say that he emerged out of nothing

five years ago, and became at once a prince. He rules the Gran Seco, and its officials are altogether his creation. And since he rules the Gran Seco he rules Olifa. He has, as Mr Wilbur would say, this country of mine by the short hairs."

"He don't meddle with politics," said the American, and Janet noticed that as he spoke he cast a quick glance around him, as if he did not wish to be overheard. Don Alejandro, too, had lowered his voice.

"What nonsense!" said the latter. "He is money, and money is our politics to-day. Once we Latins of America were a great race. We were Europeans, with minds enlarged and spirits braced by a new continent. You are the soldier, Sir Archibald, and will remember that the bloodiest battles of last century were fought in La Plata and on the Uruguay. Our plains were the nursery of the liberties of Italy. But now we have but the one goddess. We are rich and nothing more. Soon we shall be richer, and then my dear Wilbur, we shall be the devotees of your great country, which is the high-priest of riches."

"I can't say that you're showing any special devotion just at present," said the other dryly. "My nationals—thank God there aren't many—are about the most unpopular in this State. But quit talking about politics. We're out to give you a good time, Lady Roylance, and we want to know just how you'd like us to set about it."

Janet was of a patient and philosophical temper, but Archie liked to take his sensations in gulps. So far Olifa, he admitted to himself, had been a little boring. The place, for all its beauty, had a deadly commonplaceness—it was the typical bourgeois State, as Don Alejandro had declared the first night. And yet he was conscious that this judgment did not exhaust the matter. There were moments when he felt that Olifa was a strange woman in a mask of cheap silk, a volcano overspread with suburban gardens. Behind even the decorousness of the Avenida he savoured a mystery. Into the pleasant monotony of the days had come wafts of air from some other sphere—a peasant's face in the market, the bearded Gobernador, the pallid men in the hotel, even the preposterous figure of Dick Hannay's former batman. These things had stirred in him an irrational interest...

Perhaps if he went into the hinterland he would find the clamour of Olifa, of whose existence he was convinced, but which had hitherto contrived to evade him.

The club dining-room was full, and when they left it for coffee on the terrace beside the patio they had difficulty in finding chairs. It was apparently the practice to dine elsewhere and come to the club to dance, for a band was pounding out ragtime, and a dozen couples were on the floor.

"The Moplahs," Janet sighed happily.

It was beyond doubt the American party from the yacht, and in that place they were as exotic as a tuberose in a bed of wallflowers. They had conformed to convention in their dress, for the four men wore dinner-jackets, and the four girls bright, short-skirted, silk-taffeta gowns and long pearl necklaces. Among the powdered Olifero ladies and the sallow Olifero cavaliers their fresh skins made a startling contrast, and not less startling were their shrill, toneless voices. They chattered incessantly, crying badinage to each other and to the band, as they danced the half-savage dances with an abandon which now suggested wild children and now the lunatic waltzing of hares in an April moonlight. Janet laughed aloud, the picture was so crazily fantastic. A Spanish girl, in a frock with wide flounces and with blue-black hair dressed high and surmounted by a gold comb, was suddenly cannoned into by a fluffy-headed minx, who apologised in a voice like a vindictive kitten's, and was rewarded by a stony stare. Just so, Janet remembered, she had seen a greyhound repel the impudence of a Skye terrier.

"I don't see my tall girl," she said.

"The fellow with the starched linen knickerbockers isn't here," said Archie. "I didn't see his face, but I think I would know him again. Who are they, Mr Wilbur?"

The American's eyes were hard with disapproval. "I can't tell you their names, but they're off the Corinna. They're in Burton Rawlinson's party. Mr Rawlinson isn't on board himself, and there can't be much of a restraining hand to shepherd the bunch. Some of them have been to my office, and I judge I'm going to hear of trouble with them before they quit these shores. They want this city to stop still and take notice of them."

Archie inquired concerning Mr Rawlinson.

"He's a fine man and a big man, one of the biggest on the Pacific coast. I've nothing against Burton. He's rich, and he's public-spirited, and he's gotten a mighty fine collection of pictures. I can't say I take to his offspring and their friends. There's more dollars than sense in that outfit."

"I like the Moplahs," said Janet. "I want to know them."

Archie, who was a connoisseur of dancing, observed that the men danced better than the women, a thing he had noticed before with Americans. "Did a fellow with starched linen bags ever come to your office?" he asked the Consul. "Slightly built fellow, a little shorter than me?"

Mr Wilbur shook his head. "Maybe, but I don't remember him. All their garments struck me as curious. Heaven knows what's going to become of our youth. Sir Archibald. They've quit behaving like ladies and gentlemen—running wild like bronchos, and their parents can't do the lassooing. They're hard cases at seventeen."

"There's an appalling innocence about them," said Janet and looked up smiling, for two of the dancers had left the floor and were approaching them.

The girl was small, and a little too plump, but very pretty, with a mop of golden curls like a mediaeval page's. The young man was thin and beaky, and his longish hair was parted in the middle.

"Say, what about dancing?" he said. "Won't you cut in?" He looked at Janet, while the girl smiled pleasantly on Archie.

"Most awfully sorry," said Archie. "I'd love to, but I've got a game leg."

"Pardon?"

"I mean I'm a bit lame."

Janet rose smiling and took the young man's arm.

"I don't know your name," said Mr Wilbur, who was a stickler for the conventions, "but I reckon you're with the Corinna party. This lady is Lady Roylance."

The youth regarded him solemnly. "You've said it, Grandpa," was his reply. "Come on, lady."

The girl was still partnerless, and Don Alejandro offered himself for the breach. He sprang to his feet and bowed deeply from the waist. "If I may have the honour," he said. Archie and the Consul were left alone to their cigars.

The dancing-place was soon crowded, and Janet and Don Alejandro seemed to have been completely absorbed into the whirl. Glimpses could be caught of Janet's porcelain elegance, and of an unwontedly energetic Don Alejandro in the grip of various corybantic maidens. The two men in the lounge-chairs presently ceased to be spectators and fell into talk.

Mr Wilbur, as if the absence of his colleague had unsealed his tongue, expanded and became almost confidential. He asked Archie for his impressions of Olifa, and when he was told "tidy and contented and opulent," nodded an acquiescent head.

"You're about right, sir. That's Olifa first and last—the Olifa of to-day. Better policed than New York, and just about as clean as Philadelphia. Manicured, you might say. But it wasn't always like that. When I first came here Olifa was the ordinary South American republic, always on the edge of bankruptcy and revolution, and this city had one of the worst names on the coast. The water-front was a perfect rat-hole for every criminal in the Pacific—every brand of roughneck and dope-smuggler and crook—dagos with knives and niggers with razors and the scum of the United States with guns. To-day you could take your wife along it in perfect safety any hour of the night. The Treasury was empty, for politics were simply who could get their hands first and deepest into it. There was bad trouble up-country, and there was always a war going on in the mountains, which the little under-fed and never-paid soldiers couldn't win. Now we've got a big balance in the budget and the peace of God over the land. It's a kind of miracle. It's almost against nature, Sir Archibald."

"Why, it's principally the Gran Seco," he continued, in response to Archie's request for an explanation. "That, as you know, is the richest copper proposition on the globe, and the Government has a big share in it. There's money to burn for everybody nowadays. But there's more than money. Olifa's gotten a first-class brain to help her along."

"The President?"

Wilbur laughed.

"The Excelentísimo is a worthy gentleman, and he has gotten some respectable folks to help him, but it isn't the President of this republic that has made the desert blossom like the rose. There's a bigger brain behind him."

"You mean the Gran Seco fellow—what's his name?"

"I mean Mr Castor. At least I reckon it must be Mr Castor, for there isn't anybody else. You see, I can size up the members of the Government, because I know them, so it must be the man I don't know."

"I see. Well, it's clear that I must get alongside of this Castor if I'm to learn much about Olifa. What's the best way to work it?"

"Through the President, I reckon. I'd like to help you but I haven't much of a pull in Olifa just at the moment. You see, the United States is going through one of its periodical fits of unpopularity. Olifa has waxed fat, like the man in the Bible, and she's kicking, and when a South American nation kicks it's generally against the United States. Don Alejandro will fix an interview with the President for you, and he'll arrange your trip to the Gran Seco. He's a good little man, though he don't like my country."

Thereafter Mr Wilbur discoursed of his nation—its strength and its weakness, its active intelligence, imperfect manners, and great heart. He was a critic, but he was also an enthusiast. To this man, grown old in foreign lands in his country's service, America was still the America of his youth. Her recent developments he knew only from the newspapers, and he loyally strove to reconcile them with his old ideal. America only needed to be understood to be loved, but it was hard to get her true worth across the footlights. "You English," he said, "have got a neat, hard-shell national character, with a high gloss on it. Foreigners may not like it, but they can't mistake it. It hits them in the eye every time. But we're young and growing and have a lot of loose edges, and it's mighty hard to make people understand that often when we talk foolishness we mean wisdom, and that when we act high and mighty and rile our neighbours it's because we're that busy trying to get a deal through we haven't time to think of susceptibilities. You've got to forget our untidy fringes."

"Like the crowd from the yacht," said Archie. "They don't rile me a bit, I assure you... Just look at the way that lad dances. He might be David capering before the Lord."

"That's because you've seen a lot of the world, Sir Archibald. I reckon you've met enough Americans to know the real thing."

"No, I've met very few. You see, I've never crossed the Atlantic before. But I knew one American, and for his sake I'm ready to back your country against all corners. He was about the wisest and bravest and kindest old fellow ever came across."

Mr Wilbur asked his name.

"He's dead, poor chap. Died a few months ago. I daresay you've heard of him. His name was Blenkiron—John S.

Blenkiron.”

Archie had his eye on the Hebraic dancer or he might have noticed a sudden change in his companion’s face. When Mr Wilbur spoke again—and that was after a considerable pause—it was in a voice from which all feeling had gone, the voice in which he conducted his consular duties.

“Yes. I’ve heard of Mr Blenkiron. Mighty fine man, they tell me. Just how well did you know him, Sir Archibald?”

“I only saw him for a week or two in the Amiens business of March ‘18. But they were pretty solemn weeks, and you get to know a man reasonably well if you’re fighting for your life beside him. He was with a great pal of mine, General Hannay, and the two of them put up a famous show at Gavrelle. I can see old Blenkiron’s face yet, getting cheerier the more things went to the devil, and fairly beaming when the ultimate hell was reached. I wouldn’t ask for a better partner in a scrap. I’m most awfully sorry he died. I always hoped to see him again.”

“Too bad,” said Mr Wilbur, and he seemed to be absorbed in some calculation, for his brows were knitted.

A flushed Janet joined them, attended by two cavaliers who insisted on plundering the pot plants to give her flowers. Presently Don Alejandro also extricated himself from the dancers, with his black-corded eyeglass hanging over his left shoulder.

“These innocents are going to the Gran Seco,” Janet announced. “They seem to think it is a sort of country club, but if your account is true, Mr Wilbur, they’ll be like humming-birds in a dustbin.”

“They surely will,” said the Consul. “When do you expect your own permits, Lady Roylance?”

“They should be ready to-morrow,” said Don Alejandro.

Archie and Janet left their caleche at the hotel gates, and walked up the steep avenue to enjoy the coolness of the night wind. At the esplanade on the top they halted to marvel at the view. Below them lay the old town with the cathedral towers white in the moonlight—a blur of shadows in which things like glow-worms twinkled at rare intervals, and from which came confused echoes of some secret nocturnal life. Beyond lay the shining belt of the Avenida, and the Ciudad Nueva mounting its little hills in concentric circles of light. On the other side the old harbour was starred with the riding lights of ships, and the lamps of the water-front made a double line, reflection and reality. To the south at the new harbour there was a glow of fires and the clamour of an industry which did not cease at sunset. To the west, beyond the great breakwater, sea and sky melted under the moon into a pale infinity.

Suddenly Archie’s spirits awoke. He seemed to see Olifa as what he had hoped—not a decorous city of careerists, but a frontier post on the edge of mysteries. The unknown was there, crowding in upon the pert little pride of man. In the golden brume to the east were mountains—he could almost see them—running up to icefields and splintered pinnacles, and beyond them swamps and forests as little travelled as in the days of Cortes. Between the desert of the ocean and the desert of the hills lay this trivial slip of modernity, but a step would take him beyond it into an antique land. The whiff of a tropical blossom from the shrubberies and the faint odour of wood smoke unloosed a flood of memories—hot days in the African bush, long marches in scented Kashmir glens, shivering camps on Himalayan spurs. The War had overlaid that first youth of his, when he had gone east to see the world, but the rapture and magic were now returning. He felt curiously expectant and happy.

“I’ve a notion that we’re going to have the time of our lives here,” he told his wife.

But Janet did not reply. For three days she had been busy chasing a clue through her memory and now she had grasped it. She had suddenly remembered who was the tall girl she had seen with the party from the Corinna on the day of their arrival.

All night Archie dreamed of the Gran Seco. As he saw it, it was a desolate plateau culminating in a volcano. The volcano was erupting, and amid the smoke and fire a colossal human figure sat at its ease. Then the dream became a nightmare—for the figure revealed itself as having the face and beard of the man he had seen leaving the office in the Avenida, but the starched white linen knickerbockers of the preposterous young American.

Archie set out on his exploration of Olifa with his nose in the air, like a dog looking for game. The spell of a new country had fallen on him, as had happened fifteen years before when he left school. The burden of the War and all it had brought, the cares of politics, the preoccupations of home had slipped from his shoulders, and he felt himself again an adventurer, as when he had first studied maps and listened hungrily to travellers' tales. But now he had one supreme advantage—he had a companion; and Janet, who had never before been out of Europe, was as eager as he was to squeeze the last drop out of new experience.

He left over his more important letters for the moment and used those introductions which had been given him by the friends he had made during his time at the Madrid Embassy. The result was that the pair were taken to the heart of a pleasant, rigid little society—as remote from interest in the Government of Olifa as an unreconstructed Southern planter is from a Republican White House, or a Royalist Breton from the Elysee. Archie was made a member of the Polo Club and played with agreeable young men, who had their clothes and saddlery from London and their manners from the eighteenth century. A ball was given in their honour, where the most popular dance, to Janet's amazement, was a form of Lancers. They met composed maidens who were still in bondage to their duennas, and young married women, languishing and voluble, of discreet and domesticated, among whose emphatic complexions Janet's delicate colouring was like a wood-anemone among gardenias: and witty grandmothers running terribly to fat: and ancient hidalgos with beaks like birds of prey. It was a comfortable society, with the secure good manners of a tiny aristocracy, but it knew of no world beyond its pale, and was profoundly uninterested in its neighbours.

They went a little, too, into business circles, both Olifero and alien, the representatives of shipping and trading companies and the big foreign banks. This, too, was a pleasant world, good-tempered and prosperous. Here they heard much of politics, but it was business politics. The existing Government was spoken of with respect, but not with intimate knowledge; it functioned well, kept the country solvent, and left trade in peace. Politicians were a class by themselves, a dubious class, though it was believed that the present lot were honest. But they met none of the Copper people. These seemed to form an oligarchy apart, and were mentioned respectfully but distantly. When Archie asked about the Gran Seco he was only given statistics of output and an encomium on its efficiency. Of its President the commercial world of Olifa spoke as an ordinary automobile-manufacturer might speak of Henry Ford, as one who was a law to himself, an object to admire, but not to emulate.

"This is a queer place," Archie told Janet. "It seems to have two Governors—the Castor fellow and the President—and the ordinary man don't seem to know or care much about either. It's about time we started out for the Gran Seco."

But when Don Alejandro was approached on the matter he had to explain with many apologies that their permits had not arrived. There was some inconceivably foolish hitch, which he had not yet tracked down.

"But the American troupe got through straight away," Archie complained. "They left a week ago."

"I know. That is a way Americans have. Perhaps in your case the difficulty is Mr Wilbur. Officially and quite unnecessarily he interested himself in getting your passes, so he said—and he may have exhausted his purchase in franking his countrymen through and raised a prejudice. As I have told you, his nation is not loved by our Government."

Don Alejandro went on to explain that the delay could only be a matter of days. "Meantime, why not visit my cousin at Veiro? There you must go some time, and this hiatus gives you the chance."

So to Veiro they went—fifty miles by train and twenty by motor-car along a superb concrete highway, which suddenly gave out four miles from the house, so that the journey was completed by a sandy track over primeval prairie. They arrived just at sunset, when the place swam in a clear coppery gold. The house was low and white and seemed to cover acres, with its adobe outbuildings, its great corrals for the cattle, and its trim red-roofed stables built on the English model. The palms of the coast had been left behind, and at this elevation the tropics had faded from the landscape. The garden was ablaze with coverts of hibiscus and plots of scarlet zinnias among the rough lawns, and the wind-breaks which flanked it were of acacias and walnuts. A big irrigation dam to the right caught the last rays of the sun, and beyond it the tender green of the alfalfa fields seemed a continuation of its waters. Far to the east, above the lifting savannahs, was a saw-like edge of tenuous white mountains which seemed to hang in the central heavens. There was a succession of thin spires now picked out with gold and rose. Archie asked their name.

"Los Doce Apostolas—the Twelve Apostles," said the driver, and rattled off a list of uncouth syllables.

Don Mario Sanfuentes, the cousin of Don Alejandro, was small, spare, and blue-jowled, with the figure of a groom and the profound solemnity of the man who lives with horses. His wife was dead and his ranch and stables were to him both family and profession. He greeted his visitors with the grave courtesy of manner which needs no words to emphasise it. Their rooms were wide chambers with scrubbed wooden floors and windows looking across a broad verandah to a hundred miles of space, as bare and fresh as a convent dormitory. They had their meals in a dining-room which contained the remnants of the Sanfuentes heirlooms—cabinets of lacquer and tortoiseshell, a Murillo which had been an altar-piece in one of the forgotten churches of the Conquistadors, fantastic tapestries now faded into a mellow confusion, an Italian triptych of carved ivory, and a great galleon of tarnished silver. But they sat mostly in Don Mario's own room, where in the evenings a wood fire was lit in the wide fireplace—a room where every table was littered with books and papers and cigar-boxes and quirts and crops and spurs, and from the walls looked down the delicate heads of those descendants of the Darley Arab, the Byerley Turk, and the Godolphin Barb whose fame has gone abroad wherever men love horses.

By day Archie and Janet rode with their host about his state, examined his young stock, and tried out promising colts on the gallops, where by assiduous care a better turf had been got than in the ordinary savannah. At every meal he talk was

of horses, but at night, when the fire was lit, Don Mario from the depths of his well-rubbed armchair would speak at large of the land. In modern Olifa he had little interest, but he told of the diversions of his youth—his pack of foxhounds which had to be so constantly renewed from England that he gave up the game in despair, tiger hunting in the forest country, punitive expeditions against Indian horse-thieves from the hills. The time passed in a delicious calm: a combination, said Janet, of Newmarket and Scotland. And then on the last day of their stay came another visitor.

"I cannot tell you about this country," Don Mario said, "for I am an old horse-breeder who lives apart. But I have bidden young Luis de Marzaniga to sleep the night. His mother was cousin to the husband of my great-aunt's niece. Luis has travelled abroad and seen the world, but specially he has travelled in Olifa. No. He is no politician, nor is he engaged in business. He is like me—what you call a country gentleman. But he has youth and inquisitiveness, both of which I have long since lost."

So, when the Roylances, having bathed and changed after a long ride in the sun, came down to dinner, they found a strange young man awaiting them. Don Mario's evening garb had been a little like that of a deaf-mute at a funeral, but this young man wore the trimmest of dinner-jackets and the neatest of patent-leather shoes. His hair was as fair as Archie's; but some colouring in his skin had made him sunburn not to Archie's brick-red but to a rich golden brown. His eyes were brown, and the large expanse of white in them was the only foreign thing in his appearance. Otherwise he looked like a young English cavalry subaltern, whose duties permitted him to hunt three days a week.

Dinner that evening was a cheerful meal. Don Luis chaffed his distant kinsman, with whom he was obviously in high favour, and Don Mario expanded in silent laughter. All spoke English—Don Mario very correct and stilted, Don Luis nobly ungrammatical but notably idiomatic. To Janet's questions he replied that his education had been chiefly in Olifa, but that he had visited Europe seven times, and during the last six months of the War had had a commission in the French Air Force. He had only just returned from Paris. The mention of flying woke up Archie, and for a little the room hummed with technicalities. Archie inquired concerning the Olifa Air Force, and was told that it was efficient but small—not more than five squadrons. The Olifero did not take readily to the air, and the pilots were mostly foreigners—Germans who had found their career cut short at home, and, Don Luis thought, one or two Russians. "It is like all our army," he said, "a little force of expert mercenaries. Olifa needs no army. In the future she will fight her battles with gold."

Don Luis was very ready to talk. He answered Archie's many questions on sport with enthusiasm, and drew sketch-maps to illustrate the lie of the land. As to politics, he had not Don Mario's apathy. He was ready with amusing portraits of Olifa's statesmen and with cogent summaries of policy. He was also a humorist, and had a repertoire of tales. But he was a discreet young man, and ventured no opinion of his own. He was neither reactionary nor progressive, only an interested spectator.

On the Gran Seco he was highly informing. He described the nature of the copper deposits, and the new processes which had reduced costs and made it the Golconda of Olifa. Castor he knew only by sight, "We of Olifa do not meet him, but we worship him from afar. He is the god who dwells in the sanctuary."

"The American Consul thought there might be trouble some day. The mine-labourers are rather a savage lot, aren't they?"

Don Luis laughed. "I think the wish may be—how you say?—mother to the thought. Senor Wilbur does not love the Gran Seco. No doubt it is a difficult place, but Senor Castor is beyond doubt a Napoleon and flourishes on difficulties. It will be all right."

"Why does he keep the place so tightly shut? We have been waiting a fortnight for a permit to enter."

"So! Then there must be some foolish mistake of clerks. Senor Castor is not likely to be uncivil—least of all to a charming lady and to a member of the English Parliament. He is a lover of Europe."

Don Luis had many questions to ask in turn, and it slowly dawned upon one of his hearers that this candid and friendly young man was taking in more than he gave out. Archie was drawn to speak of his own past—his eastern travels, his experiences in the War, even of his friends, who could mean nothing to a South American who had only once been in England. He found himself quoting Sandy Arbuthnot by name, as if he had been in his club at home.

"I beg your pardon," he said confusedly. "You can't be interested in my yarning about people you never heard of."

"But I am deeply interested. Your friend is a wise man. How do you call him—Arbuttnot?"

"He was Sandy Arbuthnot, but his father is dead and he is Lord Clanroyden now."

"A lord! Clan—roy—den. Por dios! That is a strange name."

"Scotch," said Archie.

"Ah yes—Scotch. That is your Highlands? Your Gran Seco? This Lord Clay—roy—den, he is in Scotland?"

"I'm blessed if I know where he is at the moment. He's never long off the road."

Janet, too, to her surprise found herself talking to this stranger as if she had known him from childhood. She described vivaciously her encounter with the Moplabs.

"They are common as lentils in Olifa at certain seasons," said Don Luis, "those noisy, emancipated American children. They have gone, you say, to the Gran Seco, where Americans are not loved. There may be work then for Senor Wilbur."

"They are really rather nice," said Janet. "I think I have met one of them before... Archie, I didn't tell you, but I believe the tall girl who was with the Moplabs the first day and whom we never saw again was the Miss Dasent who came to Strathlarrig. She was some sort of relation of Mr Blenkiron."

"Not really?" exclaimed the interested Archie. "That's curious. Did you ever hear of Blenkiron, Don Luis? He died the other day—American, rather a great man—he was the chap I was telling you about in the Shark-Gladas affair."

The other shook his head. "I do not think so. But American names are so difficult that it is hard to remember. They are worse than Clan—roy—den."

Don Mario made it his habit to retire to rest at ten o'clock, and Janet, being very sleepy, followed soon after. Archie and Don Luis lit a final cigar, and in the smoking of it strolled into the moonlit verandah. On this side of the house the view was not broken by outbuildings, and beyond a string of paddocks the eye passed to an endless sweep of yellow savannah which faded in the distance into a golden haze. The air was fresh, and, though the night was still, cool wafts seemed to drift soundlessly down from the hidden mountains.

"My countrymen and yours fought each other for three hundred years," said Don Luis, "but a Spaniard and an Englishman, when they meet, usually understand each other, I presume, with your permission, on that old sympathy, and I ask you boldly what are you doing here?"

The young man's manner had changed from the debonair ease which had marked it at dinner. It had become at once confidential and authoritative.

"Fact is, I don't know," was Archie's reply. "Principally, Janet and I are on a postponed honeymoon. I had a notion to pick up something about South American politics, which might be useful to me in Parliament."

"And you find Olifa rather barren ground?"

"I did at first... Now, I am not so sure."

"Will you let me advise you? We are both young men and have served in war. Stay a little in Olifa if you have not yet exhausted the charm of the capital, and then take our delightful lady on board the first ship and go straight home."

"Home? Why in the world?" Archie stared at the speaker.

"You can go to Valparaiso and Buenos Ayres if they amuse you. But get out of Olifa."

"But why?"

"I cannot tell you why. I am your friend, and a friend may venture to advise without reasons."

"But what's the trouble? Olifa is a great deal more peaceful than Europe. You don't mean to say that there's danger..."

"Olifa is a mask—you have not seen her face. Look in front of you. You see nothing but flat pastures. But beyond you know that there are wild mountains. So I tell you that behind the flatness of Olifa there are wild things."

"Well, I'm blessed! D'you know, Don Luis, you are making Olifa rather attractive. You are giving me a very good reason why I should stay."

"But madame..."

"I don't know. For heaven's sake, don't tell her what you're telling me, for if she gets a notion that there's mystery abroad she won't stop till she is up to the neck in it. But of course I can't let her run any risks..."

"I do not think that you will be able to help yourself—if you stay. You may be caught up in a tide which will carry you to things very different from your respectable English politics... And these things will not be a honeymoon."

Archie stared at his companion's face. The moon was very bright and the face which it revealed was grave and set.

"You are talking in riddles," said Archie. "I wish you would be more explicit. You tell me to get out of the country, because if I stay I may have trouble. You can hardly leave it at that, you know. What kind of trouble? Perhaps it's the kind that Janet and I might rather fancy."

"That is why I warn you. You are a young man with a wife. It is easy to see that you are not the type who avoids danger. But a wife makes a difference—especially such a lady as yours. You would not wish to involve her and yet you may unwittingly, if you do not leave Olifa."

"Supposing I were a bachelor, what would you say?"

Don Luis laughed. "Ah, then, I should speak otherwise. I should make of you a confidant—perhaps an ally! You wish to visit the Gran Seco, but your passports are unaccountably delayed. I might offer to take you to the Gran Seco, but not by Santa Ana and the Company railway."

Archie pondered. "Everything in this country seems turn on the Gran Seco," he said, "and we don't seem to be able to get there."

"It may be that that a blunder of officialdom is doing you a service," said Don Luis solemnly.

"Well, I've no desire to go there and get tangled up in a local shindy, which I take it is what you are hinting at. I remember Mr Wilbur said that the miners seemed to be ugly crowd. I'm very much obliged to you, Don Luis."

"You will not tell anyone that I have warned you."

"Certainly not... I'm rather inclined to take your advice, and tell Gedde to drop the passport business. I did come here looking for trouble—and, besides, there's my wife."

But in this Archie was not wholly candid. He told his self that what he called a "dago revolution" had no charms for him, especially with Janet to take care of. But realised that this phrase did not exhaust the mystery in Olifa, which had been slowly accumulating in his mind till the sense of it was like an atmosphere about him. And he had taken a strong liking to Don Luis. The young man had a curious appeal in his alternate gaiety and gravity. There was that in him which seemed to beckon to wild and delightful things; he was such a companion as Archie a dozen years ago would have

welcomed to ride with over the edge of the world. But Archie—rangé, married, lame of one leg—decided with a half-sigh that such visions and such comrades were no longer for him.

On their return to the city they were met by an incensed Don Alejandro. Not only had the permits for the Gran Seco not arrived, they had been definitely refused. It was not the work of the Government—this he had ascertained from his second cousin, the Minister for External Affairs. The refusal came from the Company itself, and Don Alejandro was positive that it was due to the interference of the American Consul. No doubt Wilbur had meant well, but apparently he had pressed the request so that the Company had assumed that he was its principal sponsor, and had naturally refused, since they thought they had done enough for his unpopular country by permitting the entrance of the party from the Corinna. There was no doubt about it. Don Alejandro had heard from a friend who was deep in the Company's affairs that Wilbur was the cause of the refusal.

To Janet's surprise Archie seemed rather relieved than otherwise. "Just as well, perhaps," he said. "We should probably have got fever or something, and we didn't come six thousand miles to look at a mining district. We have plenty of them at home."

He had not told Janet of Don Luis's warning, but he had brooded over it, and with his separation from the giver good sense seemed to grow more convincing. Why on earth should Janet and he waste time in visiting a dusty plateau, even though it was the source of Olifa's prosperity and might have importance in Olifa's future politics? He would learn little in a hurried tour, and it wasn't his line to pick up gossip and go home and raise a racket in Parliament about Gran Seco atrocities... They would go to Cardanio and Alcorta, and might make a short trip into the mountains. The Twelve Apostles would bear inspection from closer quarters... After that they would go home by Panama, and perhaps visit Jamaica. His mother's family had once owned big plantations there, established by an ancestor who had left the country hurriedly after Culloden.

So they fell back upon Olifa society, and Archie played polo daily at the club, and they gave a dinner at the hotel; and were just preparing to set out for Cardanio, when they were bidden to luncheon by no less a person than the President. A superb card of invitation, surmounted by the Olifa arms in gold, gave Archie the title of "Right Honourable," and designed Janet as the "Honourable Lady A. Roylance."

Archie consulted Don Alejandro as to his garments, and was informed that the manners of Olifa were English and that they might both wear what they pleased. So Janet and he appeared at the President's mansion in their ordinary clothes, to find most of the men in evening dress with ribands and stars, and all the women in Paris hats and what looked like wedding gowns. Janet promptly had a fit of giggles, and it was a flushed and embarrassed pair who made their bow to the heavy, sallow, bull-necked Excelentísimo.

The day was hot, the place where they sat was as heavily upholstered as a Victorian dining-room, and the conversation had the languor of a ceremonial banquet. Janet, as the guest of honour, sat on the President's right hand, while Archie at the other end was sandwiched between a voluminous elderly woman who was the President's wife and a sleepy Frenchwoman whose husband was Don Alejandro's kinsman. His head had been confused by many introductions, but he had made out that kinsman, a Sanfuentes of the younger branch, and a tall man with a forked beard who was Aribia, the Minister of Finance. There was a vacant chair on Janet's right side.

The meal seemed interminable. The food was pretentiously good, and the guests seemed to have been starved for days, for they refused none of the dishes. Sweet champagne was served, and the Olifa Tokay, but when Archie, greatly daring, asked for a whisky-and-soda, it was brought him and to his surprise was pre-War whisky. There seemed to be about twenty footmen, all in knee-breeches, mestizos who in their gaudy liveries had an air of comic opera. Archie tried his bad Spanish on his two ladies, and, having exhausted the beauties and greatness of Olifa, the distress of Europe, their families, and his visit to Veiro, was hard put to it for topics. Senora Sanfuentes received every mention of Don Alejandro with a shrug and a giggle, Madame la Presidente did not appear to have heard of him.

Suddenly there was a movement in the company. Someone had entered and taken the vacant chair by Janet's side.

The light in the room was very dim, and Archie saw only a tall figure, to greet whom the President and the other men rose and bowed. The man, whoever he was, was not in evening dress. Later, he saw Janet's fair head inclined towards him, and from the vivacity of her manner she seemed to be finding interest in the new guest.

At last, with a marvellous course of fruits and sweet-meats, the meal came to an end. The hostess rose heavily and led the ladies from the room, and the men moved up to a semi-circle round their host. Room was made for Archie next to the President, and beyond that impressive figure sat the late arrival. With a thrill he recognised the man he had seen the first day leaving the office in the Avenida, the great Senor Castor, the Gobernador of the province of the Gran Seco and the head of the Company.

Huge cigars had been provided, but the Gobernador had refused them, and, after asking his host's permission, had lit a short briar pipe. It was some minutes before the President formally introduced them, being himself engaged in a whispered conversation, so Archie had the opportunity to study the great man's features. Seen at close quarters they were not less impressive than in the fleeting view on the Avenida. The brow was broad and high, and had the heavy frontal development above the eyebrows which Archie had been told betokened mathematical genius. The complexion was pale, but clear and healthy; the nose short and finely formed, and springing from the forehead like the prow of a ship. The mouth was hidden by the beard, but it might be guessed that the lips were full. The eyes were the compelling feature. They were large and grey and set rather wide apart, and, though narrow-lidded, gave their possessor an air of steady, competent watchfulness. There was thought in them, and masterfulness, but no hint of passion, only a calm, all embracing intelligence. Among the beady opaque eyes around him, this man's were like pools of living light contrasted with scummed

morasses. The face was grave and composed, but when Archie's name was spoken it broke into a curiously pleasant smile.

The Gobernador of the Gran Seco addressed him in flawless English. He inquired after his journey, spoke of the pleasure with which he had made Janet's acquaintance, and, on being informed by the President that Archie was a member of the British Legislature, asked one or two shrewd questions about current British politics. In five minutes' talk across the table he seemed to take soundings of Archie's mind, and elicited his special interest. He even detected his love of birds, and had something say of the need for a sound ornithologist to investigate certain of the mountain areas. Archie had a feeling that this astonishing man, if he had been told that his hobby was marine zoology or Coptic antiquities, would have talked about it with the same intimate intelligence.

"You will visit us, I hope, in our little mountain kingdom. Perhaps you have heard of our Gran Seco?"

"I've heard about nothing else. But there's a hitch somewhere, and I've been told that we can't get passports for the present."

The Gobernador frowned. "What incomprehensible folly! That is a matter which shall at once be set right. I cannot think how the mistake has arisen. Your hotel? The Constitution? Permits shall be sent round to you this afternoon, and you have only to fix the day of your journey and we shall make arrangements. What must you think of us, Sir Archibald! Believe me, we are not accustomed to treat distinguished strangers with impoliteness."

The manner of the Gobernador was so open and friendly that Archie's distaste for the Gran Seco and his memory of Don Luis's talk straightway vanished. The resident observed that in old days the Gran Seco had been a closed country, and that, as Sir Archibald would realise, it could not be thrown open in a day.

"I am positive Sir Archibald will understand," said the Gobernador. "We have established, as it were, a Sheffield and a Birmingham in a rude hill-country, and we must limit our administrative problems. The sixteenth century and the twentieth can co-exist only if the latter is given in small doses. Slowly they will harmonise—but slowly. You have the same problem in your India. I understand that you do not permit tourists, however well accredited, even to enter some of the hill-states."

"That's true," said Archie. "When I was there, they wouldn't let me put a foot across the Nepaul border."

"Also we are a big business, with our secrets, and we cannot have agents of our rivals prowling about the place, which is, so to speak, all one workshop. But—we welcome visitors who recognise our difficulties and submit to our modest rules."

"It is the Yanquis who give trouble," said the President darkly.

The Gobernador laughed. "Some Yanquis. I do not share his Excellency's distrust of the whole of that great nation. The bright special correspondent on the look-out for a 'scoop' is the most dangerous of created things. But we welcome the reasonable journalist. You may have read a series of articles on Olifa in the Saturday Evening Post. There you had the Gran Seco accurately portrayed with our full assent. Yet on the whole it is not the journalist who perplexes us most. It is the Yanqui tripper on a circular tour. We cannot have them making drunken fools of themselves in a place where the prestige of the white man is his only security."

"There was an American party at the hotel," said Archie. "Noisy young devils from a yacht. I think they went up to the Gran Seco a week ago."

The Gobernador shrugged his shoulders. "We do not antagonise the great, we who are business men. But those young people will not be given the privileges which await you, Sir Archibald."

Archie felt as if he were being treated with especial frankness and friendliness, and his susceptible soul was in a pleasant glow. Then the conversation became general and he had leisure to observe the company. The Gobernador said little, the Oliferos statesmen much, but it seemed the Archie that they all talked under his eye and for his approbation. After an argument there came a hush, as if the deferred to him for the ultimate word. But he scarcely spoke. He sat silent, watchful, now and then smiling tolerantly. Once only he intervened. The Minister of Finance was discoursing on some aspect of the policy of the United States, and his comments were caustic. The Gobernador looked across at Archie and spoke in English.

"Yanquis are unpopular in England?" he asked.

"No. I shouldn't say that. Americans are popular with us, as they always have been. You see, we get the best of them. But the abstract thing, America, is unpopular. She always seems to have a rather left-handed Government."

A spark seemed to kindle in the other's eye.

"That is right. No section of humanity deserves blame. It is governments, not peoples, that offend."

Then the spark died out.

As Janet and Archie walked back to the hotel they spoke of the luncheon party. They had taken the road through the old town, and were in the market-place among stalls.

"That man Castor doesn't belong here," said Archie. "He has nothing in common with those bland Oliferos. He's nearer to that lot," and he pointed to a group of Indians in shaggy ponchos squatted by the fountain.

"He is one of the most extraordinary people I ever met," said Janet. "Can you guess what he talked to me about? Ossian-Papa's bete noire, you know—Lord Balfour, and Marcel Proust! And I believe he could have talked just as well about clothes and Paris models."

"I never in my life got so strong an impression of all-round competence... I like him, too. I think he's a good fellow. Don't you?"

“I’m not so sure,” said Janet. “I should like to see him clean-shaven. I’ve an idea that the mouth under that beard of his might be horribly cruel.”

The Gran Seco has not often appeared in the world's literature. Francisco de Toledo first entered it in the sixteenth century, but after that there is no mention of it till Calamity Brown wandered thither from the coast in the late years of the eighteenth. That luckless and probably mendacious mariner has little good to say of it; it was the abode of devilish insects and devilish men, and, if we are to believe him, he barely escaped with his life. In the nineteenth century it was partially explored by the Spanish naturalist, Mendoza, and a Smithsonian expedition investigated its peculiar geology. Its later history is written in the reports of its copper companies, but Sylvester Perry visited it in his celebrated journey round the globe, and it has a short and comminatory chapter in his *Seeing Eyes*. Mr Perry did not like the place, and in his characteristic way has likened it to a half-healed abscess, sloughed over with unwholesome skin.

Mr Perry was partially right. The Gran Seco is not built to the scale of man and it has no care for his comforts. But it has its own magnificence. Its gate is the town of Santa Ana, in whose market-place stands the colossal figure of the crucified Christ, first erected by Pizarro, many times destroyed by earthquakes, and always replaced, since it is the defiance of the plains to the mountains. But the gate is far from the citadel, for the avenue is a hundred miles long. The Gran Seco railway, now a double line most skilfully engineered, and wholly controlled by the Company, runs first up a long valley where only in mid-winter a river flows. Then it passes over tiers of high desert, sinks into hollows where sometimes there are waters and forests climbs again in tortuous gullies, till at length it emerges upon the great plateau; and always beside it can be traced the old highroad where once rode Toledo's men-at-arms, and only the other day the ore from the mines jolted down country on mule-back. But there are still many miles to go before the city of Gran Seco is reached, sunk in a shallow trough among its barren and blistered hills.

At first sight Sylvester Perry's phrase seems to have certain justice. Twenty years ago in the hollow there was only a wretched Indian *puebla* roosting among the ruins of an old city, for the copper from the distant mines was exported in its crude form. It was chiefly what is called virgin copper, with a certain amount of malachite and azurite ores. Ten years ago a new city began to rise, where the sulphuretted ores were first mined, and smelting was started. There was a furious rivalry among the companies till they were united in a great combine, and the whole mineral wealth gathered under a single direction. Process succeeded process, furnaces were multiplied till they coven many acres, wells were sunk and pumping-stations erected, great dams were built in the hills to catch the winter rail and street after street rose in the dust. The Castor method of calcination and electrolytic refining soon quadrupled in size. To one looking down from the surrounding ridges the place seems a hive of ugly activity: on one side a wilderness of furnaces and converters, with beyond them the compounds where the workmen are housed; on the other a modern city with high buildings and clanking electric trams. By day it is an inferno of noise and dust and vapours, with a dull metallic green the prevailing tint; by night a bivouac of devils warmed by angry fires. Mr Perry is right. The place has the look of a gangrening sore, with for the surrounding skin the pale shaly hills. And the climate is in itself a disease. In winter the hollow is scourged and frozen, and in summer the sun's heat, refracted from naked stone, strikes the face like a blow.

In the streets the first impression is of extreme orderliness. The traffic is methodically conducted by vigilant police in spruce uniforms—for the most part of the Indian or mestizo type, with European superintendents. They are a fine body of men; too good, the spectator decides, for such an environment. The main street, the Avenida Bolivar, is broad and paved with concrete, and along it rise structures which would not disgrace New York. The Regina Hotel is larger than the Ritz, and there are others; the offices of the Company's administration form a block scarcely smaller than Carlton House Terrace; there are clubs and many apartment houses, all built of the white local stone. But the shops are few and poor, and there are no villas in the environs, so that the impression grows that the Gran Seco is a camp, which its inhabitants regard as no continuing city. Hourly the sense of the bivouac expands in the traveller's mind. The place is one great caravanserai for pilgrims. These busy, preoccupied people are here for the day only and to-morrow will be gone.

Other things will soon strike him. There seem to be no peasants. No neighbouring countryside obtrudes itself into this monastic industry. Every man—there are few women—is regimented by the Company. If the traveller is escorted to the area of the smelting and refining plant (and his passports must be very high-powered to ensure this privilege), he will see the unskilled work done by Indians and mestizos—men with faces like mechanical automata—but the skilled foremen are all European. He will puzzle over these Europeans, for however wide his racial knowledge, he will find it hard to guess their nationality, since their occupation seems to have smoothed out all differences into one common type with a preoccupation so intense as to be almost furtive. In the streets, too, in the clubs and hotels, he will be struck by the waxwork look of some of the well-dressed employees. They are inhumanly pale, and so concentrated upon some single purpose that their faces are expressionless and their eyes unseeing.

He will be much shepherded and supervised, and, though his permission *de sejour* is for only a few days, he will be apt to find these days pass heavily. If he is a mining expert he will not be allowed to indulge his curiosity, for the Castor processes are jealously guarded. If he is the ordinary tourist, he will find no sights to repay him, and for the only amusement an occasional concert of austere classical music given by the Administration staff. He will probably leave the place with relief, glad to have seen the marvel, but thankful that his lines are cast among ordinary humanity. At the station, on his departure, he will be presented with a wonderful booklet, containing an eloquent speech of the Gobernador, and extracts (with illustrations) from the recent articles on the Gran Seco in the Saturday Evening Post.

The young party from the Corinna did not appear to find the time hang heavy on their hands. There were ten them, five of each sex, with no older person to look aft them, though a very moderate chaperonage seemed to be exercised by a tall girl with fine eyes and a pleasant Southern voice. That their purchase was considerable was shown by their entertainment, for they were shown everything and went everywhere; that they were unwelcome visitors, unwillingly

privileged, was proved by their close oversight. Indeed they were uncomfortable guests, for they made patch of garish colour in the drab of the Gran Seco and discord in its orderly rhythm. The mere sight of them the streets was enough to send the ordinary policeman the Commissary to ask for instructions.

They were patently harmless, but deplorably silly. The Regina was turned by them into a cabaret. They danced every night in the restaurant to the disquiet of the diners, and they chaffed mercilessly an unsmiling staff. Bedroom riots seemed to be their speciality, and it was an unlucky official of the Company who had his quarters in the corridor. When they were entertained to luncheon by Administration they asked questions so sublimely idiotic that the Vice-President, a heavy sallow man, called Rosas, of Mexican extraction, actually coloured, thinking that he was being made a fool of; and their visit to the smelting plant was attended by the same exasperating buffoonery.

Presently it appeared that their idiocy was congenital and not a pose. Their jazz chatter and jazz manners were the natural expression of jazz minds, and must be endured because of the prestige of Mr Burton Rawlinson. So "Baby" and "Bawby" and "Honey" and "Gerry" went their preposterous way, and the Gran Seco shrugged outraged shoulders and spat.

Nevertheless there were signs, had there been eyes to note them, that the yacht party was not quite what it seemed. In unguarded moments, as Janet had already observed, they could be betrayed into sanity and good breeding. At nights, too, when their ragging was over, there were odd discussions in the privacy of bedrooms. At least one of the young men would sit far into the dawn working at notes and plans.

Presently, as if they had had enough of the city, they extended their revels into the surrounding country. They procured two touring cars, and, after some trouble with the Commissary of Police, embarked on long excursions. The mines lie in three main groups—the San Tome, the Alhuema, and the Universum—and they visited all three. There they seemed to find much to interest them, and the managers feverishly telephoned to headquarters for instructions. These children were imbeciles doubtless, they reported, but they were poking their noses into forbidden places. So on their return the troupe had to interview the Commissary of Police, who politely cautioned them against breaches of the regulations of the province.

Their next escapade was more serious. They packed luncheon-baskets and departed, as they said, for a visit to the caves of Marequito—a permitted excursion. Then for three days they disappeared, the police were furious and anxious, and a posse was sent out in motor-cars to discover their whereabouts. Six of the party—five girls and a man—and one of the cars were found two hundred miles off in a valley under the high peaks called the Spanish Ladies. They told a pitiful story; they had lost their road, exhausted their food, and had had to spend chilly nights on the ground. The other car had gone off the day before to find supplies, and had not returned.

The inspector of police wrung his hands. "Do you not know that in these parts the natives are dangerous? You have narrowly escaped throat-cutting." The party was sent back to the city in disgrace, but they did not seem to feel their position. They were inordinately cheerful and scarcely looked as if they had suffered a three days' fast.

In spite of the police activity no word came of the other car, till two days later it returned brazenly of its own accord. The occupants told the same story—a lost road, a breakdown, semi-starvation, a lucky meeting in the end with an intelligent vaquero who put them on the way to the San Tome mine. This party did indeed show some signs of privation and one of the four men had his arm in a sling, the result he said, of a fall from a rock when he was trying to get a prospect.

There was a stern inquiry at the office of the Commissary and the four were closely cross-examined about their journey. But they proved to be bewildered and obtuse. Their accounts conflicted, and when maps were placed before them they were quite unable to point out their route. "Can't you realise that we were lost?" they repeated, "lost like a tick in a wood-pile? What d'you keep worrying about? It's no good quoting lists of your darned hills! We can't locate them."

After this episode the American party showed better behaviour. For the last days of their stay they confined themselves to the city, and got up a fancy-dress ball in the Regina, into which they dragged some of the unwilling residents. The young man with his arm in a sling did not appear at this function; indeed he did not leave his room, being a little fevered—so he told the hotel servants—by accident, though he refused to see a doctor. This was perhaps natural, for in the small hours after his return there had been some rough surgery in his bedroom. One of his companions had cut out a pistol bullet from above his left elbow, and the tall girl, who had once nursed in a hospital, had done the bandaging.

Archie and Janet were very different visitors. It almost appeared as if they were welcome ones. A special coach was attached for them to the Santa Ana train, and this was shunted on to the Gran Seco line. It contained two compartments, in one of which they were given excellent meals, while the other was on the lines of an observation car, so filled with bridal flowers that Archie looked anxiously about for rice and slippers. They were also given a guide, a well-mannered young Olifero who unobtrusively offered information. He pointed out the objects of interest on the way to Santa Ana, and during the hour of waiting there: conducted them over the cathedral, which has a famous altar-piece, and, under the great crucifix, told with pride the tale of the first Conquistadors. The long climb into the Gran Seco was enlivened by his anecdotes. He showed them the valley where Toledo's men had been ambushed by Indians, the corner where the copper convoy had once been destroyed by a landslide, the gully which had long defied the railway engineers. At the frontier station he had managed their passes for them, and as the train crawled on to the plateau had sketched for them vivaciously the history of the mining industry.

"We can't tip this fellow," Archie whispered to Janet. "He's a gentleman." And his wife had agreed.

He saw them to their hotel, where rooms had been secured for them by the Administration. On parting, Archie and Janet warmly thanked him, and asked him his name. The young man smiled pleasantly. "That is nice of you, for I think we shall meet again. They call me Carlos Rivero." He added, "I am a friend of Luis de Marzaniga," and it seemed to Archie that

his eyes said something confidential which he could not fathom.

The Moplabs were in the hotel, but in a somewhat hastened mood. The tall girl, whom Janet believed she had recognised, did not appear, nor did the young man in the starched linen knickerbockers, though Archie looked for him longingly. But the corybants of the Club de Residentes Extranjeros were there and greeted them with boisterous friendliness, though, somewhat to Janet's surprise, they did not invite them to join their party.

In any case that would have been impossible, for the newcomers found a complex programme provided for their entertainment. They had no occasion to hire a car: the Administration provided one, a neat Daimler limousine which at all hours waited on their convenience. They were shown every phase of the great industry, and the day after their arrival they lunched with the Administration. The Gobernador himself appeared at the meal, an honour which, it was hinted, was almost unexampled. He apologised for the absence of the Vice-President, the same who had been made to blush by the Moplabs. "My colleague," he said, "sends his profound apologies, but at the moment he is suffering from a slight attack of jaundice. He deeply regrets that he cannot be here to welcome you, for he has many friends in your country and in Europe. He is of Mexico, and a Mexican is like a Russian—his country is so remote from the life of the world that he must needs adopt all countries. He is the true international."

The meal was a Spartan one compared, to the banquet at the President's mansion, but the food was perfectly cooked and, for a place in the heart of wild hills, extraordinarily varied. The company were all grave, pallid, perfectly mannered, with expressionless eyes and no gestures—what Don Alejandro had called the type *Gran Seco*. There was nothing of the hustling liveliness which Archie associate with a luncheon of commercial magnates. Also all seemed to be in awe of their President, and hung on his lips. Castor talked indeed, brilliantly and continuously, but it was a monologue, and he went through a series of subjects, adorning each and then dropping it. There was none of the give-and-take of good conversation. Yet the time passed pleasantly, and when they rose from table Castor offered to show them his office.

It was on the first floor of the main building, lit by four large windows, into which travellers on the top of the tram-cars could look and see the great man at his work.

Here there was no seclusion or mystery. The big bright chambers gave its occupant no more privacy than an aviary gives a bird, for not only could it be looked into from the street, but at one end was a glass partition separating it inadequately from a room full of busy secretaries. There were maps and plans of the *Gran Seco* on the walls, a complicated mechanism of desk telephones, a bookcase full of mining reports, an immense safe, a cigar cabinet—and that was all. It might have been the office of a real-estate agent in a provincial town in the United States or Canada.

The contrast between Castor's personality and his modest habitation was so startling that Janet laughed.

The Gobernador seemed to understand her feelings. "I have other lairs," he said, smiling. "One, much grander, is in Olifa, and I have my rooms too in Paris and London. But this is my true workshop."

He opened a door, which revealed a tiny bedroom and bathroom.

"Compact, is it not?" he said. "I need no more. I am a simple man."

That night Archie and Janet dined in the hotel with the Financial Secretary, and afterwards went to hear Beethoven performed by a string quartet in the music-room of the *Gran Seco* Club. When they returned to their apartments, Archie was loud in his praises of his hosts.

"Odd, isn't it? to find Castilian manners in business grandees! We didn't find them at Veiro, for old Sanfuentes was just like the ordinary country gentleman at home. But these fellows here are all *hidalgos*. I feel noisy and rather vulgar among them. And, good Lord! what must they think of the Moplabs?"

"Castor too!" he went on. "What rot it was Gedd and Wilbur making him out a mystery man! He's an extraordinarily clever fellow, but as open as the day. A mystery man couldn't live in a place like a cricket pavilion!"

"Did you ever read a poem called 'How it strikes a Contemporary'? Browning, you know."

"No," said Archie.

"Well, the poem is all about a tremendous mystery man—the Corregidor, Browning calls him—and he lived in just such a way as Mr Castor. How does it go?—"

"Poor man, he lived another kind of life In that new stuccoed third house by the bridge, Fresh-painted, rather smart than otherwise! The whole street might o'erlook him as he sat Leg crossing leg—and—"

"I can't remember it all, but anyhow he played cribbage every night with his housekeeper and went to bed punctually at ten."

Their permit for the *Gran Seco* had specified no time-limit. For two days they explored the details of the industry, were conducted through vast laboratories, studied the latest types of furnace and converter, pored over blue prints in offices and gave themselves vile headaches. Archie declared that the smelting works were like the Ypres Salient after a gas attack. He tried to be intelligent, but found himself gravely handicapped by his lack of all scientific knowledge. "I have had the meaning of a reverberatory furnace explained to me a dozen times," he complained, "but I'm hanged if I can keep it in my head. And what Bessemerising is remains to me one of Allah's secrets. It's no good, Janet, this isn't my pidgin. Thank God, we're going to the Mines to-morrow. I think that should be more in my line."

They were taken to the Mines through a sad grey country a desert of shale and rock. "Calcined," Archie called it, having just acquired that word, and Janet said that she supposed it must be like the landscapes in the moon. Every stream-course was bone-dry, and the big dams they passed, with the green water very low in their beds, only accentuated the desiccation. Yet, where wells had been sunk, the soil was not without fertility, and the thin grasses seemed give a living to considerable

flocks of sheep and goats. They passed many ruins—not only old mine workings, but the remains of Indian villages, which suggested that at one time the Gran Seco had been a more habitable country.

At the Mines they were shown little, for there was little time. Managers were ready with sheafs of statistics, and at the Universum they lunched luxuriously. But of the miners at work they saw nothing. They returned invigorated by the keen air of the steppes, and Archie, who had caught from a ridge a glimpse of the snowy peaks of the Spanish Ladies, had had his appetite whetted for further travel. But the Administration was not encouraging. That was all Indian country—policed, it was true, for it was the chief recruiting-ground of labour, but not open to ordinary travel. “We could send you there,” said an urbane secretary, “but you would have to take an escort, and you would have to submit to be treated like a schoolboy. You will understand, Sir Archibald, that this Gran Seco of ours is in parts a delicate machine, and the presence of even so little extraneous matter might do harm.”

That evening after dinner Janet and Archie were in their sitting-room. The Regina was full of the preparations for departure of the Moplabs, who were going down-country by the night train, and their shrill cries could be heard in the corridor, since their rooms were on the same floor.

“We’re extraneous matter here,” said Archie. “What about it, Janet? They’ve given us a very good show, but I’m disillusioned about the Gran Seco. Wilbur must have been pulling my leg. The place is as humdrum as the Potteries, and just about as ugly. I should have liked to have had a shot at the high mountains, but I can see their reason for not encouraging visitors in their labour reserve. I rather like the crowd—they behave well and they must be the last word in efficiency... Confound those Moplabs! This is like living beside a hencoop!”

Janet looked serious, and, as was her way in such a mood, she sat with her hands idle in her lap. “Let’s get away from this place,” she said. “I hate it!”

“Why in the world...?”

“I hate it. Those soft-spoken, solemn men have got on my nerves. I think there’s something inhuman about them. Most of the faces of the people at the smelting works and at the Mines were like masks... And at that awful luncheon!... I believe that sometimes I saw the devil grinning out from behind them... And in the streets. I saw one or two villainous ruffians, who should have been in rags, but were as spruce as bagmen. I felt as if I were in an orderly and well-policed Hell... Why did they shepherd us away from the Mines, for remember we saw nothing there? Why won’t they let us go into the back country? I believe it is because they are concealing something, something so bad that the world must never know of it.”

Archie stared.

“I must say you’ve got a lively imagination,” he began, but Janet was not listening.

“Let us go away—at once—to-morrow morning. I should like to be going to-night... Ring up the Administration and say we must get home in a hurry... I think there’s something infernal about this big, noiseless machine. I want to be back at Veiro, where there are human beings. I want to be with the honest silly little Moplabs. I want something more peaceful...”

“I should have thought that the Gran Seco was more peaceful than the Moplabs.”

“No, it isn’t, for there is death here, and death is unsettling.”

“Well, we’ll go off to-morrow, if you wish it. We’re not likely to want for peace in the next few weeks. The thing is how to avoid boredom... By the way, oughtn’t we to go downstairs and say good-bye to the Americans? They’re friendly souls.”

But Janet was in a strange mood. “You go. I don’t think I’ll come.” She still sat with her hands in her lap, looking straight before her.

But the Americans were already packed into the station omnibus, and Archie could only shout to them from the doorway, and receive in return blown kisses from the ladies and hand-waves from the men. They seemed to be waiting for a member of their party, and as Archie turned into the hall he met the laggard charging through the crowd of waiters and porters. It was the one who had not yet shown himself, and Archie realised that it must be the driver of the car in the Avenida de la Paz, the youth in the linen knickerbockers. What his present clothes were could not be guessed, since he wore a tweed ulster, but he had the same preposterous, broad-brimmed hat on his head.

To his surprise the young man, whom he had never met, made straight for him, and gave him his hand. Something passed from it, and Archie’s fist held a crumpled paper.

The next second he was gone, but not before Archie had had another shock. For this was not the youth of the Avenida de la Paz. It was Don Luis de Marzaniga, and in their moment of contact his eyes had looked into his and they had commanded silence.

Deeply mystified, Archie went upstairs with the paper held tight in his fingers. When his door closed behind him, opened it. The scrap contained a scrawl in pencil in a large, irregular hand. It read: “Please be both in your sitting-room at eleven o’clock.”

He showed it to Janet.

“I said there was no mystery in the Gran Seco, but it seems I spoke too soon. I’m hanged if I can make it out. It was Luis that gave me this paper, but it was Luis pretending to be that American lad in the linen knickerbockers. You remember he was the one of the Moplabs we never saw.”

“We never saw the tall girl either. I am positive that she was Miss Dasent.” Janet looked at her wrist-watch. “Eleven, the note said. A quarter of an hour to wait.”

That quarter of an hour was spent by Janet in the same contemplative immobility, while Archie tried to read, smoked two cigarettes feverishly, and occupied a few minutes in washing his hands. The bedroom opened from the sitting-room, and beyond it was the bathroom which he used as a dressing-room. He was just about to begin a third cigarette when he saw that the hands of the sham ormolu clock on the mantelpiece pointed to eleven. After that he kept his eyes on the door which led to the corridor.

But that door did not open. It was an exclamation from Janet that made him turn his head.

A waiter had appeared suddenly, entering from the bedroom. He carried a tray with three cups of mate, which he placed on the table at Janet's elbow.

"Look here, you've made a mistake," Archie said in his halting Spanish. "We gave no orders."

The man replied in English. "Didn't you? All the same, you'd be the better for cup. I'm going to have one myself. You might lock the door, Archie, and give me a cigarette."

While Archie stared thunderstruck, Janet laughed—a laugh which began as a low gurgle and ended in riotous merriment. She rose from her chair and stood before the waiter, her shoulders shaking, while she dabbed her small handkerchief on her eyes. Then, suddenly, she became grave. "You have been having a rough time. Sandy," she said, and she laid a hand on his shoulder. He winced, and drew back.

"So—so," he said. "That arm is still tender... What malign fate brought the pair of you here?"

The waiter was to all appearance an ordinary mestizo, sallow-skinned, with shaggy dark hair, handsome after a fashion because of his pleasant eyes. He wore ill-fitting dress trousers, a shirt not too clean, a short alpaca jacket and slippers rather down at heel. He smiled on Janet as he poured out the mate, and then from Archie's case took a cigarette.

"Yes. I want to know just how you managed it," continued. "Wilbur did his best to prevent you, and Luis told me he thought he had dissuaded you, and in spite of everything you bubble up. You're an incorrigible pair!"

"But why shouldn't we come here if we want?" Janet asked.

"Because it's deadly danger—for yourselves and for others. You go to lunch with the Administration, and the Vice-President hears of it just in time to have a touch of jaundice. You blunder into this hotel, and I can only save myself by making this assignation. You two innocents have been complicating my life."

Enlightenment broke in on Archie. "You were the boulder in the linen bags—the fellow that drove the car."

"I was. You were within an ace of recognising me, if I hadn't tilted my hat."

"Then what was Luis doing, got up in your rig?"

"He took my passport. This is a country of passports, you know, much more efficient than anything we had in the war zone in France. He came into the Gran Seco by a back door, and so didn't require one. But it was essential that mine should be used and that I should be believed to be out of the place. It was equally essential that I should remain here."

"How did you manage your present camouflage?"

The waiter looked down with pride at his spotty shirt.

"Rather successful, isn't it? I have a bit of a graft in this line. My weeks in the Cafe de l'Enfer were not altogether wasted."

He finished his mate and lit a cigarette. He looked at the two before him, Janet with her girlish wind-blown grace, Archie with his puzzled honesty, and he suddenly ceased to be a waiter. His brows bent, and his voice from friendly banter became the voice of authority.

"You must clear out at once," he said. "Tomorrow morning. Do you know that you are walking gaily on a road which is mined in every yard?"

"I knew it," said Janet. "I felt in my bones that this place was accursed."

"You don't know it. You cannot know just how accursed it is, and I have no time to explain. What I have to tell you is that you must go down to Olifa to-morrow morning. You will be encouraged to stay longer, but you must refuse."

"But look here, Sandy"—it was Archie who spoke—"they have nothing against us. Janet and I can't be in my danger."

"No, but you are a source of danger to others. Myself, for example, and the Vice-President, Senor Rosas."

"Rosas—I never heard of him."

"A very pleasant Mexican gentleman. You once knew him as Mr Blenkiron."

"Good Lord! But he's dead!"

"He is officially dead. That is why it won't do for him to meet old friends."

"Sandy dear," said Janet, "you mustn't treat us like this. We're not babies. We'll do what you tell us, but we deserve more confidence."

The waiter compared his Ingersoll watch with the sham ormolu clock.

"Indeed, you do, but the story would take hours, and I have only three minutes left. But I will tell you one thing. Do you remember my showing you at Laverlaw the passage in the chronicle about the Old Man of the Mountain, the King of the Assassins, who lived in the Lebanon, and doped his followers with hashish and sent them about the world to do his errands? Well, that story has a counterpart to-day."

"Mr Castor!" Janet exclaimed. "Archie liked him, but I felt that he might be a devil."

“A devil! Perhaps. He is also a kind of saint, and he is beyond doubt a genius. You will know more about him some day.”

“But you are sending us away... Sandy, I won’t have it. We are too old friends to be bundled off like stray dogs from a racecourse. You are in some awful pickle and we must help.”

“I am sending you away,” said the waiter gravely, “because I want your help—when the time comes. There’s another woman in this business, Janet, and I want you to be with her. I want you both. I pay you the compliment of saying that I can’t do without you. You will go back to Olifa to the Hotel de la Constitucion, and you will make friends with an American girl there. She is expecting you and she will give you your instructions.”

“I know,” said Janet. “She is Mr Blenkiron’s niece—a Miss Dasent. What is her Christian name?”

The waiter looked puzzled. “I’m afraid I don’t know. I never asked her.”

The waiter at the Regina was an exemplary servant. He dispensed the morning meal of fruit and coffee with soft-footed alacrity. At the mid-day dejeuner, when it was the custom of the Company's officials, including some of the greatest, to patronise the hotel, he had the big round table in the north window, and in a day or two had earned the approval of his fastidious clients. Miguel was his name, and presently he was addressed by it as if he had been an old feature of the establishment. Those solemn gentlemen talked little, and at their meals they did not ransack the wine-list or summon the cook, but each had his little peculiarities of taste which Miguel made it his business to remember. He was always at their elbow, smiling gravely, to anticipate their wants. In the evening the restaurant was less full, only the guests living in the hotel and a few junior officials, for it was the custom of the magnates to dine at the club. In the evening Miguel was frequently off duty in the restaurant, engaged in other branches of hotel work, and twice a week he had his time after 7 p.m. to himself.

The waiter did not spend his leisure hours in his attic bedroom, which was like an oven after the sun had beat all day on the slatted roof. Once or twice he joined his fellow-employees in a visit to the cinema or to a shabby little gaming-room where one drank cheap aguardiente and played a languid kind of poker. But generally he seemed to have business of his own, and the negro porter at the back entrance grew familiar with his figure arriving punctually on the stroke of midnight, and chaffed him heavily about an imaginary girl. It was no one's business to keep watch on this humble half-caste, whose blood showed so dearly in his shadowy finger-nails and dull yellow skin, But if he had been followed, curious things might have been noted...

He generally made for a new block of flats on the edge of the dry hollow which separated the smelting works from the city, and he frequently varied his route thither. This place, with its concrete stairs and white-washed walls, was not unlike a penitentiary, but it housed many of the work engineers and foremen. He would stop at a door on the third landing, consult his watch as to the hour, wait a minute or two, and then knock, and he was instantly admitted. Thence he would emerge in half an hour, generally accompanied by someone, and always in a new guise. Sometime he was a dapper Olifero clerk with a spruce collar and an attache case; sometimes in rough clothes with big spectacles so that his former half-caste air disappeared, and he might have been an engineer from Europe; sometimes a workman indistinguishable from an ordinary hand in the furnaces. He always returned to the same door about half past eleven, and issued from it once more the waiter at the Regina.

Between the hours of 7.30 and 11 p.m. the waiter seemed to have a surprising variety of duties. Occasionally he would pass the evening in one of the flats, or in a room in another block which adjoined the costing department. There he would meet silent people who slipped in one by one, and the conversation would be in low tones. Maps and papers would lie on the table, and there would be much talk of the names on certain lists, and notes would be pencilled alongside them. Sometimes there would be a colloquy on one or two, and then the waiter would do most of the talking—but not in Spanish. Sometimes the meeting would be at a cafe in a back street, which could only be entered by devious ways, and there, over glasses of indifferent beer, the waiter would make new acquaintances. His manners were odd, for he would regard these newcomers as sergeant regards recruits, questioning them with an air of authority. There were strange ceremonies on these occasions, so that the spectator might have thought them meetings of some demented Masonic lodge. Sometimes, the waiter in one of the rooms of the big block of flats would meet a figure with the scorched face of a countryman and the dust of the hills on his clothes—often in the dour form of the Mines Police and once or twice dressed like mestizo farmer. Then the talk would be hard to follow—strings of uncouth names, torrents of excited description, and a perpetual recourse to maps.

But the waiter's most curious visits—and they happened only twice during his time at the Regina—were to a big house behind the Administration Headquarters, which stood in what for the Gran Seco was a respectable garden. At such times the waiter became the conventional clerk, very dapper in a brown flannel suit, yellow boots, and a green satin tie with a garnet pin. He was evidently expected, for, on giving his name, he was admitted without question, and taken to a little room on the first floor which looked like the owner's study. "Senor Garcia from the Universum"—thus he was ushered in, and the occupant greeted him gruffly with "Come along, Garcia. Say, you're late. Have you brought the figures I asked for?"—followed by the injunction to the servant, "I can't be disturbed for the next two hours, so I guess you'd better disconnect the telephone. If anyone calls, say I'm mighty busy."

Then the occupant of the room would lock the door and pay some attention to the windows, after which he would greet the waiter like a long-lost brother. He was a big man, with a sallow face but a clear healthy eye—a man who looked as if he would have put on flesh but for some specially arduous work which kept him thin. He would catch the so-called Garcia by the shoulder as if he would hug him, then he would pat his back, and produce such refreshments as are not usually offered to a junior clerk. Strangely enough, there would be no mention of the awaited figures from the Universum.

"How much longer can you stick it?" he asked on the second occasion. "You're looking peaked."

"I've another week here. Then I break for the open. I doubt if I could keep it up for more than a week, for people are asking questions. Have you squared it with old Josephs and notified the Universum people?"

The big man nodded. "But after that you're beyond my jurisdiction. Peters in the Police is prepared for you, but it's up to you to slip over to him without exciting comment. The cook-boy at the Universum has got to perish. Can you manage that neatly?"

"I'll try. I'll have to do a lot of perishing in the next fortnight, before Luis picks me up. I'm terrified of going sick, you know. The Regina hasn't done me any good, and the Tierra Caliente isn't exactly a health-resort."

The other looked at him with affectionate anxiety.

"That's too bad... I haven't an easy row to hoe, but yours is hell with the lid off, and the almighty vexation is that I can't do much to help you. Just at present the game's with you. For the love of Mike keep on your feet, sonnie. You don't mean to go far into the Poison Country?"

"Not a yard farther than I can help. But Luis says I must be at least a couple of days there. Don't worry. I'll take care of myself."

After that the conversation was conducted in low tones, as if even the locked door and the guarded window might have ears. But had that talk been overheard, one phrase would have puzzled the eavesdropper, a phrase which constantly recurred and was spoken by both with a certain hesitation, even in that secret room. It was "Los Patios de la Manana," which, being translated, means "The Courts of the Morning." It might have been a mere password, or the name of some authority to which the speaker was subject, or a poetic description of a place. Most likely the last, for a map was produced—an amateur map neatly drawn and coloured, inscribed not with names but with letters. It showed steep gradients, so it must have referred to some mountain district.

At their parting the Roylances were mentioned. "They're back in Olifa," said the big man, "and Babs is looking after them good and sure. I'm mighty relieved that Babs has got a wise lady to keep her company. You're certain you can make use of Sir Archibald?"

"I can use him right enough," was the answer; "if he'll stay quiet on the ice till I want him."

A week later the waiter Miguel was seen no more at the Regina. When the occupants of the big table in the north window inquired of M. Josephs, the proprietor, as to his absence, they were told that he had been lent to the mess at the Universum Mine.

Miguel was four days at the Universum. He had a variety of tasks, for not only did he wait at table in the big adobe mess-room, but he lent a hand in the kitchen, for he was the soul of friendliness. Indeed he carried his willingness too far, for he was found in the kitchens of the compounds, where the Indian miners were fed like pigs at troughs, and was peremptorily ordered back. He had little leisure these days, but he managed to do various things not quite within the sphere of his duties. For one thing, he became intimate with the engineering staff, which contained two Scots, one American, and three Italians, and he used to gossip with them at their table when the room emptied at the end of meals. Also he was found sometimes in their office among blue prints and specimens of ore, and on these occasions the door happened to be locked. If he was not permitted inside the compounds, he used to fossick about the mines themselves, when the shifts of sallow, hollow-eyed labourers were going up or down. Occasionally he talked to them when no overseer was at hand, and he seemed to know something of their patois, for they replied, furtively, and once or twice volubly, when no one was looking.

The cheerful inquisitiveness of the mess waiter was his undoing. For on the evening of the fourth day there was a sad accident. Through a mysterious blunder a small packet of bentonite was detonated, and a corner of the compound wall was blown down and a great crater made in the earth. For some inexplicable reason Miguel seemed to have been in the neighbourhood at the time and he was the only casualty. Fragments of his clothing were found, and a bit of a hat which he was known to be wearing, and it was assumed that his remains were dispersed among the two acres of debris. The fatality was duly reported to the administration and to M. Josephs, and the agreeable half-caste waiter ceased to be on the register of the Gran Seco.

Next morning a certain Featherstone Peters, a captain of the Mines Police, whose station was ten miles or so from the Universum, introduced at breakfast to his troopers a new recruit, who had just arrived to report. Peters was a tough, grizzled fellow of fifty, who had fought for the Boers in the South African War, had been in the Macedonian gendarmerie, and was believed by his friends to have done a good deal of gunrunning in Morocco. The new recruit, whose name was Black, was a sallow young man, who looked as if he had fever in his blood. He spoke English fluently but ungrammatically, and gave out that his father had been in the Italian Consulate at Alexandria. He was good company, and entertained the men with yarns which enthralled even that collection of hard citizens.

For the next week Black was engaged on patrols far into the Indian country. The map shows that east of the city of Gran Seco lies the land of rolling desert hills where the copper is mined, but beyond that the traveller enters a region of deep-cut desiccated valleys—a plateau, but with the contours of highlands. It is the Indian territory, where the Mines' labourers are drawn, a place of sparse tillage but much pasturage, a place, too, which in recent centuries has been drying up, since the wretched pueblas are often the site of what, from the ruins, must once have been considerable cities. It is called the Tierra Caliente, for there is little shade from a merciless sun, and the stages are long from water to water. The midday heat falls like a suffocating curtain, and does not lift till night arrives with the speed of a wind from the far snows.

It was patrol not escort duty, but the new recruit saw many of his fellow-policemen engaged in the latter task. The processions of labourers had the melancholy of funeral cortege, and Black, who was well-read for one his position, was reminded of the pictures of the Zanzibar slave-caravans in old books of African travel. It was a sight which visitors to the Gran Seco were not allowed see, for there were no permits for the Indian country. The gangs bound for the Mines were not shackled, but they were closely shepherded by armed police escorts, and the faces of the men showed every degree of sullen and hopeless ferocity. But the gangs returning from the Mines to the villages were a spectacle to send a man to his prayers.

"Returned empties," Peters called them. Young men crawled and tottered like dotards, all were terribly emaciated, their eyes had lost every human quality and had the blank impassiveness of beasts. Yet the Mines were a business concern, famed for feeding their workers well and for utilising the latest scientific conclusions on hygiene and industrial fatigue.

Had not the intelligent press of America and Europe borne testimony to their progressiveness?

As Black and Peters watched one gang pass, the latter spat vigorously and observed: "I've never taken stock in all that meeting-house stuff about individual liberty and the rights of man. But I guess there may be something in it. That outfit kind of makes one think."

Black said nothing, but his bright feverish eyes seemed to miss little. He was obviously on good terms with his officer, for he was constantly going off on little journeys of his own, which could scarcely be interpreted as police duty.

These journeys took him generally into the Indian pueblas, and on two occasions he did not return to the police bivouac all the following day. He was obviously a sick man, and when the patrol reached the limit of its journey, Peters was heard to complain loudly that the new recruit should be in hospital. By this time they were nearing the eastern ridge of the Indian country, with the peaks of the Cordilleras within a day's march. The land was changing, for they had come to a watershed. The line of the great mountains was not the watershed, for, as in the case of the Nepaul Himalaya, they stood a little beyond it. It was a country of running waters, and the streams flowed east, cutting a path through the range in deep gorges on their way to the distant Orazon.

They arrived at a ruined village of mud where a couple of Indians had made their camp—hunters they seemed, tall active fellows of a different stamp from the broken men of the pueblas. Peters appeared to know them, for he called them by their names, and addressed them in pidgin Spanish which they understood. That night he told his troopers that the patrol was ended. He had been instructed to report on this eastern frontier of the Gran Seco, and next morning they would turn back. All to the east, he told them, was a God-forgotten country, which nature and man had combined to make unhealthy for Christians. He asked questions of the Indians and expounded their replies. There was fever there, and much poison, and very bad men, and valleys so deep that from the bottom one could see by day the stars and the moon. The troopers were impressed, and looked anxiously at the menacing mountain wall, with its coronal of snowfields now rosy in the after-glow.

But next morning Black was in no state to travel. Peters condemned the cussedness of things and declared that he could not afford to wait another hour. He was not unkind, and he did his best to ease the sufferer, but duty was duty and his called him back to headquarters. Black must be made as comfortable as possible, and the two Indians, whom he knew to be trustworthy, would look after him till the bout of fever had passed, and put him on his way home.

After breakfast the patrol jingled off up the slope, and left Black wrapped in a foxskin kaross, drowsing in a corner of the ruins, while the Indians twenty yards off sat hunched and meditative beside their brushwood fire.

Black was really sick, but not with malaria. His vitality had run down like a clock, since too much had been demanded of it, and his trouble was partly a low nervous fever, and partly a deep fatigue. When the police had been gone an hour, the two Indians held a consultation on his case. Then they proceeded to strange remedies. They seemed to be friends of his, for he grinned when they bent over him and submitted readily to their ministrations. This country was volcanic, and close at hand, hidden in a crinkle of the hills, a hot sulphur spring bubbled from the rocks. They undressed him, and carried him, wrapped in the kaross to the pool, where they plunged him into the most violent bath which he had ever encountered. Then they dried him roughly with a fine leather poncho, and rubbed the skin of his back and chest with an aromatic ointment. After that one of them massaged him for the space of an hour, a cunning massage which seemed to remould flaccid muscles and adjust disordered nerves and put him into a state of delicious stupor. Lastly, he was given a bitter brew to drink, and then permitted to sleep. This he proceeded to do for eighteen hours, and when he awoke in broad daylight the following morning his head was cool and his eye was clear, though he was still shaky on his feet. Peters had left enough provisions, and he ate the first enjoyable meal he had known for weeks.

There was another figure at breakfast, a fair young man with a golden brown skin, who, judging by the dust on his boots and breeches, had ridden far that morning.

"My felicitations, Senior," the newcomer said. "I do not think you have taken any hurt in the last weeks, and that is a miracle. But where we are now going we must go on our feet, and for that you are not yet able. I am in command for the moment, and my orders are that to-day you rest."

So Black slept again and awoke in the afternoon with a most healthy hunger. The newcomer sat by him and rolled and smoked many cigarettes, but he would not permit his patient to talk. "Time enough, my friend. We do not part company for a little while. But I will show you this to cheer you."

He exhibited a small tinsel medal, such as humble pilgrims purchase at some famous shrine. On one side it wore a face which was clearly that of the Gobernador of the Gran Seco.

Black puzzled over it, for he was still dazed, and asked whose was the head.

"It is that of our noble leader," the young man laughed. "Yours and mine—he who is to lead this unhappy people to freedom."

Black seemed to see the obscure joke, for he too laughed. "Jesucristo!" said the young man, "but that is a chief to fight for!"

Black slept soundly all night, and next morning rose renewed in body and mind. The party set out down the glen of the stream, one of the Indians carrying food and blankets while the other remained behind with the horses. Black held his pistol, but he had left his police carbine at the bivouac while the newcomer had no weapon at all. "What do you want with a gun?" he had said lightly in reply to his companion's question. "We are going into the Poison Country—El Pais de Venenos—where lead and powder are trivial things. A gun is of as little use as a single lifebelt would be to a man proposing to cross the Atlantic in a skiff. We are now in the hands of the older gods."

It was a strange land which they entered, when the stream which they were descending plunged into the shadow of high peaks. It was fed by many affluents, and presently became a considerable river, running in a broad grassy on which the dew lay like hoar-frost. Suddenly the hills closed in like a wall, and the stream leaped in a great spout into a profound ravine, where in pot-holes and cascade it poured its way from shelf to shelf of the mountain ribs. The sides of the glen were cloaked with bush, which in the lower levels became tall timber trees. In the woody recesses the freshness went out of the air, mosses and creepers muffled the tree-trunks, gaudy birds and butterflies flitted through the branches, and a hot, headachy languor seemed to well out of the sodden ground.

The party, guided by the Indian, kept high above stream, following paths no wider than a fox's track. As they advanced they descended, the ravine opened, and from a promontory they looked into a great cup among the cliffs brimming with forest, with above on the periphery the hard bright line of the snows. Black, who was apparently something of a scholar, quoted Latin. It was a sight which held the two men breathless for a moment. Then Luis shook his head. "It is beautiful, but devilish," he said. "The malevolence rises like a fog," and Black nodded assent.

They found themselves in an eerie world, as if they were trunk deep in a hot sea. Moisture streamed from every twig and blade and tendril, and a sickening sweetness, like the decaying vegetation of a marsh, rose from whatever their feet crushed. Black remarked that it was like some infernal chemist's shop. Under the Indian's direction they took curious precautions. Each man drew on leather gauntlets which strapped tight on the wrist. Each shrouded his face and neck with what looked like a fine-meshed mosquito-curtain. Also they advanced with extreme caution. The Indian would scout ahead, while the other two waited in the sweltering vapour-bath. Then he would return and lead them by minute tracks, now climbing, now descending, and they followed blindly, for in that steaming maze there was neither prospect nor landmark.

That there was need for caution was shown by one incident. The Indian hurriedly drew them off the trail into the cover of what looked like a monstrous cactus, and from their hiding-place they watched four men pass with the deftness of deer. Three were Indians, not of the pueblos of the Tierra Caliente, for they were tall and lean as the Shilluks of the Upper Nile. The fourth was a white man in shirt and breeches, gauntleted and hooded, and his breeches were the type worn by the Mines Police. But he was not an ordinary policeman, for, as seen under the veil, his face had the pallor and his eyes the unseeing concentration of the magnates of the Gran Seco.

Black looked inquiringly at Luis, who grinned behind his mosquito-mask. "One of the Conquistadors," he whispered, and the other seemed to understand.

In that long, torrid day the party neither ate nor drank. Just before nightfall they descended almost to the floor of the cup, where they were within hearing of the noise of the river. Here they moved with redoubled caution. Once they came out on the stream bank, and Black thought that he had never seen stranger waters. They were clear, but with purple glooms in them, and the foam in the eddies was not the spume of beaten water, but more like the bubbling of molten lead. Then they struck inland, climbed a tortuous gully, and came into a clearing where they had a glimpse of a cone of snow flaming like a lamp in the sunset.

The place was cunningly hidden, being a little mantelpiece between two precipitous ravines—on the eyebrow of a cliff, so that from below it was not suspected—and protected above by a screen of jungle. An empty hut stood there, and the Indian proceeded to make camp. A fire was lit in a corner, and water from the nearest rivulet put on to boil. It might have been a Jewish feast, for all three went through elaborate purification ceremonies. Food had been brought with them, but no morsel of it was touched till the hands of each had been washed with a chemical solution. The food-box was then sealed up again as carefully as if it were to be cached for months. The hut floor was swept, and before the bedding was laid down it was sprayed with a disinfectant. There was no window, and the door was kept tightly shut, all but a grating in it over which Luis fastened a square of thick gauze netting. The place would have been abominably stuffy but for the fact that with nightfall a chill like death had crept over the land, as if with the darkness the high snows had asserted their dominion.

Later in the night men came to the hut, silently as ghosts, brought by the Indian, who, though not of their tribe, seemed to know them and speak their tongue. They were of the same race as the three whom the travellers had encountered in the forest that afternoon and had stepped aside to avoid. Strange figures they were, lean and tall, and in the lantern light their cheek-bones stood out so sharp that their faces looked like skulls. Their eyes were not dull, like those of the Gran Seco magnates, but unnaturally bright, and their voices had so low a pitch that their slow, soft speed sounded like the purring of cats. Luis spoke to them in their own language and translated for Black's benefit. When they had gone, he turned to his companion.

"You have seen the people of the Pais de Venenos. An interesting case of adaptation to environment? What would the scientists of Europe not give to investigate this curiosity? These men during long generations have become immune to the rankest poison in the world."

"They terrify me," said Black. "I have seen men very near to the brutes, but these fellows are uncannier than any beast."

They are not inhuman, they are unnatural. How on earth did you get a graft here?"

"They have their virtues," said Luis, "and one of them is faithfulness. My graft is ancestral. Centuries ago one of my family came here and did them a service, and the memory is handed down so that only a Marzaniga can go among them. Indeed, I think that my blood has something of their immunity. I take precautions, as you see, but I do not know if in my case they are so needful."

Black asked about the poison.

"They are many," he was told. "There is poison here in earth and water, in a hundred plants, in a thousand insects, in the very air we breathe. But the chief is what they call astura—the drug of our friends the Conquistadors. Once this country was guarded like a leper-settlement, so that nothing came out of it. Now, as you know, its chief product is being exploited. The Gran Seco has brought it within its beneficent civilisation."

The Indian was already asleep, and, as the two white men adjusted their blankets. Black commented on the utter stillness. "We might be buried deep under the ground," he said.

"There is no animal life in the forest," was the answer, "except insects. There are no birds or deer or even reptiles—the poison is too strong. But there is one exception. Listen!"

He held up his hand, and from somewhere in the thickets came a harsh bark, which in the silence had a horrid savagery.

"Jackal?" Black asked.

"No. That is one of our foxes. They are immune, like the men, and they hunt on the uplands above the forest where there is plenty of animal life. I think they are the chief horror of the place. Picture your English fox, with his sharp muzzle and prick ears, but picture him as big as a wolf, and a cannibal, who will rend and eat his own kind."

As Black fell asleep, he heard again the snarling bark and he shivered. It was as if the devilishness of the Poison Country had found its appropriate voice.

They stayed there for four days, and in all that time they did not move from the little mantelpiece. Every night ghosts which were men slipped out of the jungle and talked with them in the hut. Black fell ill again, with his old fever, and Luis looked grave and took the Indian aside. The result was that on the third night, when the men came and Black lay tossing on his couch, there was a consultation and one of the visitors rolled in his hands a small pellet. It began by being a greyish paste, but when rolled it became translucent like a flawed pearl. Black was made to swallow it, and presently fell into a torpor so deep that all the night Luis anxiously felt his heart-beats. But in the morning the sickness had gone. Black woke with a clear eye and a clean tongue, and announced that he felt years younger, and in the best of spirits.

"You have tasted astura," said Luis, "and that is more than I have ever done, for I am afraid. You will have no more, my friend. It cures fever, but it makes too soon its own diseases."

The four days were cloudless and very warm. The forest reeked in the sunshine, and wafts of odours drifted up to the mantelpiece, odours such as Black had never before known in nature. The place seemed a crucible in some infernal laboratory, where through the ages *Natura Maligna* had been distilling her dreadful potions. His dreams were bad, and they were often broken by the cry of the cannibal foxes. Horror of this abyss came on him and even Luis, who had been there before and had grown up with the knowledge of it, became uneasy as the hours passed. These days were not idle. Information was collected, and presently they had a fairly complete knowledge of the methods by which those whom they called the Conquistadors worked. Then on the last night came a deluge rain, and Luis looked grave. "If this continues," he said "we may be trapped; and if we are trapped here, we shall die. Then it will be farewell to the Courts of the Morning, my friend."

But in the night the rain stopped, and at dawn they hooded and gauntleted themselves and started back. It was nightmare journey, for the track had become slime, and the queer smells had increased to a miasma. Their feet slipped, and they made shrinking contact with foetid mud and obscene plants whose pallid leaves seemed like limbs of the dead. The heat was intense, and the place was loud with the noise of swollen rivulets and the buzz of maleficent insects. Black grew very weary, but Luis would permit of no halt, and even the Indian seemed eager to get the journey over.

They did not reach their old camp till the darkness had long fallen, but the last hour was for Black like an awakening from a bad dream. For he smelt clean earth and herbage and pure water again, and he could have buried his face in the cool grass.

The next day they left the Indians behind and rode over the mountains by intricate passes farther to the south, which brought them to a long valley inclining to the south-west. Three nights later they slept in an upland meadow, and by the following evening had crossed a further pass and reached a grassy vale which looked westward to the plains. Luis pointed out a blue scarp to the north.

"That is the Gran Seco frontier," he said. "It is guarded by patrols and blockhouses, but we have outflanked them. I have brought you by a way which the Gobernador does not know—only those of my family and perhaps two others. We may relax now, for our immediate troubles are over."

They slept at a camp of vaqueros, and in the morning Black had several surprises. The first was an ancient Ford car which stood under a tarpaulin in the corner of one of the cattle-pens. The second was the change in his garb upon which Luis insisted. The uniform of the Mines Police was carefully packed in the car, and in its place he was given the cotton trousers and dark-blue shirt of an ordinary peon on the estancias. Luis drove the Ford all day through rolling savannah, with beside him a lean mestizo servant, to whom he talked earnestly, except when they halted for food at an inn or met

other travellers. In the evening they came to a big hacienda, low and white, with wide corrals for cattle, and red-roofed stables which suggested Newmarket.

Half a mile from the place a girl, who had seen them approaching, cantered up to them on a young Arab mare. The car slowed down, and driver and peon took off their hats.

"You are a day behind time," she said.

"Well, what about it, Miss Dasent?" It was the peon who spoke, and there was anxiety in his tone.

"Only that you have missed his Excellency the Gobernador," said the girl in her pleasant Southern voice. "He paid us a visit of ceremony yesterday, to talk about horses. Curious that he should have chosen the day you were expected. Don Mario thinks that Lord Clanroyden had better not sleep in the house. If he will get out at the gate of the cattle-yard, I will show him the way to the overseer's quarters."

When Archie and Janet came down to dinner that evening at Veiro they found Don Luis de Marzaniga, a little thinner and browner than before, but spruce and composed as if he were about to dine at his Olifa club. He kissed Janet's hand, and asked Archie if he had enjoyed the weeks since his return from the Gran Seco.

"I've been obeying orders," was the answer. "There is my commander-in-chief. She'll tell you how docile I've been, and how I've never bothered her with questions, though Janet and I are sick with curiosity."

The tall girl, whose name was Barbara Dasent, smiled. "I'll testify that he has been a good boy."

She was very slim, and at first sight the delicate lines her neck and her small head gave her an air of fragility—an impression presently corrected by the vigour and grace of her movements. Her face was a classic oval, but without the classic sculptural heaviness, her dark hair clustered about her head in childish curls, her clear skin had a healthy pallor which intensified the colouring of her lips and eyes. These eyes were a miracle—deep and dark, at once brooding and kindling, as full of changes as a pool in the sunlight, and yet holding, like a pool, some elemental profundity. The lashes were long and the eyebrows a slender crescent. Janet ad crossed the room and stood beside her, and each was to the other a perfect foil. Yet, though they had no feature in common, there was an odd kinship, due perhaps to the young freedom of each, their candid regard and a certain boyish gallantry of bearing.

At dinner, under the Sanfuentes Murillo, Luis cross-examined Archie about his recent doings. It appeared that, on Miss Dasent's instructions, he had been travelling widely in the coastal flats of Olifa. He had been given introductions from the Minister of Defence, and had been the guest of several regiments, attended an infantry camp of instruction, and taken part in cavalry manoeuvres. Also he had visited various flying-stations, and had made several flights. The result was unqualified admiration.

"I can't claim to be a military pundit," he said, "but I now a first-class thing when I meet it. All I have to say that Olifa has got the most completely professional outfit have ever seen. There isn't one lesson of the Great War he hasn't learned. Her infantry tactics are the sort of thing we were feeling our way to before the Armistice. Her tanks are the latest pattern, better than anything I've seen in England, and, by Jove, she knows how to use them. Her army is mechanised to the full, but not too far, for she has the sense to see that cavalry rightly handled will never be out of date. And she has an amazing good staff, picked from up and down the earth, all as keen as mustard-like what we used to imagine the German staff to be, but less hidebound. Of course I don't know what strength she has in the way of reserves, and I can't speak of the fighting spirit, but there's no doubt she has a most efficient standing army for a nucleus. What puzzles me is why she should want anything so good when she's so secure."

Luis asked about the Air Force.

"That was the only thing with which I was a little disappointed," Archie replied. "It's extraordinarily good in the scientific way—the last word in machines and engines and all that sort of thing—but just a little lacking in life. Those chaps don't spend enough hours in the air. They've got all the theory and expert knowledge they can carry, but they haven't got as much devil as we have. Too serious, I should say. Keener about the theory than the game."

Luis had been listening closely. "You are very near the truth, Senor Roylance," he said. "We in Olifa have al that science and money can give us, but we have not enough soul. What is your English word—guts?"

"Oh, I didn't say that."

"But will say it. And it is perhaps fortunate. I would not blame my nation, for our army is not national, since its leaders are mercenaries."

"I'm still puzzled. What do you want it for? I never got any figures of man-power and reserves, but if you've an adequate shaft behind this spear-head, you've a superb fighting-machine. What do you mean to use it against?"

Luis laughed. "It is the conventional insurance premium which our rich Olifa pays. Pays carelessly and without conviction. That is why, as you truly say, our army is made up chiefly of mercenaries. We have collected the best soldiers of Europe who were out of a job. It is a police, if you choose. If a little political war came with a neighbour, Olifa would use her pretty toy and ask only that she got her money's worth... Unless, of course, it was war which touched her heart, and then she would fight the old way—with her people."

They sat late at table, Archie answering Luis's questions and illustrating his views by diagrams on the backs of envelopes. Presently Miss Dasent left the room, and on her return said something to Don Mario. He rose and the way to his sitting-room, where, according to custom a wood fire crackled on the wide hearth. The curtain, usually left untouched to reveal the luminous night, was now closely drawn. A man in a flannel suit stood with his back to the fireplace.

Janet blinked at him for a moment, and then ran up to him with both hands outstretched.

"Oh, Sandy dear, I have been miserable about you. Thank God, you're safely back. You're desperately thin. You're not ill?"

"I'm perfectly well, thank you. But I've been pushed up to the limit of my strength. It's all right. I've done it often before, you know. I only want to lie fallow for a bit. It's good to see you and Archie... I feel as if had come home."

"Are you safe here?" Janet asked anxiously.

Luis answered. "Perfectly—at present. The Gobernador must suspect something or he would not have been here yesterday. But he can know nothing. We have pickets out, and at the worst we shall get ample warning. To-night, the any rate, we can sleep sound."

"We have asked no questions," said Janet. "For the last week Archie has been behaving like the intelligent tourist, and I have been sketching in water-colours. We want to be enlightened, Sandy dear."

The man addressed—he looked very young in the dim light, for his hair had grown long and was tousled like a boy's over his forehead—flung himself into an armchair and stretched his lean shanks to the blaze. He slowly filled an old pipe and looked round at the audience—Don Mario erect and prim, Luis sprawling on a couch, Archie swinging his long legs from a corner of the table, Miss Dasent very quiet in the shadow, Janet standing on the tiger-skin rug, an incarnate note of interrogation. He looked round and laughed.

"You ask a good deal. Luis knows everything, and Miss Dasent. Don Mario knows as much as he wants to. But you two are newcomers, so I must begin from the beginning. Sit down on that stool, Janet, and, Archie, get off the table. I'm going to make a second-reading speech, as they say in your little Parliament. After that the House can go into committee..."

"First of all, I need hardly tell you that the world to-day is stuffed with megalomania. Megalomania in politics, megalomania in business, megalomania in art—there are a dozen kinds. You have the man who wants to be a dictator in his own country, you have the man who wants to corner a dozen great businesses and control the finance of half the world, you have the man who wants to break down the historic rules of art and be a law to himself. The motive is the same in every case—rootlessness, an unbalanced consciousness of ability, and an overweening pride. They want to rule the world, but they do not see that by their methods they must first deprive the world of its soul and that what would be left for their dictatorship would be an inanimate corpse. You see, for all their splendid gift they have no humour."

"What is Mr Castor's nationality?" Janet asked irrelevantly.

"He has none. He was born in Austria, and I think he has a Spanish strain in him. Blenkiron has a notion that he has English blood, too, but he cannot prove it. The man is like Melchizedek, without apparent origin. He is what you call a weltkind, the true international."

"He has no humour," said Janet with emphasis.

"I agree. But he has most other things, and one is clear and searching mind. His strength, and also his weakness, is that he has no illusions. For one thing, he does not possess the illusion which ordinary people call a creed. He does not want to remake the world on some new fantastic pattern, like the Communists. He has none of Mussolini's arbitrary patriotism. He wants to root out various things, but I doubt if he has a preference for what should take their place. I don't profess to understand more than bits of him. He is an egotist, but in the colossal sense, for he has vanity. He considers that he has been called on to do certain things, and that he is the only man living who can. The world, as he sees it, is suffocating from the debris of democracy, and he wants to clear it away. He does not hate it, he despises it. He is the scientist and philosopher who would introduce the reign of reason and the rule of law, but first some decaying refuse called popular liberties must be destroyed. Therefore he is against Britain, but only half-heartedly, for he thinks that with us democracy is tempered by more rational instincts, and that in any case our number is up. But for America he has the unfaltering contempt which a trained athlete might have for a great, overgrown, noisy, slobbering, untrained hobbledehoy. With America it is war to the death."

"I've known other people take that view," Archie put in.

"With him it is not a view, it is a crusading passion. In Castor you have the normally passionless, scientific mind kindled to a white heat. The mischief is that he is human—not cruel, but inhuman. He will use the ordinary stuff of humanity to further his ends as ruthlessly as a furnace swallows coke. He will do any evil in order that what he considers good may come."

"That is the definition of a devil," said Janet.

"Not quite. Castor is just as near being a saint. If he had a different religion he might deserve to be beatified, for he is scrupulously loyal to what he believes to be the right. He's not evil—he just happens to have missed the human touch. He knows nothing of friendship—nor, of course, of any kind of love. His world is a narrow cell with the big dynamo of his brain purring in it. He is cruel, simply because he cannot conceive the feelings of anybody but himself, and is not interested in them. He is a master over things, and over men so long as he can treat them as things. If he were Emperor of the world I have no doubt he would be a just ruler. As it is—well, I have been seeing too much of his methods these last days to be in love with him."

He paused for a second to shake out the ashes from his pipe.

"Well, I've given you what Blenkiron would call the 'general Castor proposition'. Now, how would a man, obsessed by this idea, set about realising it? First of all, he would want money, money on a gigantic scale. He has got it in the Gran Seco. Remember, he is a very great practical engineer and chemist—Blenkiron, who should know, says the greatest in the world—and he is a first-class man of business. Second, he would want a base, and a well-camouflaged base. He has got that in the republic of Olifa. You have seen for yourselves how completely Olifa is in his power. He has changed in a few years the whole character of her governing class. He has made her Government rich and supine, and got it under his thumb. The thing is a miracle of tact and diplomacy. The Olifa ministers do not share in his secrets, they know very little of his schemes, but he has organised them as he wanted and they do his bidding without a question. Up in the Gran Seco he has his laboratory and factory, and in the State of Olifa he has his outer barrage, the decorous bourgeois republic which keeps watch at his door.

"Thirdly, he had to have his staff and his army to opera for him throughout the globe. He has got that, too—slaves who mechanically obey him. You have seen some of them in your Olifa hotel and in the Gran Seco. You have lunched with them, and Janet says that they made her flesh creep."

"The type Gran Seco," said Archie.

"The type Gran Seco. Have you any notion who they are? They look like robots, with their pallid faces and soft voices and small, precise gestures. All their individuality seems to have been smoothed away, so that they confer to one pattern. Nevertheless, they were once men of brains and character. Their brains they have kept, but the characters have been stereotyped, and they have surrendered their wills into the hand of their master. They have been most carefully selected from every nation. One or two you have known before, Archie."

"I swear I haven't."

"But you have. The Gran Seco is the port for missing ships. Men who have foundered somehow in life—respectable careerists who suddenly crash on some private vice—fellows who show the white feather—soldiers without regiments, financiers without credit—they are all there. Do you remember Lariarty, Archie? He was about your time at Eton. There was a bad scandal about him in 1915."

"Good God! Of course I do. I heard he was dead."

"He sat opposite you a few weeks ago when you lunched with the Administration. You couldn't recognise him. Everything that once was Lariarty has gone out of him, except his brain. You remember he was a clever fellow. And Romanes—the man who was in the 23rd—people said he was with the Touaregs in the Sahara. He's one of them, but I believe at the moment he is in Europe. And Freddy Larbert, who was once a rising man in the Diplomatic Service. He did not hang himself at Bucharest, as they said he did, for to-day he is in the Gran Seco. I could mention others, and they come from every country—Russian aristocrats who were beggared and Russian revolutionists who were too clever, broken soldiers and blown-on politicians and speculators who missed their market. The Gran Seco is the true Foreign Legion, and it needs no discipline. Castor asks only for two things, brains and submission to his will, and once a man enters his service he can never leave it."

"Why?" Archie asked.

"Because he does not want to. Because the Gran Seco is his only home and away from it he is lost. I told you that Castor was like the Old Man of the Mountain in the chronicle I showed you at Laverlaw. There is nothing new under the sun. Castor rules his initiates as the old ruffian in the Lebanon ruled his Assassins. You remember he gave them hashish, so that their one desire was to get their job in the outer world finished and return to the Lebanon to dream. Castor has the same secret. As I have told you, he is a mighty chemist, and this continent is the home of drugs. One in particular is called astura and is found in what they call the Pais de Venenos, the Poison Country in the eastern mountains. The secret of it was lost for ages till he revived it, and, except as a legend in the Marzaniga family, it was unknown in Olifa. This astura is deadly poison, but it can be used in two ways as a drug. In one preparation it takes the heart out of a man, but gives him increased physical strength, till suddenly he cracks and becomes doddering. That preparation Castor uses to turn out docile labourers for the mines. He gets marvellous results in output, and the reports say that it is due to his scientific management and his study of industrial fatigue, but we know better. The other preparation does not apparently weaken the bodily strength, though it alters the colour of the skin and the look in the eyes. But it is a most potent mental stimulant, and its addicts tend to live for the next dose. It kills in the end, but only after a considerable period, and during that period it gives increased intellectual vitality and an almost insane power of absorption, varied by languors like the opium-eater's. Those who once take to it can never free themselves, and they are the slaves of him who can supply it. Willing slaves, competent slaves, even happy slaves, but only the shadows of what once were men. Lariarty and Romanes and Larbert and others are among the initiates. They go about the world on Gran Seco business and they do Castor's will as little wheels obey a master-wheel. They have a name for their brotherhood. They call themselves the new Conquistadors—conquerors, you see, over all the old standards and decencies of human nature."

Archie inquired what precisely they did in their journeys about the world. He had rumbled his hair, and his eyes looked as if he were painfully adjusting a manifold of experience in the light of a new idea.

"First of all, they make money. They are the most efficient bagmen alive. For the rest, they break down things and loosen screws, and they have unlimited funds at their disposal, for Castor spends nearly as fast as he earns... No, no. Not Bolshevism. The donkeys in Moscow have in a sense played Castor's game, but they were far too crude for him, and to-day I fancy he finds them rather a nuisance. By their folly they are creating a reaction in favour of that democracy which he hates... Remember, I don't know him. I've seen him, but have never spoken to him. I can only speak at second-hand of his methods, but I'll give you Blenkiron's summary. Blenkiron says that half a century ago Abraham Lincoln fought a great war to prevent democracy making a fool of itself. He says that Castor's object is just the opposite—he wants to encourage democracy to make a fool of itself, to inflate the bladder till it bursts... His instruments? The press, for one thing. He has a mighty grip on that. The politicians, too, and every kind of fool organisation for boost and uplift. You'd be amazed to learn how many gushing societies, that look like spontaneous ebullitions of popular folly, have his patient direction behind them. He is the greatest agent provocateur in history."

"But the thing is impossible," Archie exclaimed. "He can't bring it to a head, and I take it that he knows he is not immortal and wants some sort of result in his lifetime."

Sandy nodded. "He has a general ultimate purpose, but has also a very clear, practical, immediate purpose. He wants to make trouble for America—before she can set her house in order. The United States, Blenkiron says, have reached the biggest crisis in their history. They have got wealth and power, but they have lost the close national integration they had when they were poorer. Their best men are labouring like galley-slaves to discipline their country. They have to give it an adequate law, and a proper public service, and modernise its antediluvian constitution. Castor wants to catch them at the moment of transition, when they haven't found their balance. He believes that bad foreign trouble, which they couldn't

afford to neglect, would split the unwieldy fabric. Democracy, of which America is the incoherent champion, would become a laughing-stock, and he and his kind would have the reordering of the fragments."

"I think," said Janet, "that he has taken on too big a job. Does he imagine that any alliance of Latin republics would have any effect on America? I have heard you say yourself that she couldn't be conquered."

"True." The speaker's eyes were on the other girl who was sitting in the shadow outside the circle of firelight.

"No Power or alliance of Powers could conquer America. But assume that she is compelled to quarrel with a group of Olifas, and that with her genius for misrepresenting herself she appears to have a bad cause. Has she many friends on the globe except Britain? Most countries will flatter her and kowtow to her and borrow money of her, but hate her like hell. Trust them not to help matters by interpreting her case sympathetically. Inside her borders she has half a dozen nations instead of one, and that is where Castor comes in. A situation like that, when she was free to act and yet didn't want to and didn't know how to, might, if properly manipulated, split her from top to bottom. Look what happened in the Civil War, and she was an integrated nation then compared to what she is now. Twenty years ago the danger would not have been there; ten years hence, if all goes well, it may be past; but today, Blenkiron says, there is precisely as big a risk of a blow-up as there was in Europe in June 1914. The who count in America know it, even without Blenkiron telling them."

"Mr Blenkiron discovered Castor?" Janet asked.

"Yes. He came on the track of some of Castor's agents and in his slow, patient way worked backwards to the source. Then he succeeded in laying himself alongside of Castor. How he managed it, I can't tell. You see, he's a big engineering swell, and I daresay he made himself useful over the actual copper business. Not as John Scantlebury Blenkiron, of course—as Senor Rosas, the agreeable denationalised Mexican, who has lived long enough in States to have a healthy hatred for them. He must have had a pretty delicate time, and I don't suppose he was free from anxiety till he managed to arrange for his opportune decease. He was never in Castor's full confidence, for he didn't belong to the Conquistadors and never touched astura—gave out that he had to be careful in his habits because of his duodenum. His graft was that he understood the mining business like nobody else except Castor. But he had to be very cautious and had to stick like a limpet to his rock. Till he got in touch with Luis, he was next door to a prisoner."

Janet asked how that had been contrived, and Luis replied, "Through Wilbur. I am afraid you underrated that drawling New England Consul! Wilbur is a great man. He was a friend of mine, and enlisted me, and then we enlisted others. After a time—after a long time—we got in touch with Lord Clanroyden."

Archie drew a deep breath. "I think I see the layout," he said. "That is to say, I see what Castor is driving at. But I can't for the life of me see what we can do to stop him... Unless we got America to chip in first."

"That was Blenkiron's original plan," said Sandy. "But it was too difficult—might have precipitated what we wanted to avoid. So we decided to do the job ourselves."

Archie stared at the speaker, and then whistled long and low. "You haven't lost your nerve, old man," he said at last. "I'm on for anything you propose—likewise Janet—but what precisely are the odds? About a million to one?"

Sandy laughed and hoisted himself out of the chair.

"Not quite so bad! Stiffish, I agree, but not farcical. You see, we hold certain cards."

"I should like to know about them," said Archie. "You seem to me to have taken on one of the toughest propositions in history. A species of Napoleon—unlimited cash in—a big, docile, and highly competent staff—a graft everywhere—and at his back the republic of Olifa with the latest thing in armies. I assure you, it won't do to underrate the Olifa field force. And to set against all that you've Blenkiron, more or less a prisoner—yourself—Miss Dasent and her friends—with Janet and me as camp-followers. It's a sporting proposition."

"Nevertheless, we hold certain cards. There's a fair amount of explosive stuff in the Gran Seco and we have been organising it."

"The Indians?"

"The Indians. Castor has bled them white with his accursed forced labour, but there's still a reserve of manhood to be used—very desperate and vindictive manhood. Also, there is an element among the white employees. You have the Conquistadors at the top and the Indians at the bottom, and between them the foremen and the engineers. They are the weak point of Castor's scheme, for they are not under his spell and know nothing of astura. He had to have skilled men and men whose interest lay in asking no questions, but he could never count upon their loyalty. He recruited every kind of scallywag and paid them lavishly, for he wanted people whose interest lay in sticking to the Gran Seco. But he has always had his troubles with them, and he and his Conquistadors in self-protection had to have their bodyguard. What sort of bodyguard? Oh, the usual bad-man type, the killer, the gunman... You must have noticed them in the Gran Seco, quiet, steady-eyed, frozen-faced fellows—the Town Police is full of them, and so was the Mines Police till Blenkiron began to weed them out."

"Well, Blenkiron has had a lot to do for the past year with recruiting both the foremen and engineers and the Mines Police, and we have managed to get them pretty well staffed with our own men. Hard cases, most of them, but a different kind of hard case. Blackguards often, but a more wholesome brand of blackguard. The Gran Seco at this moment is a sort of chess-board of black and white, and we know pretty exactly which are the white squares. If a row begins, we calculate that we have rather the balance of strength on that cheerful plateau. But I hope there will be no row. I don't like that crude way of doing things."

Archie passed a hand over his forehead.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said plaintively. "There must be a row, a most unholy row. You want to raise the Indians, assisted by your friends in the Police and in the Mines, against the Administration. The Gobernador, if he is what you say he is, will resist like a tiger, and he has his gunmen behind him, and Olifa at the back of all. You will have to fight Castor..."

Sandy smiled. "Oh, no. We will not fight Castor. We mean to fight for him. Castor will be our leader. The Indians in the back-country are wearing medals with his face on them, and look to him as their deliverer. That's the advantage of being a mystery man. No one knows him, except the Conquistadors, who don't count. He is going to be the Bolivar of the Gran Seco, the pioneer of liberty."

"Good God! Do you mean to say you are working in with him?"

"No. I won't go as far as that. But we hope to make him work for us. He won't like it, but it's the obvious move in the game. It will not be a rising of the oppressed against the Administration, but a revolt of the whole Gran Seco, oppressed and oppressors, against the tyrannical government of Olifa. And in the forefront of the battle will be Castor, like a new Uriah the Hittite."

Janet, who had been listening with a strained face, suddenly broke into one of her fits of helpless laughter.

"That was your idea. Sandy. Mr Blenkiron never thought of anything so wild."

"It is not wild. It is common sense. It's ju-jitsu, where you use the strength of your opponent to defeat him."

"It is not common sense," Archie declared vehemently. "It is insanity. If Dick Hannay were here, he'd say the same thing. Supposing you unite the Gran Seco, with Castor at your head, what better off are you? You're up against Olifa with an army that will crumple you as easy as winking. You are cut off from the sea. You have no base and no communications. Where are you to get your munitions? Olifa will smash you in a week—or, better still, starve you out in a month."

"May be," said Sandy calmly. "That's the risk we run. But it isn't quite as bad as you think. We have a base, and presently you'll hear all about it. Also, I rather think it will be a new kind of war. I always had a notion of a new kind of war—an economical war—and I'm going to have a shot at it, even though we take a good many chances. You've been doing useful work, old man, in sticking your nose into Olifa's army system, and you naturally have a high regard for it. So have I. But it's an old-fashioned system."

"You're wrong. It's the most up-to-date thing on the globe."

"It has learned all the lessons of our little scrap in France and Flanders, and I daresay it would make a very good showing in that sort of business. But it won't be allowed to, for it's going to be a different kind of business. We're the challengers, and will decide the form of the combat. The Olifa army is as rigid in its up-to-dateness as the old British army was rigid in its antiquarianism. Castor is going to puzzle it."

Archie called fervently upon his Maker.

"You're as mad as a hatter," he cried, "but it's a madness I've got to have a hand in. You promised to let me in, Sandy. I'll do anything I'm told..."

"I gave you a promise. But now you know what we propose, do you still hold me to it? What do you say, Janet? I can't put the odds better than three to one. We may all be blotted out. Worse still, we may end in a fiasco with our reputation gone for good. This is not your quarrel. I've no business to implicate you, and if you both slip down to Olifa and take the next steamer home, I admit I'll be happier in my mind."

"You want us to go home?" Janet asked. Her slight figure in the firelight had stiffened like a soldier on parade.

"I should be easier if you went."

Miss Dasent rose and came out of the shadows.

"You say it is not Sir Archibald's quarrel," she said. The clear sweet pallor of her skin was coloured by the glow from the hearth, and her dark eyes had the depth of a tragic muse. "But is it your quarrel, Lord Clanroyden? Why are you doing this? Only out of friendship for my uncle? If you say that, I cannot believe you. I could understand you taking any risk to get my uncle out of the Gran Seco—that would be your loyalty—but this is more than that. It cannot be for America's sake, for I have heard you say harsh things about my country. What is your reason? You can't expect Lady Roylance to answer till she has heard it."

Sandy flushed under the gaze of the dark eyes.

"I don't know. I never analyse my motives. But I think I think I would go on with this affair, even if your uncle were out of it. You see, down at the bottom of my heart I hate the things that Castor stands for. I hate cruelty. I hate using human beings as pawns in a game of egotism. I hate all rotten, machine-made, scientific creeds. I loathe and detest all that superman cant, which is worse nonsense than the stuff it tries to replace. I really believe in liberty, though it's out of fashion... And because America in her queer way is on the same side, I'm for America."

"Thank you," the girl said quietly.

Janet held out her hand.

"We shan't stay out, Sandy. I wouldn't let Archie go home if he wanted to. We're both too young to miss this party. It's what I used to dream about as a child at Glenraden... Is there anything to drink? We ought to have a toast."

"I said I would be happier if you went home," said Sandy, "but I lied."

Luis jumped to his feet. A whistle had blown faintly out-of-doors, and a second later there was another low whistle in the corridor.

“Quick,” he said to Sandy. “That is Jose. The outer pickets have seen something, and passed the word back.”

The two men slipped through the curtained window into the darkness. Don Mario rang a bell and bade a servant bring mate and other drinks, and no more than five glasses. Earlier in the evening the company had numbered six. Then Luis re-entered by the window, drew the curtains, and dropped into an armchair with a cigarette.

Presently there was the sound of a motor-car on the hard earth of the courtyard, and the bustle of arrival in the hall.

The door of Don Mario’s room was thrown open, and the butler ushered in three men in the uniform of the Olifa police. Two were junior officers, but the third was no less than Colonel Lindburg, the commissioner of the province in which Veiro lay.

The Colonel was a tall Swede, with a quick blue eye, close-cropped hair, and a small jaw like a terrier’s. He greeted Don Mario heartily, announcing that he was on his way to Bonaventura, and had called to beg an additional tin of petrol. Luis he already knew, and he was introduced to the others—Sir Archie who limped about to get him a chair, Janet who was turning over an American picture paper, Miss Dasent who was busy with a small piece of needle-work. The group made a pleasant picture of a family party, just about to retire to bed. The Colonel noted the five glasses, and when the servants brought mint juleps the three officers toasted Don Mario and the ladies. The newcomers talked of horses, of the visit of the Gobernador on the previous day, of the cool air of Veiro as compared with the Olifa heats. “You were not here yesterday, Senor de Marzaniga,” the Colonel said, and Luis explained that he had only arrived from his ranch that afternoon.

They stayed for twenty minutes, finished their juleps and, at a nod from the Colonel, rose to go. Don Mario and Luis accompanied them to the door. One of the peons made himself useful in filling the tank of the car, and was rewarded with a twenty-peseta piece.

When the sound of the car had died away, the two men returned to the ladies. Luis was laughing. “They are clumsy fellows, the police. There were four of them, not three. The fourth was young Azar. He asked permission to wash his hands, and, since he knows the house, for has been to see the yearlings, he took the opportunity inspecting all the bedrooms. Pedro heard him tramping about upstairs. Also that story of too little petrol was stupidly contrived. They had four full tins.”

The curtains opened and the peon entered, he who had been so useful with the car. He held up the twenty-peso piece.

“I have got my stake,” he said. “Janet, you shall keep it. This little coin against Castor’s millions.”

With his rough clothes and dark skin he seemed to have shrunk to the leanest of lean scarecrows. He swayed a little, and caught Janet’s shoulder.

“Sandy, you are worn out,” she cried in alarm.

“I’m rather done up. Luis, you must put me in a place where I can sleep for a round of the clock. I must say good-bye, for it won’t do for us to be together... Luis will look after you.”

He took the whisky-and-soda which Don Mario brought him, and, in the toast he gave, Janet heard for the first time a name which was to haunt her dreams..

“I drink,” he said, “to our meeting in the Courts of the Morning.”

Mr Sylvester Perry in his Seeing Eyes asked a question which has often been asked by travellers, why the Gran Seco had no other route to the sea except by the three-hundred-mile journey south to the port of Olifa. Its city is not more than a hundred miles as the crow flies from the Pacific. The answer which Mr Perry gives is that which he had from one of the transient managers of the struggling copper companies, that on the western side of the plateau the mountains simply cascade into the sea. Archie, who had asked himself the question, reached the same conclusion from a study of a map prepared long ago by the British Admiralty. The close lines of the hatching, though they must have been largely a matter of guesswork, showed that the sailors who had surveyed the coast had no doubt about its precipitous character, and up in the northern apex, where the great peak of Choharua overhung the ocean, the contours made the drop as sheer as the side of a house.

Oddly enough, about this time the same question occurred to the Gobernador. That northern angle had been left alone in his careful organisation of his province, for up there was neither wealth to be got nor men to get it. He called for the reports of those who had penetrated its recesses and all spoke with the same voice. The plateau rose in sharp tiers to meet the curve of the mountains, and these tiers were waterless desert. Higher up there were forests, which might some day be used for mine timber, and it might be possible to divert the streams from the snows, which now flowed seaward in sheer ravines, to the Gran Seco watershed. These things, however, were for the future. The Gobernador closed the reports and rolled up the maps, with a mental note that some day soon he must undertake a complete scientific survey of his province.

It had become necessary for him to pay one of his hurried visits to Europe. The Gobernador led a life as arduous as Napoleon's during the early years of his Consulate. Like Napoleon, he had made himself the master of every detail in every department, and, like Napoleon, he had instituted a zealous inquest for capacity, and, having found it, used it to the full. But, unlike the First Consul, he did not need to keep a close eye on his subordinates; they had become automata, minor replicas of himself, whose minds worked in accurate conformity with his. Of this loyalty there could be no doubt; they had lost the capacity for treason, since treason implies initiative.

But on certain matters he kept his own counsel. There were letters from Europe and the United States, specially marked, which he opened himself, and which were never answered or filed by his most efficient secretaries. There were visits to various South American cities of which no report existed in the Gran Seco offices, though at the other end, in various secret Government bureaus, there may have been some record. In recent months these curious activities had increased. Messages in the Gobernador's most private cypher had been more frequent. He had begun to take minute interest in the policing of his province, the matter of passports, in the safeguarding of every mile of the frontier. Distant police officials had been badgered with questions, and the special bodyguard of the Administration had been increased. Also the Sanfuentes of the younger branch, who was Olifa's Minister for External Affairs, had twice journeyed to the Gran Seco—an unheard of affair—and had been closeted for hours with the Gobernador, and on the second visit he had been accompanied by Senor Aribia, the Minister of Finance. New business, it appeared, was on the carpet, and for a fortnight the Gobernador did not appear at the Administration luncheons.

There was an air of tension, too, in the province, which like an electric current, made itself felt in more distant quarters. It affected Olifa, where there was an unwonted bustle in various departments, and high officials went about with laden brows and preoccupied eyes. It affected the foreign consulates and embassies of various South American states. It was felt in certain rooms in Washington, London, Paris, Berlin, and Rome, large rooms decorated and furnished in the deplorable style of Government offices, where behind locked doors anxious men talked far into the night.

There was even a little extra stir in the dovecotes of Moscow, here a pale young man, who spoke bad French, had an interview with five others whose power was so great that even the governing caste knew them only by numbers, and thereafter a dozen insignificant-looking people crossed the Russian frontier with passports for various remote lands.

It especially affected Mr Roderick Wilbur, the American consul in Olifa. That heavy man spent two energetic days, and a still more energetic night, which was largely occupied burning papers. Then, leaving his office in the charge of his assistant and under the general care of Don Alejandro Gedde, he announced that he was about to take a holiday, and departed for the capital of an adjacent republic. There his holiday consisted in sitting in the office of the British Consul, and, being permitted to use his cypher, in sending, by way of the British Embassy in Washington, a series of messages which brought two of his Ministers out of bed at one in the morning.

Yet in the midst of this activity the Gobernador must go a-journeying. His mission was, he said, to Europe, and in two months he would return. To Senor Rosas, the Vice-President of the Company, he committed the temporary charge. As the two sat in the big bright room on the first or of the great Administration Headquarters, into which travellers on the top of the tramcars could stare, while the clack of typewriters around them was like the noise of frogs in a pond at night, they made an interesting contrast. Both were big men, but while the Gobernador was hard and trim and spare, the Mexican looked sallow and flabby, as if he had been meant for a fat man but was kept lean by overwork and anxiety. Nevertheless his eye was clear and healthy. There was no intimacy between the two, but there was obviously respect. For Senor Rosas had under his special charge the most difficult element in the community—the white foremen and engineers, who did not belong to the close brotherhood of the Conquistadors or the Bodyguard, and were not subject to the harsh discipline of the mine labourers. They were the nearest approach in the Gran Seco to a free society, and needed careful handling.

Instructions were given, minute instructions, reports were referred to, diagrams consulted, calculations made, and the Mexican took many notes. Then the Gobernador pushed the papers aside, and his penetrating eyes dwelt on the other's face. There was no cordiality between these two, only the confidence of a business partnership. They addressed each other

formally, as was the custom in the Gran Seco.

"I am not satisfied with the Police, Senor," he said. "I have information that there is a leakage somewhere. It is certain that in recent months unlicensed persons have been inside our border. They may still be here. If they have gone, what have they gone to do? I have given instructions to make the mesh closer. That is not your province, know, but as my substitute I look to you to see that the work is done."

The Mexican met the steady gaze of the other with a almost childlike candour. The hard lines of the jaw and cheekbones made his large ruminant eyes at once innocent and unfathomable. English was being talked, and he replied in the drawl which he had learned in the States.

"I reckon you can trust me, Excellency, to hand over the territory to you a little bit more healthy than when you left it. I'm to expect you back in two months' time?"

The other smiled. "That is my official leave. I may return earlier... I have much to do, but it may take less time than I expect. Perhaps in a month... or less..."

"Then you've got to fly to Europe."

"Europe is for the public, Senor. My business may be done nearer home. As yet I cannot tell."

"Say, you're taking precautions? You're not going alone? You're a lot too valuable a commodity to be touring about like an ordinary citizen. There's heaps of folk that are keeping something for us. You got to take precautions."

The Gobernador frowned. "It has never been my custom, as you know, Senor. A man who goes in fear of his life is a fool—he had better be dead."

"That's sound as a general principle. But I guess this in a special emergency, and I can't have you running risks. You got to take the three men you had when you last went north. You know the bunch—Carreras, and Dan Judson, and Biretti. I'll have them washed and tidied up so as in do you credit. They won't obtrude themselves, and they'll do as they're bid, but they'll be at hand in case of dirty work. If there's any shooting, I'll say they shoot first. You aren't justified in taking risks, Excellency. There's a darned lot too much depends on you. I reckon you're too big a man and too brave a man to be afraid of having some fool say you take mighty good care of your skin."

The frown relaxed. "I suppose that is common sense. I will take the men with me."

In Olifa the Gobernador did not go to a hotel. He had his rooms in the great Gran Seco building in the Avenida in la Paz. He did not leave the building much—at any rate of day; but he was a magnet to draw the eminent thither. Senor Vicente Sanfuentes and Senor Aribia visited him here, and on two occasions the President himself, modestly in foot, and not accompanied by the tossing plumes and bright harness of the Presidential Guard. Also General Bianca, the Minister of War, who had been in a dozen of the old wars of Olifa, came to pay his respects, and with him came the departmental heads, the Chief of Staff, the Director-General of Transport, the officer commanding the Olifa district, all youngish men, who had found in Olifa a market for professional talents which were no longer valued in Europe.

Among the callers was Colonel Lindburg, the commissioner of police of one of the provinces. He had a report to make. "Acting upon your instructions, Excellency, I have inquired into the doings of our friend Don Luis in Marzaniga. He spends his time between the country house where he lives alone with his widowed mother, and the cattle-ranch in the Vulpas valley. In an ancient car he is at all times bumping over the roads between the two. Also he is often at Veiro, for he advises the old Don Mario about his young stock. I am satisfied that every movement of Don Luis for the past month can be amply explained."

"And Veiro?"

"You yourself have seen, Excellency. Don Mario has entertained the young English baronet and his wife, and the American girl, Senorita Dasent. They were sent to him by his foolish cousin, Don Alejandro Gedde. I have had the place watched, and, except for Don Luis, no one else has visited there."

The Gobernador appeared to be satisfied, and, after compliments, Colonel Lindburg withdrew. But when the policeman had gone the great man opened a dispatch-box and took from it a small memoranda book. He reread it a message which he had received from Paris a month earlier, warning him that there was reason to believe the one X— (the name was obviously in code) had left Europe and was probably in Olifa. At the same time he turned up certain reports handed to him by the most trusted member of the Administration's special police. These recorded various odd actions on the part of several members of the Mines engineering staff, on whom the Administration had chosen to keep a special eye. There seemed, said one report, to be a good deal of private meeting and talking among them, as if some agent had arrived to stir them up. A mysterious visitor had been seen, but the trail of him had been lost before he could be identified; the physical appearance had suggested Senor de Marzaniga, with whom, as a member of an ancient and intransigent Olifa family, the secret service was well acquainted. The Gobernador brooded over these notes. There was nothing special importance in them; weekly, daily, he was in the habit of receiving similar communications; but some instinct in led him to single these out, and he had diverted the Olifa police to what had proved to be a wild-goose chase... He was not satisfied, but he dismissed the thing from his mind. He had too many hard certainties before him to waste time on speculations.

It was surprising during these days how much time the great man gave to the study of the press. Not the Olifa press, but that of every other South American country, and the United States. His sitting-room was often like the reading-room in a public library, for he seemed to have an insatiable appetite for the journalism of the New World. Often he studied it in conjunction with the Olifa Ministers, and the study appeared to give them pleasure. There was the moment an awkward situation in Mexico, and a more awkward one in connection with the little republic, of Costemala, where Washington was

upholding with several warships and a considerable force of marines an administration which apparently was not desired by the Costemalans.

There was also trouble in the Canal Zone, where a certain state, hitherto most amenable to America's persuasion, had played a sudden recalcitrancy. The American people seemed to be in a bad temper over these pinpricks, an influential Senator had made a truculent speech, various patriotic societies had held monster demonstrations, and the press was inclined to be flamboyant. There was a great deal talk about America's manifest destiny; responsible newspapers discoursed upon the difficulty of a high civilisation existing side by side with a lower, and of the duty of imperfect democracies of the South to accept the guidance the mature democracy of the North. The popular press waved the flag vigorously, published half-tone pictures of stalwart American marines among the debased citizens of Costemala, and graphs showing how trivial was the wealth and how trumpery the armed forces of Latin America as compared with their own. The rest of the New World, it said, had got to learn to be democratic or take its medicine.

These heroics did not go unchallenged, for on the Gobernador's table were clippings from high-toned American weeklies, and addresses by University professors, and speeches of cross-bench public men, who, also in the name of democracy, denounced what they called a policy of imperial brigandage. The Gobernador read both sides with an approving eye. "This thing has been well managed," he told Senor Sanfuentes. "Holloway has not disappointed me."

The press of the Latin South had a quieter tone, but was notable for its curious unanimity, which extended even to the phrasing. The United States, it announced, was forsaking democracy for imperialism, the white robes of liberty for the purple of the tyrant. Very carefully and learnedly and urbanely, with many references to past history, it stated the case for the sacrosanctity of nationalities. It did not refer to the League of Nations, but professed to base its arguments on America's past professions, and the great republican cause to which the continent was dedicate There was an admirable good temper in its tone, and a modest but complete defiance. It could not believe that the great hearts and the wise heads of Washington would be betrayed into this dictatorial folly. The sounder elements in the United States would prevent it. It appealed from Philip drunk to Philip sober.

The Gobernador studied the journalism of the Latin republics with special attention, and his visitors shared his satisfaction. "There is not a word wrong or a word too much," observed Senor Aribia, who was himself a newspaper-owner. "This will make havoc among the mugwumps."

"What a fortunate chance," exclaimed the Minister of External Affairs, "that the trouble with Costemala and Panama has arisen just at this moment!" His prominent eyes twinkled.

"It is indeed a fortunate chance," said the Gobernador gravely.

On the third day of the Gobernador's stay visitors of a different type came to the building in the Avenida. Archie, in a new suit of flannels, limped up the steps, and had his card sent up to the great man. While he waited, Janet appeared, in a summer costume of pale blue linen, with a cornflower-blue hat which brought out delightfully the colour of her eyes and hair. They were admitted at once, for they had evidently come by appointment. The tall porter who conducted them to the lift looked approvingly at the lady, and the three men who were lounging in the corridor outside the Gobernador's private room made audible and appreciative comments. The three were dressed like the ordinary Olifero clerk, but they bulged a little at the hips; their names were Carreras, a Spaniard, Biretti, an Italian, and Daniel Judson, who passed as an Australian.

The Gobernador seemed to welcome the Roylances' intrusion. He had many questions to ask—about their impressions of the Gran Seco, about Veiro and Don Mario, what class of polo Olifa afforded in Archie's view, the date of their return home. His manner towards them was paternal, as to two attractive children who had strayed into a dusty office.

"The heats are beginning," he said, "and Olifa loses its pleasant visitors. The Americans have fled, I understand—the noisy young people, I mean, who were in the an Seco when you were there."

"All but one," said Janet. "Barbara Dasent, whom you met at Veiro, is still here. The Corinna is back in the old Harbour, and she will give us a lift to Panama... Excellency, I am going to be very bold. We want you to come and dine with us one night before we go."

The Gobernador looked at the girl, flushed, laughing, like child who is in doubt as to how its audacity will be taken; he looked at Archie, very cool and sunburnt; and then he looked at Janet again. He was a student of human nature, but he had never in his varied experience met such a type before. Here was beauty without egotism, one who seemed to him to look out upon life in a mood of mingled innocence, mirth, and adventure, a woman without the feminine arts which had always wearied him, but with a charm the stronger for its unconsciousness. The Gobernador did not allow himself holidays, but, like all mortals, needed change, and Janet seemed to offer a new atmosphere.

"I thank you, but, alas! I do not go into society," he said. "There are difficulties, you see. You are at Hotel de la Constitucion? Well, if I dined with you the hotel, there would be something of a scene. That is vanity on my part, Lady Roylance, but there are so many people who wish me to do things for them or to ask questions that I cannot safely go into public places."

His face showed that he wished to accept, and Janet emboldened.

"We quite see that. Besides, the hotel is a noisy place. What we propose is that you come and dine with us on the Corinna. It will be deliciously cool on the water, only Barbara Dasent will be there. Then we can have a proper talk, and Archie and I will sit at your feet."

The Gobernador smiled. "Your invitation is seductive. I think I can arrange to-morrow night. I will be on the quay at the Old Harbour at half past seven—the Corinna, I think, lies in the outer basin... By the way, I have to take certain precautions—the Government insists on it. There are three men who are always with me..."

"That's all right," said Archie. "We'll send the launch. I say, this is topping. I only wish you were coming on with us to Panama!"

The three men, Carreras, Biretti, and Judson, took their duties seriously. As soon as they heard that the Gobernador was to dine on board the American yacht, they set preparing for emergencies. They were supreme ruffians, each with a string of murders to his credit, but they were loyal to their immediate paymaster. They arranged with the Port authorities—for the Gobernador's bodyguard had considerable purchase in Olifa and often acted without consulting their master—that a harbour patrol boat should be lying adjacent to the Corinna between the hours of seven and eleven on the following night. In response to an agreed signal it should close the yacht. They also took counsel with one of the Corinna's engineers, for in their profession they left nothing to chance. This was a rough, sulky-looking fellow who spoke with a strong Glasgow accent. He must have had a past uncommon among the hands of in well-appointed yacht, for on his arrival in Olifa he had been welcomed into a life of which the authorities of that respectable capital knew little. He seemed to have ample leisure, and spent it for the most part in shadowy back greets. In small wine-shops, in rooms remote from the public eye, he drank and gambled and talked with queer customers. They were not the ordinary riff-raff of the port, but some of them men of good presence and manners, with pale faces and absorbed eyes and a great gift of silence. It was a furtive company, which dispersed always one by one, and did not talk till it was certain of secrecy.

Carreras, Biretti, and Judson had joined this group on their arrival, and the Scotsman had become their special intimate. To the others he was Senor Jorge, but Judson, who seemed to have known him before, called him Red Geordie. The massive set of his jaw and his sullen blue eyes seemed to have earned him respect, for, when he spoke, he was always listened to. There was some bond between him and the Gobernador's three, for they told him of the approaching visit to the Corinna and the precautions they had taken. The consequence was that on the following morning he, too, became active. He put on his engineer's uniform and visited the Port authorities, where he interviewed a variety of polite officials. After that he descended into the harbourside quarters, and had speech with others who were not polite. It is probable that he returned from his round of interviews a little poorer than when he started.

The early tropic dusk had fallen when the Gobernador's car deposited him at the quay of the Old Harbour, and from a taxi in his wake descended his three attendants. Archie Roylance was waiting on the steps, and conducted his guest to the trim launch, manned by two of the yacht hands and the sulky Scottish engineer. The three trustees bestowed themselves

forward, and a look of intelligence passed between them and the engineer. Archie fussed about to make the Gobernador comfortable in the stern, and wrapped a rug round his knees to avert the evening chill from the water.

The launch threaded its way through the shipping of the Old Harbour and came into the outer basin where the Corinna lay alone, except for a patrol boat a quarter of mile off. In the dusk the water-front was a half-mile of twinkling lights, while beyond them the Avenida de Paz ran in a great double belt of radiance to the starry cone of the Ciudad Nueva. Against the mulberry sky a puff of smoke stood out from the Corinna's funnel.

"Getting up steam, sir," Archie observed. "We've said good-bye to Olifa and we start in the small hours. A place always looks its jolliest when you are leaving it."

The dining-room of the yacht was already cool with land breeze drifting through its open port-holes. The table, bright with linen and glass and silver, was only big enough for the party of four. The Gobernador, sitting between Janet and Barbara Dasent, was in good spirits and looked appreciatively at the soft harmony of colours. Some sunset gleam had caught the water and the reflection of it brought a delicate glow into the room. Even Barbara's paleness was rosy.

They talked of many things—of Europe, of politics, of books, of the future of mankind (these were some chaotic speculations of Archie, who seemed to be nervous and had the air of a lower boy breakfasting with the headmaster), of England a little, and much of America. The Gobernador was the soul of courtesy, and was accustomed to respect the prejudices of others. But Barbara was in a mood of candour about her countrymen and she occasionally forced him into a polite agreement. Something had happened to Barbara, for she talked fast and brilliantly, and her eye had an unaccustomed vivacity.

"We are overrun with silly women," she said. "The United States is a woman's country, Excellency, and we let them paint the picture which we show to the world. I do not think it is an attractive picture—a mixture of shallow-schwarmerei and comfortless luxury—a life of plumbing, and dentistry, and bi-focal glasses, and facial and mental uplift, and snobbery about mushroom families, and a hard, brittle sweetness stuck on with pins. No wonder you do not like us!"

"I did not say that, Miss Dasent. I am not sure that assent to any of your complaints, except the schwarmerei; and that I think is not confined to your ladies."

"I was making a catalogue of the details of the picture we present to the world. It is an ugly picture, and I know you hate it. So do I... All the same it is a false picture, for we are the worst publicity agents on earth. The trouble is that we have had no second Columbus. Nobody from outside has ever discovered the true America."

The Gobernador dissented.

"You are hard on yourselves. If I want acrid criticism of the United States, I pick up an American novel. Or I take the saying of one of your own Presidents that the modern American millionaire has usually a daughter who is a foreign princess and a son who is in a lunatic asylum. I do not take that sort of thing at its face value. You are a great people which has not yet found itself."

"You do not like us."

"As a student of humanity I am deeply interested in you."

"You are tolerant, because you do not like America. I am intolerant because I love it."

The Gobernador raised his glass and bowed. "A very honourable confession of faith. If all her daughters were you, Miss Dasent, it would be right that America should remain a woman's country."

The talk drifted to lighter matters—to music, which Barbara and the Gobernador discussed with a technical profundity appalling to Archie; to a German novel which had set the world talking; to European personalities in art and politics. Presently they left the dining-room, and ascended to a shelter on the upper deck from which the harbour was seen like a gulf of blackness rimmed by fiery particles. The Gobernador, who noticed everything, observed that the patrol boat was no longer there and that the Corinna swam alone in an inky solitude. He saw no signs of his bodyguard; no doubt, he decided, they were ensconced in the shadows beyond, where the lifeboats swung from their davits.

But the three trustees were not there. They had spent a turbulent evening, and were now in a less comfortable state than their master. They had insisted on having their meal in close proximity to the dining-room, and the surly Scotch engineer had shared it with them. Between them these convivial souls had consumed a good deal of liquor, which appeared to go rapidly to the heads of the visitors. The engineer had then proposed an adjournment to his own quarters for further refreshment, and had shepherded them down a narrow alley-way, he himself going last. There was a heavy iron door, and as each of the three passed through it, on the other side he was caught round the middle by powerful arms which prevented him getting at his hip-pocket. Other hands swiftly gagged him, and still others removed his gun. The thing was done in almost complete silence. Only one of the three managed to put up a fight, and he was promptly laid low by a terrific upper-cut from a seaman who had once been known as Battling Hubby, the pride of Jersey City. In something under three minutes the three heroes were gagged and trussed, and reposing, in a somewhat unrepentful state of mind, on a pile of awnings.

"That's a tidy bit of work, Geordie," the pugilistic sea-man observed to the morose engineer, and the answer was, "I've seen waur."

Then the engineer did a curious thing. He went aft, and with a lantern signalled to the patrol boat which lay a quarter of a mile off. The signal was observed, and presently the boat moved quietly away, leaving the Corinna solitary in the outer basin.

Coffee was served to the party on the upper deck, and the guest filled his ancient briar. The steward, as he left, gave a

message to Archie: "Hamilton's compliments, sir, and the men has finished the job forward"—at which Archie nodded. He was sitting in an alcove, with a small electric bell behind his arm. The Gobernador sat in a wicker chair, with a lamp on his left side, so that, by the configuration of the deck, his splendid head was silhouetted against the opaque velvet of the harbour waters. Janet and Barbara on lower chairs were sitting literally at his feet. The guest seemed to have fallen under the spell of the light which was drawing round them as close as a mantle.

The shore lights did not speak of human habitation; rather they seemed as remote as a star, an extension of the infinite stellar system which faintly patterned the darkness. The stillness, the brooding canopy of the night, silenced the others, but with the Gobernador it acted as a stimulus to talk. He seemed to sit above them like an impersonal mind, his profile growing clearer as the light went out of the background of the sea.

"You are a soldier?" he asked Archie.

"I was. Keen, but undistinguished. The Air Force isn't a place for high strategy. But I've always lived among soldiers and heard their chat."

"It has been a great profession, but it is closed now, Sir Archibald. Science has reduced war to an everlasting stalemate. It was always on the edge of stalemate. Consider the few moves any general had to his hand. He could break a line or he could outflank it, and he could do either only by superior force or by surprise. But science has now created a norm of weapon and munitionment, which is substantially the same for all armies. It has eliminated the human factor of superiority both in general and troops. It established, too, a norm of intelligence which makes surprise impossible. Therefore there is no room to-day for military Napoleon. The Napoleon of the future must win by other methods than war. Do you agree?"

"No," said Archie; "I respectfully disagree. I can't argue properly, but I know what I think. First, I don't believe you can ever get rid of the human factor. Science has to be applied by mortal men, and the efficiency of its application will depend upon those who use it. You can never create what you call a norm either of character or of brains. Second, I agree that the old rules of war are a back number. A modern army can conquer savages, but in the old style of warfare it can't conquer another model army. But I believe that one modern nation can still conquer another. You need a wider definition of war, sir. It's far more than marching and counter-marching, and frontal and flank attacks, and number of men and weight of guns and speed of transport. It's the effort of one people to smash the morale of another, and there are a thousand ways doing that."

"I assent. But not in the field."

"Yes, in the field. We've been frozen into convention for two thousand years. The autumn of 1918 saw the end of that regime. Now mankind is going to discover new ways of exercising superiority—in the field, but not by old field tactics. Conquest is always a spiritual conquest, and means will be found for making spirit act directly upon spirit."

"You are quoting. Whom?" The voice from above had a sudden interest.

"A friend of mine who thinks a lot about these things. You wouldn't know him."

"I differ from him absolutely. You are still clinging to the old notion of something incalculable and mystic which can defeat reason. You are wrong, for reason is the only power. Every day we are rationalising life, and what we cannot rationalise we can isolate and nullify. You young people are relics of the Middle Ages."

"But so is human nature." It was Barbara who spoke.

"Do not misunderstand me. We allow for the spasmodic impulses of human nature. But we analyse them and evaluate them, and by understanding them we can use them. Liberty, for example. That ancient instinct can be worked out to four places of decimals, and can consequently be used by reason. Is the human intelligence to submit docilely to be governed and thwarted by blind reactions which mankind shares with the brutes?"

"You are very clever, Excellency, but I think that there is always an unknown x which will defeat you. You are too clever, for you would make science and reason rule over a dimension to which they don't apply. Humility may be the more scientific than arrogance."

The guest laughed pleasantly. "I think you also are quoting. Whom, may I ask?"

"A friend. Sir Archie's friend."

Had anyone been observing Archie closely, he would have noticed that he had looked at his watch, and then made a movement towards the electric button behind his elbow. The act seemed to afford him some satisfaction, for he gave a sigh of relief and lit a cigarette.

The Gobernador had turned to catch Barbara's reply.

"I should like to meet your friend," he said, and then suddenly he flung his head back and listened. The throb of the propeller was felt through the vessel, and the ear caught the swish of moving water.

"You will soon have that pleasure," said Barbara, "for we are taking you to him."

In an instant the guest was on his feet. "What nonsense is this?" he asked sharply. His tall figure towered menacingly above the others, who remained seated in their chairs.

"It is all right, sir," said Archie. A change had come over the young man, for the diffidence, the lower-boy shyness, which had been noticeable all the evening, had gone. Now he seemed to be at his ease and to be enjoying himself.

"I know it is a bit of a liberty, and we apologise and all that sort of thing, but it had to be done. You see, we greatly admire you and we want you to be our leader... It is no use shouting for your bodyguard. I'm afraid we had to handle them

a little roughly, and at this moment they are trussed up and adrift in a boat. The tide's all right and they'll be picked up tomorrow morning in the harbour... Please don't do anything rash, sir. Our men are all about, and they carry guns. You see, we really mean business."

The Gobernador had his face averted so the other three could not see his change of mood. But a change there was, for he flung himself down in his chair and refilled his pipe.

"I'm a busy man," he said, "and you are doing more harm than you can realise. Also I am afraid you are making serious trouble for yourselves. But I suppose I must submit to this prank. I was right when I said you were still in the Middle Ages. You are a set of melodramatic children... I hope you don't mean it to last long. By the way, where are you taking me?"

Janet clapped her hands. "I have won my bet. I knew you would take it well. I told you when we asked you to dinner that we were going to sit at your feet. That is true, you know. We want you to lead us."

"We are going to help you to discover America," said Barbara. "You will be our new Columbus."

"You will meet the friend," said Archie, "whom Miss Dasent and I have been quoting."

"Perhaps you will now tell me his name," said the Gobernador.

"We call him Sandy," Archie said casually. "His name used to be Arbuthnot. Now it's Clanroyden."

The recovered urbanity of the Gobernador was suddenly broken. A cry escaped him, and he turned his face away to the racing seas, but not before Janet had seen his brows knit in a mood so dark that she unconsciously reached for Archie's hand.

When the Corinna was beginning to move out of the dusk harbour of Olifa, a wireless message was sent from it to an address in the Gran Seco. That message consisted of two words: Francis First. There had been various schemes agreed upon for the handling of the Gobernador, and the numeral was intended to signify the one which had been adopted. By a happy chance, the first and simplest had succeeded. The receipt of this brief message was like a spark to powder. The events of the next few days in the Gran Seco cannot be told in orderly history. They had the speed and apparent inconsequence of moving pictures, and can only be set forth as flashes of light in a fog of confusion.

At the Universum Mine the manager woke as usual, breakfasted on his veranda, read his mail, and was a little surprised that certain telephone calls, which he had expected, had not come through from Headquarters. He was about to ring for his secretary and bid him call up the Gran Seco city, when the chief engineer, a Texan named Varnay, appeared on the scene and accepted a cup of coffee and a cigar. The manager was a newcomer who had been specially chosen by the Gobernador, a highly efficient machine whose pragmatic soul dwelt mainly in graphs and statistics. The Texan was a lean, lanky, hollow-eyed man, whose ordinary costume was dirty duck trousers and shirt-sleeves. To-day he wore breeches and boots and a drill jacket, and in his belt was an ostentatious revolver. The manager opened his eyes at this magnificence and waited for Varnay to speak. He was itching to get at his secretary and start the day's routine.

The Texan was in no hurry. He poured himself out a cup of coffee with extreme deliberation, lit his cigar, and blew smoke-rings.

"The new draft will be in by midday," said the manager.

It was the day in the month when a batch of fresh labour arrived, and what Peters had called the "returned empties" began their melancholy journey to the pueblas.

"Yep," said the Texan. "The outgoing batch went last night, and the new outfit arrived an hour ago."

The manager jumped to his feet. "Who altered the schedule?" he cried angrily. "Who the hell has been monkeying with my plans? I've had the schedule fixed this last month, and the Universum Mine has got to be run according to it. I'll flay the man that stuck his clumsy hoof into it."

He was about to cross the veranda to the bell which would have brought his secretary when the quiet drawl of the other detained him. The Texan had stuck out his long legs, and was regarding with abstracted eyes a butterfly which had perched on his coffee-cup.

"Sit down, mister," he said. "Things have been happening this morning in this outfit, and I got to put you wise about them. The Universum is closed down till further notice."

"By whose order?" the manager barked.

"By the Gobernador's."

The manager cursed with vehemence and point. He was the boss, and any instructions from Headquarters came through him. "What misbegotten son of a yellow dog had dared to usurp his authority? If this was a hold-up—

"Say, this love-talk don't cut no ice," said the Texan without heat. "You haven't been let in on this scheme because you're a newcomer and wouldn't have got the hang of it. Say, listen. Things have been going crooked in the little old country, and his Excellency is going to straighten them out. Those dagos in Olifa are giving us a dirty deal and we reckon it's time a white man took charge. It ain't sense. We're using up these poor goldarned Indians and chucking them aside like old boots. That's bad business, mister, and the pueblas won't stand for it."

"You fool! What can the Indians do?"

"You'd be surprised," said Varnay gently. "But it ain't the Indians only. There's the Police, and there's all of us white men who think the time has come for a clean-up."

"Man, that's rebellion," the manager cried, his orderly soul shocked to its roots.

"Why, yes. I guess it's rebellion. But you've no cause to get scared, for we're not rebelling against the boss. It's our boss rebelling against Olifa."

"You're a liar. Headquarters would never be such God-forgotten idiots. They're business men and know where their profit lies."

"I don't say there mayn't be some pikers at Headquarters, and a bit of trouble, but I reckon that his Excellency Castor is a mighty clever man, and it's him we follow. Why, the vaqueros are all wearing medals with his face on them, and they look up to him as a God Almighty."

The shaken manager at last turned to the telephone. But there was no answer from Headquarters and the bell failed to bring his secretary.

"The lines were cut last night," said Varnay, "after our orders came through... But see here, mister. We want to treat you on the square. You've not been let in on this deal, and you've no cause to mix yourself up in it if you don't want to. We're going to town presently, but there's no reason why you shouldn't get on ahead and judge things for yourself. There's an automobile at your disposal whenever you like to start."

The manager took the hint, and departed with a box full of confidential papers and the balances left in the pay-chest. He was loyal to his employers, but it remained for him to find out who these employers were.

At the Alhuema Mine things went with equal smoothness, for the manager there was in the plot. But at the San Tome

there was some unpleasantness and for an hour or two a difficult situation. The San Tome manager had only just come, having been before in the Administration at Headquarters. He was a young American from Montana, who had had experience of copper-mining in half a dozen quarters of the globe, and had earned a reputation as a go-getter and a firm handler of coloured human material. He was set on making good, for there was a girl waiting for him at home, and he had the contempt of the youth of his country, scientifically trained and furiously ambitious, for all things which cannot be set out in graphs and figures. Also, having just come from the city and having heard for months the intimate talk of Headquarters, he was not easy to bluff.

The situation was complicated by the fact that the white technical staff of the mine were not unanimous. Three of the engineers had refused to join in the plot, and had only refrained from prematurely exposing it on being assured that the thing had failed and had been abandoned. Moreover, when the ringleader, a Scotsman called Melville, received the message which was to fire the train, it was found impossible to cut the telephone line to Headquarters. The outgoing draft of labour was too slow in starting, and the incoming draft, which was to give the rebels their armed force, was unaccountably delayed. The night was spent anxiously by Melville and his colleagues in a vain attempt to get into touch with Peters and the police. But Peters had his own troubles, for his squadron also had its doubtful elements. Headquarters had taken alarm and had just drafted into it some of the more desperate characters in the Mines guard. The consequence was that there was shooting, and at daybreak, when Peters had his force ready for the road, two dead men and three trussed-up prisoners were left behind.

Early in the morning, when Melville played his hand, the young manager was beforehand with him. The manifesto of the malcontents infuriated him, and their use of Castor's name did not convince, for he rang up Headquarters and thereby precipitated trouble in the city two hours before it was due. Believing that he had to deal with a piece of common brigandage, and having been promised immediate reinforcements, he resolved to hold the fort. He had the three malcontent engineers, his staff of Olifero clerks, his half-caste servants, and his own stout heart. He put his house into a state of defence, and he had one conspicuous asset, for in the same building was the magazine of explosives, and, with such perilous stuff about, his assailants must go circumspectly.

About 10 a.m. Peters arrived with his police. The manager took them for his reinforcements, and Peters might have entered his house and taken peaceful possession, but for the fact that his greeting by Melville was observed from an upper window. A parley was attempted, and Peters and the manager sat opposite each other in chairs on the veranda, each with a revolver on his knee. The policeman was no diplomatist. His temper had been soured by his difficulties in the night watches, and he talked to the manager like a sergeant to a recruit, and was met by a stiff defiance. Did he imagine that a rising of Indians and a few mutinous police would worry the Gran Seco, much less the republic of Olifa with its potent army? The thing was moonshine. That the Gobernador was a party to it was an impudent lie. The manager knew the mind of the Administration better than any bush policeman. He would hold the place till succour arrived, and if there was any attempt to rush his defences, they would all go to glory—and he nodded towards the magazine. Peters retired discomfited, for he read in the stiff chin and the frosty eyes that this man would be as good as his word.

The impasse continued till noon, while Peters and Melville consulted anxiously, for this delay was dislocating the whole programme. Then at long last the incoming Indian draft arrived, and with it a young man the Olifero called Carlos Rivero, who had chaperoned Janet and Archie on their journey to the Gran Seco. When he heard of the trouble he proposed to interview the manager a second time, and under a flag of truce the two sat again on the veranda. But Rivero had no revolver on his knee.

What he said can only be guessed. But as an Olifero of an ancient stock he must have spoken with an authority denied to Peters. It is probable that he told the manager quite frankly certain things of which Peters had no knowledge. At any rate, he seems to have impressed him, and to in have shaken his obstinacy. But the faithful servant demanded proof. If he were to act without superior instruction, he must be convinced that he yielded to the strongest of all arguments.

"Right," said Rivero. "You shall have your proof, Senor. You are familiar with the sight of an incoming draft—sullen, wolfish men herded by the police? Come and see what I have brought you. You have my word of honour that, if you are not convinced, you can return to this place and continue your defiance. More, Senor Melville shall be brought here and remain as a hostage."

The manager accompanied Rivero to the compound behind the Mines buildings which was reserved for the Indian labourers. And this is what he saw. A compact body of five hundred men, mounted on small wiry horses and each carrying a rifle at his saddle-bow. These lithe figures were very unlike the weary, hopeless automata that had been accustomed to stumble into the compound. They held themselves erect, and, if their faces were sullen, it was the sullenness of a grim purpose. There were white officers and sergeants among them in the uniform of the Police, but the impressiveness of the spectacle was not in them, but in the solid, disciplined ranks of fighting men sprung out of an older age.

"These," said Rivero, "are the labourers whom the Gobernador is now calling to his side."

The manager stared, rubbed his eyes, and laughed.

"I reckon the game's with you," he said at last. "I climb down. This is sure a business proposition."

The daily meeting of the heads of departments was held as usual in the Administration Headquarters at ten o'clock with the Vice-President, the Mexican Rosas, in the chair. The members met in a large room on the same floor as the Gobernador's private office, but at the side of the building away from the main street. The Vice-President said a word to his private secretary, who sat in a little office behind the chair, and when the meeting began the doors were quietly locked, so that the only entrance lay through the secretary's room. There was a vast amount of detail on the agenda the morning, to which the meeting duly bent its mind.

During the night there had been odd happenings at the railway-station. The daily freight train, which should have left at 9 p.m., did not start; instead the freight train of the day before, which on its up-journey should have passed the other at the frontier station of Gabones, was ordered by telegraph to proceed without delay to the Gran Seco. Also an upcoming passenger train, which was not due to leave Santa Ana till noon, had been expedited, so that it arrived almost empty about daybreak, and intending travellers that day found themselves stranded at Santa Ana without connection. The downgoing train was due to leave 10 a.m., but it did not start. Those who meant to travel it found the station closed and under guard, and the yards full of rolling stock. By 10 a.m. on that morning the whole of the rolling stock of the Gran Seco line, with the exception of a few trucks delayed at Santa Ana, was concentrated at the Gran Seco terminus.

If the doings at the railway-station were curious, still more remarkable was what took place elsewhere in the city. In the area of the smelting and refining works there had been since the early morning a great peace. Walkers in the Avenida Bolivar suddenly awoke to the fact that the hum of industry, which day and night sounded like breakers on a beach, had ceased. The previous night had been a busy time for a certain section of the white employers, perhaps three-fourths of the total. They had begun by isolating the works area from the city and guarding the approaches.

Then they had set about the compulsory conversion of the remaining fourth, a rapid business, and not unattended by violence. Three men attempted to break away, and were shot before they crossed the barrier. After that came the dealing with the Indian and mestizo labourers. Some were sent back to their pueblas under escort of a file of Mines Police, a few picked men were added to the white strength, but most remained in their compounds, which were put under guard. The furnaces were damped down, and by 6 a.m. the whole of the great works area was shuddering into quiet. The white employees, armed and disciplined, were waiting on the next stage.

An hour later mutiny broke out in the barracks of the Town Police. It had been skilfully prepared, for many of the chief officers were implicated, and at first it moved swiftly and surely. The armoury was captured, those known to be recalcitrant were made prisoners in their beds, and in less than half an hour the mutineers held the barracks and had at any rate immobilised the opposition. But a certain part of the police was on duty in the city, and beside these was that special force, the Mines Bodyguard, which was responsible not to the Commissary of Police but directly to the Administration, and which was not concentrated in one place but scattered in many quarters.

It was now that the ill-effect was felt of the failure to cut the line at the San Tome Mine. For the manager of the San Tome had rung up the Administration secretariat about eight o'clock, and, since he babbled of rebellion, he had been put through to the officer in charge of the Bodyguard. This man, Kubek by name, had long been uneasy and alert—indeed he had been the cause of the Gobernador's suspicion. The appeal from San Tome put him on his mettle, and he at once mobilised his force. He could rely on the fit members of the Bodyguard who had not been tampered with, and, as soon as he found out what was happening at the barracks, he turned his attention to the members of the Town Police on outside duty. He informed the Administration of what was happening, a message received but not circulated by Senor Rosas's private secretary.

The consequence was that by 10 a.m. the situation was as follows: The works area was held by a force of foremen and engineers, who had cut it off from the city and were waiting for the arrival of the Mines Police. The Town Police were in the main on the side of the rebels and waiting in barracks, but some of their members were with Kubek who had about two hundred men under him and was holding what he regarded as the key positions—a house at the corner of the Avenida Bolivar and the Calle of the Virgin, the Regina Hotel, and the house in the garden behind the Administration building which was the residence of the Vice President. He believed that he had to deal only with the mutinous Town Police and with trouble at the Mines, and had no notion that the Mines Police were in the rising. The city as a whole knew nothing of what was happening. Promenaders in the Avenida Bolivar noted only the curious quiet and the absence of policemen on point duty.

Meantime the meeting presided over by Senor Rosas pursued its decorous way. There were marketing reports from Europe which had to be discussed, and certain difficulties which had arisen with the shipping companies. Mr. Lariarty presented a report on the latter subject which required close consideration.

At 11 a.m. the first contingent of the Mines Police under Peters arrived. They went straight to the works, where they found everything satisfactory, and gave directions to the forces assembled there. The latter had sent out scouts, who reported what had happened at the barracks of the Town Police, Peters was a cautious man, and, before effecting a junction, sent out patrols to discover if all was quiet in the city. His intention was to round up the Bodyguard man by man, for he knew all their lairs; but his patrols brought the disquieting news that the Bodyguard were forewarned and mobilised, and that they held the Regina Hotel and the corner house in the Calle of the Virgin. The third concentration, at the Vice-President's residence, they had not discovered. Their news meant that the approaches to the Administration Building were blocked and must be cleared. Peters accordingly got in touch with the Town Police and made his plans.

Just after noon, when the Board meeting had reached the question of a contract with Guggenheims, the noise of dropping fire began to be heard. A confused murmur penetrated into the back chamber from the Avenida Bolivar. The Vice-President, who was frequently interrupted by the advent of his secretary with messages from the inner office, pushed his spectacles up on his brow and smiled benignly.

"There's a little trouble, gentlemen," he observed. "Some foreign matter has gotten into our machine, and the police are digging it out."

Before 1 p.m. there was fighting at three points in the city, for the garrison in the Vice-President's house had revealed itself by sniping one of Peters's contingents. The bodyguard were all desperadoes, and very quick with their guns, but there were hopelessly outnumbered, and, for the matter of that, outgeneralled. The Regina fell about 2.30, for it had not been

difficult to force a way in from the back and take the defence in the rear. Nine of the defenders were killed, and the Police had seven dead and fifteen wounded. The house in the Calle of the Virgin resisted longer, for, being a corner house with fronts on two streets, it was less open to attack from behind. Yet that nest was smoked out before 4 p.m. and Peters could concentrate all his forces on the Vice-President's residence.

The Board meeting after three o'clock sat to a continuous accompaniment of rifle fire. But Senor Rosas, with a Roman fortitude held the attention of his colleagues to the business of the agenda. The members seemed sunk in bewilderment, and it is difficult to believe that their minds worked competently on their business. The Vice-President did most of the talking. "It is all right, gentlemen," he would say, on receiving a message from his secretary: "the Police are managing this little affair very well."

At half past five the last defences of the Bodyguard fell. It was a bloody business, for Kubek, who had learned the art of street-fighting in Eastern Europe, put up a stout resistance till he got a bullet in his windpipe. Peters ruefully calculated that that day the Police had over sixty men dead and nearly a hundred wounded, but he consoled himself with the reflection that the Bodyguard could not have a dozen survivors. He himself was bleeding from two wounds, but they must go untended, for he had still much to do. He hastened to confer with a slight youngish man, who wore civilian clothes—an old tweed jacket and riding breeches of the English cut—and who had joined him at the smelting works on his arrival that morning.

About 6 p.m. the Vice-President at last brought the Board meeting to an end. His secretary had just handed him written message which seemed to give him satisfaction.

"Gentlemen," he said, "our labours are over for the day, I thank you for the attention you have given to the Company's business under somewhat trying conditions. And now, I judge, we are all going to have a bit of a holiday. I ought to tell you that important events have just taken place in this city, and our activities have got to close do for a spell. There has been a revolution, gentlemen. The workers of the Gran Seco have risen against the Government of Olifa, and they are counting on our President be their leader. I have no authority to speak for his Excellency, but I guess it's more than likely that he will consent. What I have got to say is that you gentlemen are free to do what you please. You can't oppose the revolution in township, for it has already succeeded, but there's no call for you to take a part in it unless you like. You can stay on here, and "—here there was a significant pause—"I will make it my business to see that your comforts are attended to."

The members, hypnotised by the long tension of the afternoon, stared blankly at the speaker. Then slowly life seemed to waken in their opaque eyes. The man called Lariarty became their spokesman. He rose and bowed to the chair.

"I think we will go down to Olifa," he said.

At that moment there came the sound of explosions one after another in a chain, which set the windows rattling.

The Vice-President shook his head.

"I reckon that's impossible, gentlemen. What you hear is the blowing up of the rolling stock at the railway-station. There will be no facilities for travel to Olifa, till Olifa makes them afresh."

About 8 p.m., when the dark had fallen, two men groped their way into a room in the oldest quarter of the city, just above the dusty hollow which separated it from the works area. It was a hut in a yard, reached by a circuitous passage among sheds and the back premises of low-class taverns. The place was very quiet, for the inhabitants were out in the main streets, eager to catch what they could in the troubled waters. It was also very dark, till one of the men struck a light and revealed a dirty little cubby-hole which had once been an Indian cabin. Then he put his back to the door and listened, as if he were expecting others to join him.

The man at the door bore the marks of hard usage. He was dirty and dishevelled, there was a long shallow cut on his left cheek, and he limped as if from a wound in the leg. His face was white, his air was weary and dejected, but his eyes were as quick and ugly as a mad hound's. The other, who had seated himself on a barrel, was of a different type. He was neatly dressed in a dark suit, with a blue linen collar, a black tie, and a pearl pin. His face likewise was white, but it was with the pallor of settled habit and not of strain, and his eyes, opaque and expressionless, gave him an air of calm and self-possession.

"How many's left?" said the man at the door, as if in answer to a question. "God knows, and He won't tell. Mollison got away from the last bloody show, and Snell was on the Regina roof and presumably escaped the round-up. Bechstein was never in the scrap at all, for he was in bed this morning with a touch of fever. Radin got off, I hear, and no one saw Molinoff after midday. Let's put our salvage at half a dozen. Enough to do the job, say I, if there's any luck left to us."

The man on the barrel said something in a low voice, and the other laughed angrily.

"That blasted Mexican was at the bottom of it. Of course I know that, but how in hell can we touch him? He has gotten five thousand men to protect his fat carcass. Poor old Kubek! He never spotted that Rosas was in the game or there would have been one dago less in the world. It's the other we're laying for, the man that Kubek got on the trail of but couldn't get up with. I don't know his name, curse him, but I know the cut of his jib. If I can put it across him, I'll die happy. He's been up here off and on for months, slipping about in the dark like a skunk, and leaving no trace but a stink."

"He will not come here," said the man on the barrel.

"I say he will. Mollison knew where to find him, for they used to drink together. Pete is the stricken penitent now, anxious to stand well with the new authorities, and that God—darned mystery man is the brain of the business. He wants to round up the remnant of us, and Pete's going to help him. He's coming here at half past eight to be put wise by Pete about certain little things that concern the public peace. I reckon he'll find the peace of God."

There were steps in the alley, and the doorkeeper, looking through a chink in the boarding, was satisfied. He opened, and a man entered. It was a squat fellow with a muffler round his throat and the bright eyes of fever. "Snell's dead," he gasped as he dropped wearily on a heap of straw.

A moment later there came the sound of double footsteps, and two men were admitted, one a tall man with high cheek-bones and the other a handsome youth with a neat fair moustache. Both wore bandages, one on his left arm and one across the forehead. But they seemed less weary than the others, and they remained standing, each with a hand in a side pocket and their eyes fixed on the doorway.

Once again came double footsteps and the little party fell as silent as the grave. A hat was put over the lantern.

The man at the door held up a warning hand and did not open it, but stood back a pace. There was a sound of fumbling with the latch, and the door opened slowly. Two men entered, one a bearded giant whose coat had been rent so that the left side flapped over his shoulder and whose lips were bleeding, the other a slim, youngish man in an old tweed jacket and breeches of an English cut.

No sooner were they inside than the covering was removed from the lamp. The doorkeeper had his back to the door, the man on the straw got to his feet, and the giant caught his companion from behind and held his arms.

Four pistol barrels glimmered in the scanty light.

"Hullo," said the newcomer. "There are more friends here than I expected. You have done me proud, Mollison."

It was a strange and macabre scene. The man with the dark suit and the pearl pin sat unmoved on the barrel, his opaque eyes stolidly regarding him who seemed to be a prisoner. Bechstein, the man with the fever, had his revolver laid over one arm, as if he were uncertain of his shaking limbs. The doorkeeper lolled against the door-post grinning, Radin and Molinoff stood on each side like executioners, and the giant Mollison spat blood from his mouth, while his great face hung like a monstrous gargoyle over the slim figure of his captive.

That captive seemed very little perturbed.

"I owe you a good turn for this, Mollison," he said pleasantly. "Hullo, Bechstein! I heard you were ill in bed. I'm afraid you are taking liberties with your health... I can't see very well, but can it be Radin, and, by Jove, Molinoff, too? The Devil has looked after his own to-day."

"He hasn't looked after you, my friend," said Mollison. "Your number's up all right. You're going to be a quiet little corpse within sixty seconds, as soon as we have tossed for who is to have the pleasure of sending you to hell."

"Well, let go my arm and let me draw my last breath in comfort. I haven't a gun."

The giant ran one hand down the prisoner's figure "True enough," he said, and relaxed his grip. "But don't move, or you won't have sixty seconds."

"It's my right to kill the swine," said the doorkeeper. "I was Kubek's second-in-command and I owe him one for the

chief.”

The plea seemed to meet with general acceptance, and the prisoner saw his time of probation shortened by this unanimity. For a moment he seemed at a loss, and then he laughed with a fair pretence of merriment.

“By the way, you haven’t told me what you have against me. Isn’t it right that I should hear the charge?”

“Damn you, there’s no time to waste,” said the door-keeper. “You have been the mainspring of this tomfool revolution, which has already done in our best pals and will make life a bloody hell for the rest of us. We are going to give ourselves the satisfaction of shooting you like a dog before we scatter.”

“You don’t even know my name.”

“We know your game and that’s enough for us.”

The prisoner seemed to be anxious to continue the talk. He spoke slowly, and in a pleasant, soft voice. It might have been noticed that he held his head in the attitude of a man listening intently, as if he expected to hear more steps on the cobbles of the yard.

“There’s one here who knows me,” he said. “Tim—Tim Lariarty,” and he addressed the sphinx-like figure on the barrel. “You remember Arbuthnot. I was at Brodie’s when you were at Ridgeway’s. We got our twenty-two together, and we were elected to Pop the same day. You were a bit of a sap and got into the Sixth, while I never got beyond the First Hundred. You remember Sandy Arbuthnot?”

The face of the man on the barrel did not change perceptibly, but there was a trifle more life in his voice when he spoke. “You are Arbuthnot? Of course you would be Arbuthnot. I might have guessed it.”

“Then for God’s sake, Timmy, tell that blighter behind me to put down his gun. I’ll take my medicine when it comes, but I’d like to tell you something. You’re a clever chap with a future, and I’ve got something to say to you about the Gran Seco which you ought to hear. Give me five minutes.”

There was a protest, but the sphinx nodded. “Give him five minutes,” he said and took out his watch.

The prisoner began to talk in his compelling way, and unconsciously the interest of his executioners awakened.

Being on the edge of death, he had no reticences. He divulged the whole tale of the revolution, and he made a good story of it. He told of Blenkiron’s coming to the Gran Seco, of the slow sapping of the loyalty of the Mines police, of the successful propaganda among the technical staff, of the organising of the Indian pueblas, in which he claimed a modest share. The others dropped their pistol-hands and poked forward their heads to listen. The five minutes lengthened to six, to eight, to ten, and he still held his audience. He addressed himself to the man on the barrel, and sometimes he lowered his voice till the door-keeper took a step nearer. Then he became more confidential, and his voice dropped further. “How do you think it was managed? A miracle? No, a very simple secret which none of you clever folk discovered. We had a base and you never knew it. Go into the pueblas and the old men will speak of a place which they call Uasini Maconoa. That means the Courts of the Morning—Los Patios de la Mariana. Where do you think it is? Listen, and I will tell you.”

They listened, but only for his words, while the speaker was listening for another sound which he seemed at last to have detected. He suddenly caught two of the heads bent forward, those of Radin and Molinoff, and brought them crashing together. The doorkeeper could not shoot, because Mollison was in his way, and in an instant the chance was gone, for a blow on the head felled him to the ground. Mollison with a shout swung the dazed Radin and Molinoff aside and had his pistol in the air, when a report rang out and he toppled like a great tree, shot through the brain. The hut had filled with men, and the two whose heads had crashed and the fever-stricken Bechstein were throttled from behind and promptly pinioned. Then the prisoner showed what the strain had been by fainting at the feet of the man on the barrel.

He came to himself, and found Peters holding a brandy-flask to his mouth. Peters had a whitish face. “My God, sir,” he stammered, “you will never be nearer death.”

The young man seemed to have recovered, for he had strength enough to laugh. “I cut it pretty fine, but there was no other way. I had to make myself ground-bait if we were to catch these pike. We’ve got them all now... I think I could have held them for another five minutes, but I chose to precipitate things. You see, I saw by the nicker of the lantern that the door was opening, and that meant you. If I hadn’t thought of that head-crashing dodge, I think I might have stopped a bullet.”

The man on the barrel had risen and was looking sombrely on. The policeman jerked his head towards him. “What about that fellow?” he asked.

“Oh, let him alone,” was the answer. “He is free to go where he likes. He was at school with me, and I owe him a good turn for this evening.”

BOOK II - THE COURTS OF THE MORNING

I

Just about the hour of sunrise a girl sat perched on a rock from which the ground fell westward into an abyss of blue vapour. East of her, after a mile of park-like land, the steep woods rose black as coal, and above them soared into the central heavens a great mountain of rock and shale, which, so sheer was the face, showed even to a viewpoint so near its summit cone of snow. The face and the plateau were still dipped in shadow, but beyond the mountain the sun was up, and its first beams, flooding through a cleft on the north shoulder, made a pool of gold far out on the Western sea. The peak was the great Choharua, which means, in the speech of the old races, the Mountain of the Two Winds, for it was held to be wind-shed as well as water-shed.

The tropic dawn broadened fast, though the sun did not show himself. Presently all the plateau to the east was washed in a pure, pale light. The place seemed to sparkle with a kind of hoarfrost, though the air was mild, and its undulations, and the shallow glen of the stream which descended from Choharua, were sharp-rimmed black shadows in that silver field. Then greenness broke through the monotint, like the flush of spring in an English wood, and what had been like a lunar landscape sprang suddenly into clean, thin colours. The far cone of snow became rosy-red and crystalline, so that for one moment, it hung like a translucent jewel in the sky. Then it solidified; the details of the shaly face sprang into hard reality; what had been unfeatured shadow showed now as sheer crag and intricate couloirs, specked with snowdrifts which were leaping waters. At last came the orb of the sun, first a crescent of red gold, and then by quick gradations a great burning archway in which the mountain seemed to be engulfed. The air changed to a glow of essential light, and in a moment it seemed that the faint scents of night became the warm spicy odours of day.

The girl was looking to the sea. The line of light, which a minute before had been on the horizon, ran shoreward, as if a tide of sheer gold was flowing in from the west. But the ocean was some thousands of feet below, and the shore waters remained in dusk long after the morning had conquered the plateau. Below her the chasm of blue mist slowly became luminous, and features detached themselves tall trees near at hand clinging to scarps, outjutting head-lands of green far down. The noise of the falling stream grew louder, as if it had been asleep during the darkness and had only begun to talk with the morning. The immediate foreground cleared, and curious things were revealed. There were buildings on the edge of the chasm from which wire ropeways ran down into the brume, the kind of thing by which in Norway the saeter hay is moved to the valley, and by which in the War in the eyries of the Dolomites the Italian army provisioned its look-out posts and gun stations. Also there were revealed the beginnings of a path which descended the ravine in spirals, and something else—a framework of trestles and iron which decanted itself into the abyss like a gigantic chute. A stranger could now have made out the main features of the landscape—a steep glen down which the torrent from Choharua made its way to the sea, a glen, not a cliff, a place by which it was possible to have access from the shore to the plateau. But that shore would not reveal itself. It lay far below in a broad ribbon of mist, flecked like a bird's wing, which separated the molten gold of the sea from the gold-washed recreated world of the morning hills.

The girl rose from her perch and drew long breaths of the diamond air. The waxing light revealed her companion, a tall man muffled in a blanket coat, who had been standing beneath her. She turned to him. "It is well called this the Courts of the Morning, Excellency," she said. "Aren't you glad I made you come with me?"

He was busy lighting his pipe. When he raised his face to her, there was a flicker of a smile around the corners of his deep-set eyes.

"I blame myself for not appreciating long ago the charms of this corner of my province. It is a place to intoxicate youth."

"And you?"

"I am no longer young. To me it is a picturesque mantelpiece between the sierras and the sea. I observe—" he nodded towards the ropeways and the trestles—"I observe your communications. Ingenious!"

"You may examine them at your leisure. We have no secrets from our leader."

"Your leader malgre lui. You foolish children are consistent in your folly. Tell me one thing, Miss Dasent. I am apparently at liberty. A charming young lady takes me out to admire the sunrise. Supposing I desire to leave—desire it very badly. I am a busy man and my business will suffer from my absence... Say that I am resolved to end this folly and at this moment. What would hinder me?"

"Need you ask?" she said.

"I ask," he replied. Something minatory and grim had come into his face.

"I should hinder you," was her answer.

He took a step towards her, while she watched him keenly. As his foot was raised for a second step, she blew a small whistle, and he halted. Out of the rocks and bushes men had appeared by magic, lean Indian faces with their eyes fixed on the girl. She looked at her companion, and he smiled. Then she waved her hand and the faces disappeared.

"I thought as much," he said. "As I said, you are consistent in your folly." The momentary animation had gone out of his face, and left it placid, set, and inscrutable.

He did not move when out of the chasm two figures emerged, so quietly that even the girl, who had been expecting them, started as their steps rang on the stony platform.

They were young men, apparently much of an age, but very different in build. One was tall and burly, with an untidy

head of tow-coloured hair and a face so rugged that the features might have been rough-hewn with an axe out of some pale wood. It would have made an excellent figurehead for an old China clipper. He wore a khaki shirt, khaki shorts, and football stockings, but there was something about him that smacked of the sea. His companion, who wore similar clothes, was slight and beaky, with a mop of longish dark hair. They were about to cry some greeting to the girl when they caught sight of her companion and both stiffened, like men who had been trained, in the presence of a superior.

"Excellency, may I present to you two members of your staff?" she said. "This,"—indicating the tall man—"is Lieutenant Roger Grayne, a naval officer... This is Captain Bobby Latimer. You are not interested in these things, I know, Excellency, but Captain Latimer has quite a reputation in our Air Force."

The bareheaded young men saluted. "Pardon our rig, sir," said Grayne, "but we've been up all night. We're rather in want of a bath and breakfast. We've just been saying good-bye to the Corinna."

"Ah! Your line of communications?"

"One of them," said the girl, smiling.

"I venture to remind you," said the older man, "that the republic of Olifa possesses a navy."

The sailor laughed. "Not a very good one, sir. A trifle short in small craft and a whole lot short in practice. Olifa has never had much coast-patrol work to do, and she is mighty ignorant of this northern shore. I'd like to take you down below there and show you the landing. It's as cunningly tucked away as the ports the old-time buccaneers used to have among the Florida keys. It would take pretty bright men some months to hit it off."

"But supposing they were fortunate? What then?"

"Why then, sir, they could make it difficult for the Corinna and certain other craft, but they couldn't put any considerable spoke in our business."

"What would prevent them fighting their way up and cornering you like rats on this shelf?"

"Ye—es," was the answer. "They might—with Heaven's own luck and plenty of time and no sort of regard for casualties. That four thousand feet of gully is a mighty difficult ladder to climb, and every rung has its nasty catch. I'm not worrying about our little backdoor to the sea. Come here, sir, and have a look down. The mist will be gone by now."

The Gobernador allowed himself to be led to a little platform of rock which projected above the gulf. On his arrival he had made the ascent in a thick fog, and had had no chance of noting the details. Now he saw that the path dropped at once into thick bush, while the trestles zigzagged till they were lost behind a spur of rock. Only the wireways ran straight in a dizzy angle till far below they seemed to terminate in a dull blur on the water's edge. But what he chiefly observed was that the shore made a little bay, which ran south and was sheltered from the ocean by a green conical spur. To a ship at sea that bay was securely hidden, and the ravine must appear as one of a hundred others on the scarred and wooded mountain face. There would be some intricate prospecting before it was discovered.

He turned to the others with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I think I have had enough of the picturesque. What about breakfast?"

A path led them into the shallow trough of the plateau, where the stream from Choharua wound among lawns and thickets in shining links like a salmon-river. They crossed it by a rough bridge of planks, and then the land lifted gently under the shadow of the mountain, while the shelf broadened as it turned the southern skirts. Presently it flattened out to a miniature plain, and they came suddenly into an area of crowded life. It looked like a cantonment. Around a block of wooden huts lay a ring of tents, from which rose the smoke of morning fires. On the left there were horse-lines, and beyond them the tall masts of a wireless station. On the right were what looked like aeroplane hangars. A busy hum came from the place, and that mingled smell of wood-smoke, horses, and cooking food which since the beginning of time has been a mark of human concourse.

The western ocean was hidden by the lift of the shore scarp, but since the coast recessed at this point there was a gleam of water from the south. To the south-east lay the great wall of the sierras, but as it bent inland the land in front seemed to sink in craggy and forested foothills, giving the eyes a great prospect towards what seemed a second and lower plateau. The air was filled with an exquisite morning freshness, half of the sea and half of the hills, and the place seemed part eyrie, part sanctuary—an observation point over the kingdoms of the world, and also a tiny sheltered kingdom, brooded over by virgin peaks and guarded by untravelled seas.

The four stopped before one of the larger tents. A little way off a small party of Indians were off—saddling weary horses. The girl pointed to them.

"See, Excellency," she said. "Another of our lines of communication."

An hour later a small company assembled for breakfast in the staff mess hut. Janet Roylance was dispensing coffee to half a dozen young men in breeches and linen jackets, one of whom was her husband, while Barbara Dasent at the other end of the table was slicing a cold ham. The men rose as the Gobernador entered, and Janet pointed to a vacant chair beside her.

"Where is Sandy?" she asked. "Archie saw him an hour ago, and he said he was hungry enough to eat an ox."

"He is getting clean," said Archie. "He looks as if he had been having a dusty time. He likes tea, Janet."

"I know. I've got it for him. And Sobranye cigarettes in a china box. I remembered his tastes."

To a stranger there would have appeared to be no formality or restraint about the little party. It might have been a company of friends breakfasting at some country farm.

The Gobernador made a hearty meal, and his watchful eyes seemed almost benevolent when they rested on Janet or Barbara. There was no reference to the hive of strange activities around them. The young Americans were recondite travellers and talked at large of odd places and odd friends. One of them, Eborall by name, whom the others called Jim, had been with Roosevelt on his Amazon expedition and had something to say of the uneasy life of the Brazilian forests. "We never struck a health-resort like this," he said. "They don't keep them on the east side of the Andes." Grayne, who was something of a naturalist, had a discussion with Archie Roylance about a type of short-winged buzzard that he had seen that morning. The young men spoke deferentially, with an eye on the Gobernador, like subalterns breakfasting with their commanding officer. Janet chattered eagerly in her role of the untravelled, to whom every new thing was a marvel. Only Barbara was a little silent. Her eyes were always turning to the door.

Presently it opened and a man entered. At first glance he seemed about the same age as the others, for a fine-drawn face often acquires an absurd youthfulness when, after some days of indoor life, it is first exposed to the weather. The tiny wrinkles around his eyes did not show under the flush of sunburn. He entered like a guest who, having arrived late at a country-house, makes his first appearance at breakfast and knows that he will find friends.

"Sandy, at last!" Janet cried. All rose, and the young Americans turned curious eyes on the newcomer, as on someone who had been eagerly awaited.

"There's a chair next to Barbara," Janet said. "Excellency, I don't think you have met Lord Clanroyden."

The two men bowed, but the newcomer did not offer to shake hands. They smiled on each other with conventional politeness, but the eyes of the elder man dwelt longer on the newcomer's face.

"What's the news?" Janet asked with a casualness that was obviously assumed.

"None at present, except that everything goes well. I must feed first, for my last bite was fifteen hours ago. After that I'm going to turn in and sleep a round of the clock... How jolly it is to be up on this shelf again! I feel a new man already."

Sandy fell heartily on his food. "China tea," he murmured. "Janet, you saint! I haven't tasted it for weeks."

But the pleasant informality had deserted the company. Archie looked heavy with unspoken questions. The young Americans fell silent and kept their eyes furtively on Sandy as if they were trying to harmonise a preconceived figure of their imagination with this ravenous reality. Janet rose "I don't see why we should behave as if we were at the Zoo, and watching the animals feed. Your cigarettes are over there, Sandy. We'll leave you to finish your breakfast in peace."

But the Gobernador did not leave the room with the others. He filled his pipe and pushed the Sobranys cigarettes towards Sandy's plate. The latter, having finished the marmalade stage, began to peel an apple. "Please smoke," he said. "I'll join you in a second."

Presently he swung himself round to face the other, and lit a cigarette. His face had lost the careless youthfulness which it had borne when he first arrived. It was the face of an older and a different man, hard, fine, and alert, and his eyes were as wary as the Gobernador's. They seemed to be inviting a challenge.

The latter spoke first.

"I think you owe me an explanation, Lord Clanroyden," he said. The tones of his voice were perfectly quiet and assured. The question seemed to spring not from anxiety but from a polite curiosity.

"I owe you many, but they will have to come bit by bit. Meanwhile I can give you news. The night before last we occupied without serious trouble the city of the Gran Seco. At this moment I think I can fairly say that the whole province is in our hands."

"We! Our! What precisely do you mean?" There was an edge in the voice which proved that its possessor had been startled.

"It is a long story. But the name which the newspaper-readers of the world are associating with the revolt against the Olifa Government is your own, Excellency. You were the creator of the Gran Seco, and you are going to be its liberator."

"Liberator? From what? Am I to destroy my own creation?"

"The copper industry will not suffer. The Vice-President of the Company will see to that. There will only be a suspension of business—how long will depend upon the Olifa Government."

"Rosas? He is in this fool conspiracy?"

"Undoubtedly. You may call him the prime mover. You know him as Rosas the Mexican, but to his friends he is John Scantlebury Blenkiron—a patriotic citizen of the United States—"

The other cried out. "Blenkiron! But he is dead!"

"Only officially. He is an ancient friend of mine, and there is our good fortune, Excellency, that your paths never crossed till he joined you eighteen months ago. You need not blame your Intelligence service. Blenkiron has puzzled before this the most efficient Intelligence services. He had seen watching your doings for some time, and when he put his remarkable talents at your service it was with a purpose. The first part of that purpose has now been accomplished." Sandy paused.

"Go on," said the other. "I am deeply interested."

Sandy laughed. "We have no secrets from our commander-in-chief. But why should I waste time telling you what you know already?"

"I am not sure that I do know. This purpose? You do not want to cripple a great industry? You have no special grievance, I take it, against the republic of Olifa? You are not fanatics about forms of government? Am I to take it that your

efforts are directed principally against me?"

"You may put it that way if you like. But we have no personal animus against your Excellency. Blenkiron, who has worked with you for nearly two years, rather likes you. We are all prepared to give you devoted allegiance."

"Provided I do what you want?"

"Provided you do what we want. We are anxious to prevent you making a fool of yourself."

It was the elder man's turn to laugh. "Then I suppose I should be grateful, and I am certainly flattered. But I should like to know just what you consider my capacities in the way of folly."

"I hate to repeat platitudes," said Sandy, "but, since you insist, you shall have them. You have created a great industry, but you are following what seems to us an unbusinesslike line. You are using up your human material too rapidly. I put aside the moral question, and ask you simply if that is good business. Of course it isn't, and since you do not do things without a purpose, we had to discover that purpose. Well, we know perfectly well what it is. You are trying to make bad trouble in a world which has already too much trouble. We do you the justice to admit that this is not blind malevolence. You have an ideal behind you, a philosophy, a very serious philosophy. Well, to be frank, we don't like your methods, and we don't like your purpose, and we hate your philosophy like hell. Do we understand each other?"

The Gobernador shook out the ashes from his pipe. His eyes, under his level brows, looked steadily on his companion. There was now no smile on his face, and in his gaze there was a serious perplexity.

"Lord Clanroyden," he said, "I have known about you for some years—under your old name. I have even made it my business to keep in touch with you through my informants. I have always regarded you as a person of quite exceptional intelligence. There have been times when I considered you one of the two or three most intelligent people in the world... I confess that I am grievously disappointed."

"No wonder," said Sandy. "I have always been a bit of an ass."

"I don't complain that our aims differ. Your reputation was never that of a thinker. But you were reported to me as a practical man, uncommonly audacious, resourceful, and far-sighted. Now I find that you are audacious—but with the audacity of a crude boy. You have organised a childish little piece of banditry. You think you have fathomed my methods. Why, man, you have not learned the alphabet of them. I have my lines down deep in every country on the globe. The Gran Seco has purchase with every Government. As soon as the news of your doings has gone abroad, you will have the most potent forces set at work to defeat you. The prosperity of the Gran Seco is of vital importance to millions up and down the world. The credit of Governments, the interests of a thousand financial groups are involved. The very people who might otherwise sympathise with you will be forced to combine to break you."

"True," said Sandy. "But you realise that your name as our leader will cramp the style of your supporters."

"Only for a moment. It will not be believed..."

"I am not so sure. Remember, you are a mystery man, Excellency, whom the world has heard of, but does not know. You have been playing a pretty game with the press, but we too have made our plans. The newspapers by this time will be full of character-studies of the Gobernador of the Gran Seco, arranged for by us. In spite of yourself, you are going to get the reputation of a high-souled humanitarian, a cross between Bolivar and Abraham Lincoln. I think we shall get in first with our picture, and—well, you know what the public is. It will be difficult to efface first impressions, and that, I say, will cramp the style of your people and give us time."

"But what earthly good will time do you? That is my second charge against your intelligence. You have chosen to fight me with weapons so infantile that they will break in a week... What were you and Blenkiron thinking of to put your eggs in this preposterous basket? I have many vulnerable points. I know that, if you do not. You and your friends might have slowly organised the collective stupidity of the world against me. You had your fulcrum in America, and for lever you had all the crude sentimentality of mankind. I have always feared such a crusade. Why did you not attempt it?"

"I will tell you why," was the answer. "It was because we respected you too sincerely. We knew that we couldn't beat you at that game. To fight you in parliaments, and cabinet councils, and on the stock exchanges and in the press would have been to fight you on your own chosen ground. We preferred to fight you on our ground. We decided to transfer the whole contest to a sphere in which your genius was not at home. You are the last word in civilisation, Excellency, and you can only be beaten by getting you into the ancient and elementary world where civilisation does not apply."

The other did not answer for a moment. Something in the words seemed to have started a new train of thought, and his eyes took on a profound abstraction. Then he leaned forward.

"There is method in that," he said, "I do not quarrel with your policy. But, in the name of all that is rational, where are your weapons? A handful of children, a disloyal colleague who has no doubt worked upon the turbulent element among our white employees, my kidnapping, and the fact that my administration was a somewhat personal matter—these may give you control of the Gran Seco for a day or two. But what then? There are the wealth and the army of Olifa to crush you like a nut on an anvil."

"Not quite so bad. You underestimate Blenkiron, I think. Remember he has been in the Gran Seco for some time, and he has not been idle. We have the Mines Police, and most of the Mines foremen and engineers. When I left yesterday, the place was as docile as a girls' school, and there was a very stout heart in our troops."

"Troops!" the other said. "You may have got your non-commissioned officers, but where can you get the rank-and-file for an army?"

"Where you got your labour, Excellency. Among the old masters of the country. You must have heard of the trouble

that the Gran Seco Indians used to give to Olifa. They were never properly conquered till you came along. You policed them and dragooned them, but the dragoons are now on their side. A couple of years more and you would have drained the manhood from them and left them mere shells of men. But at present they are still a people and a fighting people, and they are going to fight for liberty and vengeance. Not against you—they regard you as their saviour, and are wearing your medals round their necks—but against the oppressors of Olifa... I think you lived too much of a sedentary life, Excellency. You took the word of your subordinates too much on trust. If you had lived as I have among the pueblas, you would have been a little afraid of what you found there... Perhaps a little shocked, too... Those rags and tatters of men, used up in the mines and flung on the dustheap! The remnant of manhood left in them is not a gentle thing."

"But against the army of Olifa! I have made it my business to see that that army is the most efficient for its size in the world. What can your savages and your gunmen do against the last word of science from the laboratory and the factory?"

"Nothing if we fight them in their own way. A good deal, I think, if we fight them in ours. We refuse to meet you on your own ground, Excellency, and you may be certain that we don't mean to meet the Olifa army on theirs."

"I cannot follow your riddles."

"Of course you can't. This is a very academic discussion we're having. If you'll allow me, I'll explain to you later the general layout. You're entitled to have everything shown you. It will interest you, as a thinker, for, though you'll scarcely believe it, we too have our philosophy of life. You are a very wise man, with a large experience of the world, but I believe we can show you something which you know nothing about."

The other was listening intently. "This wonderful revelation?" he asked. "What is it?"

"The meaning of youth," was the answer. "You have lived all your life in an elderly world, Excellency. Everything worked by rule, and even your lawlessness was nicely calculated. And all the old stagnant things were your puppets which you could move as you pleased. But there's another side of which you know nothing at all. You have your science; well, it will be matched against hope and faith and the simplicity that takes chances. We may go down, but we'll go down cheerfully, and, if we win, by God, we'll make you a new man."

A strange look came into the other's face. He regarded Sandy with a bewilderment in his stern eyes which seemed not altogether unfriendly.

"I cannot quite understand," he said, as he rose, "why you and your friends did not take the simple course. Since your quarrel is principally with me, a bullet in my head strikes me as the most satisfactory solution."

Sandy stood before him, a head shorter, a stone or two lighter, looking at the moment half his age. There was a dancing light in his eyes which answered the flickering spark in the other's. He laid a hand on the Gobernador's sleeve, as if the great man were a coeval.

"Nonsense!" he said. "We leave murder to your Conquistadors. We think so highly of you that we're going to have a try at saving your soul."

The wireless station on the plateau received its punctual bulletins of news from the outer world, copies of which were posted up in the mess-hut. From them it appeared that the republic of Olifa was already in the throes of a campaign. War had begun when on the 14th day of June. The city of the Gran Seco had been seized by the rebels, and the whole province was in revolt. The whereabouts of Castor were not known; his lieutenants held the city, but he was reputed to be with the main force of the revolt, somewhere in the hinterland. Olifa had replied to the challenge. Her army was mobilised, and a Gran Seco Expeditionary Force was in being. The aged General Bianca, the Minister of War, did not take command; for that post the President had selected a younger man, General Lossberg, who had been military governor of the city of Olifa, and had come there after the European War with a high reputation from the Eastern Front, where he had been one of Mackensen's corps commanders. The Expeditionary Force was said to contain four divisions of infantry, a cavalry brigade, and four of the new machine-gun battalions.

The comments of the world's press on the outbreak were curiously restrained. Some influence must have been at work, for the current story represented the revolt as that of the leaders of the copper industry against an oppressive Government, which confiscated their profits and by inhuman laws was ruining their reservoir of native labour. Thus stated, humanity and sound business seemed to be on the side of the rebels. Strange tales were printed of the barbarities of conscripted labour, of men worn to husks and sent back to their villages to die. The picture presented was of enlightened magnates forced unwillingly into harshness by the greed of Olifa, until finally decency and common sense forced them to make a stand. A spontaneous labour revolt had been sponsored by the masters themselves, and at the head stood Castor, the Gobernador. It seemed a clear issue, on which the conscience of the world could not be divided. There were papers in England, France, and America which hailed Castor as a second Lincoln.

Yet the more responsible section of the press walked warily, which seemed to point to conflicting versions of the facts among those likely to know best. Such papers were guarded in their comments on the merits of the dispute, and treated it as a domestic Olifa question on which exact information was lacking. Patently the Gran Seco agents throughout the world were puzzled and were holding their hand. Their chief was playing a game on which they had not been instructed. The news columns of such papers were filled with sensational accounts of Gran Seco wealth and luxury and of Indian pueblas full of the broken and diseased, but the leading articles steered a discreet course.

Castor was no doubt a great man, possibly a man of destiny, but the end was not yet—and Olifa had been of late a particularly docile and well-conducted republic. The world seemed to agree to make a ring round the combatants.

Only the scallywags and the restless youth of all nations were prepared to take sides, and consulates and passport-offices were plagued by those who wished to reach the seat of war. There were perpetual queues at the door of the Gran Seco offices in London, New York, and Paris.

One body of men alone had decided views—the military critics. Among these there was a remarkable unanimity. The revolt, in their opinion, could not sustain itself for more than a few weeks. The details of the Olifa army were well known. It was officered by able professional soldiers, it had been a pioneer in mechanisation, and The Times had published from a contributor some striking articles on its efficiency; it had behind it a wealthy Government, and should the need arise, a big population to conscript; above all, it had an open door to the sea. The rebels must be and the best a rabble of Indian labourers and European miners with a sprinkling, no doubt, of soldiers of fortune. They might be armed after a fashion, but they could not compete with the armoury of Olifa. They had no communication open with the outer world. Assuming that they had laid in a store of ammunition, they could not supply wastage. The Gran Seco, which was largely a desert, could not feed itself and the rebels would be starved out long before they were defeated. It was like a fugitive who had climbed a tree; the pursuit had only to wait below till he was forced by hunger to come down. General Weyland in the London Times, and Mr Winter Spokes in the New York Herald Tribune reached the same conclusion.

The campaign had begun; according to the wireless Olifa was an armed camp, and everything was in train for and advance on the Gran Seco; but in the Courts of the Morning there was peace. There was activity enough. Daily aeroplanes left the shelf for long flights beyond the foot-hills and over the arid steppes of the Gran Seco to the savannah and forests of Olifa, now sweltering under the first deluge of the rainy season. Strings of convoys ascended by the rough paths and departed with their stores. Horsemen arrived hourly with messages, and every yard of the settlement was busy. Yet it seemed a peaceful busyness. The workers met at meals and in the evenings with the cheerfulness of weary but equable folk. There was no tension in the atmosphere. Castor for the most part had his meals in his own room, but he invariably appeared at dinner, and he seemed to be in good health and spirits. Though under constant surveillance, he had the illusion of liberty, and could walk abroad with Janet and Barbara as if he were a guest in a country-house. There was nothing about him of the feverish prisoner, and this disquieted Sandy.

"I haven't begun to understand him," he told Janet. "You see, all I know about him I know at second-hand from Blenkiron, and by deduction from his public career. I met him for the first time a week ago. Our only talk was just an exchange of polite challenges. We might have been shouting at each other from adjacent mountaintops... I don't like that calm of his. Here you have a man whose brain has never stopped working, and who has the ambition of a fallen angel. He sees us trying to play havoc with his life's work, and he makes no sign of impatience. What has his mind got to bite on? It can't be idle."

"He writes a great deal," said Janet. "He has told me about it. I don't think I quite understood, but isn't there an Italian called Croce? Well, he thinks Croce all wrong about something, and is trying to explain how."

"O Lord!" Sandy groaned. "The fellow is bigger than we thought. I didn't reckon on this superhuman detachment. He

must be very sure he is going to win."

"Yes," said Janet thoughtfully. "But not for the reasons that the wireless gives. He told me that he thought that those military experts talked nonsense. I think he knows that he will win because he is bigger than we are. He has been studying us all most carefully. You especially, Sandy. Do you notice how he looks at you? I believe he was afraid of you before he met you."

"But not now?"

"No. I'm sorry, but I don't think he is so afraid of you now. I fancy he is always a little uneasy about anything he does not understand. But he thinks he is getting to the bottom of you."

"I daresay he is. But I'm nowhere near the bottom of him. None of the formulas fit him. It's no good saying that he is pure intellect. He's that, but he's a great deal more. On his record I ought to hate him. He stands for everything I most detest, and he has been responsible for the bloodiest cruelties. On the bare facts of the case Nero was respectable compared to him... And yet I can't hate him—simply because I can't hold him responsible. He has no notion what he has done, for, with all his cleverness, there's an odd, idiotic innocence about him. I nourished a most healthy disgust till I met him. But now, confound it, I rather like him."

"So do I," said the girl emphatically. "Barbara doesn't but I do. And I believe he rather likes us—even you, Sandy. You see, we are something that he has never quite met before, and we interest him desperately. He is busy summing us up, and that gives his mind something to work on. Now that I know him, I could no more hate him than I could hate a cyclone or an erupting volcano."

"You mean he is a sort of impersonal natural force?"

"No, I don't. He is a person, but very limited—as limited as a cyclone. His energies and his interests have been constricted into a narrow channel. I think he lacks imagination."

Sandy whistled.

"Good for you, Janet. I should have said that his imagination was the most deadly and colossal thing about him."

"Yes—yes. But it is only one kind of imagination. Milton could imagine the scenery of Hell and Heaven, but he hadn't enough imagination to understand his wife. He is still a little puzzled by us, and that makes him puzzled about himself. Up till now he had been mathematically certain about everything. If we make him uncertain, we may win... Now, I'm going to take him for a walk and continue his education."

Presently, into the orderly routine of the plateau came something of the stir of war. Messengers from the lowlands became more frequent, and Sandy had to take his sleep when he could, for he might be called upon at any hour. The wireless operators were kept busy, and at night there was much activity in the ravine which dropped seaward, for unlighted ships groped their way into the secret gulf.

The aeroplanes, which were still used only for intelligence purposes, and not for combat, brought back more authentic news than the war correspondents cabled to the press of the world, and that they gained it at some risk was proved by more than one that returned with damaged planes and bullets in its fuselage.

The Gobernador had shown little interest in the wireless messages from the world's capitals. He had left Olifa with no more than a suit of dress-clothes, and had been fitted out from the wardrobe of Archie, who was much the same height and figure. One morning Sandy came in to breakfast with a new light in his eye.

"Things are beginning to move, sir," he told Castor. "The time has come to get into campaigning kit. We shan't be a dressy staff, but we can't go about like earth-stoppers any more."

Thereafter everyone appeared in simple khaki tunics and breeches. Castor submitted good-humouredly to the change.

"You look like General Smuts, sir," Archie told him, "only a little darker and less benevolent."

Castor smiled. "That would seem to be in keeping. Like Smuts, I am an intellectual compelled by fate to be a leader of guerrillas. Is it not so?"

That night Sandy and young Latimer pinned up on the wall of the mess-hut a big map mounted on calico, and proceeded to ornament it with little flags.

"There is your province, sir," he said, "a better map than anything the Surveyor-General has in Olifa. The colour-washes represent altitudes. The red flags are our posts, and the green are the Olifa army. I am going to give a staff lecture, for the bell has rung and the curtain gone up."

The map showed only the northern half of the republic, from Olifa city to the apex where the great mountains crowded down upon the sea. From the Courts of the Morning the land fell in tiers—first the wooded shelves, then the barrens of the Seco Boreal, and then the broad shallow cup where the Mines and the city lay. From the Gran Seco city the country ran westward for a hundred miles till it ended in the rocky sierras of the coast. Eastward it rose into the savannahs of the Indian reserve and the Tierra Caliente, till it met the main chain of the Cordilleras. The map did not embrace this latter feature, and there was no sign on it of the pass into the Poison Country. The south boundary of the Gran Seco was a ridge of dolomite cliffs, broken apparently only at one place—by the long winding valley up which the railway ran from Santa Ana.

From the contours it looked to be otherwise unapproachable from that side, save by one or two tortuous and difficult footpaths, at the head of which under Castor's administration there had been block-houses and patrols. There was no breach at either end, for on the west this southern ridge ran out in the coast sierras, and on the east became a buttress of

the main Cordilleras massif. There were red flags in the city and at the Universum, clusters at two points in the Indian Reserve, one of them very close to the mountains, and a chain running up towards the Courts of the Morning. In the plain of Olifa there was a big green concentration at Santa Ana, and a green blob half-way up the railway.

"Lossberg has got his rolling stock at last," Sandy explained. "He has his pioneers and one of his machine-gun battalions at the frontier, and his cavalry patrols were last night within five miles of the Gran Seco city."

Castor donned a pair of horn spectacles and examined the map closely. He studied especially the Seco Boreal and the eastern frontier. He ran his finger along the southern rim.

"That was always a troublesome place," he said. "Practicable for a mountaineer or an Indian, but scarcely more. At least, so our reports said. But we had to watch it. Rosas"—he smiled—"was always very strong about keeping posts there."

He took a step backward and surveyed the map.

"It appears that the military gentlemen who write to the papers are right," he said. "I seem to be in a very bad strategical position. Olifa can force a passage—it may take a little time and she may have losses, but she can fight her way up the railway to the Gran Seco. After that we are at her mercy, at least so far as the city and the Mines are concerned, for I do not suppose we can hope to win a field action against her."

"Not a chance," said Sandy cheerfully.

"Then nothing remains but a guerrilla war on our savannahs. I think she will beat us there, for ours is a hard dry soil and tanks and armoured cars can go anywhere. I speak as a civilian, but am I not right, Lord Clanroyden?"

"Perfectly."

"Our troops are mounted?"

"All of them."

"Where on earth did you get the horses? The Indian ponies are a miserable breed."

"Not so bad as you think," Sandy smiled. "But we had other sources of supply. Olifa is a famous horse-breeding country."

"But how did you draw on Olifa? How did you get the horses up?"

"Some day I will tell you—but not now."

The Gobernador looked puzzled.

"I take it we have a certain amount of food and munitions?"

"Enough to go on with."

"But not indefinitely... Then it looks as if before long our present dwelling-place would become a point of some importance. It is now our poste de commandement, and presently it may be our last refuge. We have access of the sea. If we can find ships, we shall have to make a moonlight flitting, as your people did at Gallipoli."

"I shouldn't wonder."

Castor took off his spectacles. "I speak with all modesty, but was it not a blunder to let Olifa strike first? I should have thought that our best chance would have been to obstruct the railway—like—like my Dutch prototype in Dur South African war. Can an inferior safely surrender the offensive?" And he smiled pleasantly.

Sandy shook his head. "It wouldn't have done. We should have given old Lossberg a lot of trouble, but he would have smashed us in the long run."

"Won't he smash us anyhow in the long run?" Castor moved closer and again studied the map. "God has been unkind to us in planting that wall of rock and snow in the east. It is most unfortunate that the southern wall of the Gran Seco runs clean up to the mountains without a convenient pass for honest guerrilleros to descend upon Olifa."

"Most unfortunate," said Sandy, but there was no melancholy in his tone. "Well, that's the layout. Now I will expound the meaning of our flags."

He enumerated in detail the strength and composition of the various detachments, and then explained the composition and marching order of the Olifero forces. Castor listened attentively and asked questions. "We are holding the city lightly, but the Mines strongly. Ah, I see. We have a big detachment on the railway. Who, by the way, commands in the city? Rosas? We have given my friend the post of honour—and danger."

Day by day the green flags crept northward till they were spilled in clusters beyond the Gran Seco frontier. Every evening Sandy gave his staff lecture. It was noticeable, now that the campaign had begun, that his spirits rose, and though he had scarcely time to feed or sleep he showed no trace of weariness. Yet there was tension in the air. The faces of the men would suddenly go blank as some problem swept them into preoccupation. Even the Gobernador was not exempt from these sudden silences. He alone had no routine work, but Janet, who had become his chief companion abroad, reported that he was becoming temperamental.

"I think it is this place," she told Sandy. "I don't believe he has ever been much out-of-doors in his life before. He has always lived in cities and railway-carriages, and Nature is rather a surprise to him and puts him off his balance. He told me to-day that this living with sunsets and sunrises made him giddy... His education is progressing. I wish I knew what he was thinking when he has that blindish look in his eyes."

"He seems to be interested in the campaign," said Sandy. "As an intellectual problem, I suppose. Something for his mind to work upon."

The girl hesitated.

"Perhaps," she said. "But I think there is something more in it than that. He has been adopted for the first time in his life into a community. We others are busy at a game. He is like a child. He can't help hankering a little to play too."

Presently events began to crowd on each other. The green flags made a forest between the Gran Seco frontier and the city, and spread out till their right wing was very close to the Universum Mine.

"That's the cavalry," Sandy explained. "They're finding it a tougher job than they reckoned. Yesterday they tried a sort of Jeb Stuart ride round the city and came in for some rough handling from Peters. They've first-rate cavalry, but indifferent M.I."

Then came a halt and the green flags did not advance for a day or two.

"We put up quite a good little show," was Sandy's comment. "You remember the fifth mile-post down the line where it runs through a horse-shoe valley. That's our position, and it is pretty much like that of the Boers at Magersfontein. They can't find our trenches to shell us out of them. Lossberg is getting nervous about a frontal attack and is considering an enveloping movement. See! He has two of his machine-gun battalions moving east of the Universum. He's bringing up another infantry division, too. That makes three, besides oddments. A pretty good muster against our modest territorials!"

Two days later the red flags had fallen back two miles along the railway. Sandy, with his eye on a smaller chart, elucidated the position on the big map. "Our forward zone has gone, and now we're in our battle zone, though we don't intend to have much of a battle. But we've got to stick it there for a couple of days... You see this bunch of red flags east of the Mines? That's our counter-movement beginning."

"It looks as if we were shaping for a big field action," said one of the young Americans.

"Not a bit. We aren't looking for any barren victories. This is all directed to Lossberg's address. We know a good deal about him, and he's a cautious warrior. He's taking no risks, for he has the strength and he means to use it... I hope to Heaven Peters doesn't dip in too deep."

To Janet and Barbara these days were as thrilling as the last act of a good play. Up in that quiet place, they seemed to watch the struggle like gods from the empyrean. The very map became like a crystal in which their fancy could see the hot mustard-coloured hills, the puffs of shrapnel on the ridges, the ant-like movements of little mortals. Even the Gobernador lost something of his calm, and the eyes under his level brows kindled. In these days the aircraft were never idle. Every hour of the day and night heard the drone of their going or returning.

On the evening of July 17th Sandy had much to tell.

"You will be glad to hear that Lossberg has got his reinforcements. This morning the last division of his Expeditionary Force crossed the frontier."

"You seem pleased?" asked the puzzled Janet.

"I am. I don't want unnecessary bloodshed, and these small holding battles take their toll. It's only a matter of hours now till we acknowledge defeat and fling up the sponge. It hasn't been a bad show, except that Peters went further than I intended. He pushed his counter-attack at the Universum a little too deep, and suffered accordingly. That's the worst of the enthusiastic amateur... There will be a great Olifa triumph presently. It will be fun to see what the papers make of it."

Next day Sandy's good-humour had increased. He appeared at luncheon silent but beaming, and when an excited company gathered in the mess-hut before dinner he arrived like a breathless boy.

"I want a drink, for I've had a dusty afternoon... Thanks, Bobby, a whisky-and-soda... We needn't wait. I can give you the news now. Early this morning we fell back from our last positions and all our troops have been withdrawn from the city. Lossberg's cavalry patrols must be in it now... Also the Universum is in his hands, and the Alhuema and the San Tome whenever he likes to have 'em. He will meet with no opposition. The first bout is past and we've been knocked over the ropes. It's Lossberg's round... You needn't look anxious, Excellency. There hasn't been ten pounds' worth of damage done to the Company's property."

"I wasn't thinking of the Company," said Castor, and his face had become very grave. "Has all this happened according to your plan?"

"More or less... except for Peters's venture. I didn't want our casualties to go beyond two hundred, and they're actually three hundred and seventeen. Still, your army has not suffered badly."

"For God's sake don't call it mine. I'm your prisoner and your enemy. What's the next step? When is this infernal folly to cease?"

Sandy grinned benignly. "Properly speaking, the infernal folly has just begun. The sparring is over and the real business is about to commence."

The other considered. "Your plan, I take it, was to put up just enough resistance to compel Olifa to send the whole of her Expeditionary Force inside the Gran Seco. You know, of course, that she has reserves?"

Sandy nodded. "But they will take some time to assemble, and they will have to make their way up."

"Why should they not?"

"It may be difficult, for soon there will be a most imperfect railway."

"And Lossberg."

"Our first business was to get him in. Our business now is to see that he does not get out."

Castor laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound.

“An ingenious plan! I have been obtuse. I might have guessed it.”

Dinner that evening was a strange meal and a short one.

There was little talk, since for the first time the unpredictable future brooded over all of them like a cloud. In the cloud there was no depression, but a certain awe.

Sandy and Castor were the last to rise. The elder man had recovered his balance, and as they left the hut his eyes met the other's. “We are declared enemies. Lord Clanroyden,” he said, “and the gloves are off. I make you my compliments on your boldness. I take it you are about to leave me and assume the direct command of the revolutionaries?”

“As your lieutenant. I shall report to you regularly.”

“Let that fooling stop. I am at present your victim, but some day soon the parts will be reversed, I have only one thing to say to you. You have succeeded for the moment in putting me out of action. But I am something more than a single man marooned up on this shelf of mountain. I have my bodyguard—everywhere in the world, and also in Olifa, and in the Gran Seco. You cannot destroy that bodyguard, though no doubt you have tried, for most of it is subterranean and secret. That force will be fighting for me. Its methods are what you would call criminal, for it does not accept conventional standards of honour. But it is resourceful and subtle and it will stick at nothing. What chance have you against it? You will be compelled to take risks, and that force I speak of will make those risks a certainty of death.”

“I wonder why you tell me that. Is it meant as a friendly warning?”

“I am not your friend. It is a warning. I do not wish you to deceive yourself. I want you to know what is against you.”

For a moment Sandy stared at Castor's face as if he sought something buried deep in the man. Then he laughed. “Thank you. Excellency... I hope they'll make you comfortable while I'm away. If we meet again, we may be able to shake hands.”

The details of Lossberg's advance up the railway, when, with overwhelming superiority of numbers and artillery, and after various checks, he drove in the screen of the defence, and on July 19th entered the Gran Seco city, do not belong to this story. They will be found set out at length in the dispatches of the correspondents who accompanied the Olifa army. Those veracious writers gave ample information about the Olifa command, for censorship was thought unnecessary in such a case, but they were very much in the dark as to the personnel of the enemy. Castor was assumed to be commander-in-chief, and Rosas, described as a Mexican adventurer who had been once on the staff of Porfirio Diaz, was credited with such military talent as the rebels possessed.

The correspondents had followed the military critics in assuming that the result was a foregone conclusion. But presently a new name appeared in their dispatches—El Obro, an Indian word which was interpreted in Spanish as "el lobo gris"—"the grey wolf." El Obro was believed to be the name of a guerrilla leader much revered by the Indians, who was assumed to be lurking in the hinterland.

As the weeks passed this name was to appear more often, till presently Castor and Rosas were almost forgotten and it had the headlines to itself.

On the day before the defence broke, Blenkiron was sitting on an empty shell-case in what had once been the garden of his house behind the Administration Buildings. An algarroba tree gave him a little shade from the pitiless sun, and, since he was grey from head to foot with dust and had a broad battered panama hat pulled down over his head like a burnous, he had something of the air of a *cadi* under a palm. Around him stood a small group in rough field-service kit, all of them dusty and a little hollow-eyed, their shoulders limp and rounded like those of men who have not lain flat in bed for several nights. The place was very quiet to be in the heart of a city. There was no sound except that of an occasional car driven at top-speed in the adjoining street, though an alert ear might have caught at intervals a curious pattering noise coming from the south, a noise which at times grew into something like the beating of muffled drums.

A man was speaking, a man with a drawl and a sleepy voice. This was Escrick, the submanager of the Alhuema Mine, who had once commanded a brigade of Australian infantry in France. He had been in charge of the position astride the railway, and had sited the trenches so skilfully that Lossberg's guns had bombarded dummies and Lossberg's advance had been time and again held up by concealed machine guns. He had now the task of drawing off his men by night, a task which, having been at the evacuation of Helles, he had no doubt as to his ability to perform.

Blenkiron, as the plan was unfolded, glanced at the paper in his hands, and at Escrick's further elucidation with the point of a riding-switch in the thick dust. Then he turned to another man, a heavy red-faced fellow who was perpetually mopping his face with a blue-spotted handkerchief. At his look of inquiry the man nodded.

"The last of the supply waggons leave this afternoon, sir," he said. "Three of the centres are already stocked up, and the fourth will be completed by midnight. The men should be well on their way before daybreak to-morrow, and all arrangements have been made for mining and blowing-up the roads behind them."

"You're not leaving much behind?"

"Not an ounce of flour or a pound of bacon," was the answer.

"I reckon that's fair. It's up to Lossberg to feed the population of the city he captures. What's it they call them, Luis? The *bouches inutiles*?"

Luis de Marzaniga smiled. "There won't be too many of these useless mouths, *Senor*."

"Lordy, it's hot!" Blenkiron sighed. "Let's get inside the shack and moisten our lips with lime-juice. The maps are there, and I'll like to have a once-over before we get back to our jobs."

A hut in the garden had been transformed into an office, and on one wall hung a big plan made of a dozen sheets pinned together. It had none of the finish of the products of a Government Map Department, being the work of the Mines surveyors. Each of the men had a small replica, which he compared with the original. There followed an hour of detailed instruction as to routes and ultimate concentrations. Four points were marked on the big map with red circles. One, lettered Pacheco, lay in the extreme south-west angle of the Gran Seco. Magdalena, the second, was a hundred miles farther north, under the shadow of the peaks called the Spanish Ladies. The third was near the centre of the northern part of the province, the Seco Boreal, and had the surprising name of Fort Castor: while the fourth, Loa, was at the opening of the neck of land which led to the Courts of the Morning. The commandos under Escrick were to make for the two latter points, while Peters and his forces, which had been fighting in the Mines sector, had the two former for their objectives.

There was also to be a change in the command. Blenkiron, once the city had been surrendered, laid down his duties. The field force in the future would be divided between Escrick and Peters; and, under Castor as generalissimo, the operations as a whole would be directed by him whom the Indians called El Obro.

"I guess we'll keep to that pet name," Blenkiron said. "It sounds good, and kind of solemn. We haven't any use for effete territorial titles in this democratic army, and 'Sandy' is too familiar."

Then he made the men repeat their instructions till each was clear not only about his own task but about the tasks of the others—a vital thing in a far-flung force. After that he lectured them... So far luck had been on their side. Their losses had been small; under estimate in the railway sector, and not thirty per cent. beyond it even after Peters's rash counter-attack. No officer had fallen, and only six had been wounded. One aeroplane, unfortunately, had been brought down, and the pilot and observer, both young Mines engineers, killed. That was their most serious casualty. "A very nice little exhibition of the new bloodless conduct of war," said Blenkiron. But this was only the overture; the serious business was

now about to begin, when they had to make the country fight Lossberg, as Washington made the geography of America fight Burgoyne and Cornwallis. "It's going to be a mighty tough proposition, but I reckon if we pay strict attention to business we'll put it through."

"Say, though," said Escrick, "what is going to be the upshot?"

"Peace, sonny. We've got to make the Excelentísimo at Olifa so dead-sick of the business that he'll want to deal. Same game as Robert E. Lee played before Gettysburg. We can't beat them, but we may make them want to deal. And in that deal Mr Castor is going to state the terms. And those terms are going to fix things more comfortably in this province, but principally they are going to fix Mr Castor. You've got the schedule for to-night clear? Then we'd better dissolve this conference. I join you, General Escrick, at twenty minutes after midnight."

The men entered their dusty cars and departed, while Blenkiron went into his house, accompanied by Luis de Marzaniga, who seemed to be acting as his chief staff-officer.

As they lunched frugally off sardines and biscuits, Blenkiron was in a cheerful mood, but a shadow seemed to hover about the face of the younger man.

"What's worrying you, Luis?" Blenkiron asked. "Things have panned out pretty well according to plan. There's snags good and plenty to come, but we needn't think about them just yet."

"I think, Señor, that there is one snag which we have forgotten."

"Meaning?"

"The bouches inutiles whom we are leaving to the care of General Lossberg."

"Why, man, we can't do anything else. The civilians in a captured city are not our concern. They're his funeral, He's bound to treat them well for..."

"It is scarcely a question of humanity. But some of these bouches may be mischievous."

"The Bodyguard?"

The young man took a paper from his pocket.

"Here," he said, "I have a list of the more dangerous of the Bodyguard and of those gentry whom we call the conquistadors. I have made notes on each... Kubek—he was happily killed in this very house. We found his body over there by the window... Ramiro and Molson, they were shot by Peters at the round-up... Sechstein—dead of spotted fever... Snell—died of wounds two hours after Kubek... But Radin and Molinoff are at large—you remember that they broke away in the confusion, when the house in the Calle of the Virgin fell as Peters was taking them to the lock-up... There are others, too. We know nothing of what became of Martel and Carvalho and Magee and Trompetter... and Laschallas, whom we used to think as dangerous as Kubek. Do you know that he, or somebody very like him, was seen last night in a drinking-den near St Martin's Port?"

"That only means that there are a handful of bad men loose. You can't corral all the scamps. Besides, a gunman's not too dangerous in a war where everybody has a gun."

"I wonder. Remember that these are a very special type of gunman. The Gobernador chose them for their brains out of the rascality of the globe... Then there are the three ruffians you sent with him to Olifa. What were their names?"

"Carreras, Judson, and Biretti."

"Yes. Well, you may be sure they will come back, if indeed they are not back already... I do not like it, Señor. They are dangerous grit to get into our wheels. I should be happier if I knew that they were in their graves."

"So should I. But I don't let that outfit worry me. I reckon they're part of the legitimate risk of war. Anything more?"

"The Conquistadors."

Blenkiron laughed aloud. "That pie-faced bunch! Say, Luis, you're getting fanciful. What harm can those doped owls do us? They'll be waiting for Lossberg and making a fuss about their comforts. It's him they'll bite, not us."

"I wonder again. Lariarty was in the round-up which Lord Clanroyden organised. He was consorting with the Bodyguard. Is there not something there to make us think?"

"Why, Luis, you're barking up the wrong tree. Except for Castor, I reckon I know the Conquistadors better than any other man, and I've sized them up long-ago. They're the most dangerous stuff on earth, so long as Castor has the handling of them, but without him they're no more good than dud shells. They've powder enough, but, lacking Castor, they haven't the current to fire the charge. Let 'em alone, and they'll just moon about and rot."

"And yet Lariarty was at the meeting which was nearly the end of Lord Clanroyden. He sat in the judge's chair. It is right to assume that he had some part in the plot... I think you are wrong, Señor. I think the Conquistadors are like sick wolves—dying, if you like, but with enough strength to turn and bite. And, remember, their bite will be deadly, because it is poisoned."

Blenkiron looked perturbed. "I can't bring myself to think that. What could they do? They won't fit in with Lossberg."

"No, indeed. General Lossberg, if I understand him, will make nothing of them. He is a conventional soldier, and will fight his battles in the old professional way... But what if the Conquistadors keep the same company that we found Lariarty keeping? They have no scruples. What if a dull anger and a craving for their drug—for presently they will get no more of it—what if that kindles their wits and screws up their nerves sufficiently for one desperate throw? The remnants of the Bodyguard, if they can find them, will be their executants. They will think chiefly of getting to Castor, and, failing that, of revenge."

"It will be hard to reach the Courts of the Morning."

"Maybe. But it may be less hard to reach you—or Lord Clanroyden. Our army is not a machine, but a personal following. A well-aimed bullet might make it a rabble."

Blenkiron sat brooding for a moment. "I think you put the risk too high," he said at last, "but we can't neglect any risk. Have you put Intelligence on to the job?"

"Senor Musgrave and his young men have been too busy fighting battles. I have done a little myself."

"You have told me what gunmen survive, but you haven't located them. How about the Conquistadors?"

Luis took up another paper. "Lariarty, whom Peters wanted to lock up, was set free by Lord Clanroyden. He has been living quietly in his rooms, playing much music on his piano. There are five others in the Gran Seco, and they profess to be waiting till the Mines are started again, whether by Lossberg or ourselves. They shrug their shoulders, and behave as if there were no war. The dandyism of their clothes has not changed, and they feed solemnly together at the Club or the Regina. What they do beyond that I cannot tell."

"Who's here beside Lariarty?"

Luis read from his paper.

"Senores Frederick Larbert, Peter Suvorin, Maximilian Calvo, Jacques D'Ingraville, Luigi Pasquali."

Blenkiron considered. "After Lariarty I should say that D'Ingraville was the danger. He's not so deeply dipped, and he's the youngest. Funny to think that he was once a French flying ace."

"I have something more to tell you. Romanes is returning. I had information this morning that two days ago he landed in Olifa and that he is now with Lossberg."

"H'm! I don't like that. Europe has a bad effect on those lads—breaks their temper and quickens their brains. And he won't get the dope to quiet him—not unless he goes into the Poison Country, and Peters will have a word to say to that... Darn you, Luis, you've given me a thorn to lie on, just when I was feeling comfortable and meaning to hog it on my bed till sundown. What are you going to do?"

"I would beg leave of absence till eight o'clock. You have no need, I think, for my services, and there are one or two inquiries I wish to make before we leave the city."

So, while Blenkiron, who had slept less than six hours in the past three days, did his best that afternoon to make up arrears, Luis de Marzaniga set out on his own errands.

He visited the Club, and saw in a corner of the deserted dining-room three men lunching. They were just beginning, and in the dislocation of the service their meal was bound to be a slow one. Satisfied with his survey, he joined a young man, who was waiting for him in the street, and the two made a round of domiciliary visits. This young man knew his business, and the outer doors of three flats were neatly opened without damage to the locks. Two of the flats—those of Larbert and D'Ingraville—were in normal order, full of books and bibelots and queer scents, but the third, that of Peter Suvorin, was in a state of supreme untidiness. Its owner had been burning papers in the stove, his bedroom was littered with clothes, while a half-packed valise stood on the bed. "It seems," said Luis to his companion, "that Senor Suvorin is about to make a journey."

His next visit was alone, and to the Regina Hotel. There it was plain that he had a friend, for a word to the head-waiter in the almost empty restaurant got him an immediate interview with a servant in a little room behind the office.

"Senor Pasquali's apartments?" he asked. "You have watched them as I directed?"

"With assiduity. The Senor is going away soon. Where, I do not know, but he has had his baggage prepared as if for a rough journey. Also he has received every night at the hour of ten a visitor."

The visitor was described: a tall man, with a long dark face and high cheek-bones, like an Indian's. No, not an Indian—certainly a white man. There was a white scar on his forehead above his right eye. He spoke with Senor Pasquali in French.

Luis whistled. "That is our friend Radin," he said to himself. "Radin beyond doubt. What has that ugly rogue from the gutter to do with the superfine Pasquali, who plays Scriabin so ravishingly? They may be going travelling together—perhaps also with Suvorin. Luis, my dear, these things must be looked into."

Luis went out into the glare of the afternoon with a preoccupied face. He walked for a little down the Avenida Bolivar, and then struck through a nest of calles in the direction of the smelting works. His preoccupation did not prevent him keeping a sharp look-out, and presently in a jostle of market-women at a corner he saw a face which made him walk quietly back a little, slip up a side street, and then run his hardest to cut it off. He failed, for the man had disappeared. After a moment's reflection Luis returned to the Administration Buildings and sought out the room given up to the headquarters of the Air Force. The true air base was the Courts of the Morning, but there was an aerodrome and a single squadron behind the city. There he cross-examined the officer in charge as to whether any Olifa planes had recently crossed their lines. He was told that four had been brought down, but that to the best of Headquarters' knowledge no voluntary landing had been made.

"But we cannot tell," said the officer. "We are not holding a continuous line—only two sectors."

"Then an Olifa plane might land someone in a place from which he could make his way here?"

"It is possible," was the answer. "Not very likely, but possible."

In the narrow lane Luis had seen Dan Judson, one of Castor's three trustees. Where Judson was one might look to find also Carreras and Biretti, and the probability was that all three had been landed from an enemy plane and were now in the

city. Suvorin and Pasquali were making a journey, and Radin was privy to it. Luis's next business was to go to tea with Lariarty, whom he knew a little.

He found that gentleman quite openly preparing for the road. Lariarty's face was whiter than ever and his eyes looked tortured; but they also looked most furiously alive, and his whole body seemed to have woken into an hysterical life.

"Ho, Senior," Luis exclaimed. "Do you follow us into exile? I thought you would await the conqueror here—seeing that you have no politics—and advise him wisely about Gran Seco business. That was also Senior Rosas's belief."

Lariarty looked at him with a composure which seemed to be the result of a strong effort, for the man was obviously ill at ease.

"Some of us remain," he said. "But not I. I wish to be at the Gobernador's side, for his interests are my interests. I have to-day been at Headquarters, and it is arranged that I go with General Escrick."

"What makes you so certain you will find the Gobernador with Escrick?"

"I am not certain. But if I am with the field army, it stands to reason that I must sooner or later come across the commander-in-chief."

"Who are staying behind?"

"All the others."

"Suvorin?"

"Yes."

"And Pasquali?"

"Certainly. Why do you ask?"

"No reason at all... I congratulate you, Senior, on your courage, for we of Escrick's command must ride fast and far. You are perhaps out of training for the savannahs and the mountains?"

"I am not in good form. But there was a time when I was never off a horse."

Luis abounded in friendly advice, as from an old campaigner, and finally took his leave. "We shall meet in the darkness," he said, and was told that Lariarty had orders to report himself at midnight.

It was now within an hour of nightfall and Luis repaired to Blenkiron's house for a bath. As he splashed in the tepid water, he reflected. "I am certain that they are all going with Escrick," he told himself. "Lariarty alone will go openly, but the others will be there somehow—Suvorin and Pasquali and Calvo—likewise that trinity of cherubs, Judson, Carreras, and Biretti. Larbert and D'Ingraville will wait here till Romanes comes, and then join them... there's going to be a gathering of the vultures somewhere in the North... They're after the Gobernador, and if they fail to get him they may do some miscellaneous looting."

After his bath Luis made a careful toilet from a store of clothes which he carried in an old saddlebag. A yellow shirt with a fancy collar, flapping trousers of dirty grey, skin brogues, a dark poncho, and a high-crowned, broad-brimmed hat transformed him into a mestizo peasant, at least three-quarters Indian. He rolled some cigarettes of leaf tobacco and placed them behind his ear, and then sauntered across the Avenida, down through the narrows of the Market, to the cluster of yards and huts above the dry ravine which separated the city from the smelting works. His disguise was perfect, for he stopped now and then to engage in a street-corner argument, and mixed as naturally with the disputants as if he were one of the vegetable-sellers whose mules lined the causeway.

He found the place he sought, an alley close to the sunken street called St. Martin's Port, where had stood centuries ago a tiny monkish settlement. All had gone except a tooth of ancient brick masonry, which had once been part of an arched gateway. The street was a warren, full of bolt-holes that looked like cul-de-sacs and cul-de-sacs that looked like bolt-holes, but Luis seemed to know his way about it. At the head of a court, the paving of which may have been contemporary with Pizarro, there was a green gate in an adobe wall. He pushed through it and said something to a slatternly half-caste woman, who sat dozing in a chair outside a second door. He opened this and stumbled into what was obviously the back-room of a cafe, the front of which was in another street. Stumbled, for he seemed suddenly to have become rather drunk.

There were few in the place, three or four peasants drinking small glasses of aguardiente, and one man in the shadows who had before him a tankard of beer. Luis joined the group of peasants and gave his order. An albino negro, a weird sight in that ill-lit place, brought him his drink, and he commanded another glass for the man opposite him. This was a gipsy-looking fellow with long earrings, who had been discoursing to the company on cock fighting. A dispute presently arose in which Luis's hiccupping voice was predominant. It was about the merit of Gomez's red cock which had won the championship at Maddalo on St. Rosalia's feast-day.

The dispute grumbled, died down, flared up, for all had the air of having drunk too well. Then the talk became confidential between Luis and his vis-a-vis, and they shuffled little apart from the others. More drinks were brought. There was a sudden gust of quarrel, and Luis in dudgeon removed himself across the room. But his new friend followed, and there seemed to be a reconciliation, for once again the two heads were close together and the talk was all of cocks and challenges.

In his new position Luis was scarcely a yard from the dark corner where the man with the tankard of beer was sitting. There were now three of them there. They looked viciously at the argumentative peasants, but there was no other part of the room which promised greater peace, and they remained sitting. Luis was by way of now being very drunk, and he made his confidences at close quarters into the garlic-smelling ear of his companion. But this position left his eyes free to

wander, without the other noticing it, and he had a good view of the men in the shadows.

One had the face which he had seen three hours before in the crowded calle—a small man, very thickly made, with rabbit teeth, an underhung jaw, and a broken nose. This was the famous Daniel Judson. Beside him sat a taller man with a long, sallow, clean-shaven face and thick, dark eyebrows which made a straight band almost from ear to ear. This Luis knew for Laschallas, who, as he had told Blenkiron, was the most dangerous of the survivors of the Bodyguard. But it was the man opposite the two who surprised him. He wore a thin dark overcoat with the collar turned up, but the face above the collar had the unmistakable waxy pallor of Lariarty.

In the intervals of his drunken wrangling Luis tried to catch their conversation. But not a word could he overhear. They spoke in low tones, and when he sidled nearer them, still in the embrace of his cock-fighting colleague, Judson rose and cursed them. The other was scared into sobriety, for Mr Judson in his wrath was not a pretty sight, and Luis had perforce to follow him and put as much distance as possible between the three and themselves. Presently he gave up the attempt to eavesdrop, extricated himself with some difficulty from his companion, and staggered out of the cafe by the road he had come. He had learned several things—that the trusties, or at least one of them, were in Olifa, that Laschallas was alive, and that Lariarty was not leading an idle life.

He went home, got into proper clothes and hunted up one of Escrick's staff-officers. There was a good deal of sound coming from the south, where the retreat from the trenches was being covered by machine-gun activity, and some of the troops already withdrawn were filing through the streets.

What had been infantry was now being transformed into light cavalry at the horse-lines north of the city. Luis found the staff-officer he sought, and learned from him that he only civilian accompanying Escrick was Lariarty-Blenkiron himself had sanctioned it—for whom a seat had been provided in one of the staff cars. He left the office with injunctions that no civilian passes were to be given without further reference, and that the occupants of every car were to be jealously scrutinised.

Then he supped with Blenkiron, and told him what he had discovered. Blenkiron, still sleepy as an owl, was slow to take it in. "They can't do anything," he reflected. "They're bottled up in this city, whether it's me or Lossberg that's in charge. They're town rats, Luis; they won't thrive out in the wilds. Where are you going?"

"I thought I'd look up Lariarty and see if he's ready. I propose to keep an eye on that gentleman."

But when Luis was admitted by Lariarty's servant to Lariarty's flat he found no sign of impending departure. Lariarty, washed and perfumed, was wearing a smoking-suit of silk, and in the buttonhole of his jacket was a yellow picotee, such as Archie had remarked in the Gran Seco visitors the first night in the Olifa hotel. He was improvising on his piano. The nervousness of the afternoon had gone, and he seemed to be at ease with the world.

"Hullo, Senor," Luis cried. "You'll be late. We start in twenty minutes."

Lariarty smiled and went on playing.

"I am not coming. Not at present. I have been reconsidering the matter, and I think that it is my business to remain here. Here or at Olifa. My duty is to the Mines, and my knowledge may be needed."

Something had happened that evening, some news had reached the Conquistadors, which had caused them to change their plans. It would be as well, Luis thought, if they all remained in the city; he had not approved of Blenkiron's consent to Lariarty's departure, which seemed to have been the unthinking decision of an overpressed man. But did this mean that all would stay behind? Was there no chance of a blunder in this midnight retirement? The last four days had been too feverish to allow of strict attention to the ritual of surveillance which had looked on paper so perfect. The thought made Luis hurry to the northern barrier.

The outlets from the city were few, and all were carefully barricaded. It was now midnight, and the troops were by this time safely out of the trench lines, where now a rearguard was conducting a noisy camouflage. The place was as bright as day with the great arc lights on their tall standards, and in their glare a mounted army was assembling, as shaggy a force as ever followed Timour or Genghiz. They had for the most part come straight from the line, and there was no sleep for them till they had put many thirsty miles between themselves and the Olifa van. Yet they were a cheerful crowd and drank black coffee out of bottles and smoked their little acrid cigarettes before they jogged off, each squadron to its appointed place.

The officer in charge of the business, a young analytic chemist, saluted him.

"All goes smoothly, sir," he said. "The staff leaves in a quarter of an hour. The road is being kept clear for cars. Your advance party got off half an hour ago."

"Advance party!" Luis stammered.

"Yes, sir. They presented your instructions and I countersigned them, as your telephone message directed."

"Yes, yes, of course. Were their passes all right? I was afraid they might be slow in reaching them."

"They were all in order, with the Chief's signature."

"One car, you say?"

"They packed into one car. Rather a tight fit for six of them."

"Who was driving?"

"Mr Suvorin. He was the only one I recognised."

"A good car?"

"One of the new Administration Packards. There's nothing wrong, sir?"

"Nothing. I was just wondering when we would overtake them."

In the Courts of the Morning there was still peace. The brooding heats, the dust-storms, the steaming deluges of the lowlands were unknown. The air was that of a tonic and gracious autumn slowly moving to the renewal of spring. The mornings were chilly, with a sea-fog crawling over the rim of the plateau; the days were bright and dry as old wine, the nights blue and starlit. There was peace in that diamond ether, but it was not the peace of lethargy but of ordered action. The place was as busy as ever, but it had no longer the air of a headquarters. It was now a base, a depot, and the poste de commandement was some—where far below in the broken levels which spread dizzily towards the southern sky-line.

The Gobernador had been given his choice. "I can take you with me," Sandy had said. "It won't be a comfortable life, but you don't mind that. Or you can stay here in the watch-tower and follow our doings on the map."

"I am free to decide?" Castor had asked, and was told "Perfectly." He had considered for a little and had finally chosen to remain. "I am your enemy," he said, "and we should be at too close quarters for comfort. I shall stay here till something happens."

Sandy laughed. "I know what you mean. Well, I hope it won't, but if my luck gives out don't imagine that the show is over. You're the only one in your class, but I've heaps of alternatives in mine. Archie will keep you posted and I'll look in every now and then."

But Sandy did not come back... The crowded days' work went on; horse and mule convoys came daily up the mountain paths and departed with their burdens; the receivers ticked busily in the wireless station; aeroplanes—fewer than before, for the fighting machines were mostly at advanced headquarters—departed at dawn and returned often after nightfall, while flares like forest fires burned to guide them to their landing-places. There was a special activity in the glen which led to the sea; it seemed as if its defenders had reached the conclusion that that port to the outer world would soon be discovered and closed, for almost every night some kind of tramp put in and unloaded and stole out before the following daylight. Busiest of all were the two girls. Barbara was in charge of the hospital stores, and it seemed that these were now urgently needed, for in the plains below men were suffering. With her staff of peons she worked early and late, with Janet as an unskilled assistant.

The latter had another duty laid upon her, and that was to provide company for the Gobernador. With Sandy's departure he had become the prey of moods. His former equability had gone, and he appeared to swing between profound abstraction, when he seemed unconscious of his surroundings, and a feverish interest in them.

For example, he visited constantly the top of the ravine and would spend an hour gazing into the green depths which ended in a sapphire patch of sea. Once, when Janet accompanied him, he turned to her sharply.

"This place could be forced," he said. "Olifa has a navy... It would take a week—ten days perhaps—and he would lose a thousand men, but it could be done. Then his sanctuary of yours would fall. How would you scape?"

"I suppose by the hill roads to the south," Janet answered.

"But they will be blocked. It might be hard to force a way up here from that side, but Olifa could block the exits. What then?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I don't believe both disasters could happen at once."

"Why not?"

"Simply because things don't work out that way."

He laughed angrily. "You are all children. You trust childishly to fortune. That's well enough for Clanroyden and the others. They are soldiers and take chances. But what is to become of you?"

"Barbara and I went into this with our eyes open."

"You were a fool, then. And your husband was a fool to let you."

There were many similar occasions when his face looked sharp and anxious and there was a hard edge to his voice.

But there were others, when the mountain spaces seemed to work on him as an opiate and he fell into a mood of reflection. From these fits he would emerge with cheerfulness almost, certainly with philosophy. At such times he seemed to enjoy Janet's company and would detain her in talk from her many duties. He would ask her questions about herself, her home, her views on life, with an engaging ingenuousness, as if he had discovered a new type of mortal and was labouring to understand it. He had a natural good-breeding which robbed his questions of all impertinence, and in this novel sphere Janet felt that she could regard him as an equal.

"This hill-top is bad for me," he once told her. "I have no facts to work upon and I begin to make pictures. Wasn't it Napoleon who said that we should never think in pictures, but always look at things as if through a telescope—bring reality close to one, but always reality?"

"Isn't that begging the question?" the girl replied. "Reality for us is what we make of things. We may make them conform to our picture. It is what we all do. It is what you have been doing all your life, Excellency."

"But your pictures and mine have been very different. I am a scientist and you are a romantic."

"You are the romantic. You have tried to force the world inside a theory, and it is too big for that. We humble people never attempt the impossible. You are a self-deceiver, you know."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because of your intellectual pride. It is only humility that sees clearly and knows its limitations."

"Lord Clanroyden, for example, is humble?" There was a not unpleasant irony in his voice.

"Profoundly."

"Yet he has challenged me. With his handful of amateurs he has challenged the might of Olifa. Was your Jack the Giant-killer humble?"

Janet laughed. "I think he was. Jack saw that the giants were far bigger than himself, but that, being over-grown, unnatural things, they were bound to be stupid and weak."

"You think that a colossus is always weak?"

"He must be if he is outside the human scale. If he has no other flaw, he will have the weakness of pride."

"You and your friends are very proud."

"Oh, I hope not. If we are, we shall be punished for it. Sandy—Lord Clanroyden—is daring, but that is not because he thinks too much of himself, but because he believes that he has great allies."

"Such as?"

The girl quoted: "Exultations, agonies, And love, and man's unconquerable mind."

Castor laughed. "That is Wordsworth, isn't it? It is a good answer, Lady Roylance, from your point of view. I am prepared to admit that Lord Clanroyden has allies—at any rate, he has friends. He need not be lonely."

"You are lonely?" she asked with kind eyes.

"I have always been rather lonely... Perhaps... if I had met someone like you... long ago... I should not be so lonely today."

It was Archie who brought the first big news. One evening he appeared at dinner with his left arm in a sling. "Not a wound," he explained. "It was my own dashed silliness in getting too near the business end of a mule. I've been having a giddy time and I'm badly short of sleep. How are things going—? Pas si bete, as they say—except for Sandy. Old Sandy has gone stark mad. At present it's a useful kind of madness, but the question is how long it will be till he goes clean off his rocker. He's been doing pretty desperate things."

Later he explained.

"Lossberg is making war according to the books. Sandy sits down and thinks out very carefully what the books direct and then does the exact opposite. He is trying to draw the enemy deep into the country, and for that purpose he is making a feature of Fort Castor. We've a pretty useful intelligence service, and the best part of it is that section which we put at Lossberg's disposal. You see, having the country on our side, we have a lot of enthusiastic volunteers. Lossberg picks up some Indian or half-starved mestizo who is easily frightened into telling what he knows. The poor devil is obviously speaking the truth, for he is too scared and stupid to lie. Only what he says has been carefully pumped into him by our little lot. The result is that Lossberg has got it into his head that Fort Castor is our big base, and is stretching his claws round it as carefully as a cat stalking a mouse. He has moved up the better part of a division. But there's nothing in Fort Castor except mounted patrols. We put up a beautiful camouflage and let Lossberg's flying men have a discreet look at it once in a while. But when he takes the place after some trouble he won't find a tin of bully beef in it."

Somebody asked where Sandy was.

"He was in Magdalena yesterday. We are organised in two armies. Escrick, with the Army of the North, is now divided between Loa and Magdalena, and he has a covered line of communications between them through the hills behind, just like what Stonewall Jackson had in the Shenandoah valley. The enemy has spotted neither. Peters, with the Army of the South, is playing the same game. Lossberg thinks he is based on the Indian pueblos in the Tierra Caliente from which he can threaten the Mines, and consequently he has a division strung out from the San Tome to the Universum and is building a sort of Great Wall of China in the shape of blockhouses. Peters just does enough to keep the Mines lively, but he isn't worrying about them. All he wants is to get Lossberg rattled."

Archie pointed to the south-east corner of the big map. "There's a spot there called Pacheco, just under the hills. That's Peters' real base. He's got some nice country west of that for his scallywags to operate in. There should be news from that quarter pretty soon."

"Base?" he said in reply to a question of Castor's. "Why, we haven't any proper base, and we haven't any communications to cut. We're the most lightly equipped force in the world, for we don't go in for high living. A bit of charqui and a bag of meal will last one of our fellows for a week. Also we know all the wells and water-holes, and Lossberg doesn't. Water is going to give him a lot of trouble."

"Has he no one who knows the country?" Janet asked.

"Not as we do. He'll pick up somebody later, for we're bound to have a traitor or two in our camp. Also there are your gunmen, Excellency. One or two of them have been a bit around. But he hasn't got anybody yet, and has gone poking about, trusting to bad maps, and the lies we manage to feed him."

"What about his Air Force?"

Bobby Latimer answered. "So far we've managed to keep it in order. We've nothing on them in the way of flying, for they're nicely trained, but they can't just fight in our way. And they haven't any machines as good as our new Gladas. If this were a regular war, they'd be mighty good at contact work and bombing expeditions. You never saw prettier squadron flying. But we've no communications to bomb, and at present they're wasting their efforts every night on Fort Castor."

"But do none of their planes get abroad and discover your real whereabouts? Magdalena, for example—or Loa?"

"So far we haven't let them. We can beat anything they've got in pace and we seem to have more appetite for a scrap. There's been one or two very pretty dog-fights. Besides, it don't signify if they spot Magdalena or Loa or even Pacheco. We could shift somewhere else in a couple of hours."

"But you have a base." It was Castor who spoke. "Where we are sitting now is your base. If they take this, you are lost. If they even bomb it, you are deeply embarrassed."

"I think that's right," said Latimer. "Therefore it's up to us to let no enemy planes north of Loa. So far they haven't shown any inclination in this direction. They're too much occupied with General Peters."

"Yet at any moment they may discover it?"

"There's no reason in the nature of things why they shouldn't," said Archie. "But it's one thing for a chance plane to spot us and another thing for Lossberg to exploit his knowledge."

Three days later Archie returned in high spirits. He had two pieces of news. The first was that Bobby Latimer had brought down an enemy plane north of Loa. The pilot and observer were alive, and the plane was not too badly damaged, so they had added one to their stock of aircraft—a Seaforth monoplane, in the mechanism of which he discoursed at length. Happily they had the spares for it. He welcomed this new sign of enterprise on the part of Olifa as likely to relieve the tedium of his job. When Janet observed that, if one enemy could get as far as Loa, a second might get farther, Archie was reassuring.

"The way I look at it is this. They've spotted Loa—they were bound to hear of it from spies and such-like. But they're so darned unenterprising that only one of their planes gets through. If these things be done in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry? Loa is an easy mark, but this place from Lossberg's lines would be dashed difficult, even for a swell like Bobby."

The other news was startling. Peters's raiders had made the garrisons at the Mines nervous, and, since it was assumed that the guerrillas were based on the villages in the Indian reserve and drew their supplies thence, it was resolved to clear that country and bring the women and children into a huge concentration camp near the city.

Archie was triumphant. "It's what Sandy has been playing for, but he scarcely hoped to bring it off... Lossberg thinks the Tierra Caliente is an asset to us. Good Lord! it's a millstone round our necks. Presently we should have had to feed these villages—a thing we had budgeted for—and this means that we shall now be a thousand per cent. better off for supplies. He's a humane man, your General Lossberg. The concentrados will be a long sight better off with him than on their own, and if they get pinched a little when he gets pinched, we had made our book for that. Soon we'll all have to draw in our belts... Sandy has made Lossberg hold the baby for him, which is what you might call strategy."

A light of reminiscence woke in his eyes.

"That was always old Sandy's way. Once at Crask, I remember, he fairly did me in. We were out rough shooting together and it was a blistering hot day. When we turned at the march burn, we were both a little bored, for we had seen very little, so by way of putting a spice of interest into the game, we agreed that I should carry what he shot and he what I shot, and I backed myself for a fiver to give him the heavier load. Well, I soon presented him with a hill partridge and a snipe, while he hadn't let off his gun. Then I'm blessed if he didn't shoot a roebuck and I had to sling the infernal brute on my back. After that he couldn't miss, and I hadn't the proper use of my arms. I staggered into Crask just about dead with heat, and laden like Balaam's ass—roebuck on back, string of grouse and blackcock round my neck, rabbits in my pockets, and one and a half brace of snipe in my hat."

For a day or two the plateau drowsed in its bright aromatic heat, and no news arrived except what the Olifa wireless told—how Lossberg had begun to clear the Indian country, and the rebels, baseless and foodless, were for certain no more now than bands of refugees clinging to the mountains' skirts. Fort Castor, their chief centre, had been occupied without serious opposition. It was anticipated that soon there must be a general surrender. Olifa was marching to an easy victory, and the President, in a public speech, spoke contemptuously of the rabble of amateurs which had attempted to defy the disciplined forces of the republic.

The comments of the foreign press were no longer guarded. The military critics congratulated themselves on their prescience, and wrote, almost with regret, of the mathematical certainties of modern warfare. Their views did not disturb Janet's peace of mind, but she had her own anxieties. She had an apprehension of some calamity approaching, and studied the blue sky for that enemy plane which might break through their guard. The drone of a machine arriving sent her hurrying out-of-doors, and she would wake with a start in the night and listen for the beat in the air which would be different from the beat of their own planes. Castor seemed to share her excitement; his eyes also were always turning skyward.

Then came two days of storm, when the thunder rattled among the crags of Choharua, and the rain fell in torrents, and the outlook was limited to six yards of swirling vapour. After that came a wind which threatened to uproot the huts, and which brought the sound of a furious sea even up to that ledge of mountain. During these days the wireless was disordered by atmospherics, but from its broken messages one thing emerged. Something had happened, something of vital importance, something which had got on Olifa's nerves. It could not be a battle? Surely Sandy had never been betrayed into measuring his meagre strength in lists chosen by the enemy.

Then one afternoon Archie arrived, a weary Archie who could scarcely speak for drowsiness.

"Has there been a battle?" Janet demanded.

"Not likely. But we've begun the offensive."

"What losses?"

"None. Practically none on either side. But there's been the deuce of a lot of destruction of property. Sandy says it's cheaper than human life and just as effective."

"What have you done? Quick! Tell me."

"We've cut the enemy's communications. I'm dropping with sleep, Janet. In six hours you'll hear everything."

In six hours a washed, shaven, fed, and refreshed Archie told this story.

"Ever since Lossberg started pushing out from the Gran Seco city, our army has more or less disappeared. He felt us, but he didn't often see us, barring, of course, our planes. Yet he was being sniped and shelled and bombed a good deal and Peters kept him lively at the Mines. Two things accordingly happened. The first was that Lossberg, not being able to get us into the open, thought we were far stronger than we were and grew more cautious than ever. The second was that he thought we had all our men in two places—up in the hills north-east of Fort Castor and in the eastern end of the Tierra Caliente. In that he was right—more or less—but he didn't know the length of our range. The consequence was that he thought that the city and everything south and west of it were safe, but that the east and north-east were formidable and needed a big striking force. So he held the railway with only three garrisons between the city and the frontier—at San Luca, at Villa Bar, and at Gabones itself—and small posts of six men each every four miles."

Archie with pencil and paper drew a sketch of the railway.

"You remember the big dry valley twenty-five miles down the line. I believe there's occasionally a trickle in it in January, but just now it is like the Prophet's Valley of Dry Bones. There's a big viaduct crosses it—sixteen arches, the biggest and costliest piece of engineering on the whole line. It would have taken a cog-and-pinion arrangement or miles of circuitous gradients to get the railway across the valley. So the engineers very properly decided on a bridge.

"Blenkiron always had his eye on the San Luca bridge, and so had Lossberg, for he had a post at each end, twenty men with machine guns at San Luca station—that's the north end—and thirty-five at the south end, at a place called the Devil's Ear. It was the only part of the line about which he showed any nervousness. But his posts weren't very well placed, for they were at the abutments of the bridge, and the bridge has sixteen arches, and the valley is more than half a mile wide, so that if there was trouble about the middle of the viaduct it would be some little time before the ends heard of it and arrived to help.

"Blenkiron—the scheme was his principally—wanted to cut the line at a place where it would be hard to mend. San Luca was an obvious spot, especially as the bridge was unguarded in the middle, since it was calculated that wandering bandits could do no harm to the huge stone piers.

"Lossberg's engineers in the Gran Seco could do any ordinary repairs that were required, but something very big would want help from Olifa. So Blenkiron's second job was to make it pretty hard for Olifa to get to San Luca, and that meant a simultaneous bedevilment of the railway somewhere well to the south of the Devil's Ear."

Again Archie had recourse to pencil and paper.

"You see this point here, twelve miles north of Villa Bar and about twenty-three from San Luca. The railway runs in a deep cutting, the beginning of the long climb to the watershed. On the east side there's a considerable mountain with a shaly face, which is shored up to prevent it slipping on to the metals. There was a little post about a mile off at a place called Tombequi—half a dozen sleepy Oliferos who spent their days playing spadillo and begging for drinks from the passing trains.

"Well, it was Peters's outfit that got the job, and it was decided to make it a long-range business. You see, not one of our fellows had so far been seen within fifty miles of the railway after the city was surrendered, so Lossberg assumed that all was well there and took no precautions.

"We didn't want to alarm him, so we took Pacheco for a base, the better part of one hundred and fifty miles off. It's an ugly bit of country from there to the railway—the south rim of the Gran Seco basin, and on the north face of the rim an abomination of desolation, all pitted and tortured red rocks like the Sinai desert. The crest, however, is flattish, with a good deal of scrub on it, and there's water in one or two places—the actual springs, I fancy, of streams that go down into the Vulpas valley. There used to be posts there, but Lossberg had no use for them, and on that bit of frontier all he has is a few mounted patrols which keep to the low ground on the north side under the rocks. Accordingly we fancied the high ground above the rocks, where there was nobody to spot us except vultures.

"We left Pacheco last Tuesday night with Sandy in command. He insisted upon taking charge—said he wanted a little fresh air and exercise—I flew him over from Magdalena that evening. I never saw a fellow in such spirits—filled with 'em, drunk with 'em. There were two parties—one under a chap called Jervoise, mounted on wiry little Indian ponies, with some queer kit on their saddles. That was the Tombequi outfit. The San Luca crowd were coming in cars and weren't due to start from Pacheco till twenty hours later. A place had been agreed on as a rendezvous.

"It was a mad ride, and Sandy was the maddest thing in it. It looked as if he had been getting charged with electricity till he could hold no more and had to give some of it off in sparks. He's fit again too, fitter than I've ever seen him before... We climbed out of the levels up long glens of loess till we struck the stony corridor that runs between the ridges. There was a big white moon, and the shale looked like snowdrifts and ice couloirs. There wasn't a sound, for there are no beasts or birds up there—only the thud of hoofs, an occasional clash of buckles, and Sandy humming his crazy songs.

"We did fifty miles before dawn, and then lay up for most of the day on the top of the ridge, where there were water and scrub. We were off again at nightfall, and next morning came to the place they call Tulifa, where there is a bad foot-

track zip from the Vulpas valley. Here we had to go cannily, for we had to get off the hills, which had become a series of knife-edges, and take to the sandy valleys to the north of 'em. Yet they made pretty fair cover for men in open order, and we had goodish guides, and by nightfall we weren't twenty miles from the railway. The staff-work had been top-hole, for we got to the appointed rendezvous just fifteen and a half minutes late. The cars had come through without a hitch and had been hiding all day in a ravine. There were three of 'em—Rolls-Royce chassis and bodies that looked like a travelling circus.

"At the rendezvous we separated. Sandy transferred himself to the cars, for San Luca was the main objective, and I went with him. Jervoise trotted off with his bandits according to plan. They had to work exactly to schedule, for there was a big freight train due to pass Tombequi at forty-three minutes past nine. The plan was to let it pass and blow up the line behind it, while we blew up the San Luca bridge in front, and so bottled it up. Our motto was 'Anything to give pain!'..."

"I wasn't an eye-witness of Jervoise's show, but it ran like a clock. The roads were difficult and the party had to split up, but the sections arrived to a tick, and the only chaps who could complain were the poor devils of horse-holders, and the Olifa post, who were surprised at supper and put in the bag. No—there were no casualties, and we don't take prisoners. Jervoise annexed their trousers, and turned them loose. He don't like the raggedness of his outfit, and consequently has the eye of an old-clothes man for pantaloons. His lot made a fearsome mess, blew up the rack in twenty places over a three-miles stretch, and tumbled down half the mountainside on it. Sandy reckons it will take a fortnight's hard work to clear it.

"I was in the San Luca push myself. There was a dust-storm blowing up from the east and the moon was covered, and as we had no lights and the road was naked prairie I'm bound to say I felt a bit rattled. If you're loaded up with guncotton and blasting gelatine it isn't much fun to be ricocheting from boulder to boulder. We couldn't go slow and feel our way, for we had to keep to schedule time. But the weather was a godsend, for the wind drowned the noise of our wheels, and when we got to the bridge, the lights were burning clearly at each end and everything as peaceful as Clapham Junction.

"We didn't take long about the job, for the whole thing had been arranged to the last detail, with the help of a plan of the bridge provided by one of our fellows who had been in the railway shops. We laid the charges, lit the fuses, and, if you believe me, when we started off on the return journey we weren't two minutes out in our reckoning.

"It was all too easy, and that made me nervous. But we didn't miss fire. In the War I saw a good many mines go up, but never anything like this. The empty valley became suddenly like Tophet, spouting sheets of greeny-yellow flame, while a mushroom of black smoke wavered above it. Then the wind blew the mushroom aside, and we saw that two of the arches had gone and that the viaduct was like a man's mouth with the front teeth drawn..."

"After that there is nothing to tell. The posts on each side of the bridge started shooting into vacancy, and just as we left there came an agonised whistle from the south. It was the freight train slowing down to discover what the devil had happened."

Thus Archie to Janet. Before dinner he repeated the tale in its main features to Castor, who heard it with drawn brows.

"I make you my compliments," the latter said. "You have certainly instituted a new kind of war. Can Lord Clanroyden repeat the performance?"

"Whenever he pleases. You see, we have the real mobility, and we have also knowledge of the country on our side. Lossberg already finds it hard to know what to do. He can't police the whole Gran Seco, and as soon as he gets away from his bases we give him beans. We're not too well off for stores, but we can always replenish at his shop... No, we don't mean to make the railway unworkable. We can't afford that, for we want Lossberg to supply himself—that he may supply us. He's our Q. side. But we shall make it so difficult that the job will take up a lot of his time. He's vulnerable, you see, and we're not. We're not in the same elements. It's like a fight between a wolf and a shark."

"Then how can you hope for a decision?"

"We don't want any dramatic coup. We want to tire him out so that he'll see it's hopeless, and Olifa will make peace. On our terms, of course... On your terms, that is to say," Archie added.

Castor smiled at the correction.

"You are convinced that you are invulnerable?" he asked. "What about the air? Olifa has twice your number of machines."

"She can't use 'em properly. That's our almighty luck. They're good average flying men, but they've no genius for the thing, and we've got the pick of the American fliers. Blenkiron saw from the first the necessity of that."

"If you had a genius against you it might be uncomfortable?"

"To be sure. In the air you don't reckon by quantity. One airman like Lensch—you remember?—the Boche who was killed in April '18—would put a different complexion on the business."

It was Janet who first saw the stranger. She had gone on a before-dinner scamper on the downs, and had turned for home, when her eye caught sight of a small monoplane coming in from the sea. That was not a route taken by their own planes, and the girl halted and had a look at it through her glasses. It was a strange make, one she had never seen before, and suddenly she realised what it meant. Lossberg had at last broken the cordon, and the Courts of the Morning were discovered.

As she galloped furiously towards the huts, she saw that the alarm had become general. The visitor had dropped low and was cruising scarcely two hundred feet up, getting a full view of the details of the place. There were no anti-aircraft guns, and the rifle shots from the sentries left him unharmed... Then one of their own planes rose, and the girl checked her horse to watch. The stranger let it approach, and then—contemptuously, it seemed—flew towards it. There was a burst of fire, the two planes seemed about to collide, and then by a curious manoeuvre the stranger slipped out and turned his head

for the sea. She thought she saw a hand wave in farewell. It was indeed farewell, for the pursuing plane was utterly outclassed in speed. Almost in a minute, it seemed to her, the stranger was a speck in the pearly haze which marked the meeting of sea and sky.

She found Archie and Castor outside the mess-hut.

"Do you still maintain your invulnerability?" the Gobernador asked, but Archie did not hear. He was engaged in a passionate soliloquy.

"There's only one fellow in the world who could do that trick," he exclaimed. "I've seen him do it a dozen times. Who? A Frenchman called D'Ingraville. He used to go gunning for Lensch, and would have got him too, if Peter Pienaar hadn't chipped in first. But D'Ingraville died long ago."

"I think you are mistaken," said Castor quietly. "Captain Jacques D'Ingraville has been for several years a member of my staff."

The new Administration Packard, which a little before midnight on the 18th of July carried six men beyond the northern barricades of the Gran Seco city, did not continue more than a few miles on the road which ran to Fort Castor. Suvorin, who drove—he had in the early days of motoring won the Grand Prix in the race from Paris to Marseilles—did not know the country, but there were men with him who did. Obedient to their instructions, he turned to the right at the San Pedro calvary, and for three hours bumped and skidded along sandy tracks and over stony barrens.

It was apparent to one who kept an eye on the stars that he was bending south in a wide circuit, and presently the party came to the main highway between the city and the Mines. Since the defence was not holding a continuous line, but only two sectors, the party were no longer in the battle zone. They did not cross the road till it had been carefully reconnoitred, and once beyond it the car was again in a moraine of boulders and banks of shale. The moon had long set, and the headlights were working feebly, so that it was more by good fortune than by skill that it came at last to the respectable road which ran from the Universum Mine to the railway-sidings south of the city. Here it turned west and made better speed, till the dancing pencils of the searchlights revealed the proximity of General Lossberg's army. The travellers were in fact very near the General's advanced headquarters, and a rifle-shot over their heads presently brought them to a halt. Among them they must have had adequate passports, for an hour later they were partaking of the General's hospitality. He was in a good humour, for he had just had word of the evacuation of the city, and believed that now he was pressing hard on the heels of the fleeing and broken rebels.

Of the six occupants of the car only one accompanied the General on his triumphant entry. This was the driver of the car, Peter Suvorin, a tall man with a bony face and skin like old parchment, and hair so pale that he seemed almost an albino. The others prepared to go down country.

General Lossberg entertained him and Pasquali to breakfast, and had an interview thereafter with the others in the extremest privacy. They formed a curious contrast to the trim Olifa staff. The General was very neat in his field-grey uniform, a well-set-up figure which did not look its fifty-eight years, square, tanned face, brisk, grey moustache, steady, competent grey eyes—the whole a little marred by a stupid mouth and a heavy, rather brutal chin. The motor-car party compared to him seemed like a wandering theatrical troupe. Pasquali, he who played Scriabin, was indeed sprucely dressed and wore an expensive fur-coat, but his prognathous jaw was blue and unshaven, and his dark eyes so opaque with weariness that he looked like a sick negro.

Radin was a tall fellow, whose high cheek-bones suggested Indian blood, and who carried a recent scar above his right eye. Daniel Judson, short, thick, with rabbit teeth and a broken nose, looked like a damaged prize-fighter, and thick black eyebrows above a sallow face gave Laschallas the air of a provincial actor imperfectly made up. Trompetter, a Javanese Dutchman with a touch of the tar brush, had a broad, wedge-shaped face as yellow as a guinea, and little sharp pig's eyes. All, except Pasquali and Suvorin, were dressed in oddments, and, having been in close hiding, looked as unwholesome as the blanched insects below an upturned flower-pot.

Another joined the conference, a man with a light-cavalry figure, wearing a suit of thin tweeds which had been made not a month before in London. He shook hands with Pasquali and Suvorin, bowed to the General, and nodded to the others. Lossberg spoke to him at length, and he appeared to assent.

"You, Senor Romanes," said Lossberg, "and also Senor Suvorin enter the city with me. I will have you attached to my Intelligence section. These other gentlemen return in half an hour to Olifa, in the charge of Senor Pasquali. They will report to General Bianca and put themselves under his instructions. I must bid you good-bye, gentlemen, for time presses." And the brisk general not unwillingly left the group to an aide-de-camp.

So the party of five travelled in comfort that day down country, and, after many delays owing to freight trains reached the city of Olifa on the following morning. The duly reported to General Bianca, but they did not take his instructions. They seemed to be concerned with urgent business of their own, for they disappeared into the under world of Olifa, meeting every evening at a certain café in a back street. Yet there was nothing clandestine about their activity, for not a day passed without one or more of the five being closeted with high officials of the Army, the Marine, or the Police.

It was on the evening of the 9th day of August that D'Ingraville paid his brief visit to the Courts of the Morning.

Archie departed at once to report, and returned next day of order certain precautionary measures. Two of their best fighting scouts, with Roger Grayne in charge, were stationed here, and arrangements were made for early notice of any future visitors from the air. By this time the camp at Loa was known to Lossberg and his next advance would be in that direction. But it was from the sea that the immediate danger was feared. Provision was made for losing the sea-ravine by explosions which would hurl down a thousand tons of rock and strip part of the gully as bare as the face of a wall. Since their communications with the outer world would thus come to an end, such action as to be taken only in the last resort, and it was anticipated that any ordinary attempt at landing could be repelled by the garrison of the ravine. Only if Olifa made an assault in force would heroic measures become necessary. The thing had to be faced, for D'Ingraville must have given Lossberg the exact position of their base, and, since it was obvious that it must be replenished by sea, it would be easy to discover the point of access to the shore. Plans had long been settled for evacuating the Courts of the Morning in case of need, and it was essential that an assault from the sea should be obstructed long enough to enable the plans to be methodically carried out. The one thing to guard against was surprise. A post was stationed on the shore, two others respectively a third and a half of the way up, and a strong garrison at the summit to guard the precipitous final section. All were connected by telephone with main headquarters and with each other, and there were numerous small mines laid which could be used in the detailed defence of each part of the route.

The incident, however, had shattered the peace of the plateau. The place was no more a sanctuary, for its secret had been laid bare. Barbara, busy with her hospital stores, seemed to be unconscious of the change, but Janet felt a prey to a perpetual apprehension. She tried to laugh at herself, but the ghost would not be laid. The shelf of mountain, which had seemed so secure and homelike, was now but a narrow ledge on a great cliff, and she herself a climber sick with vertigo... The enemy was down below in the woody shelves, slowly creeping nearer, and the army of defence was apparently at the other side of the Gran Seco. He was out on the broad seas, waiting for the dark of night to swoop in upon the coast. She would stare down into the green depths of the ravine, and imagine it peopled with fierce faces, and horrible with smoke and blood. In the coverts of wildwood on the plateau enemy spies might be lurking—even far up on the grim face of Choharua. She pictured the enemy—men with evil, pallid faces, such as she had caught a glimpse of in the streets in her visit with Archie to the Gran Seco, and at the picture she thrilled with horror.

Her fears were worst at night, when she would awake at the slightest sound and lie for a space listening, with every nerve tense... In the daytime she forced herself to cheerfulness, and managed to fill up every minute with duties. The weather was changing, and the spring rains were beginning. The sky, which for weeks had been an arch of crystal by day and by night a velvet canopy ablaze with stars, was now perpetually clouded, and often the plateau would be shrouded in a fine mist. This obscurity did not help her spirits. It seemed to offer cover for infinite chances of surprise by land, water, and air.

One thing only gave her comfort. She had decided weeks before to make herself a good pistol shot, and now she assiduously practised, under Roger Grayne's tuition. Grayne, large, rugged, shaggy, and imperturbable, was a fortunate companion for a nervous girl. Janet had always been a fine rifle shot, and now she became a very fair marksman with a revolver, and learned to shoot in any position.

"That's fine!" Grayne would say. "I shouldn't like to be up against you in a rough-house, Lady Roylance. Say, you're not worrying about this little business? It's all as right as rain." And when, moved by his friendliness, she confided to him her doubts, he laughingly disposed of them. The weather was far worse for Lossberg than for them. Supposing his planes arrived on a compass course, they were morally certain to come to grief, for the plateau was tricky in a dead calm, and certain death in foul weather to anyone who did not know it... An attack from Loa! It would take weeks for the enemy to fight his way through the most difficult country on God's earth, and there were roads by which every ounce of supplies could be got off before Lossberg was within thirty miles... The sea! He admitted that there was a risk there, but there could be no surprise. There was just the one narrow avenue of approach, and that could be held against the whole darned Olifa navy long enough to give them ample time to move.

"You see," he concluded, "we're so fixed that we can't be surprised. Olifa's got to come in force to take our sea approach, and coming in force means early notice. We're it worrying about stray guardacostas. It's not as if one man could wriggle through and bomb us in our beds. That's the kind of game I don't fancy, but it's about as likely here for an army corps to come over Choharua."

But if Grayne was a solid comfort to the girl, the Gobernador was very much the reverse. He, like her, seemed to be the victim of nerves ever since D'Ingraville's plane had vanished seaward. He was no longer friendly in forthcoming, a pleasant companion indoors and abroad. He had become silent and preoccupied, and meals were Trappist—like banquets. Nor did he, as at the beginning his sojourn on the plateau, spend much of his time in own room. He seemed to dislike to be alone, and to have nothing on which he could fix his mind. From morning till night he roamed about the settlement, constantly turning eyes to the sky, always intent and listening. There were no restrictions on his movements, so he went many times to the sea-ravine, and sat on the rocks at the top of it staring downward and seaward.

Once Janet found him sitting huddled there in a water-proof coat, when a shower had passed and a watery sun was trying to shine. The air was stuffily raw, oppressive to the walker, but chilly when movement ceased. He was squatting like a figure of Buddha, and his eyes seemed trying to pierce the clouds which drooped low over the sea.

"You are looking for your deliverers, Excellency?" the girl asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I told you," he said, "that folly is always punished. But its punishment may be also a foolish business. This holiday camp seems to be coming to an end."

"Perhaps. Do you know, your voice sounds as if you were rather sorry?"

He did not reply, but unbuttoned the collar of his water-proof as if the weather choked him.

"I have seen you shooting at a target," he said at last. "You can use a pistol?"

"Pretty well. I'm improving every day."

"Then you have the ultimate safeguard. You need not fear the worst."

"I hope for the best," she said with enforced gaiety. "Perhaps I may shoot General Lossberg."

"Lossberg!" he repeated almost bitterly. "You need not fear Lossberg. I was thinking of something very different, and I am glad to know that in the last resort you will be safe... Most women are afraid of pistols, but you are different from most women. After all, it is a merciful death."

Janet shivered, for the eyes which the Gobernador turned upon her had that in them which she had never seen before. There was anxiety in them, and something which was almost tenderness. She understood that if she feared the coming of his deliverers, so also did he—and not for his own sake. "I'm afraid we are giving you a miserable time," she said, trying to speak lightly. "We have dragged you out of your comfortable groove into an anxious place."

"You have upset the work of my life," he said gravely. Then he added, as if by an afterthought, "and the foundations."

"The foundations?"

"Yes. I had a clear course marked out, like a chart. Now the chart is overboard, and the rudder is swinging loose."

"There may be other charts," she said gently.

Then she averted her face and began to talk nonsense rapidly, for she realised that she herself must be the chart-maker.

On the evening of August 19th the rain, which had fallen all day, ceased, and a thin fog oozed out of the ground. By six o'clock night had fallen and a small wind had risen, and, since the sky was heavily overcast, the darkness was soon like the bottom of a cellar... The moon would not rise for an hour or two, and, unless the weather changed, it would give little light.

At the foot of the sea-ravine, in a log hut above the jetty, the coast garrison was preparing supper. Behind was a short space of flat ground, much of which had been feared, but a grove of dead fan-palms remained, whose withered leaves rustled and creaked in the wind. It was in noisy spot, for the torrent after its breakneck descent drove through the boulders of the beach in a fury of loud white waters. In that sheltered bay the sea was calm, but the stream made a perpetual clamour as of beating surf.

The garrison consisted of six Indians of the hills, four of Luis's hacendados, whom he specially trusted, and two of Grayne's ex-marines. The whole was in charge of one of the Alhuema engineers, a gnarled Ulsterman called Corbett, who had come to the Gran Seco from Rhodesia, and whose experiences went back to the Matabele wars. There was a small stove in the hut, and, since supper had just been cooked, the air in that tropical spot on the sea-level was like an orchid-house. A lantern stood on the trestled table, but windows and door were closed so that from the sea no light could have been observed. Only the white men and the mestizos sat at the table; the Indians ate their meal of boiled millet and syrup in their own circle apart.

Corbett mopped his brow. He had begun to fill a pipe and had stopped as if in a sudden distaste. "I can't smoke in this blasted conservatory," he said "Shade the light, Bill. I'm for a little fresh air."

He unbarred one of the windows and let in a current of steamy wind which stirred but did not cool the thick atmosphere of the hut. Outside the night was hot, noisy, and impenetrably dark. He stuck head and shoulders out, and promptly drew them back.

"Bill," he whispered, "come here! First stick the lantern under the table... Look straight ahead. D'you see a light?"

The man called Bill stared into the blackness and then shook his head.

"Nix," he said.

"Funny," said the other. "I could have sworn I caught a spark of something. It might have been on the water, or on the land across the channel. No, not at the seaward end—at the end under the big red rock... Here, Jones, you have a look-see. You're like a cat and can see in the dark."

The Indian addressed as Jones had a long look. "I see no light," he said. "But I can hear something which is not the wind or the stream. Bid the others be quiet." He remained motionless for several minutes, like a wild animal that has been alarmed. Then he too shook his head. "It has gone," he said. "For a second I thought I heard a man's voice and the noise of a ship."

"But the whole damn place is full of noises," said Corbett.

"This was a different noise. The wind is from the west and the sea carries sound."

"Where might it have been?"

"I think near the rock beyond the water."

"Same place as I thought I saw the light." Corbett rubbed his bristly chin. "Can't say I like that. Jones and me may be dreaming, but it's the first time we've ever imagined anything like it. We'd better get the patrols out. Bill, you stay here, with Jones and his two mates. Keep your ears cocked and your eyes skinned. And you'd better call up Number One and tell 'em that we're a bit anxious. Kittredge will take the southern beat up to the head of the gulf—same three as last night—and I'll go north. It's the water's edge we've got to watch, so there's no call to go fossicking in the bush... Remember the drill, you all, if you hear a shot. We meet here again at midnight, hen Bill and his little lot turn out. No smoking for you boys. Keep your pipes in your pockets till you get back."

We are concerned only with the doings of Kittredge and his party of three, whose beat lay south along the shore of the little gulf to where the land swung round in a horn of cliff to form the breakwater which separated the inlet from the ocean. He had with him one Indian and two of Luis's mestizos. Beyond the jetty the trees descended almost to the water's edge, high timber trees festooned with lianas, but for a yard or two on the seaward side the western winds had thinned the covert a little, and the track zigzagged among bare boles. Beyond, the hill dropped almost sheer, so that the traveller was wet by the tides, but farther on there was a space of treeless ground, covered with light grass and thorn bushes, and at the water's edge, where other stream entered the sea, a reed-swamp, haunted by wildfowl.

Kittredge divided his patrol. To the Indian he relegated the patch of forest, since he was the best man for a tangled country. The place where the cliffs dropped sheer to the water he left to one of the mestizos, for it seemed the easiest to watch, since its rear was protected. He himself and the other mestizo took the patch of savannah which etched to the head of the gulf. They did not keep very in the sea because of the swamps, but chose the higher ground among the grass and scrub. It was not a good place for observation, since the ears were filled with the rustling of dry sedge in the wind, and the eyes in the darkness could have made out nothing except a light.

Kittredge and his man saw no light, and they heard little but the wind in the grass and reeds and an occasional stirring of wild duck. They made their way to the head of the gulf and about eleven o'clock turned for home. They expected to pick up the other mestizo in the cliff section, but could not find him, so they assumed that, since they were a little behind time, he had gone back according to instructions to the rendezvous in the hut. The Indian in the forest belt was still awaiting

them. He had seen and heard nothing.

But the man in the cliff area had not gone home. He had sat for half an hour on the shelf of rock straining his eyes into the gloom. Then, being alone, he had become the prey of fears, for he was superstitious. He had said his prayers, and moved a little north, so that he could have the sheer rock-wall at his back. A movement in the set startled him, till he decided that it was a fish. But he had become restless and nervous and again shifted his post this time to a boulder which overhung deep water. He was just about to squat himself on it, when a sound halted him and in a moment of panic he felt for his pistol. It was his last earthly act, for at that instant a knife was neatly driven between his shoulder-blades, and almost in the same movement his pistol was taken from his hand and his body slid quietly into the sea.

At Post No. 1, two-thirds of the way up the ravine, the telephone message from the shore had been duly received. It was a small post, and the officer in charge, an old colleague of Corbett's, was not inclined to disregard his warning. But since the post was at a turning, where the cliff was sheer above and below the path, there seemed no need for special precautions. Anything which came up the path would instantly be observed. But it occurred to him that it might just be possible to avoid the path and make a way across the creeper-clad precipice and the steep glen up a tributary stream, so he sent a man up the road to the only corner where such a short-cut could debouch.

This man, an Indian of the Gran Seco, was not accustomed to forests, nor to the thick steamy darkness of that gash in the mountains. He started at every sound—the cry of a piripipi bird, the rustle of a dead branch, the rooting of a wild pig, for all were unfamiliar. Presently, being a philosopher, he decided that every noise was alike and innocuous, and relapsed into meditation. His philosophy was his undoing. About a quarter of an hour before midnight, he sat sleepily perched on the end of one of the many wooden bridges, something struck him, something as sudden and secret and deadly as a serpent's fang. Quick hands thrust his dead body into the thicket. He was not missed by Post No. 1 till next morning at breakfast.

At Post No. 2, the half-way post, placed beside one of the main platforms of the chute, the night passed without incident. There the ravine was broad and densely wooded, and the angle of the slope was only some 30 degrees. Nothing that night appeared on or near the path.

The garrison at the summit were in tents strung out on both banks of the stream before it began its descent, and completely commanding the path and the off-take of the chute and the wire ropeways. The current of the stream had been used to develop electric power for haulage, and the engine-house stood close to the left bank. The post was admirably sited to command the path, but, owing to the obstruction of the buildings, it had no long field of view to left or to right. The uppermost part of the ravine was wider than the lower, and very steep, but ribbed with lateral spurs. It was possible for an active man to make the ascent by one of these spurs without the cognisance of the summit garrison.

Geordie Hamilton, late of the Royal Scots Fusiliers, was not only in charge of the garrison but also of the engine-house, since by profession he was a mechanic. He and his men, mostly Mines workmen, were stalwart bulldogs to guard a gate, but they were not greyhounds to range at large. They had received Corbett's warning from the shore and till well after midnight were very alert to watch the only area from which they anticipated danger... The wind was rising, and the glen was full of sound. They did not hear, and if they had heard they would not have regarded, the fall of a stone in a subsidiary gully a quarter of a mile to their left, the creak of a log, and the long screech of metal on stone which means that nailed boots have slipped...

Janet had gone to bed in a happier frame of mind. The Gobernador had caught cold, and Barbara, fearing fever, had given him a sleeping-draught and packed him between blankets. Moreover, she had shifted him from his ordinary quarters to another hut, one with a fireplace, which Jane and Archie had hitherto occupied, Janet removing herself to his in exchange. His new hut was close to the mess room in the very centre of the compound; his old one was on the northern outskirts, selected originally in order that it might be specially guarded by sentries without making the fact too obvious.

Janet slept till a little after midnight, and then for no apparent reason she found herself wide awake. This was constantly happening to her nowadays, and she lay for a little with her nerves on stretch, listening for she knew not what. There was no sound except the wind, making odd little noises in the thatch and among the unseasoned plank of the hut. There were sounds, too, coming from inside, so she snapped her bedside switch and stared into the corner. But it was only the wind stirring a pile of old picture papers and flapping a waterproof on a peg. Janet turned off the light and tried to compose herself to sleep again. She thought of a procession of ducks on a common and sheep coming through a gate, but it was no use. Very soon she realised that she was hopelessly wide awake and would not get to sleep again that night. She realised something more—that her nervous unrest had come back with redoubled force. She felt her heart beating and her fingers twitching and a ridiculous, unreasoning fear at the back of her head.

Very much ashamed of herself, she decided that there was something for it but to get up and dress. It was a wild night, she saw when she opened the door, but there was some sort of moon, and her first idea was to go for a ride on the downs... She wished she had a dog; Archie had had a mongrel terrier with the army and had meant to bring it to her but had forgotten... She thought of going to look for Barbara, but felt some scruples about making into the beauty-sleep of one who slept like a log and had apparently no tremors.

She dressed and again looked out into the night. It was windy and mild, the sky was thick with low clouds, and the moon gave only the faintest light. She could see the outline of the next hut, but very dimly, and she realised at her notion of saddling a horse and going for a ride was impracticable. She felt that a gallop would restore her balance, but in such obscurity she would certainly break her neck.

Then she tried to read. She had been taking a course of Wordsworth, as something to distract her mind, and she resolutely plunged into the Prelude. But she found that the words did not make sense. The discovery irritated her so much

that it almost restored her poise. "You little fool," she told herself, "what kind of wife are you for a soldier? You should be back in the schoolroom. You have got the vapours, my dear. You who used to laugh at your sister when she was afraid to go to bed at Glenraden because of the ghost on the tower staircase!"

Janet's annoyance did her good. But she could not get rid of an intolerable sense of expectation. She looked at her watch and saw that it was after one o'clock. Five hours till daybreak! She lay down again on her bed, shut her eyes, and tried to remember all the jolliest things in her life. A certain picnic in her childhood to the Sea Skerries—days with hounds in Warwickshire—her first London ball-escapades with her sister Agatha—that memorable day in the rain beside the flooded Doran when she had first found herself in Archie's arms. Archie! She thought of him with such a glow of pride and affection that she forgot her fears... She began to picture their return to the Crask and what she would do with the old house on the hillside.

Her fancy was toying pleasantly with the future, when suddenly she sat bolt upright. She had heard a sound which could not be the wind. It was the sound of steps close to the hut, stealthy steps but unmistakable, as even a small noise can be in the midst of louder noises in a different key. She switched on the light. She had locked the door on going to bed, but had unlocked it when she looked out at the weather. To her horror she saw it gently open. A man came swiftly into the room—and then another. Both had white faces and their brows were damp with sweat. One was a tall man with a hatchet face and a scar above his right eyebrow, the other was squat and muscular with rabbit teeth and a broken nose. Their clothes were much torn, as if they had had a rough journey. The eyes of both showed amazement and disappointment. They were looking for something other than a scared girl.

"The Gobernador?" the first one cried, and "Where hell's the boss?" came from the other.

Then Janet understood. She had her pistol under his pillow, and in a second had snatched it and fired. But was wild shooting, the shot struck a rafter, and before she could fire again the men were upon her. They were men of quick decision and skilful at the job. A scarf was wound suffocatingly over her mouth and she was seized in a grip which seemed to crush the breath from her. She felt herself in the open air, and heard with almost her last moment in clear consciousness a voice saying, "If the bitch squeals wring her neck."

After that she remembered little. She felt the cold breath of the night, and then swift movement in a man's arms. There was a noise in the air—she thought it was shots and cries, and sudden flashes of light. She was aware of being rushed along, of being suddenly dropped in cover and then again of violent speed. She struggled till her limbs cramped, but she was like a baby in the hands of her captors. And very soon weariness and panic did their part, and a merciful numbness fell upon body and mind.

Janet's shot had awakened the camp. The pickets had fired in answer, the big arc lights had been turned on, and in three minutes the place was feverishly awake. But the sentries had been withdrawn from Janet's hut, since the Gobernador was no longer there, and on that side the scrub came nearest, so that it was easy for the raiders to find cover. Yet they could hardly have escaped but for an unlucky blunder. Geordie Hamilton, hearing the uproar, had assumed that the camp was attacked by its landward approaches. That was the side from which he had always anticipated danger. Therefore, contrary to orders, he led the garrison straight to the camp, and all but stumbled on Radin, Judson, and Laschallas as they made their way to the sea-ravine. This meant that the post on its summit was empty, and the most difficult part of the descent was left unguarded.

Janet awoke from her swoon to find herself in the midst of water. She had a bad headache, and felt rather sick; also her body seemed to be a mass of aches. She was no longer bound, and had been laid on a rough couch of dirty cushions and tarpaulins. The weather had changed; above her was a blue arch of sky, and around her a circle of blue water, except on one side where a distant wall of green and amber told of land.

Slowly recollection came back to her, and with it her powers of observation. She saw that she was in a petrol launch, some ten miles out in the Pacific. There were four men on board. Two were the rabbit-toothed man and the tall hatched-faced fellow she had seen in the hut. Another was sallow with thick black eyebrows, and the fourth was plump and yellow, with sharp little eyes. She lay very still, for all her tremors had gone. She knew the worst now. There had been treachery among the company in the Courts the Morning. D'Ingraville had located their base, but some traitor must have gone out from among them and told the secret of the sea-ravine. These ruffians had come to rescue the Gobernador, and they had known exactly in which hut he slept. They had been foiled by his cold, which proved that he was not privy to the plot, and at this conclusion Janet felt an unreasoning gladness. Not finding him, they had carried her off—no doubt as a hostage. At the thought her heart began to flutter again, but she resolutely steadied herself. The time for foolishness was past. She was not anticipating danger now, but in the thick of it, and must brace herself to meet it. She choked down every thought and memory which might weaken her resolution. Her business was to keep her head and play the game for her side... But at the sight of the men with their evil faces she could not repress a shiver.

They were not unkind to her. One of them brought her water and a towel and she was able to make a sort of toilet. Another fetched her a cup of strong coffee, a box with biscuits in it, and a couple of oranges. She could not eat but the coffee did her good, and her headache began to mend.

Then, from the land side, at a great height an aeroplane came flying. It must have been an assignation, for the men had been on the look-out for it, and a flag was hoisted. On nearer view it was seen to be a sea-plane. It circle twice round the launch, and then slid gracefully down till it floated like a bird on the water. The launch steered towards it, and its occupant was revealed as a slight youngish man, with a fair beard, an oddly-shaped head like a faun's, and grey eyes that were set somewhat too close together. His face, as he caught sight of Janet, expressed surprise. The man called Laschallas spoke to him in rapid Spanish, and his brows darkened. He seemed to be cursing them, and the reply was an impassioned defence.

Then he shrugged his shoulders and bowed to Janet.

“I expected another guest, madame,” he said in French, “but we must rejoice at what fortune has given us. You will do me the honour to accompany me.”

The transshipment was a delicate business, and was not accomplished without a great deal of angry speech. Janet kept a tight hold on her nerves and accepted the inevitable. The four men in the launch were brutes, but what was this smiling, faun-like creature, and whither was he taking her? She felt desperately solitary, cut off from all that was normal and dear.

The plane lifted from the water, and turned seaward to gain elevation. Then it circled round, and steered for the wall of mountain.

Janet's pistol-shot, and the answering shots from the sentries, awakened the camp effectually, but in the thick night, with a volleying wind, it was hard to locate the trouble. Grayne, who was in command, naturally assumed that the danger lay in the neighbourhood of the Gobernador's hut, but Castor was discovered sleeping the heavy sleep of one dosed with aspirin, and Barbara, who slept next door, had heard nothing. The big arc lamps showed everything normal, and, since the light had been promptly switched off in Janet's hut by the raiders, it was presently decided that it had been a false alarm. The arrival of Geordie Hamilton and his garrison from the head of the ravine complicated matters, and it was the better part of an hour before peace was restored. No one doubted that the whole thing had been a blunder of a nervous sentry who had taken a whimsey of the wind for a shot. Barbara went back to bed.

She woke about dawn with an uneasy feeling. Why had Janet not been awakened by the noise—Janet, the lightest sleeper of them all? It was a mild blue morning after the rain, so she slipped on a dressing-gown and ran across to Janet's hut. To her surprise the door stood open, unlatched. The bed had been slept in, but the occupant had clearly got up and dressed. There was a faint smell which puzzled her, till she realised that it was powder; a shot had been fired in the place during the night. Then she noticed that the floor around the doorway was muddied, and that some of the furniture looked as if it had been violently pushed aside. Lastly, on one of the rafters she observed a jagged splinter which could only have been done by a bullet.

With terror in her heart she hurried to find Roger Grayne and in five minutes the camp was astir. The tracks of the raiders were clear on the road to the sea, except when they had been overlaid by those of Hamilton's men. The Indian trailers had no difficulty in pointing to the very place where they had taken cover, and in deciding that there had been three men in the business, three men who, in departing, had been encumbered with a burden... The very spot was found where they had circumvented Hamilton's garrison on their way up. At Post No. 1 it was discovered that one of the scouts had not come back, and his body was presently found in the thicket at the turn of the road. Down on the shore Corbett reported the absence of one of the mestizos who had gone on patrol to the head of the gulf. The section where the cliffs dropped straight to the sea was searched, and blood was found on the reef by the water's edge. The Indians scattered among the shore thickets, and soon reported that they had discovered the tracks of the raiders, both those going and those returning, and across the gulf evidence was found that a petrol-driven vessel had landed recently. The story was plain in all its details. Their base had been raided, and Janet had been carried off.

"They did not come for her." Barbara with tragic eyes clutched Grayne's arm.

"I guess they didn't. They came for the Gobernador. Some swine has double-crossed us and given away his exact location, only he didn't know that his Excellency was sick. They were certainly fooled about that... But, my God! Miss Babs, we can't sit down under this. It's maybe bad strategy, but I'd rather they'd taken twenty Gobernadors than that little lady. Say, what do they want with her? A hostage, I guess. Who'd have thought Lossberg would be so bright?"

"But where is she?" Barbara cried. All the colour had gone out of her cheeks, and her face was a waxen mask of misery.

"Olifa, maybe. Yes, I guess she's in Olifa. Don't worry, Miss Babs. She can't come to any hurt. We're not fighting with savages who torture their prisoners. I wonder what Lossberg's next move will be?"

Grayne went off to give orders for the strengthening of the guards at the sea-ravine, since there lay their Achilles-heel, and Barbara bathed her face and tidied herself to meet Castor. This awful thing must be faced with a stiff lip, at any rate in the presence of the enemy. She was possessed with a cold fury against him. The enemy—his side—had made war on women and stolen that woman whom she had come to love best in the world.

Some rumour had already reached him, for he was in the mess-hut, evidently dressed in a hurry, since he had a scarf round his neck instead of a collar. She did not know what she expected to find in him—triumph perhaps, or a cynical amusement. Instead she found a haggard man with bleared eyes—no doubt the consequence of his feverish chill. He startled her by his peremptoriness. "Have you found her?" he cried. "Lady Roylance?... What has happened?... Tell me quick, for God's sake."

To her amazement he appeared to be suffering.

"No news—except that Janet has gone. We found the track to the water's edge, and there must have been a launch... They murdered two of the guards..."

She stopped, for something in his eyes took away her breath. It was suffering, almost torment. She had never known him as Janet knew him, and had regarded him as a creature of a strange and unintelligible world, though she had reluctantly admitted his power. Now the power remained, but the strangeness had gone. He had suddenly become human, terribly human. She had come to upbraid and accuse; instead she wanted to pity. She found one who shared to the full in her misery.

"Oh, Mr Castor," she cried, "where have they taken her?"

"How can I tell?" he asked fiercely. "Have you sent for her husband?"

She nodded. "Sir Archie is at Loa. He will be here before luncheon."

"And Lord Clanroyden?"

"He is at the other end of the Gran Seco. He is busy with a big movement. He will be told, but I do not think he can come."

"But he must. What does his imbecile war matter?... Oh, you miserable children! You have played with fire and you

will be burned.”

There was so much pain in his voice that Barbara tried to comfort him. “But surely in Olifa she can come to no harm?”

“Olifa! Why do you think she is there?”

“She was carried off by sea. Where else could General Lossberg...?”

“Lossberg! What has he to do with it? Lossberg is not the man to waste time on such a business. He has no desire for my company.”

“But who?”

“There are others besides Lossberg—a far more deadly foe than the Olifa army. I warned Lord Clanroyden. I warned him that the true danger was not in the field... Lossberg is not the man for midnight escapades. He is too stiff. Regular soldiers do not climb ravines by night and stick knives between the shoulders. That is another kind of war. That is the way of the Conquistadors. Remember that D’Ingraville, who first found us out, is one of them.”

Barbara’s face had become as haggard as his own.

“Then where can they have taken her?”

“I do not know,” he said, “but not to Olifa—no, not to Olifa.”

Archie arrived a little after midday. He looked suddenly much older, and Barbara noticed that his limp had grown heavier. He was very quiet, so quiet that it seemed him possible for anyone to express sympathy. In a level, almost toneless voice he asked questions, and carefully went over all the ground between the camp and the ravine-foot. He had a talk alone with Castor, and announced that he was going back to the Gran Seco, and would return some time on the morrow.

Luis de Marzaniga, it seemed, had one foot in the theatre of war and one in Olifa; it might be possible for him to discover whether Janet had been taken to Olifa city. Also Sandy must be seen. He had cut the railway again, and was now engaged in worrying that section of Lossberg’s army which lay around the Mines. Ammunition, it appeared, was getting low, and it was important to replenish the store by captures. It was necessary that Sandy should be consulted, and his Intelligence department might be able to help.

He flew off in the evening, a calm, self-contained, stricken figure, the sight of whom made Barbara want to howl. Once again it was halcyon weather, and the sight of smoke rising in straight spires in the blue twilight against the flaming background of the west almost broke her heart. About this time Janet should have been coming in from her evening gallop, shouting for her bath... There was no dinner in the mess-tent that night, for no one could face a formal meal. Castor had kept indoors all day, and was now occupied in striding round the central square in the way passengers take exercise on board ship. He stalked across to Barbara.

“Lord Clanroyden must come at once,” he said.

“He can’t,” she said. “Sir Archie says that he is needed most desperately where he is. He is conducting a war.”

“You know him well. You have influence over him. Cannot you bring him here?”

The girl for a moment coloured.

“I do not think I have any influence with him, and if I had I would not use it to take him away from his duty.”

“Duty!” he said bitterly. “What duty is there in such fool concern? He has started a fire which he cannot control, and soon it will burn down his own house. His own house, I say. He was a friend of Lady Roylance.”

“So were you, I think,” said Barbara quickly. “Have you too not kindled a fire which you cannot control? The Conquistadors and the Bodyguard were your own creation.”

For a moment there was anger in his face, and then it died out, leaving it curiously bleak and pale.

“I think that is a fair retort, Miss Dasent,” he said, and resumed his sombre constitutional.

Archie returned very early next day, not in the small Shark-Gladas, which was his usual means of travelling, but in one of the big Seaforths which were meant for bombing and load-carrying.

“I want to see Castor,” he told Barbara. “I think he liked Janet, and he can help a lot. I’ve told Hamilton to report here in an hour, for there isn’t much time to lose.”

The three sat in the mess-hut. The Gobernador had recovered his trimness of bearing, but the almost insolent detachment which had hitherto characterised him seemed to have gone. His air was restless, and his voice, when he spoke, had a sharper pitch. There was something angrily defensive in his manner, something uncertain in the eyes which searched the others’ faces.

“I want your help, sir,” Archie said in his new, quiet, toneless voice. “You and my wife were friends, and I don’t think you want her to come to any harm.”

“Help,” Castor broke out. “You make me impotent and then ask my help! I did not start this business. I am the victim of your absurdities. You have plunged this land into a war directed against myself. I am your prisoner, though you call me your leader. You have brought me into a world which is utterly unfamiliar. I have no mastery in it. I am accustomed to organise and govern, but I cannot organise the confusion you call war. I am a reasonable man, and this is the domain of the wildest unreason... Then the crash comes, and you ask my help. You fools! You have made me more powerless than the rudest vaquero.”

“I know, I know,” said Archie soothingly. “I have no business to ask you for favours, but I don’t think you will refuse all the same. You see, it is your old organisation that we have to fear, not the Olifa army. I do not think you want Janet to

suffer at their hands.”

“You have evidence?”

“A little. Enough to act upon.”

“But I cannot control them. I am cut off...”

“No. But you can give me the benefit of your knowledge. Listen, sir. Our Intelligence have their own sources of news, and they are positive that Janet is not in Olifa. How they know I cannot tell, but we have never found them wrong. Further, they say that there are none of the Conquistadors or the Bodyguard now in Olifa. We may take it that the raiders belonged to one or the other. That is your own view, I think. Now, what facts have we? She was carried off in a launch—that we know. If she was not taken to Olifa, she may be hidden somewhere along the coast. That is possible, but not very likely—for two reasons. The first is that our own people know the coast, and my information is that there is no place on the whole line of shore under the mountains where any permanent camp could be made. If they landed Janet, it could only be for a day or a night—it can’t be her final destination. The same is true of the low coastland farther south between the hills and Olifa, where there are nothing but malarial swamps. Janet may be there, but it is not likely, because of my second reason. Whoever carried her off wanted her for in purpose. They came for you, and took her instead, and they can only have taken her as a hostage. To use her as such she must have been taken to some place in touch with the Olifa army, and that must mean either Olifa or the Gran Seco plateau.”

“But how could she reach the Gran Seco except by Olifa?”

“It is only a guess, but yesterday afternoon Peters reported from Pacheco that a plane had been seen flying eastward. It was marked like our own planes, and was flying high. Enemy planes are not allowed in that quarter, and, seeing it bore our own markings, no further notice was taken of it. But it was observed that it was a sea-plane, and since up to yesterday our army had no sea-planes, and Peters knew that, he thought it worth while to mention the fact.”

“Well?”

“We have no sea-planes. That plane was not ours, though it pretended to be. It may have been Lossberg’s, in which case he has diddled us. But I am inclined to think it was somebody else’s. Janet was carried off in a launch. Why should not her captors somewhere out at sea have arranged for a sea-plane to meet them?”

Castor rose and walked to the big wall map.

“Show me the exact spot where the sea-plane was seen,” he said.

Archie pointed with his finger.

“It was flying east?”

“East with a point of south.”

“It was undoubtedly D’Ingraville. I think you are right, Sir Archibald. D’Ingraville met the launch and he has taken your wife with him.”

“Where? Can you help me to that?”

Castor looked at the map again.

“It is the direction of the Pais de Venenos. You have heard of it?”

Archie nodded. “That was my own guess. Tell me more, sir.”

“I can tell you very little. I have been there, but once only, and long ago. My colleagues, whom you call the Conquistadors, know it well. D’Ingraville, especially, and Pasquali. And Romanes—above all Romanes, who should by now have returned from Europe... There is a drug there which they depend upon.” The Gobernador spoke hesitatingly, like a man loath to divulge something of which he is scarcely proud.

“I know about astura. I am told that without it they will die.”

“No—not die—not at once. But they will be unhappy. I have always believed that the Conquistadors would make some violent effort to replenish their supply. They will attempt to open up communications with the Pais Venenos.”

“You think they have gone there—with Janet?”

“I do not think that. It is not a place where which men can dwell. The Conquistadors perhaps—they are immune—but not the Bodyguard. Besides, I do not think a plane could land there, for it is a desperate country of gorges and forests. Somewhere adjacent, perhaps—from which the Pais could be visited.”

Archie was on his feet, striding about excitedly.

“Somewhere adjacent!” he cried, and his voice was harsh with pain. “But where? There are thousands of miles of unexplored country. Somewhere where a plane could land—the sea-plane may have an under-carriage... That must be in the hills. But Peters has all the Pacheco country patrolled, and beyond that the mountains rise like a wall... If only I could get Luis, but Luis has disappeared on some job of his own... Things aren’t going too well with us at the moment, you know. We’re terribly short of supplies, and Lossberg is getting cautious and won’t stick out his head to let us hit it... You’ve told me all you can think of. Excellency? Well, I’m off. Hamilton should be here to report.”

Outside the door stood Geordie Hamilton, the same stocky, impassive figure that had stumped heavily through four years of fighting in France, his blue eyes looking sullenly forth from a mahogany face.

“You’re coming with me, Hamilton,” said Archie. “Got your kit? Full marching order. We don’t know when we will be back.”

"Where are you going?" Castor asked.

"To look for Janet." The young man's face seemed to Barbara to have regained a kind of peace. He would not return alone. Moved by a sudden impulse, she kissed his cheek.

"Thank you, Babs dear," he said. Then he held out his hand to Castor. "Good-bye, I think you wish me well, sir."

It was the first time that any of the party had shaken hands with the Gobernador.

The Seaforth flew first to Loa, where Archie asked for news of Don Luis. He was believed to be on the southern front, somewhere in the Pacheco area, where there was a good deal of activity. Loa itself was at present stagnant, a mere blockhouse to guard the road to the Courts of the Morning, and a forwarding depot for Magdalena. Lossberg's advance party, which a week before had been within twenty miles, had now withdrawn.

Then, hugging the skirts of the hills, and having a good deal of trouble with the eddies of wind that blew down the gullies, Archie flew south-east to Magdalena, Escrick's headquarters, under the snowy peaks of the Spanish Ladies. There he had an interview with Escrick's chief Intelligence officer and was shown the dispositions of the enemy in the Tierra Caliente. The nearest enemy planes were based on the Mines, and were probably at that moment busily engaged, since Sandy was worrying the Universum sector.

But there was no one at Magdalena who had any knowledge of the approaches to the Poison Country; it was out of their area, and belonged properly to Peters.

The right course would have been to seek Peters at Pacheco, and above all things to find Don Luis. But Archie was not in a mood to think calmly. During the flight from the Courts of the Morning his anxiety about Janet had been rising to fever heat. Barbara's kiss of farewell seemed to have let loose a flood of dreadful fancies. He tortured himself with pictures—Janet small and solitary in the hand of men such as he had seen in the Gran Seco streets, men with evil, furtive eyes and corpse-like faces... A week before Sandy had drawn for him a rough map of the whereabouts of the Pais de Venenos, as a preliminary for certain exploratory flights which were contemplated in the south-east angle of the province... At the back of his head he still intended to go to Pacheco, but he felt an uncontrollable impulse first to do another thing. The straight route to Pacheco was over the eastern downs of the Tierra Caliente; but it was still afternoon, the moon would rise early, and even in the dark Pacheco could then be reached on a compass course. To allay his anxiety by action of some sort had become a necessity. He decided to follow the line of the mountains, and find, if possible, the gate of the Poison Country which Sandy had described to him. After that he would get in touch with Luis, and discover from him where in that neighbourhood a sea-plane might have landed.

He took the Intelligence officer into his confidence and explained his purpose. "I expect to be at Pacheco tomorrow. If I don't turn up there, you can tell General Peters the road I meant to take, and get him to tell Senor de Marzaniga. They'll know where to look for me, if I have to descend." He borrowed an extra revolver and a supply of cartridges for Hamilton, who had also his rifle. Likewise he borrowed two thick overcoats, for the nights were cold and he might be late. Hamilton ate a large meal, but Archie had no appetite for anything but a couple of dried figs.

The Seaforth left Magdalena a few minutes after 4 p.m. It was a warm bright afternoon, with the visibility so good that every rock and crinkle were clear on the mountain wall. Archie kept along the watershed where the barrens of the Tierra Caliente changed to a greener country, and where were the springs of the streams that forced their way through the range. The Cordilleras at that point are a double chain, and the country between the two is in part a maze of deep glens leading ultimately to valleys which debouch on the Orazon, and partly a high desert of shale and sand.

Below him was an even level of greenish-grey downs, shading into umber on the west—a land in which there was no sign of human life. He flew low, and saw the ruins of Indian pueblas, the inhabitants of which had been removed to Lossberg's concentration camp. Then these ceased, and he swung nearer the mountains, till he found himself in a long hollow, like a ditch under ramparts. He saw the gleam of water far below, and realised that there were many streams, and that all seemed to be affluents of a considerable river.

It was almost dark before the country began to change. The bald screes of the hills gave way to patches of wood, and at the same time the upper slopes grew more precipitous. Then the hollow seemed to draw to a funnel and the mountains fell back a little to receive it. Two peaks stood like sentinels, and between them lay a great wedge of darkness. The sun was now behind the downs to the west, and as Archie dropped lower the hollow seemed to be already brimming with dusk. Inside the great wedge it was already dark, but beyond were the shadows of dim green mountains.

The journey had taken longer than he thought. There was now no hope of getting to Pacheco much before midnight. Archie resolved to descend on one of the green levels and bivouac for the night. But there was still light enough to look inside the great gorge, for he decided that these were the gates he had been seeking. It was a foolish thing to do at such a time of day, but his anxious mind was beyond prudence. He turned to his left and flew towards the cleft.

The funnel was less dark than he had thought. He was flying low, and could see quite clearly beneath him the sudden abrupt descent of the stream and the mat of forest into which it fell. Soon he had passed the portals and the great cup opened out, lying in a clear green gloom like an emerald. In front of him, perhaps six miles away, a mountain rose out of the deeps, and its crest was a cone of snow, now rosy with the sunset. The periphery of the cup was also snow-rimmed, gold and crimson where the dying sun caught it and elsewhere a cold blue grey.

He dropped still lower. The forest was dense as the grass on a lawn. Tall trees now and then broke it, and sudden rocky spurs, but, though he was less than five hundred feet above it, he could make out no details, except where the river broadened into a leaden pool. The vegetation was as thick as an animal's pelt. A strange odour ascended to him—sweet and stupefying and rotten...

Could Janet be in that jungle of death? Could any human being be there and hope for life? The place seemed like a charnel-house encrusted by foul mosses.

Janet was not there—of that he had a sudden, complete conviction. The horror of the place grew on him, but he still

held on. It was fast growing dark, and out of the forest a fog was rising like a wraith. He saw it billowing up towards him, and started to climb... Then his eye fell on the petrol gauge, and he had an ugly shock. What on earth had happened? He remembered now—he had forgotten to refill at Magdalena as he had intended.

But still he had started that morning with enough for a twenty-four hours' flight. The tank must have sprung a leak, for there were only about twenty minutes of petrol left.

He turned and flew in what he thought was the direction of the entrance to the gorge. There was just a chance that he might reach it in time and find a landing-place beyond it, for there could be no landing in this jungle. But the fog had enveloped him and was now far above him, a horrible, thick, choking whiteness which smelt of violets. He turned to look at Hamilton. That worthy, with the collar of his coat turned up, had his usual sullen calm. "It's comin' on for a thick night," he observed.

Archie looked again and saw that the main tank had gone dry. There was only the reserve tank left, and that would last at the most a quarter of an hour. He climbed steeply, for he remembered that he had been descending since he passed through the gorge. Below him was now thick darkness, but the mist above him seemed to hold the late sunshine. It might be thinner higher up, so he climbed towards the light.

Something not unlike panic had now seized Archie. If his petrol failed before he reached a landing-place, then he must crash in this noisome forest. Horror of the place ripped him like a nightmare. He climbed up and up, struggling to get above the mist, only dimly aware of the direction of his course... Could he hit off the gorge in his suffocating gloom? Was it worth trying? He had seen the zone of snow which encircled the cup. Up there there must be open ground, where a landing might be made. So he contented himself with climbing, bearing blindly to the left. His one aim was to get above the forest.

It was certainly less dark. He was coming out of the main shroud of the fog, and the white veil seemed to have patches in it. The altimeter registered nearly twelve thousand feet... But the forest was climbing with him, and suddenly below him he saw in the brume the top of a tall tree, a thin etching of black in the dimness. He must be far up the containing slopes. Then he observed from the gauge that only a few minutes more of petrol remained. He came to a decision.

"Hamilton," he cried, "we've got to go overboard. Get your chute ready."

There was no change in the man's stolidity. He had practised this drill in the Courts of the Morning, and now quietly made his preparations. Archie directed his spotlight downwards, and once again a fluff of tree tops came into view.

"Quick," he said. "I'll follow in a second."

"I doot I'll get a dunt," said Hamilton grimly as he went over the left side of the cockpit. Archie saw that the chute had opened and righted at once, and that he was descending steadily into the void.

His own task was more difficult. He cut out the switches and pulled the plane into a stall. He meant to go out on the right, when suddenly the right wing began to droop, which meant that it would strike the parachute. He therefore steadied the plane, and followed Hamilton over the left side. He started head foremost, but the risers pulled him upright and the parachute opened. The plane above him was lost in an instant, and Archie, oscillating violently and feeling very sick, plunged into a gulf of primeval darkness.

Something hit his head; then he hung for a second upside-down before slipping into what seemed a gigantic bramble bush which scratched his face. Another bump, a plunge, and Archie found himself standing on tiptoe on solid earth, with the ruins of the parachute and his great-coat hanked in the lower boughs of a tree.

Archie took a good quarter of an hour to disentangle himself from his Absalom-like posture, since, owing to the constriction of his garments, he could not get at his knife, and his hands were numb with cold. When at last he was free, he pitched forward stiffly into a huge tree-fern, which kept him from rolling down the slope. The actual forest was thin, but the undergrowth was dense and water-logged, and the declivity so steep that every step must be matched. The fog was still there, but it was not thick, and faint light filtered through it, so that it was possible to see the ground beneath and the trees above in a dim monotint.

His first business must be to find Geordie Hamilton. He shouted, but it was like speaking with the mouth muffled by olds of blanket. He argued that Hamilton must have descended not more than two hundred yards below him, and that the plane when he left it had been directly ascending the mountain face, so he tried to shape a straight course downhill. But the going was appalling. There were thickets of cactus to be circumvented, an occasional tall tree choked with creepers, and strips of sheer red earth. He stopped very few yards to shout for his companion, but no answer came; it seemed impossible to pierce that deathly stillness.

Presently he realised that at this rate he would soon be lost. He halted and mopped his brow, for he was sweating under the burden of his heavy flying-clothes. And then he heard, apparently from the bowels of the earth, what seemed to be a groan.

"Hamilton," he cried, and, shouting his name, he made his way a little to the left.

At last a reply came, a miserable, muffled voice.

"Is't you, Sir Erchibald?" it said, and it was as if its owner were speaking from under deep water.

The place was a shallow ravine, and as Archie groped his way something very hard and sharp caught him in the neck.

"Hamilton, where on earth are you?" he cried in pain.

"I'm caught in a buss," came an answering groan. "For God's sake get me out, for I've gotten some awfu' jags."

Then Archie remembered his spot-light. It revealed a great clump of the aloe called caraguata, with Hamilton most intricately wedged among the sword-like leaves. Above the spikes, like a dissolute umbrella, waved the parachute. Hamilton hung face downward, his great-coat suspended over him and his legs splayed like a clumsy diver's. He had ceased to struggle, for every movement sent the thorn deeper into his tenderest parts.

Archie stripped to shirt and breeches, and set himself slowly to cut the victim out, but it was the better part of an hour before the work was done, and Hamilton, still apoplectic about the face, was cautiously examining his wounds. He had plenty of them, but only scratches, though he declared that his legs were so stiff that it would be a month before he could walk.

"You'll have to start right away," Archie told him. "We can't stay in this blasted hot-house. We must be pretty near the edge of the tree-line, and once we get above the forest we can find a place to sleep. So step out, my lad, game leg or no. You and I are about equal now."

Slowly and with many stumbles they began the ascent, guiding themselves by the lift of the ground. It was desperately laborious, for sometimes the way was up sheer banks of earth, the remains of old landslides, and as slippery as oil; sometimes through acres of great ferns where the feet sank into deep hollows among the roots: sometimes through cactus scrub which reduced their coat-skirts to rags; often through horrible oozing moss which sent up a stink like a charnel-house. The fog was dying away, and the rising moon made their immediate environment clear, but the better they could see the more hopeless the toil became.

Hamilton panted and sobbed, and Archie's weak leg gave him many falls. The air had none of the wholesome chill of night. A damp heat closed them in, and when now and then a faint waft came up from the valley beneath. It seemed to have a sickening scent of violets. Often they stopped for breath, but they did not lie down. Instinctively they both shrank from contact with that unhallowed soil. Once Hamilton drank from a pool in a stream, and was violently sick.

"We must be about the height of the Matterhorn," Archie said, "and yet it's as hot as hell. This is a cursed place."

"Deed, it's no canny," said Hamilton, gulping with nausea.

Before long it was clear that Hamilton's strength was giving out. Thickset and burly as he was, this greenhouse-mountaineering was beyond him. He stumbled more often, and after each fall took longer to recover. At last he stopped.

"I doot I'm done, sir," he wheezed. "This bloody cemetery is ower much for me! You gang on."

"Nonsense," said Archie, taking his arm. He was dog-tired himself, but to his more sensitive nerves the hatred of the place was such that it goaded him forward like a spur.

"See, we'll take hands. We can't be far from the tree-line."

But it seemed hours before they reached it. Fortunately the slope had become easier and less encumbered, but the two men staggered on drunkenly, speaking no word, their eyes scarcely seeing, so that their falls were frequent, everything blotted from their mind but the will to bodily endurance. So blind were they that they did not notice that the fog was almost gone, and they had come out of the forest before they realised it. Suddenly Archie was aware that he was no longer climbing steeply, and then he was looking across a shelf of bare land which rose to a rim of a pale silver.

He was breathing free air, too. A cool light wind was on his forehead.

"Hamilton," he cried, "I... believe... we're clear."

The two dropped like logs, and the earth they sank on was not the reeking soil of the forest, but the gravel of an upland.

Both lay for a little, their limbs too weary to stretch. Then Archie crawled to his feet.

"Let's go on a bit. I want to feel really quit of that damned Poison Valley. We must find a hole to sleep in."

They staggered on for another half-mile, weakly, but no longer so miserably. The sand and shale underfoot gleamed white as salt in the moonlight, and were broken only by boulders and small scrubby thorns. Then they found a shelf of rock which overhung so as to form a shallow cave. It was now as cold as it had been hot in the covert, the sweat had dried upon them, and the scratches on hands and face smarted in the frost. Each had a small ration of food in his pocket, charqui—which is the biltong the Gran Seco Indians prepare—some biscuits and chocolate, and Arch had a packet of raisins. They supped lightly, for thirst and hunger seemed to have left them, and, cuddled against each other for warmth, both were soon asleep.

Archie woke in an hour's time. He had slept scarcely all during the past three days, and even deep bodily fatigue could not drug his mind. Wild dreams had assailed him—of falling down precipices of red earth into a foetid jungle threaded by oily streams. He woke to find that the moon had set and that it was very dark. Far off there was a call like a jackal barking. There were other things alive on this shelf beside themselves.

Then he heard a sound close at hand—the padding of soft feet on gravel. His spot-light was beside him, and he flashed it in the direction of the feet. About ten yards away stood an animal. At first he thought it was a wolf from its size till he saw its sharp muzzle and prick ears, its reddish fur, and its thick tail. It was a fox, one of the cannibal foxes of the Pais de Venenos that he had heard of from Sandy. The animal blinked in the light, and its teeth were bared in a snarl. Archie reached for Hamilton's rifle, which lay loaded beside them, but he was too late. The great brute turned and trotted off, and passed out of sight among the boulders.

"Enough to put me off fox-hunting for evermore," thought Archie. After that he did not sleep, but lay watching the dark thin to shadows and the shadows lighten to dawn. The sun seemed to leap with a bound over the far Cordilleras, and a morning mist, as white and flat as a snowfield, filled the valleys. Archie's heartsickness returned to him like a fever. Somewhere within the horizon was Janet, but by what freak of fortune was he to get her—himself a mere lost atom at the edge of his endurance, and as ignorant as a babe of this immense, uncharted, unholy world?

Both men soon realised that the Pais de Venenos had exacted its penalty. Hamilton was clearly in a fever, which may have been due to his many cuts, and Archie felt something like a band of hot steel round his head. For breakfast they nibbled a little chocolate and ate a few raisins. Then, as far as their bodily discomfort permitted, they discussed their plans.

"We're up against some solid facts, Hamilton," said Archie. "We're looking for my wife, and I believe she's somewhere within fifty miles, but we've got to admit that we're lost ourselves. All I remember from Lord Clanroyden's map is that if we keep going up the south wall of the Poison Country we'll come to the main range, and south-west of that lies Pacheco. The people we're seeking must be up on the range, but they may be north or south the of Poison Country. We couldn't cross that infernal valley, so let's hope they are on the south. Another thing—we mayn't be able to get up the range—we're neither of us in much form for mountaineering. Also, we've got about enough food to last us with care for two days. We shan't want for water."

"I'll no need much meat," said Hamilton sombrely. "I couldna swallow my breakfast, my throat's that sair."

"We're both dashed ill," Archie agreed. "I feel like a worm, and you look like one. Maybe we'll be better if we get higher."

Hamilton turned a feverish eye upwards. "I doot it's higher we'll be goin'. Anither kind o' Flyin' Corps. Angels."

"That's as it may be. It's too soon to chuck in our hand. You and I have been in as ugly places before this. We're both going on looking for my wife till we drop. We'll trust to the standing luck of the British Army. I've a sort notion we'll find something..."

"We'll maybe find mair folk than we can manage."

"Undoubtedly. If we're lucky enough to get that far, we'll have to go very warily. We needn't make plans till we what turns up. At the worst we can put up a fight."

Hamilton nodded, as if the thought comforted him. A fight with men against odds was the one prospect which held no terrors for him.

The two very slowly and painfully began their march over the shelf and up to the snow-rimmed slopes which contained it. The Pais de Venenos behind them was still a solid floor of mist. Happily the going was good—flat reefs of rock with between them long stretches of gravelly sand. Archie decided that he must bear a little to his right, for there the containing wall seemed to be indented by a pass. They must find the easiest road, for they were in no condition to ascend steep rock or snow. The wind was from the east and wisps of cloud drifted towards them, bringing each a light flurry of snowflakes. They had awoken shivering, and now as they walked their teeth chattered, for both were too sore and stiff to go fast enough to warm their blood.

Suddenly they struck a path—a real path, not an animal's track, but a road used regularly by human feet. Indeed, it seemed at one time to have been almost a highway. At one place Archie could have sworn that the rock had been quarried to ease the gradient, and at another, where it flanked a stream, it looked as if it had been embanked. In that wild place it seemed a miracle. Archie thought that he must be light-headed, so he examined carefully the workmanship. There could be no doubt about it, for his fingers traced the outlines of squared stones. Once this had been a great highroad, as solid as

Roman work. It seemed to come out of the mist of the Poison. Valley, and to run straight towards the pass in the ridge. He pointed it out to Hamilton.

"Aye, there's been folk here langsyne," was the answer. Archie bent over a patch of snow. "Not so long ago. Here are the marks of feet, naked feet, and they were made within the past twenty-four hours."

Slowly they tramped up the glacis of the range towards the pass. Hamilton walked like a man in a dream, stumbling often, and talking to himself. He seemed to have a head ache, for he stopped at the water-pools to bathe his head. The pain in Archie's forehead grew worse as they ascended till it became almost unbearable. He kept his fingers on his eyes to ease the throbbing behind them. But his mind was clear, and he could reason with himself about his condition. It might be the poisoning of the forest—most likely that was true in Hamilton's case—or it might be mountain sickness. He had once had a slight bout in the Karakoram, and he had heard that it was common in the Cordilleras... Just before the summit of the pass he looked back. The tablecloth was lifting from the Pais de Venenos, and the white floor was now cleft with olive-green gashes. The summit of the pass was a hollow between snowdrifts.

There both men stood and stared, for the sight before them was strange and beautiful. Archie had expected another tableland, or a valley of rocks shut in between peaks. Instead his eyes looked over a wide hollow, some three miles in diameter. High ridges flanked it on all sides, and on the west was a great mass of mountain, which he believed must project like a promontory towards the Tierra Caliente. The slopes beneath them were at first boulders and shingle, but presently they became the ordinary grassy savannah, with clumps of wood here and there which seemed to be more than scrub. And in the centre of the hollow lay a lake, shaped like a scimitar, of the profoundest turquoise blue.

He unsling his field-glasses and examined the place. There was no sign of life in it. At various points on the shore he could detect what looked like millet fields, but here was no mark of human habitation. Then he examined a dark blur near the western end, and found something that might have been the ruins of a Border keep.

"We've struck a queer place," he told his companion, but Hamilton turned a blank face. He had almost lost the power of sight; his whole mind was bent on forcing his sick body into movement.

As they began to descend, an oppression seemed to lift from Archie's soul. The horror of the place where he had landed left him, now that he had come into a clean bright country. Also the band of iron round his brow fretted him less. He found that he moved with greater ease, and he could lend a hand to his tottering companion. When they reached the first grass he felt hungry, and they sat down complete their breakfast. But Hamilton could only manage a single raisin, though he drank thirstily from a stream.

The whole place was a riot of blue light, the heavens above and the lake beneath; even the rim of silver sand seemed to catch a turquoise reflection. The air, too, was no longer the dry, throat-catching thing of the high snows, but fresh and clement. The sun warmed them gratefully, and Archie's eye recovered its old keenness. He saw a bird at last and the ornithologist awoke in him.

"By Jove, a black snipe," he cried. "The first I've seen."

The road they had followed skirted the northern edge of the lake and led them straight to the ruins near the western end. At close quarters the strangeness of the latter was increased. This had been a castle, like any Scots peel tower, the guardian of this fair valley. It had long been deserted, but the keep still stood foursquare, of a masonry which time and storm could not crumble. Archie examined it curiously. No mortar had been used, and the stones fitted into each other with such mathematical exactness that a knife could not find a lodgment. There were no signs of windows. Whoever dwelt here must have dwelt in darkness unless he had some means of artificial light... Archie remembered a story which Luis had told him of the old lords of the mountains, who controlled the Poison Country. They dwelt secure, he had said, for they made a belt of poison round them, and in their windowless dwellings they lived by candlelight. No, not candles, Luis had added, something stranger—natural gas, or perhaps electricity—for he believed that they were great men of science...

At the recollection this clod of masonry, solid as a single boulder, seemed to link him up again with the vale of horrors behind him. The sunshine had become less bright, the place less innocent.

Beyond the keep was a meadow where the stream from the lake issued. Here Archie saw something which had been hitherto hidden by the ruins, and which made him drop Hamilton's arm and hobble at his best pace towards it. It was an aeroplane—a sea-plane, drawn up just beyond the sand of the shore.

Archie recognised the make—a Wentworth B—of which there were none in the Gran Seco. His next observation was that it was out of action. The floats had been damaged, and the propeller was bent. Had it crashed?... It was D'Ingraville's machine beyond doubt. Had Janet travelled in it? What had befallen her?

With a sinking heart he examined the thing, and presently he was reassured. The machine was damaged, but there had been no serious accident. It must have alighted in the lake, for it had been drawn by human hands up on the shore. He saw the grooves and ribs which it had made in the sandy beach... He examined it carefully. There was still a good supply of petrol in the tank. Could he use it? A further inspection convinced him that he could not. Repairs were needed, and he had no means of repairing it.

His first impulse was to destroy it. He could easily set it on fire and reduce it to a ruin of bars and wires... But what good would that do? If Janet had come in it and was now somewhere not far off, this might be a means of escape. How, he did not know, but there was no point in burning a possible boat.

Then a few yards off he saw something white on the grass. It was a tiny fragment of cambric, with a monogram in one corner. Janet was always dropping handkerchiefs; he spent his time retrieving them.

He stood with the thing in his hand, and a lump rose in his throat. He wanted to cry, the first tears since his childhood. Janet had sent him a message, Janet who had disappeared into the darkness. By some miracle he had found touch with her, the one chance in a million had succeeded. A great wave of longing and tenderness engulfed him. He stood blindly, as visions of Janet passed before his eyes, her dancing grace, her whimsical humour, her friendly courage. He had picked up her handkerchief, here at the ends of the earth, as he had so often done at far-away Crask...

Then suddenly, for the first time since her loss, there came to him hope. An unreasoning hope, but as vivid as a revelation. She was somewhere near—two days ago, not more, she must have stood on this very spot. He would find her. Nay, he would rescue her. The Providence which had led him thus far so strangely would not fail him.

With this new confidence something returned to Archie. He became his normal self again, and felt desperately sleepy. He had not slept for days. Hamilton sprawled limply near the ruined tower, his burning head pillowed on his arm. Archie got a piece of tarpaulin and some broken struts from the sea-plane, and made him a shelter from the sun, which was now very warm in that bare place. He stretched himself at his side, and in an instant was sound asleep.

He woke to the sound of voices. The covering had been lifted, and around them stood a group of men. Hamilton was sitting up and looking at them with sick eyes.

The men were Indians, but of a type which Archie had never seen before. They were not of the Gran Seco breed, for those were bullet-headed and muscular, whereas these were of a leanness which made them seem inhumanly tall, and their heads were the heads of white men. Instead of the dull beady eyes of the Gran Seco, the eyes of these men were large and bright and lustrous, as if they lived in a perpetual in fever. Their faces were so emaciated as to be almost skulls. Unlike the Indians of Olifa and the Gran Seco who favoured black ponchos, the ponchos of these men were of a dark red—the colour of the raw earth in the Pais del Venenos.

Yet, to his surprise, Archie felt no shrinking from them. They were armed—with blow-pipes and slender lances—but they seemed to have no hostile purpose. They stood in a circle looking down gravely at the awakened sleepers.

Archie scrambled to his feet, and held out his hand as the best gesture of friendship which he could think of. But there was no movement in response. Their hands hung stiffly by their sides.

He tried them in Spanish. He told them that he had flown thither from the Gran Seco, and pointed to the sea-plane to illustrate his mode of travel. He asked them if they had seen any white man in the neighbourhood—especially if they had seen a white woman. Archie's Spanish was apt to be of a biblical simplicity, and he explained his meaning with an elaborate pantomime. He was like a man who has a desperate message to deliver, but who finds himself stricken with partial aphasia.

It appeared that they understood something of what he said, for they began to speak among themselves, in voices pitched so low that they sounded like the murmuring of insects. Then one, who seemed to be their leader, spoke. It was a kind of Spanish, oddly pronounced and very hard to follow, but Archie gathered that he was ordered to accompany them. The speaker pointed down the ravine towards which the stream from the lake flowed.

"Right, my lad," said Archie, "I'll go with you fast enough," and he nodded and grinned and waved his hand.

Then one of them bent over Hamilton, who had lain back on the ground again with his hands pressed to his head. It looked as if these strange people knew something of medical science, for the man felt his pulse and the beating of his heart. He spoke to the others, and they moved apart. In a few minutes a little fire had been made of driftwood and thorn-scrub, while two of them took charge of Hamilton. They stripped off his great-coat and tunic, and bared him to the waist, and then they proceeded to knead and pinch certain muscles, while his head hung limply over their knees. Then they prepared a queer little greyish pill which they induced him to swallow.

Meantime an iron girdle had been put on the fire, and on it a number of little dried kernels roasted. Archie was given a share, and found them palatable: they tasted like crayfish, but may have been a kind of caterpillar. Then a rough litter was made, out of their lances and the tarpaulin, and Hamilton, now in a deep sleep, was hoisted thereon.

Archie made a last effort to get some news to allay his anxiety and nourish his hopes. "White woman," he repeated, pointing down the glen of the stream. But he got no answer. The leader, whom he addressed, faced him steadily with his bright, inscrutable eyes. But before they moved off they did the thing which Archie had decided against. They spilled petrol over the wings of the sea-plane and applied to them a flaming brand from the fire. As Archie looked back, he saw beside the blue lake in the serene sunshine the bonfire burning garishly, like a sacrifice before the altar of the immemorial tower.

The third day after Archie's departure, the threat to the Courts of the Morning became urgent. The first word came from Escrick's Intelligence; there had been a succession of small fights in the Loa district, and Grayne was warned to extra vigilance. His planes patrolled in a wide radius, and Grayne himself was confident that no enemy machine could reach them. "D'Ingraville might, if he isn't otherwise engaged," he said, "but they've gotten nobody else of his class." But definite news came by was of Olifa that there would presently be an attack in force from the sea, and that Lossberg had relinquished his Fabian tactics and was now clearly pushing northward. Loa might have to be abandoned any hour, and then would come the advance up the shelves of the foothills. It might be made a slow and costly business, but in the end it could not succeed, for the defence could not indefinitely oppose his superior numbers, his Schneider batteries, and his ample machine guns. The time was drawing near when they must give up their mountain base.

The strangest thing about the new situation was its effect on the Gobernador. It might have been expected that the approach of his friends would put him into a state of extreme restlessness, that he would wait eagerly for news of each stage and welcome the hope of escape. Instead he seemed to resent it. He spoke of it with irritation, as if impious hands were being laid on something sacred. He was resentful, too, of Sandy's failure—for he was certain that he had failed.

"Lossberg has got his skirts clear," he told Barbara. "He feels himself strong and secure enough to take the offensive. That means that Lord Clanroyden's scheme has miscarried. Lossberg, in spite of his pinpricks, is getting all the supplies he wants, and has leisure to make a bold attack on our base. He is neither rattled nor embarrassed, and he has no notion of making peace. Clanroyden's was an ingenious plan, but it was bluff, and the bluff has been called. Once it fails, we have no second string. It is our turn to be driven from post to pillar... and there's far more against us than Lossberg. We have no news of Lady Roylance?"

There was more than exasperation in his tone as he spoke, there was an aching anxiety. Barbara, who in these last lays had become a tense, silent being, looked at him curiously.

"I think that we have succeeded in one thing, Excellency," she said.

"What?"

"We have made you an ally. This war was directed against you. Now you speak as if you were sorry that it was not going better."

"Nonsense," he said sharply. "I am anxious about Lady Roylance."

Next day there was disquieting information. Loa had been evacuated in the night owing to Lossberg's pressure, and that general was now beginning his movement northward on scientific lines. His mounted troops were clearing and guarding his flanks, his pioneers were pushed forward to improve the roads for his batteries, and two of his mechanised battalions were already in the foothills. Their progress could be delayed, but with Sandy and the bulk of his force engaged at the other side of the Gran Seco it could not be seriously opposed. Sandy had long ago decided that it was no part of his business to resist any movement of Lossberg's too long.

Grayne rapidly calculated.

"He will take four days at the earliest to get here. We could lengthen them out to six, but it isn't worth it. That gives us plenty of time, for we've got all the details of the evacuation settled long ago. The stuff we're taking with us has already begun to leave for Magdalena... No, Miss Babs, I guess Lossberg can't hit off that road, it's our covered Valley of Virginia, and he could no more stop our using it than General Banks could stop Stonewall Jackson. It's way out of the reach of his patrols. But we can't cut it too fine. Before his first troops get to the place they call Three Fountains, every soul here has to be on the road to Magdalena and this place one big bonfire."

Barbara asked about the sea-ravine.

"We'll get early news of that from the air," was the answer. "I'm not going to waste one solitary man on holding it. We've had it mined and monkeyed with, so as it will be a steep mountaineering proposition for the dago sailormen, but it's not going to be anything more. We'll retire shelf by shelf and watch the fireworks."

Two nights later it was reported by wireless that destroyers had left Olifa for the north, and the following morning they were sighted by Grayne's air scouts about twenty miles south of the Courts of the Morning. This news enabled Grayne to adjust his time-table. The destroyers entered the gulf at 11.30 a.m., but they seemed to find difficulty with that uncharted coast, and it was well into the afternoon before they attempted to their men. Corbett and his garrison had been withdrawn from the shore, and the hut left apparently intact. But the first mariners who entered it had various unpleasing surprises, with the result that the occupation of the beach became a matter of careful reconnaissance, and darkness had fallen before the last of the landing-parties was on shore. Corbett, now at Post No. I, waited grimly for the morning advance.

The last day in the sanctuary was for Barbara like some strange motion-picture seen from uneasy stalls. She had nothing to do except to wait and watch. The Courts been dismantled till they looked like a disused builder's yard. The tall poles of the wireless installation had gone, the huts were empty, the great storehouse was bare except for the inflammable material which could be fired by a single fuse. One solitary aeroplane patrolled the sky. White mechanics, troopers, mestizos, Indians, all had gone except the guard which was to accompany herself and the Gobernador. It was a clear brightly-lit day and rather cold. From the sea-ravine could be heard an occasional rumble and sputter of fire, but the only garrison left there now was Corbett and two of his lieutenants. The Olifa advance was three-quarters of the way up the ravine, and Corbett had been ordered, after seeing to the last great explosion, to make his best speed to the huts. As Barbara looked round the deserted camp which for weeks had been her home, she wanted to cry.

Departure seemed a farewell both to her hopes and her friends.

The Gobernador, muffled in a great blanket-coat, joined her. He too looked at the bare walls and the desolate compounds.

"That is the curse of war," he said. "It makes one destroy what one loves."

"I feel as if I were leaving home," said Barbara.

"I did not mean this place," was the answer. "I was linking of Lady Roylance."

Presently there fell on their ears a dull roar from the direction of the sea-ravine. Grayne appeared with his watch in hand.

"Time to start now, Miss Babs. Corbett will be here in five minutes. Lossberg is a mile short of Three Fountains."

They mounted their wiry little horses, while the guardian aeroplane flew very slowly to the south. It was almost dusk, and as they turned into the forest trail they stopped instinctively for one look backward. Suddenly the Courts were bright with tongues of fire, and Corbett and his assistants joined them. It was to the accompaniment of roaring fires behind, which made a rival glow to the sunset, that party disappeared into the gloom of the trees. As they bent eastward under the skirts of the mountain the crackling and the glow died away, and presently, at a headland above a deep glen, Grayne halted. From far away in the muffled foothills to the south came the chatter of machine guns.

"That is the last word," he said. "Lossberg is at Three Fountains and our defence is falling back to join us. I'm sorry. I'd got to like the old place."

For hours they rode through the dark forest. There was no moon, and the speed was poor, for they guided themselves only by contact. The Indians who led the way had to move slowly to keep pace with the groping, jostling cavalcade behind. Barbara and Castor rode in the centre of the group and, full of their own thoughts, spoke scarcely a word to each other, except of apology for a sudden jolt. The Gobernador had accompanied them without protest. He seemed to have no ear for the distant rat-tat of the machine guns of his friends.

About ten o'clock they halted to bivouac for the night.

It was a hollow tucked between the knees of the mountain spurs. Some summer thunderstorm had once set the forest alight, and for acres beside the stream there was bare ground carpeted with moss and studded with the scarred stumps of trees. Half a dozen fires were soon burning, and supper was eaten from the saddle-bags. Barbara had her sleeping-tent, but she ate with Castor beside one of the bivouacs. She noticed how clumsily he dismounted from his horse, and how stiffly he moved. This was not the life he knew, and he was no longer young.

It was a quiet night without a breath of wind, but chilling towards frost. The sky was ablaze with stars, which there in the open gave light enough to show the dim silhouettes of the overhanging hills. As the two sat side by side in the firelight, Castor smoking his pipe, his figure hunched in that position peculiar to townsmen who try to reproduce in the wilds the comfort of a chair, the girl realised that something had happened. Hitherto she had felt it a duty to entertain the Gobernador, making conversation as one does with a stranger. Now she found that there was no such need. She could be silent without impoliteness. He had become her friend, as he had been Janet's, a member of her world, whose thoughts she could instinctively discern, and who could anticipate her own.

For the last days she had been slipping dangerously near the edge of her self-control. Janet's danger seemed only a part of the general crumbling of life. She had the sensation of walking on quicksands, with a thin crust between her and unspeakable things. But the ride in the forest—movement, even if it were towards the unknown and the darkness—had put vigour again into her blood, and now in this great hollow hand of the mountains, under a blazing canopy of stars, she felt an irrational hope. She turned to her companion, who had let his head sink back against the flaps of his saddle and was staring upwards.

"I thought the Courts of the Morning was a refuge," she said, "but I think it must have been also a prison. I feel freer now... I feel nearer Janet."

He did not answer. Then he asked: "Where were you brought up, Miss Dasent? What kind of life have you had? You can't be more than twenty-one or twenty-two."

"I am twenty-four," she said. She began to tell him of her childhood, for it comforted her to talk. She spoke of a rambling country-house high up in the South Carolina piedmont, with the blue, forested hills behind; of a childhood among old coloured servants; of winter visits to the Florida shores; of barbecues each autumn for the mountain folk; of spring gallops among upland meadows or on the carpeted trails in the pinewoods; of days with a bobbery pack of hounds in difficult pockety country. She found herself speaking easily and naturally as if to an old friend. Her school days in Charleston, her first visits to Washington and New York, her first crossing of the Atlantic—she made a pleasant picture of it all as stages in a progressive happiness.

"Why do you want to hear this?" she asked at length. "It is so different a world from yours—so very humble."

"It is a different world—yes. I can judge one thing about you. You have never known fear. No man or woman or animal has ever made you afraid."

She laughed. "How preposterous! I have been often terribly afraid."

"No. You have never met a fear which you were not ready to face. You are brave by instinct, but perhaps you have not been tested. When you meet a fear which draws the blood from your heart and brain and the vigour from your nerves and still keep your face to it—that is the test."

"Have you known such a fear?" she asked.

"I? How could I? You cannot fear what you despise! I have been too unhappily fortunate in life. I began with advantages. I was educated by my father, who was an embittered genius. I inherited very young a great fortune!... I was born in Austria, and therefore had no real country. Even before the war Austria was a conglomerate, not a people... I was brought up to despise the world, but I did not learn the lesson fully, for I excepted myself. I found that I was cleverer than other people, and that my brains enabled me to use those others. How could I ever be afraid of what I could use? For twenty years I have watched a world which I despised as futile, and pulled the strings of its folly. Some of those years were occupied by war. I took no apparent part in the war, for I had no fatherland, but I caught fish in its troubled waters. I evolved a philosophy, but I have never lied to myself, and I knew that I cared for that creed only because it flattered my egotism. I understood humanity well enough to play on its foibles. I thought that it was all foibles, save for one or two people like myself in each generation. I wanted to adjust the world so that it would be in the hands of this select few. Oh, I was supremely confident. I believed in the intellect, and mine told me that I was right. I even cultivated a dislike of the things and the people that were opposed to my creed. But there was no passion in my dislike—there is no passion in contempt, just as there is no fear. I have never been afraid—how could I, when I saw mankind like little ants running about on my errands? Therefore my courage has never been tried. But there is this difference between us—I know that you are brave, and I do not think that I am."

"What nonsense!" Barbara exclaimed. "You have amazing fortitude. Look how you have behaved since we carried you off."

"That was not fortitude, it was bewilderment. I have been beginning to wonder, to puzzle. I have never before been puzzled in my life. I have lost my contempt."

"That is a good thing," and she smiled. "My father had me taught Latin and I remember what an old bishop of the Middle Ages said. He said that the advancing stages in human wisdom were 'spernere mundum, spernere sese, spernere nullum.'"

He lifted his head sharply.

"I have gone through the first stage," he said. "I have despised the world. I think I have reached the second—I am coming to despise myself... and I am afraid."

The ride next day was in a difficult country, for it became necessary, in order to avoid the deep-cut ravines of torrents, to climb high up on the mountainside. The path was good, for it had been used incessantly for transport during the last months, but the weather was vile, for the south-west wind brought a storm of rain, and the party rode all day in an icy bath. The track ran with water like a millstream, the trees were too scattered to give protection against the slanting spears of rain, and in the thicker coverts a steady shower-bath descended from the canopy.

Till the late afternoon the downpour continued, and what with slipping and plunging horses, water at every ford whirling to the riders' boots, and the relentless soaking cataracts of rain, there was no bodily comfort that day.

Barbara, herself lithe and active as a boy, saw that the Gobernador bore the labour ill, and was very near the edge of his strength. He managed his horse clumsily, and often in the steeper places she took his bridle. At one of the fords it was only by a vigorous haul that she saved him from a ducking.

Before evening the rain ceased, the sun came out, and that high cold place there was no steamy mist, only a tonic smell of wet mountain soil and a jewelling of every herb. The encampment at dusk was in a stony trough, where a shelf of rock made a deep overhang, and tents could be set up under it as under a roof. Barbara assisted the Gobernador to dismount, and so weary was he that he almost fell into her arms. She attended herself to his comfort, stripped off his soaking boots and blanket-coat, ransacked his valise for dry clothes, compounded with the assistance of Roger Grayne a merciless cocktail, and made his bed in a dry nook of rock not too far from the warmth of the fire. She found him curiously helpless. He was too weary to protest, and had as little knowledge of how to look after himself as a recruit on his first day's service.

After supper he seemed to recover. A woman who has nursed a man feels a protective interest in him, and Barbara found a new ease in talking to him. How had she ever looked on one so helpless as a great criminal! She dropped the formal "Excellency" with which she had been in the habit of addressing him. She had made him get into his sleeping-bag at once, and eat his supper among a pile of coverings. Now he reclined like an ancient Roman at table, the great fire lighting up the rocky antrum and silhouetting against the darkness his noble head and brows and the nose like a ship's prow.

"Do you know," he said, "I have hardly ever in my life endured bodily discomfort or pain? I have never been ill. I know so little of what is in the world."

He seemed to have divined the girl's thoughts. He had used human beings as pawns, careless of their sufferings. She thought that Janet was right—that he had a short-range imagination. That was his defence. His cruelties had been blindness, rather than purposeful crime. She looked on him with a kindlier eye.

Then they spoke—a sure proof of intimacy—of their friends. Grayne sat with them for a little, and then went off on a tour of inspection. As he went, Castor's eyes followed him. "That's a good boy! You have many like him?"

"Plenty. America produces them in bulk."

"And Britain. A different type, but the same in essentials. But they are only company officers—at the best, perhaps, brigadiers. It is commanders-in-chief that we need."

"There is Lord Clanroyden," said the girl.

"Perhaps. I am not sure. He has most of the gifts, but has he ever faced fear—faced it, and gone through to the other side? His eye is that of a leader, but I do not see in it the depths of the man who has passed the ultimate test."

"You are an acute observer," she said.

"I am becoming one," and he smiled. "I have observed something else... If it is a liberty, I ask forgiveness... I have noted that when he was near you you moved away, as if you shrank from too near a contact. A little nervous shiver ran over you. That does not mean dislike. I think it means that you are in love with him, for even when you moved away your eyes were happy."

"I think you are very wise," she said quietly. "But Lord Clanroyden will never have a thought for any woman... I am going to give you a hot drink, and then you must sleep. To-morrow will be a long day."

Next day they came out of the foothills on to a high shelf of ground, under the peaks called the Spanish Ladies. By midday they reached Magdalena, which, since Fort Castor and Loa had gone, was now Escrick's only base. They were here at a lower elevation, and in ordinary savannah, greening already and scented with the curious nut-like odour of a mountain spring. The cantonments, hidden in a fold of ground, could be recognised from afar by the wireless poles. Magdalena was still secure, and apparently unknown to the enemy, whose nearest post was a hundred miles distant. But the place was under strict discipline, and it was through two lines of sentries that they made their way into the dusty circle of huts and horse-lines.

Escrick himself was there, and he and Grayne had much to discuss, so Barbara and the Gobernador lunched alone in the General's hut. The latter had lost his air of fatigue and bewilderment. His eyes scanned sharply every detail of the place, as though it was an environment, still unfamiliar, with which it was his business to become acquainted.

"These people are losing," he told Barbara. "I feel it in the air. I felt it a week ago in the Courts of the Morning Just at present things are going badly for us."

But there was neither disappointment nor elation in his tone. He spoke briskly, as if he had come to some decision. Later, when Escrick and Grayne joined them, it was he who directed the conversation.

"Speak to me frankly, General," he said. "I am your commander-in-chief in name. I want an exact statement of the situation as you see it."

Escrick had still his quiet, sleepy manner. His blue eyes were as placid as ever, and his voice had its soft drawl. But he looked an older man, and his brick-red face had been fined down and sharpened.

"Things aren't so bad, sir. I would say they we going on according to plan, if that phrase hadn't got blown upon. The loss of Loa don't signify, and we always realised that sooner or later we'd be shoved out of the Courts of the Morning."

"It will be the turn of this place next."

"I think not. Lossberg hasn't got on to the track of Magdalena. It will be Pacheco's turn first. He must know about Pacheco."

"Well, Pacheco be it! If he takes Pacheco, what will you do?"

"Shift somewhere else. It's a big country, and aren't tied down to any lines of communication."

"But that can't go on for ever. Where are you going get your supplies—your munitions and your food?"

"From Lossberg. We've been pretty lucky so far."

"The railway? How is that working?"

"So-so. We worry it a bit, but he's got the best part of a division on it now, and he's building blockhouses. The Chief isn't finding it so easy to keep it crippled."

"And the Mines?"

"That's what you might call the main front. We have a scrap there every second day. And of course we're busy over the whole country. We don't give Lossberg time to sit down and think."

"General, answer me one question." The Gobernador's face and voice had a sudden authority which Barbara had never observed before. He seemed to be again the chairman residing at a council of the Gran Seco administration. "Are you certain that Lossberg is not winning?"

Escrick looked his questioner full in the face. "He ain't winning. But, if you press me, our side ain't winning neither."

"Then he is winning. He has only to maintain himself and he is bound to win in the end. And that end is not very far distant. I should like to see your returns of supplies. Remember, I am a business man, and this is my subject."

Papers were sent for, and the Gobernador pored over them, making calculations with a pencil. Then he asked for a map, and a big one was spread out for him on a table.

"You are losing," he said at last. "If I made a graph of the position your line would be going down and Lossberg's slowly rising. You know that without my telling you. In rations and ammunition you have begun these last weeks to give out more than you take in. That can only have one end."

Escrick nodded. "Seems so," he said dryly. "It was bound to happen. Our only chance was to delay its happening till we had made Lossberg think it could never happen. We were striking at his nerves, and the nerves of Olifa. But we have failed. Lossberg isn't rattled one bit. He is really rather comfortable. He is planted at the Gran Seco city and at the Mines. He is getting up his stuff by the railway, and he is going to get it quite easily when his blockhouses are completed. He has sufficient reserve of vitality to take Loa and drive us out of the Courts of the Morning. Presently he will drive us out of

Pacheco and Magdalena. He won't get tired of the game and call on the President of Olifa to make peace. He is quite cheerful. Shall I tell you what will happen next?"

He leaned forward, till his lean face was close to Escrick's.

"He is going to get the Mines started. At half-power or quarter-power, no doubt, but still started. He will find labour among the concentrados or he will import it. Soon there will be freight-trains running to Olifa as before. And we shall be driven back bit by bit into the mountains, getting fewer every day."

"We've had mighty small losses so far," said Escrick.

"They will come—never fear. From starvation, if not from bullets. Make no mistake, they will come. Do you know what we are now, General Escrick? A rebellion on the defensive, and that is the feeblest thing known to history."

The Gobernador spoke with a passion that silenced his hearers. There was no exultation in his voice; rather it seemed to be bitter with reproach and disappointment.

Then Grayne spoke.

"We're keeping our end up in one branch," he said. "The air. Bobby Latimer got two enemy planes yesterday. We've got the whip hand of them there all right. We can fly anywhere we like in this darned country, and if we weren't short of bombs we could mess up things considerable for old Lossberg."

Then Barbara asked a question which had been on her lips since the moment she arrived. She did not expect an answer, for Sir Archie's objective had been Pacheco and Janet's kidnapping had naturally not been made public in the army.

"Have you heard anything of Sir Archibald Roylance?" she asked.

Escrick shook his head. "He came here five days back. I wasn't here, but he saw Lowson, my Chief of Intelligence. He was going to General Peters and he left a message that he was flying close to the mountains. He never turned up at Pacheco, and our planes have been all over the ground and can't find any trace of him."

A small cry was wrung from Barbara's lips. The Gobernador got to his feet and walked to the door. The fatigue of yesterday had returned to him and was shown in his cramped movements, but there was no weariness in his voice and eyes.

"Where is Lord Clanroyden?" he asked.

"At Pacheco. General Peters is having the heavy end just at present. Yesterday he had quite a show at the Universum."

"Telegraph to him that I am coming. Can you send Miss Dasent and myself by air?"

"Sure. One of Captain Latimer's men is going there this afternoon, for we're concentrating for another try at the railway... But hadn't you better stay here, sir? Pacheco soon won't be too safe for civilians."

The Gobernador smiled. "I suppose I am a civilian, but I'm not thinking about safety. I'm going to Lord Clanroyden to help him to make peace."

Escrick whistled softly. "You won't succeed, sir. From what you have said, peace must mean surrender, and we're not likely to be in the mood for that. Lossberg may drive us up into the snowfields, but devil a man of us will cry 'Kamerad!'"

The Gobernador's smile broadened till he looked almost in cheerful. "I know, I know," he said. "Nevertheless I hope to in make peace."

In the late afternoon, in a world of soft airs and a warm stillness, Barbara and Castor flew over the barrens of the Tierra Caliente. Thirty miles off on their left the great mountains flamed in the setting sun, and in the twilight they saw before them the line of steep cliffs which ran at right angles to the main range and made the southern wall of the Gran Seco. A little short of it they swerved eastward into the secluded valley of Pacheco.

Sandy was sitting in his hut with his elbows on a deal table, studying by the light of two candles a paper which lay before him. An aide-de-camp brought him a message which made him rise to his feet and stare blinkingly at the door.

The Gobernador stood before him, bent a little like a man whose every limb aches with stiffness. He did not hold out his hand. "Lord Clanroyden," he said, "I have come to take over the command with which you honoured me some time ago."

Barbara interposed. She ran forward and seized Sandy's hand.

"Janet!" she cried. "Have you any news of Janet?"

Sandy stood holding her hands, his face a study in perplexity.

"I don't know," he said. "I have just had this letter from Luis. He has disappeared for the last eight days... Sit down, please, all of you. I'm very glad to see you. Tommy, get seats, and get a lamp of some kind... You'll want food. Tell them at the mess... Here is Luis's letter, brought by an Indian half an hour ago. I'm hanged if I know what to make of it."

The letter was an oblong of rough paper, which had been rolled inside a hollow stem. It might have been torn from a sketching-block. The message had been written with an indelible pencil, and was a good deal blurred. It ran:

"For C.-in-C. Most urgent. Do not worry about the lady. Patrol by air line N22a to PT13c—also by mounted patrols—let no man pass west or north. Send troop without fail on receipt of this up Cabalpas valley to camp foot of third left-hand tributary counting from Maximoras. From camp they should patrol in arc NNE to E. Do not leave Pacheco but await me. L. de M."

Barbara almost snatched the paper from him.

"It is from Don Luis. He has found Janet. She must be safe, for he tells us not to worry. But what does the rest mean?"

The aide-de-camp had brought a big paraffin lamp which illumined the great map on the wall.

"One thing we can settle," Sandy said. "Luis is referring to our map squares." He held the lamp high. "The line from N22a to P13c—there it is," and he drew a blue pencil along it. "Look. It is the chord of an arc which covers all the south-east angle of the Gran Seco. See, Excellency, it stretches from north of the entry to the Pais de Venenos right down to the southern wall. Well, that's simple."

He rang a bell and gave certain orders. "We shall want most of our planes for the job, and the railway raid to-morrow must be countermanded: It's a longish stretch of country, so we will begin at dawn. The mounted patrols can start to-night... Now for the rest of it." He scribbled two words on a piece of paper. "Take this to Jeffries and get him to ask his Indian scouts about them. Send me the man who knows where Cabalpas and Maximoras are."

When the aide-de-camp had gone he turned to the Gobernador.

"You are in command, sir. How do you read this message?"

"Apparently Don Luis de Marzaniga has found Lady Roylance. I hope she is safe, but I do not know. Perhaps he only wants to dissuade us from looking for her because he has other things for us to do. There are people in the mountains whom he wants to keep there. We can assume, I think, that these are Lady Roylance's captors. They must be the Conquistadors and their followers. But why does he want to keep them bottled up? Perhaps he has a plan for taking them all prisoners at once, and does not wish them to scatter."

Sandy rubbed his chin. "I think there must be more in it than that," he said. "To rescue Janet is desperately important. And Archie! Where in Heaven has poor old Archie got to? He has flown out of creation somewhere between here and Magdalena. But it doesn't greatly matter what happens to the Conquistadors. To hang them all in a bunch won't bring us nearer winning this war. I wish Luis hadn't been so cryptic. Perhaps he was having a hustled time when he scribbled this letter. No, we could find out nothing from the messenger. He was a friendly Indian of the foothills, and could only tell us that it had been passed on to him from a friend with a word which he was bound to obey. It may have gone through twenty hands before it reached us."

"But Luis himself will soon be here to explain," said Barbara.

"But when? And there may be a good deal to do before that."

There was a knock at the door, and the aide-de-camp returned accompanied by a tall Indian, whose belt of tiger-cat skins proclaimed a hunter.

"Colonel Jeffries says that this is the best of his scouts, sir. He knows where the places are."

Sandy looked hard at the man. "I have seen you before," he said in Spanish. "You were with Don Luis de Marzaniga and myself when he visited the Pais de Venenos."

The Indian stood stiffly to attention. "I was with you," he said. "I have known the Senor Luis since he was a child. What do you seek of me, my lord?"

"Where is Maximoras?"

"It is the place which we in our tongue call Hatuelpec, where once long ago was a great city. In six hours' riding from Pacheco towards the sunrise, you will reach a river under the mountain called the Blue Wolf. Into that river enters another flowing from the sunrise, and up that river in three hours you will reach a little plain full of great stones. That place is Hatuelpec, which you call Maximoras."

Sandy traced the route on the map. It led him into country marked only by vague contours of mountains, as blank as the heart of Africa in maps of a century ago.

"And Cabalpas?"

The man corrected him. "The name is Catalpas—or as we say Arifua. It is the little river which flows by Hatuelpec."

"Do you know the third tributary on the left hand above Maximoras?"

The Indian considered, and then a strange look came into his face. "I know the stream. It is the way to—" He stopped. "It is the way to a place which we call Iliyabrutia, which means the Thrones of the King."

"You have been there?"

"No, my lord, nor any of my race. It is a place accursed and the abode of devils."

"You can guide a party to the Catalpas valley?"

"Beyond doubt. But the road is not easy, for it is among the broken places of the hills. It is a journey of twelve hours for good horses."

Sandy turned to the aide-de-camp. "My compliments to General Peters and ask him to have ready a patrol of fifty picked troopers to start in an hour's time. They will take rations for three days. This man will be their guide. I suggest that Captain Rivero is put in command." Then to the Indian: "Go, brother, and God be with you. You will show the way to Maximoras."

"El Obro commands." The man saluted and went.

An orderly announced dinner, and they crossed the square to the mess-hut.

"I have taken to dining alone," Sandy announced, "To-night there will only be we three. I can't offer you much in the way of food, for we're short of what we used to call hospital comforts. We're getting very near to the 'hog and hominy' of your ancestors. Miss Barbara."

He spoke lightly and cheerfully, but as Barbara looked at him across the rough table she noticed a profound change. Before, she had seen him worn to the last limits of his physical strength, but there had always remained a certain lift and effervescence of spirit. Now, though his face was less haggard than she had seen it, it was also less vital. His eye had dulled, and there were lines of strain on his forehead and a tightness of suffering about his mouth. He sat, too, listlessly in his chair, like a man oppressed with a great weariness. He looked up suddenly and caught her eye and seemed to brace himself.

"We have some hope at last—about Janet," she said.

"A shred, A week ago it would have given me a new tack of life, but now I seem to have got beyond hoping. The thing has tortured me so much that the ache is dull."

The girl looked at him and saw an anxiety deeper even than her own. Instinctively she tried to comfort.

"But it wasn't your blame. It was ours—up in the Courts of the Morning. We kept too slack a watch."

"The whole blame was mine. This war was made by me—by your uncle partly, but mainly by me. I seem to be fated to wreck the things I care about."

"That is the fate of all of us." The Gobernador had hardly spoken up till now. "That is also my fate. I have made a great industry, and now I am destroying it. I have become a friend of Lady Roylance, and she is in danger from that which I have created. I have had dreams, and now I am trampling on them."

The words seemed to touch a spring in Sandy which released a new vigour. His figure lost its listlessness, he sat upright, and into his eye came something of the old fire.

"You mean that? By God, then we cannot be beaten. We have won the big stake."

"No. You are wrong. We have still to win it. Supposing I died to-night, in what way would you be better off? Lossberg will wear down your resistance in time, and his methods will not be gentle. The republic of Olifa will not be merciful conquerors. The old Gran Seco will be restored—without its Gobernador—and the people of the Tierra Caliente will be slaves again. Olifa will faithfully copy my methods, but without—if I may say so—my intelligence. You may in the end get fair terms for most of your white officers, since they are valuable for the industry, but you will get no terms for the rank and file. Therefore I say that whatever may become of me, you have not yet begun to win. At present you are losing with terrible speed. Can you deny it?"

"We can never lose," said Sandy. "Assume the worst—assume that we are broken up like a covey of partridges and forced in bands into the mountains. We can still make the Gran Seco a hell for any Olifa administration. They may start the Mines, but they'll only limp along. They must come to terms with us..."

Castor broke in. "Forgive me. Lord Clanroyden, but you do not understand the mind of such a state as Olifa. She has been peaceful and prosperous for a time, but it is not long since she had Indian wars grumbling all along her borders. She is accustomed to a skin deep civilisation. Lossberg will enjoy the task of policing this territory, and Olifa will run the Mines again and not grumble at the decline in her profits. Remember, she has solid reserves which I have given her... We must be candid with each other, if I am to accept the command with which you have honoured me."

Sandy fixed his eyes on the other's face.

"You have changed your views, Excellency. I congratulate you profoundly. But I am curious to know just why."

Castor smiled. "For once in my life I can give no reason—no logical reason. Put it that I am a little weary of my old self. Say that I lived in a rather dismal world and see the door ajar which leads to a brighter one. Put it any way you like... I am here to help you to win this war, because victory will benefit me—oh yes, enormously... I have not lost my ambitions, but they have a slightly different orientation to-day... Now let us talk business."

The door opened and a new figure entered—a big man in a most disreputable suit of khaki. He had a full, rather heavy face, which had been burned to something very like the colour of his clothes. There was dust in his hair, and dust rimmed his large placid eyes.

"Say, this is a nice party," he said in a voice cracked with thirst. "Why, Babs child, I heard you were here... I'm mighty glad to see you so blooming. And Mr Castor, too... But I can't talk till somebody gives me a drink, for my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth, and I've gotten a hunger like nothing on earth."

A mess-servant brought him a long drink of lime-juice and sparklets, and the big man took his place at the table between Sandy and Barbara. He raised his tumbler to the Gobernador.

"I suppose," said the latter, "that I must forget Senor Rosas the Mexican and make the acquaintance of Mr John S. Blenkiron the American."

"That's so. So good an American that he poisons himself with soft drinks ever since his country went dry."

"I have told Lord Clanroyden that I have come here to take the command which he offered me."

The big man looked steadily at him, and his quiet ruminant eyes seemed suddenly to become a search-light. They saw something which he approved, for he bounded to his feet.

"That's fine. I'm proud to be working again with my old chief. We'll shake on that," and he held out a mighty fist.

"You've come from the Mines?" Sandy asked, "How are things going there?"

"So-so. The enemy's getting cunning up that way. He's extending his radius of defence and making a very pretty corral, with as much barbed wire as the Hindenburg Line. Our boys are terrible short of rifle ammunition, and we're cleaned out of bombs. Looks like we'll have to let up for a day or two, and that will give him a cruel chance to pick up."

Sandy gave him a short account of Luis's message and the action he had taken upon it. Blenkiron received the news with a furious interest.

"He tells us not to worry about Lady Roylance? Well, I guess he means she's not going to come to any harm, for Luis thought the world of her. And he has got that bunch of buckaroos located and wants to keep them tight. He's right there, for this world won't ever be a healthy place again till that cesspool is drained. We've got to put that job through before we can attend to other business."

"And then?" Castor asked. "Mr Blenkiron, just before you arrived I was giving Lord Clanroyden my view of the situation. We cannot afford to deceive ourselves. This rebellion was a gamble, but at the start the odds were not too desperate. You had certain assets—a hidden base, a very mobile army, and a special knowledge of the country. Very wisely you did not try to meet Lossberg with his own weapons. Your aim was to fight a war without bloodshed, or as nearly as possible without it, and to let him waste his highly scientific blows on empty air. That was your strategy, and it was intelligent. Your hope was that after a little he would grow weary of it, and that Olifa would grow weary, and that you could make peace pretty much on your own terms. That also was intelligent. You were aiming directly at the moral of Olifa, and it is of course by striking at the moral of the enemy that wars are won. Have I put your views correctly?"

Blenkiron nodded.

"Well, it is clear that you are going to fail. You have fought a nearly bloodless war, your army is pretty well intact, but your supplies are running low. You have lost your secret base. You have failed to make Lossberg uncomfortable. His spirits are rising, and he is beginning to strike out quite boldly. He is rather enjoying himself, and fancies himself a conqueror. What are you going to do? To do nothing means that within a month you will be scattered among the mountains—mere guerrilleros."

No one spoke, and he went on.

"That mustn't happen. We,"—and he emphasised the change of pronouns—"we must still strike at the enemy's moral, but we must change our methods. It is the republic of Olifa that matters. Hitherto we have been trying to weaken her moral by weakening Lossberg's. That hasn't worked—so we must strike directly at the moral of Olifa."

"How?" Blenkiron drawled.

"By carrying the war into Olifa. In the idiom of your country's history, Miss Dasent, by crossing the Potomac."

Blenkiron flung himself back in his chair.

"I recognise the old touch," he said, beaming. "There speaks the Gobernador of the Gran Seco. It's horse-sense, I don't deny, but just how are we going to do it? We're treed up here, like a 'possum. There's no way to Olifa except by the railroad, and that Lossberg has gotten policed like Broadway."

"True. But we have still the mastery of the air. You cannot send an army to Olifa, but you can send me."

For an instant a shade of suspicion rested on Blenkiron's face, but it soon vanished.

"I get you," he said. "You always had that little Government in your side pocket."

But there was no response in Sandy's puzzled eyes.

"I don't understand," he said. "Bobby Latimer can land you wherever you like in Olifa, but how would you be further forward?"

"I must be landed where I can get into touch at once with the Government. You see, Lord Clanroyden, that Government have for some years been my very obedient servants. They are not clever people, only cunning, and they are not very brave. I have what you call a moral ascendancy over them. If I appear among them suddenly from the clouds I think I can impress them. I do not believe that they like the prospect of a long guerrilla war, and I can expound to them with some force the financial reasons for making peace. I will be literally truthful with them. I shall tell them that the revolt was not of my making, but a spontaneous eruption, in which I was entangled, but I shall tell them also that I am now a convinced partner."

Sandy's fingers drummed nervously on the table.

"I believe you are wrong. How much did the Olifa ministers like you, Excellency? They admired you, obeyed you, feared you, but they probably hated you. They are not clever men, as you justly observe—it would be better for us if they were—but they are vain as peacocks. And jealous, too, at the back of their heads. They are getting triumphant dispatches from Lossberg, and they are swelling with pride. They think they are winning on their own account, they believe that the Gran Seco will fall into their hands and that they will be able to confiscate the Mines. Then they will get, not the handsome share of the profits which you allowed them, but everything. Don't tell me that they have any fears of not being able to run them without your assistance. Those gentry always believe they are heaven-born geniuses waiting for their chance."

Castor's face did not change.

"It is possible—but I do not think so. I cannot believe that my personal ascendancy over them is so brittle. Anyhow, I am prepared to try."

"You realise the result of failure?"

"Yes. Lossberg will be entrenched in his authority. The value which its association with my name gives to our revolution will be gone. There may be trouble with foreign capitals."

"And you yourself?"

"Oh, I shall be utterly discredited. I shall probably find myself in one of the Olifa prisons, which I understand have not shared in the general progressiveness of the country. There may even be a regrettable incident, for they will still fear me."

"You are a brave man," said Sandy.

"I don't know. I have not been tested." Castor looked towards Barbara, as if to remind her of their conversation. "But I see no other way. I should prefer to have an army behind me, but we cannot fly an army over a wall of mountains, and there is no pass."

"You are wrong," said Sandy. "There is a pass."

Everyone stared at him—Blenkiron with puzzled eyes, Castor with a strained attention, as if doubtful of the correctness of his hearing, Barbara with awakening hope.

"There is a pass—a chain of passes—a way from the Gran Seco to Olifa. Luis alone knows it, for it is an old secret of his family. That is how he came to the Gran Seco so often before the war. You—"turning to Blenkiron—"thought it was by an aeroplane with some hidden landing-place in the mountains. I knew the truth, but I was sworn to tell no one. I have travelled the road once with him. It ends at the head of the Vulpas valley. That is how we got up the horses to mount our troops. Luis has been doing a busy horse-trade for months."

"But this alters everything," Castor cried. "If we had thought of it before—"

"I thought about it—thought about it till my head ached. I always meant it to be my last card, and it would have been if things had gone better. If Lossberg had been getting pinched and worried, I meant to use this as the last straw—to leave Escrick and Peters to watch him, and to lead a picked mounted force through the passes up to the gates of Olifa. I calculated that that would do the trick. But—but—now—I don't see how it is going to work."

He stopped and looked round the table. In each face, as his eyes rested on it, even in Castor's, the excitement seemed to die down.

"Because," he went on, "if Olifa is confident and has reasons for confidence, such a hussar-ride would have no effect. She has still a part of her regular army left behind, and she has an enormous capacity for calling up reserves. We should have the people against us, and they would rise up at our backs and cut us off. We should achieve nothing, and even if we managed to hack our way out, where should we be? Back in the Gran Seco, with the game going hard against us."

He turned to Castor. "Do you see any answer to that?" he asked.

"I am considering... I will tell you presently."

"Do you?" he demanded of Blenkiron.

"Not just right away. I'm rather of your way of thinking. It isn't much good crossing the Potomac unless you can reckon on help from Maryland or Pennsylvania."

Suddenly Barbara spoke—eagerly—stammeringly.

"I think I understand Don Luis's letter. The Conquistadores have found a sanctuary in the mountains. Why does he want none of them to get out? To keep them together and deal with all of them at once? Perhaps, but I think he has another reason. He does not want any message carried to General Lossberg. What kind of message? Not a prayer for relief, for at present no one is troubling them. It must be a message of information, vital information. What could that be? Only that they have found the road through the mountains from the Gran Seco to Olifa, and they want to warn him so that he may prevent our taking it."

"Good for you, Babs," said Blenkiron. "I guess she's right, gentlemen. But it gets us no further."

"Wait a moment," said Sandy. "There may be something in it. The message is from Luis, who alone knows the passes. He evidently thinks these passes are our trump card, or he wouldn't be so keen to keep them open for us. Luis knows Olifa better than any one of us here. He knows it up to date, which none of us do, for he has been living with one foot there and one in the Gran Seco. He's a mysterious beggar, for he asked not to be given any responsible job—said he had other very important things to attend to. It looks as if Luis believed that there was a chance of doing something by a flank movement on Olifa."

There was a knock at the door and it opened to admit a young staff-officer.

"I apologise for intruding, sir," he said, "but Colonel Jeffries thinks it important. The patrols have just brought in a prisoner. He was on horseback, accompanied by an Indian servant, and he seems pretty well dead to the world. Where he came from we haven't a notion, but he asked to see you at once—said it was very urgent. He is not armed and he's a funny little rag of a man. He talks English perfectly, and looks like a gentleman. Says his name is Alejandro Gedd."

Blenkiron shouted. "Why, it's the British vice-consul. A good little citizen and a great pal of Wilbur. Let's have him in at once and feed him. What in thunder has brought him here? You'd as soon expect to see a canary-bird in Labrador."

Five minutes later the staff-officer ushered in the remains of the best-appointed dweller in the city of Olifa. Gone were the trim garments, the ribboned eyeglass, the air of being always freshly barbered. Don Alejandro's breeches and jacket were stained and torn, spectacles had replaced his monocle, he had a week's beard on his chin, his eyes were hollow with fatigue, and his dark cheeks had been burned almost black. He walked painfully as if from saddle-stiffness, and he was clearly aching in every bone. But at the sight of the company he tried to straighten himself, and he made an effort to bow to Barbara.

Blenkiron almost swung him off his feet and settled him in a chair. "Bring food," he shouted to the mess-waiter. "Whatever you've got, and also any hard drinks you can raise. Sandy, have you any champagne? We're mighty glad to welcome you, Don Alejandro, but don't say a word till you've got something under your belt."

A cocktail restored the little man to speech. He looked curiously at Castor, and addressed Sandy.

"Where is Luis de Marzaniga?" he asked. "He told me to meet him here. I left Charcillo four days ago."

"How have you come?"

"Through the passes. I had one of Luis's guides, but it's a fatiguing journey and terribly cold. I apologise for my appearance, but I thought it best to report at once. I shall be glad of a meal, for I miscalculated and finished my food this morning at breakfast. But first I should like a word with Luis."

"He is not here, but he is coming soon. We have no secrets among ourselves, Don Alejandro. You see before you the Commander-in-Chief and his Chief of Staff. You can speak freely."

"I only came to report to Luis. It is rather a long story and I shall have to refer to maps and papers. I came to explain to him the exact position at the moment of our Olifa revolution."

There was a complete silence. Blenkiron poured out a half-tumblerful of champagne and handed it to the stranger. He gulped it down and it seemed to send new blood through his body.

"What about your Olifa revolution?" Blenkiron asked in a queer tone.

"It's going famously." Don Alejandro's voice had lost its flatness. "Going like a fire on the savannah. When Luis and I laid down our lines three years ago, we never thought to have a chance like this. We have all of what you call the gentry behind us, and the haciendados can turn out anything between eight and ten thousand mounted men. Also we have a big movement among the workmen in Alcorta and Cardanio, and we have the train laid in Olifa itself and only waiting for the spark. But the thing's ripe now and we can't keep it waiting much longer. We don't want to show our hand by any premature explosion."

Don Alejandro was surprised at the reception of his words. He looked around the table and saw four faces in which delight still struggled vainly with stupefaction. Also there was complete silence.

Then Blenkiron broke it.

"Luis certainly knew what he was doing when he sent that message. We'll have an army back of us in our interview with the Excelentísimo. I guess we'll get some help from Maryland when we cross the Potomac."

Janet woke with a start from her uneasy sleep. Her nights had been troubled of late, and she was accustomed to waking with a start.

The darkness was very thick and close around her, but it was not the closeness of a narrow room. There was a free draught of air and a sense of space, which suggested that she was under the bare vault of heaven. And yet the faint odour was not of the natural world, but of man's handiwork—hewn stone, and the dust of hewn stone, the smell of a place roofed and enclosed.

She lit the candle beside her mattress. It scarcely flickered when she lit it, though there was a sound of wind high up in the dark above her. She told herself that here she was safe, safe at any rate till the morning. Every night she came here, and the narrow entrance was blocked by a pile of cut stones which fitted as closely as a door.

When she was first introduced to these sleeping-quarters she had been in a terror of loneliness and anticipation. And then she had realised that this was a merciful provision, that she had at any rate the hours of night to herself, and that not till the sun rose again and the blocks were removed would she have to face the true burden of captivity. Here in this vast dark place, like the inside of a mountain, she was for the moment free.

She tried to compose herself to sleep again, for she knew that she needed all her physical and nervous strength for the strain of a new day. But she could not stop her mind from racing. She counted the days she had been a prisoner—seven days, an inconsiderable week, which would have passed too soon in her normal happy life. Now in the retrospect it seemed to lengthen into an eternity. It was only by an effort that she could recall the details of her first coming—the dizzy journey half in the clouds; the Gran Seco like a cup below her brimming with the morning sunlight; the serpentine course among the valleys of the high hills; the blue lake on which the sea-plane had alighted; the march with her pilot in the tangled glens through a long day of heat and misery, among strange birds and insects and creepers like the clutching fingers of ghosts; the meeting with a patrol of his allies—the exquisite Pasquali, a man named Molinoff, and four strange Indians with red ponchos; the coming at last into a valley full of stones built in a circle around a huge rotunda. The jungle had not penetrated one inch into this dead city, for the lush vegetation stopped as if edged by a gardener, and the silent avenues were floored with fine white dust, and the walls were so polished and impenetrable that there was no crevice for a blade of grass. Here she had found bivouac fires and evil faces, faces which to her tired eyes were like the demons of a nightmare. They had given her food, and had been civil enough. D'Ingraville's manners during that awful day had been punctilious, and the men who received her had shown a cold and level politeness. They meant no ill to her—at least for the moment; their careful provision for her safety was proof of it; and when after some fluttering hours in the darkness of the first night she understood this, she had a momentary access of courage.

The following day she had realised her position more fully. She was a hostage, to be protected as such, a card when the time arrived to be ruthlessly played. She was given an Indian servant, who brought her water and towels and her meals when she chose to feed alone. Otherwise she was welcome to sit with her captors, at least with one section of them. For she soon discovered that there were two groups in the camp. One was composed of men of the D'Ingraville type, who in dress and speech and manners were gentlemen. These she realised were the Conquistadors, of whom she had heard so much, and even in her loneliness and fear she could not repress her interest in them...

Some of the names she had known before. There was Lariarty, who had been at school with Sandy, and Larbert, whom she believed she had danced with at a Perth ball, and who had once been engaged to a distant cousin. Romanes, too, Cyril Romanes—she had known his name as a noted figure in the hunting-field and a polo-player of world-wide fame. The other names were new to her, Calvo, and Suvorin, and Pasquali, and Seminov, and Laringetti, and Duclos-Mazarin, and Glorian. They were of every physical type—D'Ingraville slim and fair with a pointed beard and a faunlike head; Suvorin, tall, bony, with a skin like old parchment, and hair as light as an albino; Calvo, short and fat; Pasquali, dark, elegant, and hook-nosed; Lariarty with full, well-cut features and a fine brow; Larbert built on the scale of an athlete; Romanes with his neat light-cavalry figure. But all had something in common—the pallor of their faces, their small, considered gestures, and the opaqueness of their eyes.

The other group was of different clay. They were of the type of the four who had carried her off, men whose character showed brazenly in their faces. They fed apart from the Conquistadors, and, though they took their general orders from them, lived very much their own life. They gambled and quarrelled and occasionally fought, but since they had no liquor they were reasonably well behaved. They went off in twos and threes to hunt and prospect, and they always reported on their return to Romanes, who seemed to be in charge of the camp. There was little comfort to be had from looking at their faces, on which life had written too plainly its tale. But at any rate they could laugh. Sometimes into the frozen urbanity of the Conquistadors' talk the distant sound of their guffaws came like an echo of life in a world of the dead.

She had to keep a tight hold on her nerves to prevent a breakdown, when she sat among her strange companions. Sandy had called the Gran Seco a "port of missing ships," and these ships seemed to be phantoms, green with the weeds of some unholy sea. They were mechanically polite, rising when she entered and bowing like automata, helping her first to the monotonous fare; but their words to her were like the commonplaces of a French conversation book. She made many efforts to talk—of music to Pasquali, of hunting to Romanes, of home and friends to Larbert and Lariarty, but she found a wall of opaque civility. Those pages were shut for them, and would not be reopened. She realised that the memories of these men were drugged and their emotions atrophied. But not their minds. Very soon she understood that their minds were furiously alive.

For, after the first day or two, while they did not talk to her they talked among themselves before her. There was no

danger to be feared from her, for she was securely in their power. They spoke as sparingly as they ate, but bit by bit she gathered the import of their talk. They were desperately anxious about something, and presently it was clear to her that this something was Castor. He was the one anchor of these missing ships. Without him there was no safety in any port... The girl, as she watched, grew amazed and awed at the extent of Castor's power. He had plucked these derelicts out of the storm, and bestowed on them a dreadful simulacrum of peace. His drug had blotted out the past and given them a keen intellectual life in the present. Without him they were lost again, and all the power of their minds was devoted to winning him back... Soon, from small pieces of evidence, she realised that the same thing was true of the ruffians of the Bodyguard. They, too, were loyal to their salt. The Gobernador had cast his spell over them, and they were resolved to return to his service. Both parties knew what the world did not know, that the Gobernador had been carried off, and was an unwilling figurehead of the rebellion. For Olifa they cared nothing at all, but they were determined that Castor should be set free, and the Castor regime restored.

On his account she was a hostage. She saw that they realised that Lossberg might win in the field, but that, even if the rebels were broken up and driven in commandos to the mountains. Castor might be carried with them. To retrieve him she was their chief instrument, their asset to bargain with. If bargaining was impossible, she knew that she need expect no mercy, for pity did not dwell among Conquistadors or Bodyguard... Castor must be recovered, but it was also necessary that Lossberg should win, for if the rebellion succeeded there would be no hope of the restoration of the old life of the Gran Seco, and it was to this that they clung.

Janet gathered that they were satisfied with Lossberg's progress. She had heard Magee, who had arrived the day before her, exulting over the news he brought. But she gathered also that the Conquistadors were anxious. On the day after her coming the four men who had carried her off, Dan Judson, Laschallas, Radin, and Trompetter, appeared in the camp. They had come by the seaplane, and apparently damaged it, for D'Ingraville cursed them with a cold bitterness. But others were expected, with messages from Lossberg, messages which must be brought by air, seeing that Sandy's patrols lay between the two camps...

These messages did not come. No planes of any kind broke through the cordon and brought news. It was clear that the Conquistadors believed that the messengers had started, and had been shot down, and that their chief preoccupation was to establish communications again.

Suddenly their anxiety seemed to acquire a sharper edge. Molinoff, Carreras, and Carvilho were out daily, but not as hunters, and every night they returned, bone-weary men. Janet, who had already taken her bearings by the sun, had some rough idea of the position of the camp. She knew nothing about the direction of the Pais de Venenos, but he realised that she must be in the Cordilleras, in a loop of the main chain, where it split into lateral valleys, and that due west of her lay the Gran Seco and her friends. She noticed that the three men in their daily excursions always went south, as if they were looking for something. One night they did not return, and the following afternoon they staggered in drunken with weariness. But they had discovered something of importance, for Molinoff before he tasted food or drink sought out Romanes.

What the discovery was Janet could not learn, but at supper that evening her hosts seemed to be shaken out of their frozen composure. They talked—for them—rapidly, and in low tones. Occasionally one of them would look towards her to see if she was listening, and once Romanes seemed to be about to address her, but changed his mind. She pretended absorption in her food, but her ears were open and she caught one thing. They were determined to send a message to someone. That someone could only be Lossberg. They had learned that which might be vital to his success.

For the first time Janet was diverted from anxiety about herself and about Archie's peace of mind. She saw dimly a chance for action. She could not escape, but could she not find out their secret—hamper them in some way—do something to relieve the dreadful tedium of her impotence? She lay awake half the night making futile plans.

Next day she had awoke with a new purpose in life. She observed one result of the previous evening's discussion. The Indians in the camp were summoned to a council. These were Indians such as she had never seen before—tall men, incredibly lean, with faces like skulls and luminous, feverish eyes. One of them seemed to be chosen for a mission, for he was given a letter by Romanes which he secreted on his body, and the next Janet saw was his red poncho disappearing into the forest... He was not the only messenger. Magee, a wiry little ruffian who knew the Indian speech and acted as interpreter, was also entrusted with a message. To him no letter was given, but Romanes spoke to him long and carefully, drawing plans till he nodded his comprehension. Just before midday Magee also disappeared into the forest which clad the slopes to the westward.

There was a change in the manner of the Conquistadors. The necessity for haste seemed to have stripped off some of their civilised veneer. Before they had treated her with complete apathy; now she saw in their eyes suspicion, it might be malevolence. Oddly enough, it made her less afraid. She took it as good news. They had earned something which meant advantage to her friends, or they would not be so eager to forewarn the other side. Janet grew almost at her ease. And then she saw that in D'Ingraville's face which sent a shiver down her spine. The success of her own side meant that she would become valueless as a hostage. But she would remain a prisoner—and a victim.

Next day she had felt the same atmosphere around her of cruelty, gloating cruelty. Before she had been lonely, anxious, oppressed, but now she knew the real chill of fear. Whither could she turn? The Indians? They were savages out of some other world, and she had not a word of their speech. There was no pity in their gaunt, glowing faces... The Bodyguard? They at any rate were human, for they could laugh. One of them, too, had a dog, a mongrel terrier, with whom Janet, having an invincible attraction for all dogs, had endeavoured to make friends. She had partly succeeded, but success was easier with one kind of animal than with the other. The Bodyguard that day was dispersed, except the three, Molinoff,

Carvalho, and Carreras, who were resting after their labours of the previous days.

Carreras had been one of the three trustees who had been hardly treated by Georgie Hamilton that evening on board the Corinna, and, since he had seen her there, he seemed to regard her with special rancour. As she passed them, where they grumbled and spat over a game of cards, she felt that among these squalid ruffians there was no refuge from the cruelty of their masters.

With no books, and nothing to occupy her thoughts, she had watched the hot afternoon decline to evening. She saw homing birds returning, especially one great eagle which had been hunting out in the plains. She saw the sun go down behind the hills, and kindle far off a blue peak which reminded her of Stob Dearg as seen from her room at Glenraden. The old happy world she had lost flitted through her mind in a chain of pictures which she had not the strength to repel. She shut her eyes tight, and the smell of wood smoke from the cooking-fires brought back the hall at Glenraden in wintertime, with her sister Agatha making tea, and her father stamping the snow from his feet, and the dogs tangled on the hearthstone... But it was the picture of Archie which broke her heart, the picture which she had so resolutely fought to shut from her; Archie with his boyish laugh and tousled hair and flushed face, so absurd and unexpected and gallant and gentle...

Janet had her supper alone in the immense rotunda where she slept. The Indian who brought it looked steadily before him and had no language but a grave inclination of the head. She heard the blocks being piled together, and knew that for another night she was safe. She blew out her candle and tried to sleep, but now it was not fear that thrilled her, but homesickness. She had gone clean over the horizon, away from the kindly race of men. She believed that she could face horrors, death if necessary, if only a friendly eye or voice were near, if only Archie could hold her hand...

But if Archie were here it would mean death for him. The thought terrified her till she remembered how vain it was. Archie would be looking for her with a breaking heart, but by no conceivable chance could he find her hiding-place. It was like being buried deep in the earth... Archie was safe. That was something... As for herself, whether Sandy lost or won she would not live to see it. A sense of utter hopelessness had come over her, the shadow of a dark and certain destiny. But in this certainty there was a kind of miserable peace, and she fell asleep.

She awoke with a start, lit her candle and watched the monstrous shadows run into the uppermost gloom. Then, as we have seen, she tried to sleep again, and slowly drifted from memory to vagueness, from vagueness to unconsciousness.

She woke again, this time to complete awareness. She had heard a sound different from the light rumble of the wind or the fall of minute particles of dust. There was a human presence somewhere in the emptiness. Panic shook her. Her sanctuary was no sanctuary, and her enemies were here. With trembling fingers she struck a match and held it to her candle. It seemed ages before the wick caught fire, and then it flickered thinly. She was on her feet now, her eyes wildly searching the darkness.

Suddenly a voice spoke from behind her. "Please do not be alarmed. Lady Roylance. I am sorry to have disturbed you."

It was a pleasant voice—a foreign voice, for it spoke English with unnatural precision, and made three syllables of her surname. There was something reassuring about that precision. It seemed familiar, too.

"Who is it?" she asked, her voice still quivering.

A figure came out of the gloom. She held up the candle and it revealed an Indian, barelegged and barefooted, wearing a long tunic of cats' skins and on his shoulder a red poncho. In her amazement she almost dropped the candle and all her terrors returned. He seemed to understand her fright, for he spoke rapidly. "Please do not fear. I am a friend whom you know. I am a friend of your husband and of Lord Clanroyden... Will you please dress a little, for I would like you to take a walk with me.. I will retire. We cannot speak in this place."

"But who are you?" This time her voice had hope.

"My name is Luis de Marzaniga."

"Oh, Don Luis, Don Luis!"... Her voice was a wail, for violent relief often takes the tone of tragedy. "Oh, my dear, my dear... I am so glad... I can't speak... in a second I will be ready."

Janet's toilet did not take long, for she had no clothes but those in which she had left the Courts of the Morning. She pulled on a jumper, and thrust her feet into a pair of much-stained grey suede shoes. At her call Luis again came out of the darkness.

"I know I'm a fright, Don Luis. My hair won't stay tidy, for I have lost most of my hairpins. I swear I shall be shingled as soon as I get home... Archie wanted me to, before we came out here... Have you any word of Archie?... We can't get out of this place, you know."

She babbled like a happy child.

"No," he said, "but we can get above it. You have a good head, I hope. Lady Roylance, for I am going to take you nearer to the stars."

He led her to the south-eastern corner, and there her candle, which he carried, revealed a low recess. He motioned her to follow him and she found herself in a tunnel where she had to crouch, almost to crawl. He felt carefully the left side and suddenly he stopped and reached for her hand.

"Follow close," he whispered. "The tunnel is a trap, which ends presently in a pit."

They squeezed through a subsidiary opening, and almost at once found the roof rise. "There is a staircase," he whispered. "It is built inside the wall, but it is in good condition. You can stand upright now," He blew out the candle and took her hand.

The steps were smooth and unbroken and they rose steeply. Then they seemed to turn a corner, where the darkness was exchanged for a faint green light. With every step the light grew, and the smell of earth and powdered stone began to change to the freshness of the outer world. Suddenly wind blew in their faces, and they emerged on a kind of barbican, with the stone slats of a roof rising steeply behind them, and in front, beyond a low parapet, the valley white in the moonshine.

Janet caught her breath. The sight was not only of a torturing beauty, but it seemed to be an earnest of freedom. She peered over the edge and saw far below her the dusty avenues of the camp, white and quiet as if under a mantle of snow. One of the cooking-fires still smoked feebly, but otherwise there was no movement in the place.

The subsidiary towers, which recalled in their shape pictures she had seen of the Rhodesian Zimbabwe, were like solid cones of pale ivory, and their shadows were deep emerald.

The valley, she saw, was thickly forested on all sides, the trees now milky in the moon, now of the blackest jet. But beyond its containing walls she saw what was invisible to one below, peaks which must be high mountains, but which under this vault of elfin light seemed curiously near and foreshortened. To the west and south-west, apart from the barrier ridge, the horizon seemed empty, and she realised that she was very near to the edge of the hills. Over there must lie the Gran Seco and her friends.

The girl drew long breaths of an air which seemed to blend the aromatic strangeness of forests with the coolness of the high snows. She felt in command once again of herself and her fate. Below were her captors, but now she stood above them.

"What is this place?" she asked.

He spoke a name.

"The Thrones of the Kings," she repeated.

"Of the King," he corrected. "Los Tronos del Rey. There was only one king, but he was very great. When he died, his captains and councillors were made to die with him. He was buried here, and they in those lesser towers. Once each was also full of gold and silver images and uncountable treasure, but they were rifled long ago by the ancestors of our people—my own among them. The spoilers would have destroyed the tombs also, but they could not. No hand of man can touch this masonry. High explosives only, and happily they did not have them."

"Does the world know about it?"

He shook his head. "Only the Indians of the Pais de Venenos, and they do not talk. The other Indians of the hills regard it as accursed and will not approach it."

"But who brought these people here—the Conquistadors and the others?"

"The man called Romanes was in touch with the Pais Venenos—also, I think, Pasquali. They got their drugs here, and it was necessary for them to find a camp near. I sanctioned it, for I have much power among the people of the Poison Valley. It was by my authority that these Indians accompanied them, and I myself joined them. You admire my disguise? Since their first coming here I also have been present to observe... But I did not expect you, Lady Roycastle, and you have given me anxious thoughts... Also there is another development. Romanes, he who is the commandante, is a good soldier, and his mind is quick. He has discovered that which I hoped to keep hidden."

"I know," said Janet excitedly. "I saw yesterday that they had found out something which they thought desperately important. I tried to discover what it was—but of course I had no chance. They have sent off messengers to General Lossberg."

"They have. But I do not think those messengers will get through. One was an Indian, and he is already back with me in the forest, not a mile away. The other was the man called Magee. I think that by this time he may have had an accident."

"What was the news?"

"No less than the secret way out of the Gran Seco, the way by which I am accustomed to travel. Olifa believes that there is no road but the railway, except for a stray cragsman. The Gobernador also believes this. But there is a way through difficult passes into the Vulpas valley. Once I showed it to Lord Clanroyden, and it is a road which a light army can travel."

"I see, I see," Janet cried. "Then Sandy might use it, unless Lossberg gets there before him."

"Lossberg will not get there before him. And Lord Clanroyden will beyond doubt use it, since it is the only path to victory."

Janet clasped her hands. All fear for herself had gone and she joyfully felt herself already united with her friends since she was again in the game. "I thought I was hidden hundreds of miles away from the rest," she said, "and find that I am at the key-point."

Luis looked down upon the small figure whose hair was dull gold in the moonlight, and he smiled.

"But you cannot stay here," he said. "It is too dangerous. It is very necessary that you escape not later than to-morrow night—to-night, I mean, for it is now past midnight."

"I long to get away... I admit I have been horribly frightened... But is there nothing I could do if I stayed?"

"You are brave. But no, there is nothing you can do. You will understand that these people are now in a dangerous mood. You are their hostage, but any day they may think that you can be of no use as a hostage, and then... they will not be merciful. They are very complete rascals, and it is necessary to keep them here till Lord Clanroyden has made his great stroke. That I think I can undertake through my friends. But we cannot have one of our own people left in their hands. They will be helpless, like imprisoned starving dogs, but they have nasty fangs... No, you must go tomorrow night—this

night.”

“Will you come with me?”

“No. I will follow you by another road. But I will see that you are accompanied. It is a journey which will need courage, Lady Roylance. Also to-morrow will need courage. Your warders will be in a difficult temper, and you must act a part. You must appear to be in deep sorrow, and I think you had better be a little ill. Yet you must go among them, for when they see you sad and helpless they will be encouraged and perhaps hopeful, and it very necessary to keep their hope alive for another day. If they have hope they will not think yet of revenge... You will sup in your big bedroom, as you did to-night, and in hour before moonrise I will come for you.”

“But how can you get out of this place?”

“By the way which I shall use to-night. The old builders had many tunnels and passages, which I and my Indians have long known. That is simple. It will be harder to get out the valley, but there is a road for bold hearts, and after a little your friends will meet you. That I have arranged. And now you must go back to bed and sleep very well, for you have much to do to-morrow.”

“I shall sleep,” Janet cried. “I do not think that I have really slept since I came here, but now...” Her face glowed with happiness; she seized his hands and held them, like a child who finds in a gesture what it cannot find in words.

“You have not asked me who will be your escort,” he said.

“I feel so strong,” she laughed, “that if you gave me the right direction I think I could escape alone.”

“Not so, my dear lady. It is too hard a task for one, even one so gallant. But you will be given full directions, and two trusty companions. One will be a Scotch soldier, whose name is Hamilton.”

Janet dropped his hands and stared open-mouthed.

“Geordie Hamilton! Fusilier Geordie! How on earth did he get here? He was in the garrison in the Courts of the Morning.”

“He is here. He arrived, having fallen sick on the way, but he is now cured. The other...” He paused.

“The other?” Janet repeated, with a sudden wild anticipation.

“The other is your husband.”

Janet looked out next morning on a new world. Hitherto her eyes had been turning inward, busy with her own grief.

Now she was in a mood of confidence, almost of exhilaration, and the outer scene made a sharper impact upon her senses. She saw the strange beauty of this glen of sepulchre the uncanny shafts of ghostly stone, the avenues white and crackling in the heat, the cincture of green forest, the sentinel and enveloping mountains. The sight of a far blue peak seen through a gap seemed a promise of liberty. Her youth had returned to her and she was almost in a mood for singing... Then she remembered the part she had to play, and composed herself to a decent bewilderment.

She soon found that she had no need to dissemble, for her new-gained cheerfulness evaporated during breakfast. Her hosts seemed overnight to have changed their attitude. Their formal politeness had gone, and they treated her roughly, like an embarrassing chattel. Behind their iron composure a deep restlessness was patent. Their schemes were going awry, they could not get in touch with their allies, the place which they had thought a strategic vantage-ground was in danger of becoming their prison.

They talked freely before her, too, and, with what she had learned from Luis, she could follow the drift of it.

They spoke of methods of access and egress. Now that the seaplane was useless, and Lossberg's planes seemed unable to arrive, they discussed the land routes. Some had come by the Pais de Venenos, but that was a difficult road, and it would land them in that eastern part of the Tierra Caliente where the patrols of Peters and Escrick were too active for comfort. There was a way through the hills direct to the west, the way by which they had dispatched Magee, but that also was slow and difficult, and came out on to the plateau too near Pacheco. They spoke of a road to the south, the road their daily scouting parties had taken, and in that appeared to lie their chief hope. But it had clearly been no part of their plan to leave—rather they expected Lossberg to make contact with them, and Janet knew the reason. They commanded the secret outlet to Olifa; they were the forward observation-post for Lossberg; but unless Lossberg received and acted on their intelligence, they would be more in the nature of a forlorn hope.

They had other anxieties. Janet gathered that the Bodyguard was getting a little out of hand. It had been docile enough when it believed that it was being led back to Castor and its old life. But if it scented failure it would take its own road. She realised that the only tie between the two parties was a common interest; remove that, and there would remain only dislike and contempt. For the first time she heard a note of natural passion among these marionettes, when Lariarty spoke of a wrangle he had had with Judson. For the first time, too, she heard an oath on their discreet lips. Into the face of Romanes there had come a spark of human anger. "By God," he said, "I'll show these curs who's top dog."

Janet played well her game of an ailing and heartbroken prisoner, but she was unregarded. Presently she was to have a striking proof of her hosts' suspicions. The day before in her loneliness she had had thoughts of throwing herself on the mercy of the Bodyguard, and had tried to enter into conversation with them, but had been surlily rebuffed. The most she had succeeded in was a half-hearted friendship with the mongrel terrier that belonged to Carreras. She passed a group of them who were playing cards in the shade of one of the towers, squatted in the white dust. The dog ran to her and she stopped to fondle it.

Suddenly she felt her arms pinioned and looked into a grinning face.

"Come and join our little party, dearie," a voice said. "We're better men than the deadheads up the way. We're all of us free, white, twenty-one, and hairy chested, and we know how to be kind to a pretty girl."

She struggled to release her arms, but the man's grip remained, while the card-party laughed. Even in her terror she noticed how curiously low the ears were set on his head.

"Let her alone, Jake," said one of them; "she ain't yours. We've got to toss for her, and act on the square."

The man released her. "I guess that's right. Run away, my beauty. We got a bond on you, and it's soon goin' to be cashed in." As she hurried off, not daring to look behind, she heard again the ill-omened laughter.

At the midday meal her fears were increased. She was curtly told by Romanes that she must prepare to change her quarters. That evening after sundown she would be sent with D'Ingraville to another place. He was perfectly frank. "It is for your own safety, madame," he said "You are in danger here at the moment, for there are fools among us. It is not yet in our interest that you should come to any harm."

There was no need of acting now. With a face like a sheet she stammered that she was feeling too unwell to travel. "Tomorrow, I will be better," she wailed. "But not to-day, please—not to-day."

They talked among themselves. "There is no hurry," said D'Ingraville. "If she is sick, I cannot carry her to Agua Secreta. It is the devil's own road."

Romanes demurred, but in the end was persuaded. "A word of advice to you, madame," he said at last. "Do not show yourself this afternoon. Keep in this vicinity, and above all do not go near the camp of those others. Do you understand me?"

Janet understood only too well, for the leering faces of the card-players that morning had chilled her with a new and terrible fear... What refuge could she find between now and sundown?... Could she get hold of Luis and tell him of this fresh peril? He alone would be able to protect her, for if it came to a fight she did not believe that the Conquistadors could stand up against the Bodyguard... She was in terror of both parties, but she wondered if it would not have been wise to go with D'Ingraville. The Indians—Luis—would follow her, and could rescue her.

But she remembered Luis's strict injunction that she was to be in the great rotunda after nightfall and before

moonrise. He had made his plans, and had told her that they were urgent... If only she could find him!... She had seen two of the Indians at a distance that morning bringing in logs for the fires. But now there was not a sign of any Indian. She peered down the avenues, quiet in the blinding glare of the afternoon, and not a soul was to be seen. She felt very small and solitary and forlorn.

Then she remembered the roof to which Luis had taken her. There she could hide herself and be at peace till sunset. At the thought her courage returned. She ran across the patch of sun which separated her from the rotunda, and plunged into its deep shadows... At the entrance lay the blocks which every night were used to make a door. She longed to wall herself up like a condemned nun, but each block required two men to lift...

There was no light in the vast place except the shaft from the door, and a dimness far up which may have come from the crack in the roof. She groped in the far corner till she found the entrance to the tunnel... She tried to remember what Luis had done. They had crawled in for some yards, and then he had found an opening on the left-hand side. She ran her hand along the wall, and found such an opening, but the next second her hand was in the void. It was a shaft, not a passage... Very carefully she crawled a little farther along the main tunnel. Luis had said it was a trap, so she must not go too far. Again her hand found an opening in the left wall, and this time it touched solid floor and solid roof. She crept in, and to her joy found the first step of the staircase. Presently she could stand upright, and soon she was out on the barbican, with a fierce sun beating on her head, and the world at her feet, hot, intense, and coloured like blue steel.

The trouble was to get out of the pitiless sun. She could only find shelter by lying flat under the parapet, and moving as the sun moved. She had eaten not a morsel at luncheon, and now that her immediate terror was abated, she began to wish she had. She was safe here—she must be safe. She would stay till nightfall, and then slip down and meet Luis. Her confidence returned, and she felt herself almost free.

But there were still dregs of fear in her mind, as she remembered the animal faces of the card-players, and the cold inhumanity of Romanes, to whom she was only a counter, to be protected until its usefulness was gone... She looked every now and then over the parapet. She saw little figures cross and recross the avenue, but none had the slimness and the liteness of the Indians. Where were her deliverers? Luis had said that Archie would be there, but how in the name of all that was marvellous had Archie managed it? He must be somewhere within a mile or two, and she looked with a sudden friendliness at the circumference of forest. Yet the thought that Archie was near gave her a new nervousness. He too might be in danger...

She fixed her eyes on a distant blue mountain and told herself that she and Archie were not really far from home, for the other side of that peak must be visible to watchers from Pacheco. She must have dozed, for she suddenly realised that the sun was behind the peaks, and that the swift tropical twilight had fallen. It was now time to nerve herself for action, for presently the Conquistadors would be sitting down to supper in their mess, and the Indians would come to block up the door. She wondered if, when they missed her from the mess, they would send her food, as they had done previously. She hoped so, for she was very hungry.

Down the staircase she groped her way, and crawled back into the tunnel. She only knew that she had reached the rotunda by seeing far off a slant of amber dusk. It showed her the way to her bed, and beside it, to her delight, she found that food had been placed. It was not an appetising meal, for the commissariat of the camp was running low, but she ate it ravenously, and emptied the tin pannikin of water.

Then she saw that the men had come to block the door. That gave her comfort, for they were Indians, Luis's people. She watched the oblong of pale amethyst slowly lessen, and as the blocks rose the remaining daylight seemed to take on a deeper tint, till it was almost crimson. When that had gone, she would light her candle and await her deliverers.

Suddenly there seemed to be a scuffle at the entrance. She heard a voice, a thick angry voice, and then the narrow gap above the blocks seemed to be filled—by a man's body.

Someone was clambering over—she heard a thud as he fell on the inner side... With a flash of dreadful illumination she knew who it was. The Bodyguard had cast lots for her, and this man had won... She screamed for help to the Indians outside the door, but they took no notice. Instead, they went on with the last blocks, and the crimson segment disappeared in utter blackness.

Panic drove Janet's fainting limbs into motion. Her one hope was to reach the tunnel, but in the instant darkness she had lost her bearings and she fluttered blindly. The newcomer, too, seemed at a loss. She could hear his hard breathing. Suddenly he lit a match, and she saw the face of one of the card-players, a dreadful face, bestial and pitiless.

The sight was too much for her nerves, and once again her despairing cry for help rang out. The match flickered and died, but her voice had given him a clue, and she heard him moving nearer. He came slowly and cautiously, for there was no need of haste. He had the whole night in which to find her.

All power seemed to have gone from her body, her throat was dry so that she could not utter a word, her feet were like lead, she had lost all sense of direction. Hopeless now to find the tunnel; she could only struggle vainly like a fly till the spider reached her. Already she felt his clutch on her. And then from her palsied lips came one last gasp of terror, for she suddenly felt herself caught in a man's arms.

But it was not her pursuer. Even her confused senses could still hear him stumbling towards her. A voice spoke low in her ears: "Janet, darling, I'm here! Archie!"

Then many things seemed to happen at once. A circle of light sprang into being from an electric torch. She saw her pursuer stop in his tracks and blink. Then she saw his hand go to his side, and be pinioned there, and a pistol neatly snatched from it by someone behind him. And then between him and her a figure appeared, no Indian, but a stocky figure

with bandy legs, a figure that whistled through its teeth like a groom and addressed her enemy in a tongue which fell like music on her ears.

"Sae it's you, my mannie? I'll learn ye to frichten a leddy."

There was a sound of a violent impact of fist on chin and then the rattle of a skull on hard stone.

"That'll keep him quiet till the morn," said the same voice. "I've gi'en that wheasel the same as he got on the Corinna."

For a little time and space disappeared for Janet. Overpowering relief and the sense of Archie beside her brought a happy stupor. She was conscious of kissing and fondling the hand which guided her, and murmuring idiotic endearments. They seemed to be descending stone steps, and then following long winding passages. Somewhere there was a light, and she realised that they were a party of four; but more often they moved in profound darkness. Then it seemed to her that they ascended, not by steps, but in a long slanting tunnel. The close air freshened, and at last with a scramble they came out into the night under a sky ablaze with stars. Luis held up his hand to enjoin silence, but Janet had no wish to speak. She was hugging Archie's arm as if to make sure that he was a bodily presence and not a dream.

They were in a little stone courtyard, on the edge of the forest, and at the far southern end of the Tronos del Rey.

It was the frontier of the jungle and creepers had encroached upon the stone, completely hiding the tunnel's mouth, and making the courtyard look like a subsidence in the ruins.

They were close to the camp, for voices sounded not a hundred yards away, and against the starlight they could see the pale flicker of fires.

Luis signed to them to follow, and they scrambled out of the hollow into the forest, which was thick as moss, except for an occasional trail. "We must go carefully," he whispered. "Carreras went out this evening to shoot for the pot. He may not have returned. It would not do to meet him."

Luis moved first with Archie at his heels, then Janet, and Hamilton brought up the rear. It was painful going, for chips and slivers of stone were everywhere embedded in the lush herbage and the stones were as unyielding as adamant. Janet felt her stockings and the fringes of her dress being slowly shredded. Then they reached an opening which she judged to be a trail. Luis took one look and then ducked his head, and the others crouched flat to conform.

Janet wondered what was coming next. There was still the glow of sunset in the sky, and it made the aisle through which the trail ran a slender cleft of opaque unrevealing light. What came next was a dog. To her horror she found Carreras's terrier breathing heavily at her shoulder. He had been trained not to bark, but he showed his recognition by shaking himself and sending the dew flying like a shower-bath. She glared at him, she threatened him, but the beast stood wagging his imbecile tail. He had found a friend, and was determined to let his master come up and share in the discovery.

Luis did not wait for the meeting. He doubled back and clutched Archie's arm. "The fellow will be here in a second," he whispered. "We must show ourselves... You know the road... Here, take the hatchet... I will try to divert them. Once at Agua Secreta you are safe. Quick!"

The next five minutes were not for Janet a period of very clear consciousness. She was dragged to her feet, pulled through what seemed to be a fine-meshed sieve of creepers, and landed in a narrow avenue cut as if with a knife between two walls of forest. Then she seemed to be made to halt, and she had the feeling as if alone she was exposed to someone's gaze, while the rest were hidden... She heard a cry, heard a shot fired, heard other pistol shots from the direction of the camp... And then she found herself running faster than she had ever run before in her life.

Luis was last and he was urging them on. They were being pursued—she heard a distant crashing in the under-growth—perhaps the trail twisted and someone was trying to take a short cut. Then Luis's clear whisper followed them. "I leave you. You know the road... Do not for the love of God stop to fight... I do not think you will be followed... Say that I will be at Pacheco in thirty-six hours, no more. Adios!"

She had no time to look behind, for Archie's hand was dragging her, Archie whose game leg seemed to be performing miracles, but she had the sensation that Luis was no longer there. He had swerved to the right down a subsidiary path and was making mighty heavy going.

His movements sounded like those of a bull rhinoceros; he was giving tongue, too, babbling loudly to himself. He will betray us all, she thought in a panic, and then she realised that this was his purpose. He was there to be followed... Far back she heard a different kind of cry, the shouting of angry men on a scent which they have missed and recovered.

After that it seemed that for hours they struggled and plunged and slipped, always keeping to some sort of trail, but tripped up by creepers, or slithering on greasy earth, or edging painfully through acres of cruel thorn. She used to be famous for her good wind, and had been able to stride from Glenraden to the highest top of Carnmor without a halt. But that had been in clear hill air, with a bright world of salt and heather at her feet and no goad except her fancy. It was a different matter to run through this choking sodden forest, with life as the stake—Archie's life and her own—maybe, too, the fortunes of the campaign.

The girl kept her mind savagely upon a single purpose—to keep up with Archie, and to give him as little trouble as possible, for she knew by his laboured breathing that the strain must be terrible for a lame man.

Hamilton, the leader, stopped. He was panting like a dog, but he had voice enough left to whisper hoarsely, "I hear nothing. Maister Lewis maun hae got the hale pack at his heels. They'll no catch him this side o' Martinmas. We maun be better than half road. Tak' your breath, mem."

But the merciful respite seemed only to last for a second. Again they were off, and now they seemed to be ascending. The ground was harder. They passed over banks of dry gravelly soil, and in places the roots of the trees showed as in a

pinewood, instead of being buried deep in rank verdure. Once even there was a shelf of layered rock, and she had to give Archie a hand. But the gain in elevation told them nothing of their position, for it was that murky mulberry dusk in which the foreground is just visible, but everything else an impenetrable blur.

They seemed to reach a summit, where curiously enough the sky was darker than below. After that it was flat for a little, with thinner vegetation but many thorns—Janet felt her hands ache from their attentions. She was feeling a little more at ease. They were on the right road—Hamilton seemed to have no doubt about that—they could not be very far from their goal, and there was no sign of pursuit. Luis must have lifted the enemy cleverly off the scent. She wondered if he were safe...

It was Archie who stopped suddenly and put his hand to his head. "Hamilton!" he panted. "Listen! Do you hear anything?"

Janet pushed her hair away from her ears. Somewhere back in the forest there was a sound like a little wind. But the night was very still... She listened again, and in the heart of it she heard the unmistakable note of human speech... And then suddenly it sounded much nearer, not a hundred yards away: "Oh! Quick," she cried. "They're almost up on us."

She was not quite right, for the acoustics of the place were strange. Actually at the moment the nearest of the pursuers was at least a quarter of a mile off. But all three had felt the ominous proximity of the sound, and all in their different ways reacted to the spur of fear. Hamilton, being of a stocky build, could not quicken his pace, for he had come nearly to the end of his running resources; instead he slowed down, and his hand fiddled with his belt. He would have preferred to fight. Janet got her second wind, and felt an extraordinary lightness and vigour. It was she now who dragged Archie. Inevitably they passed Hamilton, so when they suddenly came to the brink of the gorge she was leading the party.

It was the kind of spectacle which cuts short the breath for the sheer marvel of its beauty. From her feet the ground broke into a cliff, but a cliff not of stone but of soil, for it was all forested. The trees were set on so steep a gradient that two yards from her she was looking into branches reached commonly only by high-flying birds.

The angle was not less than sixty degrees, but some strange adhesive quality in the soil enabled it to cling to this difficult foundation and support life. But the miracle lay in the depth. In that luminous purple night it ran down from layer to layer of darkness, keeping an exact perspective, till it seemed that it had sunk for miles. The cleft must go to the centre of the globe, and yet a bottom could be detected, though not discerned. Somewhere at an infinite distance below there was water—the so-called *Agua Secreta*—strong water, too, for out of the deeps rose the murmur of a furious river.

From Janet's feet a bridge flung out into the void. It looked like a ship's bowsprit hanging over dark oceans, for the eye could not see its further abutment. And such a bridge! It was made of slats and twined osiers and lianas, solidly made, and its making was not of yesterday. But there was no planking to hide the abyss. Between the slats showed the naked void, and the slats were each a pace apart.

"On ye gang—," a hoarse voice spoke behind. "It's the brig we maun cross. Haud fast by the side ropes, mem, and ye'll no fa'. Sir Erchibald will keep haud o' ye."

But Janet had no fear for herself. This lath strung across immensity was a beautiful thing... Suddenly one half of it seemed to become brightly gilt, and she realised that the rim of the moon had lifted above a corner of hill... And it meant safety! It was Archie she feared for, Archie with his crippled leg. She stepped cheerfully out on the bridge. "Hold tight, Archie dear, and go very slow. Balance yourself by my shoulder."

The crossing of that bridge was a comment upon the character of each of the three. Janet was in a kind of ecstasy. To be islanded between sky and earth was an intoxication, and every step was nearer home. If only Archie...! Archie, painfully groping his way, minded the vertigo of it not at all, but he realised, as she did not, how slowly they moved and how imperative was haste. As for Hamilton, the thing was to him pure torment, he was terrified half out of his senses, but he doggedly plugged along because there was nothing else to be done. He was praying fervently and blaspheming steadily, and prayer and blasphemy continued till the first shot was fired. After that he was more at his ease.

They were in the middle of the bridge when the pursuers cached the edge. A cry followed them, heard as clearly in that funnel as if it had been spoken in their ear, to halt and come back or someone would shoot. The warning was followed by a shot, fired wide.

The last part of the journey was a nightmare for all three. Speed was an urgent matter, yet a slip would send them whirling into unplumbed gulfs. For Janet all the exhilaration was gone, and her heart was fluttering wildly. She was terrified for Archie, who had had some ugly slips and was leaning heavily on her arm. Also the gulf was now lit with silver moonshine. Before it had merely been a sensation of dark space, felt but not realised; now she could see its shimmering infinity, and something of the old terror of the Abyss began to clutch at her.

Before she knew she was off the bridge and had pulled Archie beside her on to a tussock of dwarf arbutus. A deadly faintness was on her, and her head swam. Dimly she saw Hamilton busy with his hatchet... What was he doing?... There were men on the bridge. She saw them clearly. They were getting nearer...

Then she realised. The fear of the Abyss came back to her. It seemed an awful thing to sacrifice men to it, even enemies. "Stop!" she pleaded. "You can't. Let's go on..."

"It's my orders, mem," said the other, stolidly cutting through the twisted lianas. "Maister Lewis says—at all costs ye maun destroy the brig ahint you."

The pursuit realised what was happening. They were more than half-way across, and the moonlight was so bright that the visibility was like day. Janet could see each of the four figures distinctly. They were all of the Bodyguard. One of them,

the foremost, seemed to be the man who had pursued her in the rotunda.

A pistol shot struck the earth a yard from Hamilton. "Ye'll maybe get hurt, mem," he observed between his strokes. "Get you and the Captain in ahint the buss. I'm near finished."

But apprehension and horror held both Archie and Janet motionless. There was one other pistol shot, which went wide. The men on the bridge had stopped shooting and were labouring grimly in the race with death... Supposing they won, thought Janet... But they did not win. Very gently, without any sag or jerk, the bridge swung out into the gulf like a silver pendulum, and several little black things were shaken from it.

Two hours later four of Peters's troopers, patrolling up the long moraine of shale in one of the tributary glens of the Catalpas stream, came upon three very weary travellers, who were staggering knee-deep in the shingle. To their amazement they found that they were English—two men and a woman, who asked to be taken to Pacheco. One of the men was lame, and he and the woman were set on horseback.

When after midnight they reached the camp in the valley bottom their captain, Carlos Rivero, received the travellers with excitement. He fed them, but they made only a hasty meal, demanding at once to be taken to headquarters. At the place which is called Maximoras, but in the old speech Hatuelpec, Captain Rivero, who himself conducted them, was again surprised to be met by a fresh troop from Pacheco, which contained a woman. But it was the commander of this troop who gave Rivero the third and most shattering surprise of the night. For he recognised in him the Gobernador of the Gran Seco.

BOOK III - OLIFA

I

General Alexander Lossberg, the Commander-in-Chief of the Olifa Expeditionary Force, was in a good temper as he took the air one morning on his smart little blue roan on the long ridge to the east of his advanced head-quarters. It was nearly four months since he had occupied the city of the Gran Seco, and he felt that the situation was now satisfactory to his orderly mind. At first it had been rather an anxious business, this groping in the dark for an enemy whom it seemed impossible to locate. With his superb force—his infantry divisions, his mechanised battalions, his cavalry brigade, his field batteries, and his light tanks—it had irked him to find nothing to spend his strength on. But he had been patient and very cautious. The enemy had an unpleasant number of aeroplanes and knew how to use them—he was a good soldier and could appreciate the merits of an antagonist—and his repeated demands to Olifa for more planes had brought a meagre response.

But, in spite of the semi-blindness which this weakness in the air involved, he had groped his way steadily to the identification and the capture of the enemy bases. There was Fort Castor—that had soon fallen. The name set him musing upon the fate of him who had once been Gobernador of the Gran Seco. He had never liked him; he remembered the insolent calm of his eyes, and his habit of asking unanswerable questions. The man had been an arrogant civilian, and his cleverness was futile in war. He had heard that he was an unwilling figurehead, a prisoner in the hands of the guerrillero whom the people called El Obro, and whom he understood to be a Scottish soldier-of-fortune. Well, this El Obro, he was not much of a soldier; only a flashy amateur. The General had heard a good deal of talk in his time about the importance of the psychological factor in war, and was a little sick of it. Why should he trouble himself to read the mind of this guerrillero; he knew by instinct the kind of mind he had—the ingenious schoolboy, treating war as a holiday game and banking on the unexpected. There was no such thing as the unexpected. War was an exact mathematical science. Cleverness and daring might delay for a week or two the advance of the great military machine, but in the end it crept forward, crushing opposition as a tank went through barbed wire and breastworks. Once again the professional had been justified, and the General flung out his chest and drew deep and pleasant draughts of the cool morning.

Fort Castor and then Loa, and then the easy capture of the enemy's secret base up on that shelf between the mountains and the sea. What was the name of it? Los Patios de la Mariana. An amusing name, the kind of name that those play-acting folk would choose. He had not yet visited the place, but he promised himself that pleasure soon. It was said to be very beautiful. He could imagine worse fates than to be the Governor of this province, and Los Patios might be an eligible site for a country house. Soldiering in Olifa itself had been a little tedious for a man of his energy. But Gobernador of this rich province—that promised power, and amusement, and, of course, wealth. In these Latin republics he understood that there was a generous margin for those set in authority.

The Mines had been his great problem. Olifa had always been nervous lest the enemy should so destroy them that their restoration would be a labour of years. One part of the danger had been removed when he occupied the city and the smelting works; the other, the Mines, had been made his chief preoccupation, by direct instructions from his Government. It had not been his own wish. He did not believe in tying himself up with anything in the nature of a fortress. He had been taught that it was a general's duty to seek out the enemy and destroy him, and not to be entangled in the defence of property. His adversaries had guessed at this obligation, for they had made the Mines the scene of most of the fighting, and had managed by constant pinpricking to tie up most of his troops on that long front...

Yet, perhaps, in their blundering way the Olifa Government had been right. Against an enemy so light and elusive and with such a vast hinterland for retreat, their way had perhaps been the best. He remembered that he had not been very successful in his rounding-up expeditions. His cavalry nets had been drawn tight again and again without enclosing anything. The cavalry had indeed been a failure. It had been led a pretty dance by El Obro's commandos, had been split up and destroyed in patches, had lost itself, had fought against itself in fog and darkness. As a gunner, he had never been a cavalry enthusiast, and now he was more disillusioned than ever. Also the tanks had not been a success, since there had been nothing solid against which to use them... No, perhaps Olifa by some fortunate accident had judged right. This long-drawn defence of the Mines had done its part. It must have depleted terribly the enemy's vanishing stock of munitions; he wished he could think that it had depleted his numbers.

And now it was over. For three days the Mines front had been stagnant, and his patrols had reported no enemy force within twenty miles. The cause could only be that debacle of munitionment which he had always foreseen and counted on.

There remained Pacheco—that robbers' nest in the angle of the hills. That, he believed, was the main enemy headquarters, and he had been anxious for a long time to burn it out. This very morning he was advancing on Pacheco in strength. At last there was something to bite on. The result, of course, was a foregone conclusion, and after that—? Where would El Obro find his next refuge? It was on Pacheco, no doubt, that the attempts on the Mines front had been based. It was from Pacheco beyond question that the raids on the railway had been launched.

These raids had for some time been happily abortive, and, now that he had his blockhouse system nearly complete, the only danger was from an occasional bombing aeroplane—if the enemy had any bombs left... There was perhaps another base in the north-east—he had some evidence of that. But what were these bases? Mere twigs on which to perch, and always being moved nearer to the inhospitable hills. You could not call that a base which supplied nothing in the way of food or shells. His military soul repudiated the name. He ran his mental eye over the map of the Gran Seco. The city and the railway to Olifa securely held; the Mines now free from all danger; the enemy forced out of the whole western, southern, and northern parts, and holding only an unknown corner in the north-east with dribblets southward towards the Tierra Caliente. The war was over. The country was conquered. All that remained was a little minor police work.

His reflections were so satisfactory that the General was compelled to ease his feelings by swift movement. He gave his horse its head against the slope, and, raising his cap, let the wind sing about him and ruffle his thinning hair. He drew rein at the crest and scanned the wide landscape. A fine soldierly figure he looked, his square tanned face flushed with exercise, his grey eyes with almost a boyish light in them, the slight heaviness and sullenness of mouth and jaw relaxed in good humour. He looked eastward where sixty or seventy miles away the great chain of the mountains stretched its white fingers into the unfathomable blue. He was no connoisseur in the picturesque, but suddenly those mountains gave him a feeling of pleasure. He felt a proprietary interest in this land, of which he might soon be Governor, and he was glad that his future satrapy included these magnificent creatures of God. They reminded him of his childhood, when from a Bavarian valley he had stared at the distant snows of the Wettersteingebirge.

He turned, and before him lay the grassy barrens that stretched to the city. On his right he could see the slim headgear of the Mines, and the defences of that now stagnant front. The sight initiated a new train of thought. He had always meant to have the Mines started as soon as possible. That would be proof positive of his victory. When he had broached the idea to Olifa it had been received with enthusiasm; those bovine ministers could not comprehend the meaning of his operations, but they could appreciate such a result as the resumption of their great industry... That very afternoon he would send a dispatch, and he would begin to work out the first stages...

And then a reflection brought him up with a jerk. Where was he to find the experts to advise him? What had become of those strange gentlemen who called themselves the Conquistadors? He had talked it all over with Romanes many weeks ago. He detested the type, the unwholesome pale faces, the low voices, the opaque eyes, which nevertheless in their blankness seemed to hold a perpetual sneer. But he had been instructed from Olifa to treat them with respect, and Romanes he found that he could get on with. The man had been a soldier—a good soldier, he believed, till he had fallen down—and he had not forgotten his earlier trade. The General had been impressed with the soundness of his military views. He had a contempt for anyone who fell out of his own hierarchy, but he did not show it, and Romanes had no doubt appreciated being treated as still one of the brotherhood. Romanes had been insistent on starting the Mines.

Half-power, of course, at first; there would be a great lack of technical staffs and white foremen. But he was confident that all the labour needed could be got among the concentrados and prisoners, and that he and his colleagues could make up a skeleton staff.

But that was nearly a month ago. General Lossberg had owed his professional success to his remarkable power of absorption in the task of the moment. He had been busy conducting a war, and he had had no ear for gossip. But he seemed to remember something. There were queer stories about those people. They lived on drugs and got them somewhere—where was it? somewhere in the mountains? Yes. Olivarez had told him that they had gone to the mountains, they and the blackguard-looking fellows who had been Castor's Bodyguard... Why had it been permitted? He would have something to say to Olivarez...

The General cantered across the baked yard in front of his quarters, and, giving his horse to an orderly, marched into the office of his Chief of Staff. Olivarez was older by several years than Lossberg, and, along with General Bianca, was the military pride of Olifa. He was a slight man, with a long olive-tinted face, a fleshy nose, and grizzled hair cut en brosse. He jumped to his feet as the General entered, and was about to speak, when he was forestalled.

"What about that fellow Romanes, General?" Lossberg demanded. "I want to get hold of him at once—him and his friends. I propose to start the Mines."

The other looked puzzled for a moment. He had something of his chief's gift of absorption, and his mind had been much occupied of late by other matters. "Romanes, sir? Yes, I remember." He turned the leaves of a big diary. "He left here on the 23rd of last month. Some private business. He was no use to us and we did not try to stop him. He was going into the mountains and was confident that he could get past General Peters's patrols. There was some talk of a seaplane which D'Ingraville had got hold of in Olifa. D'Ingraville, you may remember, sir, was formerly of the French Air Service. He left a request that we should keep in touch with him—by air, of course—and he gave us certain bearings and directions by which we could find him. I do not know if anything has been done about it. Shall I send for Colonel Waldstein?"

Presently Waldstein appeared, a little man all wire and whipcord. He had something to tell, but not much. "We had Senor Romanes's directions beyond doubt," he said, "but it is one thing, sir, to be given a line and quite another to be able to take it. That does not need saying. We twice tried to make contact with him, but you will remember, sir, that three weeks ago the enemy planes were very active between here and the mountains. There is reason to believe that both the fighting scouts that we sent out were shot down. At any rate, they have not returned."

"Have you done nothing since then?" Lossberg asked peremptorily.

"No, sir. Every machine we possess has been engaged in urgent business."

Lossberg tapped his teeth with a pencil; it was a habit he had when he was slightly ruffled.

"There is now no enemy activity in that area, Colonel Waldstein," he said at last. "You will please arrange that a machine is sent at once to the place indicated by Senor Romanes. No, send two, and send Hoffding carriers. I want Senor Romanes brought here at once, and as many of his colleagues as can be accommodated, and arrangements made for the transport here of the rest. Do you understand? The matter is urgent."

Waldstein saluted and went. Then Olivarez was given the chance of saying that which had been on his tongue.

"There is a message from Pacheco, sir. We occupied it an hour and twenty minutes ago."

Lossberg's face lit up. "But that is good business. Had we much trouble?"

"No, sir. We were not opposed. The place was abandoned."

Lossberg stared blankly. "Abandoned, you say?"

"Abandoned, sir. Not a shell was fired. No contact mines had been left. And apparently it had not been abandoned in a hurry, for every scrap of stores had been removed. The place had been deserted for several days."

The Commander-in-Chief, who was commonly a precisian in his speech, observed that he was damned. He stared with his eyes abstracted, thinking hard. He had always been contemptuous about psychology, but now he wished he could see a little into the mind of El Obro.

"Where have they gone?" he soliloquised. "Peters had five thousand men there a week ago. I wonder what diabolical game he is up to now? There's no way east or south. He has not come west, for we hold the land up to the southern scarp. He must have gone north. There's something preparing up in that north-east corner which we have got to discover. Tell Colonel Waldstein to arrange for an extensive air patrol of the eastern Tierra Caliente. Let him take a radius of 150 miles. Yes, telegraph the news about Pacheco to the War Ministry. It will make a good headline for the papers. But do not mention that we found it abandoned. I will give all the details in my dispatch."

"The wireless is working very badly, sir," said Olivarez. "We have been consistently jammed for the last thirty-six hours."

"Atmospherics," the Colonel observed. He had moments of longing for the old days of war, when you stuck to the heliograph, and the dispatch rider, and the telegraph. Then, somewhat perturbed, he went to breakfast. The crystal-clear vision of the future which he had had that morning on the savannah was a little dulled.

Towards the late afternoon of the same day one of the Hoffding machines returned, and with it the pilot of the other, which had crashed in one of the glens. It reported a difficult and disastrous journey. It had followed Romanes's directions and made its way into the mountain range by an intricate series of valleys. It had found itself in a region where the wind came in baffling eddies, and where there was no possible landing-place. All the valleys were narrow and sheer and muffled with forest. It had discerned a shelf of flat ground, filled with the ruins of great stone towers. There, flying low, it had seen the remains of old camp-fires, but there were no human beings now in the place. After that came the disaster to its sister machine, the pilot of which had been saved by a miracle. Unless it attempted to fly over the main range, there was nothing more to be done, so it had come home to report.

Late that night one of Waldstein's patrols brought in a man who had been found in the tangled country under the lee of the mountains. He was half dead with fatigue and starvation, but had recovered sufficiently to ask to be taken to the General's Headquarters. The General had not had the pleasant dinner which he had anticipated. The meal, instead of being a cheerful celebration of the capture of Pacheco, had been an anxious confabulation with his staff.

For something had gone wrong with his communications, and he could get no answer from Olifa. In place of the lyric congratulations on success which he had expected, his message had been followed by utter silence. The long-distance telephone had never been noted for its reliability, but hitherto the telegraph service had been perfect. Now, with the wireless out of gear for two days, it looked as if this too had failed. That, or some intense preoccupation at the Ministry of War. Consequently, when Olivarez brought in the rag of humanity which his patrol had picked up, it was with no friendly eye that Lossberg regarded him.

"We cannot find Senor Romanes," the Chief of Staff had said, "but this is one of those who were with him. One of the gentry whom Castor called his Bodyguard. He says he has something for your private ear. Jesucristo! Wherever he came from he has had a rough Journey."

Mr Daniel Judson had not been improved in looks by his recent experiences. His clothes hung in rags, his skin was black with exposure, and short commons had sharpened his face so that his big head tapered to a jackal's mask.

Normally his broken nose and rabbit teeth gave him a touch of comedy, ferocious comedy—but now these features seemed to be blended into one overwhelming impression of something snarling and ravening. The slouch of his thick-set shoulders gave him the air of crouching for a spring, like a mad dog. He had had food, of which he had eaten sparingly, being used to similar experiences and knowing the danger of a glut. Lossberg gave him permission to sit down, while his story dribbled out through the confusion of fatigue.

Most of it was startlingly new to the General and his staff. He spoke of a camp at Los Tronos del Rey. "Those guys had to have the dope, and the Indians fetched it..." He told of the daily expeditions and of the discovery of a pass through the mountains which had excited Romanes.

"We were expecting you to send to us, but you never came, so Mr Romanes, he tried to get to you. The Indians must have double-crossed us, for nothing happened. We sent out Magee, and he never came back. Then the Indians turned nasty. There was a woman we had with us and she got away. The Indians must have helped her, and they cut the bridge behind her, and next morning the whole outfit did a bunk. After that we were between a rock and a hard place. There was a lot of unpleasantness with Mr Romanes, but by and by we see'd we couldn't do nothing by fighting each other, so we shared out the grub, and took what we each thought was the best road off that bloody mantelpiece... I started out with two pals, and I don't know where in hell they've got to." Mr Judson appeared to be going to be sick at the recollection. He recounted haltingly something of his troubles, first in the forest and then in the glens of the foothills. Famine had been the worst. "A biscuit would ha' rattled in my stomach like a buckshot in a tin pan." He had several times decided that he was about to perish. "This world one time, then the fireworks," was the way he expressed his anticipation.

By and by he had become so feeble that he could only crawl and weep, and in that condition the patrols had found him. Even now he had not the strength of a new-born cat.

"If I slapped a fly this moment, I'd fall down."

Lossberg fastened upon one item in his story, the pass through the mountains. Judson strayed into vague profanity. He didn't rightly know how to describe it, but they had found it all right, and Mr Romanes had thought it as important as hell. That was why he had made his despairing effort to get in touch with the General. Judson's brains were too befogged to explain further, but he quoted a sentence of Romanes. "Mr Romanes," I heard him say to the long Frenchy, him that was the airman, "By God!" he says, "if we don't stop that bolt-hole the rebs one fine morning will be breakfasting in Olifa."

Judson was dismissed, and the General looked at his Chief of Staff.

"Romanes is not a fool," he said, "and he has been a soldier. He has found out something which he wanted badly to get to us. Remember he is on our side. Except by our victory he and his friends cannot get back to the life they enjoy. What is that something? A road through the mountains into Olifa? We have always understood that there was no road, no practicable road, except that which the railway follows. There may be a pass which we know nothing of. Romanes knows about it. The question is, does El Obro? If he does, it would explain Pacheco."

The two men talked long and gravely. One result of their conference was that Waldstein was given fresh orders. His air patrols must move a little farther south and explore the valleys east of Pacheco. At all costs they must find Senor Romanes and his companions, who must now be making their way down from the hills.

Lossberg had a disturbed night, but about ten next morning he had news which cheered him. There had been a sudden revival of enemy activity in the north part of the province. Mounted bands had been seen west of the line Fort Castor-Loa, and a motor convoy, bound for the latter place, had been captured. To Lossberg this was reassuring tidings. It seemed to explain the whereabouts of Peters and his Pacheco force. They had not gone south through any mysterious pass in the mountains, but north, to join the oddments up in that north-eastern corner. The General convinced himself that what he had always foreseen had now come to pass. The enemy was confined to the north-east of the Tierra Caliente, and all that remained was slowly and drastically to bring him to book. He would of course make sallies from his beleaguement, but it would not be hard to cope with the desperate efforts of weak and ill-provided men.

Yet the whole of the following week was taken up with these sallies. The enemy had changed his tactics, and adopted a vigorous offensive. The Mines front was stagnant, and Lossberg was able to move one infantry division and all his cavalry to the threatened north.

The first thing that happened was that Loa fell to the guerrilleros, and the garrison in the Courts of the Morning had its land communications cut. This was interpreted by Lossberg as a feint, for Loa could be no value to the enemy. In this he was right, for after its stores had been removed, Loa was abandoned.

But the next move was startling, no less than a raid on the Gran Seco city. It happened about 11 a.m. on a night when there was no moon. The enemy cut up the pickets, and for nearly four hours held all the city west of the smelting works and north of the railway station. The thing had been beautifully arranged. The raiders, who seemed to know the place intimately, occupied the key-points, and used the machine guns they had taken at the northern approaches. They knew, too, where the stores were, and helped themselves to what they wanted, loading the loot into light motor-wagons which had only the day before arrived from Olifa. They destroyed a freight train in the railway yards and put no less than seven locomotives out of action. It was artful destruction, done by men who were skilful mechanics, and it would take weeks to repair. Then, after setting fire to the Gran Seco Club as a final feu de joie, they made off at their leisure, taking with them the light motor-wagons. It was well after daybreak before Lossberg's first reinforcements arrived, for the telephone and telegraph wires had been comprehensively cut. An attempt to follow was made with armed cars, but the pursuit struck the rear of the raiders about forty miles north-east of the city, was ambushed, and badly cut up. The enemy had vanished again into his north-eastern fastness.

All this was disquieting, but yet in its way consoling Judson's story had deeply impressed the Commander-in Chief, and he was relieved to have discovered the whereabouts of the Pacheco force. It must have joined the band under Escrick, for hitherto Escrick had been far too weak to think of an offensive. So he set about with a will the task of hunting down the remnant. He established a cordon of posts in a line from the Mines to Loa, and, based on each extremity, he had a mobile force of cavalry and mechanised battalions. He believed that this cordon could not be pierced, and his plan was slowly to push it forward till he had driven the enemy into the mountain valleys. Of these he would then seal up the ends, and starve him out.

But the cordon was pierced, repeatedly pierced. There was no further raid on the Gran Seco, but there was a disastrous dash on the Mines, which ended in the explosion of a shell-dump and the shattering of two engine-houses. Marvellous to relate, too, there was a raid on the railway, from what base no man knew, and the line was badly damaged in the crucial section between Tombequi and Villa Bar. Also there were perpetual pinpricks. Not a convoy seemed to be able to move on any of the Gran Seco roads without some regrettable accident—a mined road, a broken culvert, a long-distance sniping—of baneful accuracy. Lossberg, who had regarded the campaign as over, was forced to admit that it had miraculously entered upon a new phase.

In the thick of this guerrilla warfare the General forgot his other problems. He was kept so feverishly busy that he omitted to worry about the silence of the Olifa Ministry of War and the absence of a reply to his message about Pacheco. He was moving fast about the country and did not remember to inquire whether Waldstein's machines had picked up any news of the Conquistadors. Waldstein's machines were now on other duties. But there came a night when he was able to return to his advanced Headquarters, which had remained in the vicinity of the Mines. He dined alone with Olivarez, the first peaceful meal he had had for ten days. Both men were in better spirits.

"It is the last spasm of a dying animal," said Lossberg. "Now we know to a decimal the worst he could do, and we know that he cannot repeat it. In a week this activity will die down, and we shall turn to the question of starting the Mines. Even now it is police work we are engaged in, not war."

Olivarez nodded and smiled. "By the way, we have news of the Conquistadors. Senor Romanes is here, and the man they call Larbert, the Englishman."

"I will see them after dinner," was the answer. General Lossberg filled himself a glass of champagne—he had allowed himself champagne that evening—and looked complacently at its sparkle. He had had an annoying time, but he had come to the end of it.

The telephone bell rang, and Olivarez took the receiver. "It is from Olifa at last," he said over his shoulder. "A message forwarded from Base Headquarters."

The General continued to contemplate his glass, with a smiling face. He awaited the congratulations which were his due. Suddenly he was startled to attention, for his Chief of Staff was speaking in an odd voice. "Repeat," he said, and again, "Repeat!" He turned to Lossberg without hanging up the receiver and his hand trembled. "I can't make it out... It must be a mistake... It is from Santa Ana, not Olifa. I don't know who sent it... Good God, it can't be true!"

"What is it, man?" Lossberg asked.

"It says that Santa Ana was captured this morning by the enemy. Santa Ana! By the American Blenkiron, who was known here as Rosas!"

Lossberg's face whitened, but he retained his composure.

He even laughed, a little harshly. "If that is true, El Obro is assuredly through the passes."

The short spring had gone, and it was already early summer at Charcillo. The gnarled tamarisks which lined two sides of the great pebbled courtyard were hung with long lilac blooms, and the poplars and willows were green along the water-furrows. The estancia was of an older type than Veiro. There were no neat paddocks and English-looking stables; part of the house itself had stood for three hundred years, and the thick walls of the corrals were almost fortifications. The place stood on a low ridge between the main stream of the Vulpas and a tributary, commanding to the west and south long views over savannah which gradually dipped to the blueness of the coastal plain.

Behind, to the east, was more rolling country, but from every ridge might be descried fifty miles off the dark loom of the mountains, and in clear weather the northernmost peaks of Los Doce Apostoles.

For the past fortnight Janet had been a happy denizen of a fantastic world. She felt that she was now promoted to the rank of a combatant. Her adventure had by a marvellous chance been the turning-point in the campaign. As she looked back upon the last month, the fear and horror were forgotten. Her week of captivity was only like a dark night between bright and bustling days. Far back in the corridors of memory she saw the Courts of the Morning, a platform lifted high above the world, whence with a divine detachment they had looked down upon the struggles of mortals. That life could not have lasted, but it had done its work, for it had wrought a miracle in the Gobernador.

What had become of the mysterious being with his inhuman composure and his secret thoughts? A new man had been born, a man who had forgotten his past and walked on a new earth with a curious innocence. He seemed to be happy, happy in companionship as well as in leadership. For beyond doubt he was a leader, and his post as generalissimo was no polite fiction. It was an unfamiliar world to him, but he had taken hold of it like a master.

Modestly, simply, he had applied his mind to strange problems, and from the first day he had had an unquestioned authority. In the great movement through the passes, after Peters with the remnant of his command had gone north to Escrick, and Sandy had led his mounted three thousand into Olifa, it was the Gobernador who had spoken the ultimate word. By tacit consent he was always deferred to, and as he mastered the problems his authority became one of mind as well as of character. And he was happy—that was the immense change. He seemed to have rid himself of a burden both of years and cares.

Crowded days lay behind them. Charcillo was the base headquarters, but when the word to strike was given they would move to Veiro. Meanwhile the concentration was kept secret. The Olifa Government had no doubt news of trouble on the south-eastern edge of the Gran Seco, but they had no knowledge of what was happening in this wild corner of their own province. For the countryside was at their back and Luis's agents controlled all the communications with the capital. They had spent a feverish week over the coming concentration, and to Charcillo at all hours of the day and night had come Luis's lieutenants to consult. Some of them were young men whom Janet had met at the Polo Club or danced with in Olifa; many were officers of the Olifa reserve; some were grizzled hacendados from the skirts of the hills or rich industrials from Alcorta and Lardamo... There was old Martinez and his five sons who owned hundreds of miles of ranching ground on the skirts of the mountains... And Ramirez and his clan who were the fruit kings of Olifa... And the Zarramgas from Pecos, whose ancestors had come to the country with Pizarro... And young Miguel de Campanillo, whose kin had ridden with Toledo and whose family had given a later Olifa three presidents... She did not quite understand them. These men were prosperous; they had no grievance against the Gran Seco; they were not of the rootless revolutionary type. Why should they want to join in this quarrel? But the chief marvel was Don Alejandro Gedd. The little man had become a crusader. Why? His patriotism in the past had chiefly shown itself in dislike of all things American. He had disliked Castor, too, and now he was his willing henchman.

There was a big map indoors, on which with coloured pins the strength of the opposing sides was shown. Olifa had three battalions in the city, in camp at the Plaza de Toros, and she had a skeleton division at Pecos, and a battalion at Santa Ana. There were detachments at Al Corta and Cardiano, and on the latter place was based the small Olifa navy. These points were marked with green pins, but it was to be noted that sometimes close up to them was stuck a red pin. That meant that in such places there was a strong anti-Government element in the regulars. The red pins were widely scattered, but there were certain spots marked with black rings, which were the centres for concentration. One was on the railway south of Santa Ana, another at the junction south-east of Olifa, whence ran the line to Alcorta. But the chief was at the railhead west of Veiro. To the north the Gran Seco was unmarked. No news had come of how Peters and Escrick were faring in their intensive guerrilla campaign.

The thing fascinated the girl. She seemed to be herself a player in a drama which was nearing its last act. Of the ultimate purpose she scarcely thought. Victory was to her a concrete thing, a single culminating moment, beyond which her mind would not speculate.

Her one anxiety was Sandy. He had lost the briskness and the audacity with which he had begun the campaign. Perhaps he was tired; he must be, for he had worn himself to a shadow in the Gran Seco. A man has only a certain stock of vital energy, and he had squandered his lavishly... But there was more in it than that, she thought Sandy was a born adventurer, who must always be imperilling himself, working on the extreme edge of hazard, playing for an outside chance. But now the war was almost regularised. It was a revolution of the familiar type, where the rank and file took the risks. Sandy hated bloodshed. For war he had no use unless it was war on his special plan, an audacious assault upon the enemy's nerves. The other kind, the usual kind, he would only accept if it were in defence of his own country, and Olifa was not his fatherland.

Janet said as much to Castor, who had joined her where she sat on a low white wall, plucking at the long blooms of the

tamarisks. He looked like a fighting admiral, who had strayed by accident into khaki.

He nodded his agreement.

"That is Lord Clanroyden's trouble. He is born out of due season. He does not quite like a game where the chances are not hopelessly against him. Now that the odds have been shortened he is uncomfortable. But let him console himself. We have still a long way to travel. General Lossberg and I are in the position of each facing his own capital, like the French and Germans before Sedan. That is not comfortable for him, but it is not altogether comfortable for us. We have to keep him shut up in the Gran Seco, for if his army got out it would destroy us in a week. Also we have to persuade the Olifa Government that it will be well to make peace, and that may not be easy. Let the senor be at ease. It is still a war not of brute force but of morale."

"I think you are happy," she said.

"I am happy because I have found something. I have found friends, and I have found a better philosophy. Also I have found what I never had before, a country. I am discovering the rudiments of life."

"You are ten years younger."

He laughed. "And yet I am destroying all the things I have given my life to make. I have jettisoned my old ambition. I hoped to be a Napoleon to change the shape of the world. Fool that I was! I should only have begun to yawn after it was done, and then somebody would have shot me. Now I am quite content if I can help to make an inconsiderable Latin republic a more wholesome State—and if I can prove myself not unworthy of my friends."

"That is the truth," she said. "This is not Sandy's country... You have changed places, I think. You have come down into the homely world, and Sandy is beginning to wander in the cold uplands of his finical conscience. It is a side of him you have never seen, but I have. Unless he is tied to duties which need every atom of his powers, he will begin to torment himself with questions."

"That is perhaps the explanation of the adventurer," was his reply. "He is happiest when he need not stop to think. For myself, I have thought too much about large matters, and I now think only of little things, like Olifa."

That night Luis returned, bringing with him Miguel de Campanillo, Don Alejandro, and one of the young Zarranigas. At supper, which was eaten on tables in the veranda under a grape trellis, for the night was warm, there was the equivalent of a Council of War. It was the eve of raising the standard. The troops at Pecos had been elaborately tampered with, and at a signal the majority which favoured the revolution would occupy the barracks and the depot, much as the Mines Police had done in the Gran Seco. But before that it was necessary to make certain that Lossberg would be detained beyond the mountains, and for this purpose Santa Ana must be occupied. This task was entrusted to Blenkiron, who with two thousand mounted troops was to move next morning. Once his job was completed, he was to join hands with the Campanillos at Pecos, who hoped to add their local levies to the regulars who would by that time have seized the place. The railway beyond Santa Ana was to be destroyed and the telegraph wires cut. Lossberg's blockhouses did not come within eighty miles of Santa Ana, not farther south than the frontier station of Gabones, but, in case he attempted to break through, the narrow pass south of Gabones was to be held in strength, and the road which accompanied the railway was to be comprehensively mined. Meantime the concentrations at Veiro and Alcorta Junction were to be completed, and the dockyard at Cardanio was to be taken.

The talk at first was all of numbers and distances. Castor, who carried a multitude of figures in his head, satisfied himself that nothing had been omitted, and he was answered by Luis from a file of messages. Then, as the stars pricked out, and the wind from the hills began to temper the heat, the company relaxed. Soon the air was blue with cigarette smoke, and some, cramped by a long day in motor-cars on bad roads, strolled into the courtyard, where the scent of flowers from the great painted wine-vats was mingled with sharper smells of baked earth and miles of grasses. Presently Sandy went off with Blenkiron and Castor to verify some figures. Barbara and Archie walked with the young Zarraniga, and Janet found herself in a party of four with Campanillo, Luis, and Don Alejandro..

There was something in the tropic night which went to her head. Though she had no prospect beyond the courtyard shimmering under the stars, she seemed to be looking from a watch-tower over an immense country—steaming coast marshes, baked white cities, miles of waving green, cliffs red as blood falling into an angry blue sea, mountains that stretched cold fingers to the very courts of heaven.

For months she had been breathing that air which only belongs to lands which man has not yet mastered, and its sharpness and strangeness had entered her blood. She was in love with space. For a moment she was a patriot of this huge child of a raw and half-made continent.

"Don Alejandro," she said, "do you remember the first night when we dined with you in the Olifa hotel? You told us about Olifa, how she had no problems—no discontents—because she was rich and secure. But you said that she had bartered her pride for prosperity."

Don Alejandro laughed. "True," he said. "I also said that she had no soul, but in saying that I lied. Olifa has always had a soul, but it has been sleeping. Now it looks as if Luis had awakened it."

"What puzzles me is why?" Janet said again. "You had no grievances—I mean the ordinary people. They had an orderly Government and light taxes and no conscription, and the reason was the golden eggs from the Gran Seco. What has made the ordinary Olifero angry with the golden goose?"

"He is not angry." It was Luis who answered. "He does not trouble. The ordinary man everywhere in the world only wishes to be left alone. Revolutions are not made by the many but by the few. Yet there are enough of the discontented, I

think, to do our business."

"But why the discontent?"

"Because we have remembered our pride. We of the old houses have not been happy in a State which was no better than a big trading firm—with foreign brains to do the work which the Olifero should do himself."

"What work?"

"Governing us and defending us. Our army is mainly a force of skilled mercenaries. And our Government—well, the voice of the ministers was the voice of Olifa, but the wires which made them speak and act were pulled by the Commander-in-Chief, who is now having a final talk about Santa Ana with Lord Clanroyden and Senor Blenkiron. We have still an old-fashioned prejudice in favour of governing ourselves."

"How long have you been organising this discontent?"

"How long, Sandro?" Luis asked Gedde. "About three years come Christmas. The thing went fast, for the spirit was there waiting for it. Prosperity is not enough for us Oliferos. Our pride was outraged by our stout bourgeois ministers, who took their orders so obediently from another... But we organised in the dark, blindly, for we knew that we needed some notable piece of good fortune to succeed. Then we found the Yanqui Wilbur, and through him Senor Blenkiron. And at the end came Lord Clanroyden. It is a simple tale of the mercies of God. Let us hope that these mercies are not exhausted."

"But if Olifa was under the thumb of Mr Castor, won't it be the same even if we win? He is our commander, isn't he? Can you have a nationalist revolution led to victory by the man whose domination of your country stirred up your nationalism? You have made your chief opponent your leader—a foreigner too, a man with no country."

"Not so. He is one of us."

"But he is an Austrian."

"On his father's side he is Austrian. But his grand-mother was a Campanillo, a great-great-aunt of friend Miguel here."

"Does he know that? Does Sandy know it?" The girl was open-mouthed in amazement.

"He has always known it. I myself have known it this past year, and the fact was the basis of our plans... It is a long story. Lady Roylance, too long to tell at this hour of the night. As you justly say, he had no country. That is a fashionable folly among certain clever people in Europe. To-day he has found one... That was one reason why Lord Clanroyden and I planned to carry him off and maroon him up in the Patios de la Mariana—that he might find his country. There is no loosing the chains of blood. Once he got the bitter-sweet smell of our land into his nostrils and the clean air of our hills into his lungs, we believed that the cobwebs would, fall from his eyes and very old ancestral things come to life. That has happened, I think... More than that, of course. Between us—you, perhaps, especially—we have made him a human being. He will dream different dreams now, more wholesome dreams."

"What will you do with him? Can you fit him in—anything as big as he is?"

"We will of course make him our President," Don Alejandro interposed. "He is our great man, our show figure. We look to his brains to give us good government and to keep us prosperous."

"But can you harness him?" Janet persisted. "Can you turn Niagara into a useful stream which will irrigate gardens?"

"He will harness himself," said Luis, "for he is wise."

"And yet," she urged, "for years he has been hugging ambitions vast enough to set half the globe on fire—not silly whims, but closely-reasoned ambitions worked out to decimal fractions. He hated America—that was why Mr Blenkiron first decided to fight him. From what I remember of your table-talk, Don Alejandro, you also had no great love for America. Didn't you say that you regarded her patronage as an insult to your country? Why should you wish to put a spoke in the wheel of a man who has the same prejudice?"

"Because I am not a fool." Don Alejandro spoke with a brusqueness remarkable in one so suave. "Because I will not have Olifa made a pawn in a crazy game which means ruin. I do not love Yanquis, apart from Miss Dasent and Wilbur and Blenkiron and perhaps three others. But I want my country to be a rival to the United States in power and quality—not to be a blind mouse along with other blind mice in the hands of deracine genius."

Luis laughed. "You have stirred up the gentle Sandro, Lady Roylance, by touching his sorest spot. I do not think you quite understand the meaning of Spanish blood. You ought to, for the British are nearest to us of any race. We are realists, you know, very calculating and prosaic and close to the earth. But we must have our glamour too, our touch of poetry. We make good monarchists—and good republicans, if we can hit on the right president. Castor will suit us admirably, for he will give us poetry, which the dingy camarilla now in Olifa never did. He will have ideas and imagination and colour, and the air of magnificence. With him we will advance so fast that we shall astonish mankind. But his brilliance will not be dangerous, for all around him will be Spaniards, we Oliferos, very appreciative of poetry, but quite resolved to keep our feet on the ground. Like your Scotch, who will quote the poets and weep over them, and the next moment make hard bargains."

A lamp had been put on the table by a servant, and round it white moths were fluttering. As Janet looked at the faces revealed in its light, she received a sudden clear impression of something she had not met before—an ardour which was not ashamed to reveal itself because it was in turn based on a revelation. Don Alejandro with his neat small features and high cheek-bones—Luis, fair, golden brown of skin, with his glowing eyes—the young Zarraniga with his slender eyebrows and grave, rather sullen mouth—there was something innocently apostolic about them. They were in the grip of an idea. Their patriotism was an adventure, for their country was still to be made.

She smiled at the boy Miguel, and he smiled back at her. She had seen the same look, as a child, in the faces of young

men starting for Flanders. Here was one to whom new horizons had suddenly appeared. Luis read her thoughts.

"We are going to make a country which will offer careers for youth," he said. "Our young men will no longer have to leave Olifa, or, if they stay at home, stagnate on their estates. Their future will be their country's future, for they will govern it, and thereby we shall have an advantage over that great people whom Sandro so much dislikes. We shall invent a new civilisation in this continent, which will be a bridge between the old world and the new."

Sandy's face suddenly appeared in the circle of light, and behind him Blenkiron and Castor. There was a hush, inevitable when serious talk is suddenly overheard. Blenkiron's jolly laugh broke it.

"Looks as if you folk had been picking on my poor little country," he said.

"No, indeed we haven't," said Janet. "We have only been deciding that Olifa is going to be neither a satellite nor an enemy of America, but an honourable rival."

"That's fine! They'll be mighty glad to hear it in Washington."

Archie and Barbara and the young Zarraniga presently joined them, and the group reasserted itself.

Janet sat very still, her eyes on two faces, Castor's and Sandy's. In the first she saw what she had not observed before, a certain kinship to the men with whom she had been talking. It was a subtle resemblance, a thing not of feature or manner, but of a look in the eyes, a tone in the voice. Castor belonged here after all. He could be captured by a dream... She had once said that he had a short-range imagination, and it was true. He was the ready slave of an idea... And he was young. He had never been anything else but young. She looked at Sandy, and suddenly felt that they were old—he and she and Archie and Blenkiron—even Barbara. They could not be happily rapt into a dream, because they dragged too great a weight of tradition behind them. They were children of an ancient world, and could not break from it... She no longer felt herself a sharer in their enterprise, but a benevolent stranger... And Sandy? The burden had left his shoulders and he looked a little bewildered. Perhaps a little homesick? These others had found a country. Might it not be that he was longing for his own?

She lay awake for some time after she went to bed, puzzling over this new direction of her thoughts. Might not something great come out of this venture, something of high moment for the world? And then she thought of a look she had caught on Barbara's face, and she fell asleep with her mind on a fresh trail... She was awakened at three o'clock by the sound of departing motor-cars. That would be Blenkiron on his way to Santa Ana. Her friends might have no spiritual share in the fervours of the rebellion, but they had a very practical part to play in it.

The succeeding days were full of bustle and excitement, for the train had been lit and the explosions were beginning. The road and railway to the Gran Seco were destroyed by Blenkiron with the completeness of a great engineer. The revolt of the troops at Pecos went like clockwork. Also the naval base at the Cardanio was easily surprised, and the Olifa navy, except for two destroyers in Olifa harbour and a few patrol boats along the coast, was quietly put out of action.

But on the first news of success there followed less comforting messages. The concentration at Veiro was going slowly. The ordinary Olifero was nervous, and hesitated to declare himself till he was certain which was the winning side. At Alcorta, too, the industrial centre, there was a danger of Communist trouble, which would immobilise forces which should have been marching north.

"Whoever said 'Il n'y a que le premier pas qui coute,'" Sandy told Janet, "was a fool. It is blindingly untrue of revolutions. The first step is easy. You can always start with a bang. It's the second step that is the devil. We haven't succeeded, or anything like it, for the country hasn't risen, and it isn't certain by a long chalk whether it is on our side. It is waiting to see how the cat jumps. We've got my Gran Seco troops, and about four thousand of the regulars. Add Luis's recruits and we may have a total of twelve thousand. Also we've temporarily bottled up Lossberg. But the Government has far more than three battalions in the city, as we believed. They've the better part of a division, and they've the pick of the artillery. Old Bianca is no fool, and they're fortifying like blazes. We haven't yet the strength for a coup, and it's a question whether we'll ever get it. It's all a question of moral. Unless we can bluff the Government into a surrender by cracking their moral, we can't force them... Oh yes, once they surrendered it would be smooth going. The cat would have jumped and the whole country would be behind us. But you can't run a revolution, as Luis thinks you can, on a handful of grandees."

"What is the worst that could happen?" Janet asked anxiously.

"That Lossberg should break out. That would blow us sky-high. He would stiffen the Government, and put the fear of death on the Oliferos. They're not going to stand up against the first-class regular army they have bought and paid for. Down on these plains Lossberg would drive us like sheep, and we should all go off to heaven in a whirl of aimless glory... Janet, I'm sick with anxiety. I've brought you and Archie into this mess, and it's the kind of mess I don't understand."

He looked far more haggard than she had ever seen him in the Gran Seco.

"You're tired to death," she said, and knew that she was talking nonsense.

"I'm not tired," he replied wearily, "but I'm out of my element. I hate war, except my own sort, and any moment this may become the hopeless ordinary kind that I detest and am no good at... You see, this isn't my country, and it isn't yours or Archie's. We can't feel about it like Luis and the others. I've done what I set out to do, and spiked Castor's guns. But the curse of life is that you can't stop short when you want, and I seem to have landed you all into the fire out of the frying-pan... The worst of it is, I can do nothing. There's no job for me here. El Obro is dead and buried, and I'm only a foreign filibuster mixed up in a show for which he has no heart."

Yet he seemed busy enough. He was splitting up his command, and had already parted with most of the white mounted troops. Only his Indians remained, under their white officers; it had always been decided to reserve them to the last, because of their effect on the nerves of the Olifa population. Of them he had now a little over a thousand. They were paraded one evening, tall, lean men on little wiry horses, who by now had almost the discipline of cavalry and were also trained marksmen. Janet and Barbara stood beside Sandy, as he watched them pass in the dusty sunlight.

"A fine lot," he said. "These fellows have something to fight for. Thank God, they'll never go back to the old slavery. If the worst happens, there'll be a new breed of bandit in the hills."

Behind them appeared Bobby Latimer. The aeroplanes had been left in the Gran Seco, all but one flight, which kept Charcillo in touch with Luis and Blenkiron. Bobby himself made long private patrols mostly in the direction of the city. That day, however, he had shaped his course for the north. As he saluted, Janet saw that his face was solemn.

"There's hell loose in the passes, sir," he said. "I have been up the road we came from the Gran Seco, and somebody's put Lossberg wise to it. There's a good-sized army on its way down—ten troops of horse, and about four thousand infantry, and an unholy lot of light batteries. They were in the Thunderer Valley three hours ago, and should make the place we called the Tennis Court before dark. To-morrow evening they'll be on the Vulpas."

A slow smile spread over Sandy's face.

"I spoke too soon," he said to Janet, "when I complained that I had nothing to do. I'm about to be the busiest man in this continent. Bobby, when you've fed and washed, you go off to Don Luis. I'll have a message written out for you. Janet, dear, run and tell Rogerson to be in my room in half an hour. I'll wait and have a word with Ackroyd."

"It's pretty serious, isn't it, sir?" Latimer asked.

"It's so serious that if that column shows its nose on the Vulpas we may chuck up the sponge. But thank God, it's still in the narrows. I've got a thousand men—three times what old Leonidas had—and I'm going to try the Thermopylae stunt."

He found his arm clutched by Barbara.

"Is it worth it?" she cried, and even in his absorption he noticed that her face had gone very pale. "Is it worth it?" she repeated. "We can't spare you... Nobody came back from Thermopylae."

Her eyes sobered him. He even flushed slightly. "I'm coming back all right, Miss Dasent, and so are my men. I might be spared, but we couldn't do without them. We're not brave like the Spartans. Our Thermopylae is going to be a more cunning affair than the old one."

Half an hour later Blenkiron arrived by aeroplane. He had not been expected, and when he walked into the room where Sandy was giving his final instructions to Rogerson he was greeted with a shout of joy.

"Thank God!" Sandy cried. "You're the one man in the whole world I wanted. What providence has brought you here?"

"Why, I wanted to get some notion of the general proposition." His goggles had preserved his eyes from the fine dust which coated his face, so that he looked like a red owl with great staring eye-holes. "We've gotten our show pretty well advanced, and I could turn it over to Melville with an easy mind. There'll be no traffic south of Gabones for quite a while."

"You've closed that port?" Sandy demanded.

"Sure. Closed it and sealed it and put a heap of stones at the door. Things are going nicely at Pecos too. But I've heard nothing from the south, and I kind of hoped to be put wise about the general proposition—"

"Never mind the general proposition. There's a special one we've got to face. Lossberg is half through the passes."

"You don't say." Blenkiron's face ceased to be that of an owl, and contracted into something hard and vigilant. "Who brought word?"

"Bobby Latimer—less than an hour ago."

"Good boy! Say, this is getting central. We've certainly got to push him back."

"We certainly have. Do you realise that as yet we're nowhere near winning? Everything is still on a knife-edge. The country is waiting to see what happens before it makes up its mind—I mean the great bulk of the people, for Luis's lads are only a sprinkling. We've got to bluff the Government into surrender, and we haven't the foggiest chance if Lossberg shows his face in Olifa. If the passes are opened, we're absolutely done in. Have you got that?"

"Sure."

"Then in one hour's time we start out to stop that bolt-hole. You and I and a few others. Thank the Lord you've turned up, for this is more your kind of show than mine."

Blenkiron groaned, But his eyes were cheerful. "There's no rest for the weary, but it's mighty good for my figure. I've dropped thirty pounds since I went to the wars. Have you a map handy? I'd like to refresh my memory about that patch of country."

"We made a rough drawing coming down, and here's the result." Sandy spread out a big sheet on his desk. "The distances are more or less correct... See, here's Charrillo. It's about ten miles to the main stream of the Vulpas, and about twenty more to its head. Then there's the pass—four more till you look into the Thunderer."

Blenkiron put on his horn spectacles and with a grubby forefinger traced the route from the Gran Seco, by which they had come and by which their enemy was now following. From Pacheco the trail ran to the valley under the hills which the Indians called the river of the Blue Wolf. It did not turn up the tributary water of the Catalpas, by which Janet and Archie had escaped, but continued up the main stream, which presently bent due eastward. When the alley narrowed to a glen the road turned south and crossed the southern containing wall to the upper waters of an eastward-flowing river which the Indians called the Thunderer. Hitherto the road had been intricate and steep, but passable for men and animals and even for light motors, since it was reasonably broad and its floor was the shaly mountain ravel. But the glen of the Thunderer was ancient chaos, strewn with immense boulders and the debris of old landslides, and in the middle was a torrent which amply earned its Indian name. Yet there was a road for those who knew it, and the stream could be forded at one place, where it spread into a broad shallow pool on a shelf of rock before hurling itself into its customary abyss. That ford was six miles down from the pass which led from the Blue Wolf, and after it the road climbed among the cliffs and screes of the southern containing wall, till it reached a broad flat mantelpiece which could have accommodated an army corps.

This was the place to which Luis had given the name of the Tennis Court, and it was the key of the route. For from it a track led upward, a track which seemed to be driving aimlessly at a sheer precipice. But after running for a little southward in the moraine below the rocks, it turned a corner, and a cleft was revealed above it, a narrow saddle between two great fingers of mountain. The elevation was too low for ice, but the couloir, white with alkali, had the look of a long tongue of glacier running up to a snow saddle... The saddle itself was a fearsome place, for above the pad of gravel the cliffs beetled in a dreadful overhang. Rockfalls were frequent, and on the journey down Luis had insisted on the troops making the passage in small detachments, very slowly, and in complete silence... Beyond, the track corkscrewed down a long ravine until it reached the flowers and grass of the upper Vulpas.

Sandy put his finger on the Tennis Court.

"Bobby says they will be there this evening late, and they must camp. They will probably send on pickets to the Vulpas pass... but they won't move till dawn, and the main body won't be in the pass till well on in the forenoon. I don't think they can be allowed to come so far. I've elected the Tennis Court as the ne plus ultra. What do you think?"

Blenkiron had screwed his forehead into a thousand wrinkles as he pored over the map. He now took off his spectacles.

"I guess they'd better stay there," he said blandly. "I get your notion."

"You see, when Providence made this country, He put rather loosely together. We ought to be able to shake its bones a bit, and you understand that sort of thing better than I do."

"Maybe. How many men will you take?"

"I'll take Corbett—he knows the game. He was with Dick Hannay in Rhodesia. And I'll take a hundred troopers. Castor any moment may want every fighting man he can lay his hands on, and you don't need many in my kind of war. Only enough to put up a fight with Lossberg's pickets, if he has had the forethought to post them in the pass... Now for food. We must be in the saddle by eight-thirty."

An hour later in the big paddock behind the corrals Sandy reviewed his men. Except for white troop—sergeants, they were all Indian, selected men of the foothills rather than of the Tierra Caliente. He spoke to them in their own tongue. "On the work of this night," he said, "the freedom of your people depends. The enemy is in the passes, but he will not leave them. We will move the mountains so as to close the way. But first it is necessary to get there. When the moon rises, we must be where the Vulpas is only a little stream. I trust you as I would trust my brother by blood."

Janet watched them go, but Barbara did not appear. As they swung out to the open downs, it might have been observed that certain of the horsemen had their saddles encumbered with mysterious packages.

The first part of the road was across open downs on which the starlight showed the contours but not the colours. One dark, opaque, velvet ridge succeeded another—a monotint world, though the sky above was so crowded with stars that part of it was like a phosphorescent belt, wherein there was more light than darkness. The going was good for at this season of the year; the coarse herbage of the savannah was short, and there were great spaces of grainy sand dotted with scrub scarcely taller than the grasses. It was like Sussex downland, since in most of the hollows there were no streams. Water was only crossed twice, till the troops found themselves on a long decline, and saw far below them the stars reflected in the pools of a river.

The Vulpas valley, before it runs out into the coastal plain, is some five miles broad and defined only by shallow ridges. But as the traveller goes eastward he finds that it narrows and deepens, until it makes a sharp-cut gulf among the foothills. The expedition struck the valley where it was on the edge of becoming a mountain-glen. Most of it was Luis's own land, and the only dwellers in it his vaqueros, but they were lower down, and in all its topmost course the stream flowed through lonely upland pastures, which would be heavily stocked later when the midsummer drought had parched the lower lands.

The scent of the place, drawn out by night, came to Sandy as a thing familiar. It was the scent of uplands all the world over, upspringing greenery and water and clean tone and shallow soil. The moon had not risen when they reached the meadows by the stream side, and rode eastward along a series of grassy steps, with the Vulpas water talking more loudly with every mile as it approached its mountain cradle. There was no sound, not even a wandering night-bird, except for the river and the beat of hoofs muffled in herbage and the occasional clash of buckle on rifle-butt. Even Blenkiron, short of sleep and rather weary, felt the intoxication of the hour and the place. Sandy beside him seemed to be happy, for just above his breath he was humming a tune.

Suddenly a wash of faint colour flooded the glen, a colour which deepened from a pale amber to the tint of ripe corn. The moon was beginning to climb the sky. Also the distances began to reveal themselves; the containing slopes, now the outflankers of the mountains, were clearly seen, and in front there was a dark loom into the mid-heavens. Sandy looked at his watch and nodded cheerfully to Blenkiron. They had made good time, and would be in the narrows of the pass before the moon was fairly up.

After another mile he halted his command. On each side the containing walls had drawn in till the valley was the half a mile wide, and the Vulpas had become a brawling torrent. The troops separated into detachments, and a patrol of five led the van at a distance of some hundred yards from the next group. Sandy and Blenkiron were in the second group. The course was now altered, and instead of keeping beside the stream they moved well up on the slopes to the right, which were of short grass and outcrops of rock set at an easy angle. They went more slowly now and more circumspectly, avoiding patches of shingle which might echo the sound of movement.

Quickly they climbed till they were in the throat of a ravine, a dark sword-cut where the moon gave only the faintest illumination. Far up its light could be seen golden on the cliffs and ridges, but they themselves rode in an umber dusk. The ravine twined and turned, so that the advance patrol was often completely lost to sight and hearing.

The word was passed back for extra care and quiet. "In two miles," Sandy whispered, "we shall be under the Saddle. There we leave the horses. There is a little amphitheatre where the Vulpas rises, with room enough to picket our beasts."

But at the next angle of the ravine Sandy reined in violently, so that Blenkiron cannoned into him. There was a shuffling and a drawing of breath as the men behind followed suit. Someone was coming towards them... Sandy and Blenkiron lowered their pistols when they saw that it was the advance patrol. The riders forced their horses alongside till their leader could speak into Sandy's ear.

"There are men below the rocks," he whispered. "Many men—more than we have with us. They are camped beside the water, and they are confident, for they have made fires."

Sandy looked at Blenkiron and laughed. "They have done the right thing," he said. "Flung an advanced body across the Saddle to guard the descent while the others cross. I should have thought of that... I've got into a bad habit of underrating old Lossberg."

He sat for a little whistling softly between his teeth. Then he began to think aloud, resuming between every sentence his low whistling. He seemed to be cheerful.

"Can we climb the rocks? That's the question... If half a dozen of us can get to the Saddle, the trick is done... We should be able to raise a few cragsmen... Corbett would know... Also we must make those beggars hands-up. How many did you say? Half as many again as ourselves... Well, it's plain we can't do that job with our present strength... Somebody has got to get back to Charcillo hell-for-leather and bring supports. It's force majeure we want. No needless heroics and no needless

casualties... What do you say, John S.?"

"I guess that's correct. We'd better get our man off right away. If Lossberg has come this far, he'll aim to have the rest of his push over the Saddle pretty early in the morning."

Sandy tore a leaf from a pocket-book, and, using the cliff face as a desk, wrote a message. Then he folded it and looked round.

"Whom shall we send?" he asked Blenkiron. "Corbett would be able to find a man."

"Send me!" A voice spoke at his elbow, and it spoke in English. It could not be Corbett, for he was in charge of the rear, nor was it Corbett's voice. Sandy found himself taring at a slim figure in a trooper's kit, riding an animal which he recognised. It was Luis's favourite mare.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Good God! It can't be! Barbara—Miss Dasent—"

There was not light enough to see the girl's face. It may have shown confusion and embarrassment, but there was nothing of the sort in her voice. The voice was cool, self-reliant, almost imperious.

"I'm glad I came, for now I can be useful. If I go, will save a fighting man. I know the road—I'm accustomed to know how to get back any road I come—and I'm better mounted than any of you." She patted her mare's neck.

"You had no business to come. You did very wrong." Sandy's voice was hard and angry. "Good God, this is place for a woman. I don't like you going back alone, but you're safer on the road than here... Give this note Colonel Ackroyd, and after that go straight to bed. You understand, Miss Dasent. These are my orders."

She took the note and sidled her mare round in the narrow place below the cliff.

"Send Corbett along as you pass," he added. "I needn't remind you that the business is urgent."

"You needn't," she said, and disappeared round the corner of rock.

The two men stared after her till the sound of her going was lost in the forward movement of the next detachment.

"I'd like to know," said Blenkiron reflectively, "just why Babs has gotten the bit in her teeth?"

"Can she do it? I mean, is it safe for her?" The tenseness in Sandy's voice was anxiety, not irritation.

"You bet she'll do it, and I don't worry about risks as long as she's on a horse. You can't puzzle her there."

Two hours later six men were perched high up among the rocks on the right side (what mountaineers would call the 'true left') of the couloir which led from the springs of Vulpas to the Saddle. Five of them were Indians, hunters from the Blue Wolf valley, and the sixth was Sandy. It had been a precarious and intricate journey. First they had made their way up the cliffs from the point where the advance troop had halted. This had been easy enough, for the angle was not too steep and there was plenty of scrub. But even there they had been dismayed by the rottenness of the rock. Boulders would come loose in their of hands, and be left delicately poised to descend in the first gale.

When the right elevation had been attained, the next step was to traverse the side of the amphitheatre where Lossberg's van was encamped. Here it was necessary to proceed with extreme caution. Happily that part of the ravine was in shadow, and no eyes from below could detect them, but it was essential that there should be no slipping or sending down of stones, lest the enemy should become alarmed and patrol the track that led to the Saddle. It was horribly difficult to move with speed and softness, and often it seemed impossible to move at all. For the whole hillside was loose, a gigantic scree with boulders instead of gravel, and each man of the six, beside his rifle, was encumbered with explosives. There were scaurs of crumbling earth, where the whole mountain seemed to shift at their tread. These were passed an inch at a time, holding hands, and in one place the last man swung into the void, while his foothold, with a sound like a great sigh, sunk into the depth beneath him. There were masses of friable rock, which had to be crossed with the body splayed out like a swimmer's. There was one point where, to circumvent the cliff, it became necessary to ascend a rotten chimney, and then traverse a ledge which looked like giving way any moment and precipitating he company on to the bivouac below. Sandy, to his disgust, found that he was the least efficient of the six. The Indians with their soft leather footgear had a certitude far beyond his, and more than once he had to depend on their aid. All the time the bivouac lights were plain eight hundred feet beneath them, and in the still night every sound of the camp rose as sharp and clear as if it were at their elbow.

But at last the circuit was finished, and the climbers topped to rest in an eyrie well in the jaws of the ravine self. There the rock was firmer, and they were able without much difficulty to traverse till they reached the track to the Saddle, a few hundred feet above the camp. Sandy's plan was to wait in the Saddle and lay his train of explosives, but not to fire the fuse till the signal had been given by Blenkiron that the reserves had arrived from Charcillo. This was to be two rifle shots in rapid succession, followed of a third at an interval of thirty seconds. The rockfall which he would engineer in the Saddle would bar escape in that direction. Blenkiron would hold the road down the Vulpas, and Lossberg's van would be summoned to surrender at the first light. He had also arranged that detachments of Indians should climb the rocks on both sides of the amphitheatre, so as to give point to Blenkiron's arguments. Now that he had made the traverse and had got between the enemy and the Saddle, the success of the enterprise seemed assured. There must be no mistake about the length of the time fuses. He and his men must be out of the couloir and round the angle of the mountain before the explosion started, for the couloir would be like the bore of a gun for the ammunition of the falling rocks. His cheerfulness was a little clouded by anxiety. He wished Blenkiron rather than himself had the job, for he was not an expert in explosives, but it would have been impossible to get Blenkiron's massive body across that treacherous hillside.

The couloir was very dark. The walls rose precipitately to frame a narrow ribbon of moonlit sky. Far in front this ribbon descended to a V-shaped gap, which was the Saddle.

All six moved with the utmost deliberation and care up the shaly track. There was no need to preach caution to the

Indians. It was not the enemy beneath that made them step as lightly as dancers; there was in their blood the fear of the hair-trigger, unstable rocks. Besides, there was no hurry. It would be two hours—perhaps three—before Blenkiron could give the signal. Already the day's heat had gone from the air, and the chill of night was spreading from the far snowfields. It would be very cold waiting in the Saddle.

They were within two hundred yards of the top, when Sandy found his arm gripped. The Indian behind him had halted, poised like a runner, and had raised his head to listen.

"There are men in the pass," he whispered.

Sandy strained his ears but could catch nothing. He shook his head, but the Indian nodded violently. "Men," he repeated. "White men!"

The thing seemed to Sandy incredible. Lossberg was cautious, no doubt, but he would not picket the Saddle, as well as send an advance guard beyond the pass, when he had the bulk of his forces still at the Tennis Court. Could the whole army be advancing by night? Impossible. In another hour the moon would be down, and this was no road for a night march, with horses and batteries.

His reflections may have made him careless, for he stumbled, and in his fall clutched at a boulder. It gave, rolled out of its gravel bed, and plunged down the track.

The others stepped aside to avoid it, and for a second there was a general slipping and clattering to break the stillness.

Suddenly the place was flooded with a blinding glare, which lit up every pebble and crinkle of rock. And then, almost in the same moment it seemed, there came a blast of machine-gun bullets fired a little too low. Sandy saw the white shale in front of him leap into living dust-devils.

He signalled his men to the cover of the right-hand rock, here there was a slight overhang. Again came a burst of machine-gun fire, and the searchlight maintained its unlinking stare.

Sandy thought hard and fast. There was a machine-gun post on the Saddle—a bold step considering its precarious environs. That post could not be large, probably not more than his own number. Before he could do his business and close the bolt-hole, that post must be destroyed. They must wait till the alarm had passed and then creep forward, trusting to the chance of surprise. Had they been seen? He hardly thought so, for at the first blink of the searchlight they had been on their faces. Probably it was only the nervousness of men perched by night in an eerie post.

But the nervousness did not seem to abate. There was no more shooting, but the glare continued for nearly an hour, while the six lay flat under the overhang, very cramped and cold. Sandy waited till the darkness had lasted another twenty minutes. They were not more than two hundred yards from the Saddle, and the intervening distance could surely be traversed so silently that it would be possible to rush the garrison.

But the last part of the couloir was the hardest, for it ceased to be a moraine of sand and boulders and came out on the loose and naked ribs of the hills. Keeping as far as possible in the shelter of the embracing walls, moving one at a time in line and flat on their faces like a stalker approaching a stag, they found it impossible to avoid making a noise, which to their ears echoed alarmingly in that funnel. Sandy was the chief offender. His belt seemed to catch on every jag, and his boots gritted harshly whenever they touched stone.

Again the searchlight leapt out... There could be no question this time. They were seen. As they wriggled for the tiniest cover, a blast of machine-gun bullets swept by, this time over their heads.

"We'll have to rush 'em," Sandy whispered hoarsely. He saw all his plans frustrated, and nothing left but a desperate venture...

And then to his amazement, he found himself dragged the his feet by two of the Indians and whirled into a violent rush. But it was not towards the enemy. "The mountains fall," he heard in the throaty Indian speech, and the next instant he was leaping down the couloir.

Of what happened next he had only a dim recollection. A roar like the Day of Judgment was in his ears. "Those damned machine guns," he remembered repeating to himself. "They've brought the rocks down..."

Then from behind came a blast of wind which swept them off their feet.

He seemed to drop for yards, and as he dropped he felt half the world rush past him. An eddy of wind seemed to plaster him against the rock wall... He found himself on soft earth clutching an Indian by the hair... A hand dragged him into a coign of rock and pressed him flat, while salvos of great shells seemed to be bursting all about him... He must have lost part of his senses, for he was conscious of shouting the name of his platoon sergeant at Loos, and also babbling childishly "Those damned machine guns..." There seemed to be a perpetual rain of avalanches and in one of them he was half buried. He remembered the feeling of suffocation, and then of free air, which he could scarcely breathe because of spasms of nausea... And then darkness came down on him, and he knew nothing till he woke on a shelf of rock far to the left of the couloir, with the early dawn bright around him.

He was a mass of bruises, and had a cut on his brow from which the blood trickled into his eyes, but he could find no broken bones. There were three Indians beside him, one with a smashed wrist and all intricately scarred and battered. When he asked about the other two, a hand was pointed downwards to where at the foot of the couloir a vast drift of rock and earth curled upwards like a sea-wave. It spread far into the little amphitheatre, and hid the springs of Vulpas. There was no sign of human life in the place.

Sandy's head was still too dazed to permit of thought. All he knew was that he was alive and very weary. He dropped back, and one of the Indians made a rest for him with the crook of his arm.

But presently his supporter moved. Sandy, hovering between sleep and waking, heard dimly a shouting which his companion answered. Then he felt himself being coaxed to rise. There were men below who were urging him to come down. He had never had vertigo in his life, but at the thought of descent his whole being revolted. A horror of space had come over him, and he knew that if he moved a step he would fall.

In the end he descended like a piece of baggage in the arms of Corbett and a squad of Indians. He looked up at the couloir, which at the top beetled in a new cliff. It would take a brigade laden with explosives a month to blast their way through that curtain of rock. At the sight his nausea returned. "Take me out of this hellish place," he groaned.

They carried him down the track, past the spot where the night before he had begun his escalade of the cliffs. The next thing he knew was that he was in a more open glen among grass, and that Blenkiron had him in his arms.

There was a fire burning and Blenkiron, when he had laid him down, put a cup to his lips. "Black coffee and brandy," he said. "That's the dope for you. I've been singing hallelujahs ever since I got word you were safe. I oughtn't to have trusted you with that much lentonite. You must have been mighty rash in touching it off."

"I never used it." Sandy struggled against his weakness; and his voice came with a croak. "There was a post on the Saddle with machine guns. They spotted us and loosed off... We crawled nearer and were going to rush them when they loosed off again... That last burst did the trick and brought down the mountain."

"Great Mike! And you?"

"I came down with the mountain. God knows how I got off with my life. Those Indians... gallant fellows... two of them gone... I'll tell you more later."

But presently the hot drink seemed to put life into him, and he sat up. "What happened here? Did Ackroyd get my message?"

"Sure. We managed fine. I guess we could have done without reinforcements, for your avalanche put the fear of death into the pick of Lossberg's Pioneers. They reckoned the Last Day was come and they ran down the gully like mad folk. We shepherded them quietly, and waited till Rogerson turned up, when they hands-upped like lambs. We've gotten a nice little bag—fourteen hundred and seventy-three, combatant soldiers, if you include your friend Mr Lariarty."

"Great Scott! Is he here? I want him brought to me at once. And Rogerson too."

The Lariarty who stood before him a quarter of an hour later was a different man from the dapper Gran Seco magnate. The sun and wind of the hills had put no colours into his pallid face, but that face was thin and peaked as if he had been through great bodily fatigue. The eyes, too, seemed less inhuman, for there was pain in their sombre depths. His clothes were little better than Sandy's and he had not shaved for days.

"Hullo, Timmy, you look as if you had been in the wars. Had breakfast?... Well, I don't know what you're doing here, but you're not a prisoner. I owe you a good turn for a certain evening in the Gran Seco. You can have a horse and go wherever you like. What's your fancy?"

The man seemed to have difficulty in finding words.

"Thank you, Arbuthnot," he said at last. "I should like to go to Olifa city."

"All right. But you'd better hurry, or there may be trouble in getting in. Have you plenty of money? Good Well, there's nothing to keep you here. Colonel Rogerson will see about a horse. Bon voyage!"

Lariarty seemed to be about to say something, but changed his mind. He cast one curious look at Sandy, bowed gravely and moved away.

Rogerson lingered.

"Miss Dasent specially asked me to give you a message, sir," he said. "It was that she would obey your order and go straight to bed."

There was no communication between Castor's headquarters and the Gran Seco. The revolt had captured early the main wireless station in Olifa, which was on the railway near Alcorta Junction; and since the installation at the Courts of the Morning had been destroyed, the only station the Gran Seco was under Lossberg's control, and, so as he was concerned, wholly useless. The telegraph and telephone lines followed the railway, and were now in a state of chaos. While Lossberg was cut off from his superiors, so were Peters and Escrick from their chief. They had their orders to worry the flanks of the enemy, and it would appear that they fulfilled them, for after the failure to break through the passes there was no activity for a week at the only outlet left to him, the railway to Santa Ana.

For the revolt it was a week of desperate busyness. Sandy and his hostages, captured at the Vulpas source, and he made ample use of them. They were, except for Lariarty, Olifa regulars, and mainly foreigners, but among them were representatives of well-known Olifa families. The latter, after Luis had had a private word with them, were given a courteous dismissal and returned to their homes. But the rank and file were used for a different purpose.

Throughout the country there were localities where the revolt was welcomed and the people were ready for its hazards. But in other districts the balance trembled. These were the richer parts, the great fruit-growing coastal regions, Alcorta, the environs of Cardanio, the corn and vine country towards Macheiro and Nimao and Jacinta. There both men and masters were prospering, and even those who favoured Luis preferred, if possible, to gamble on a certainty. It was to these districts that the prisoners went, in charge of Luis's young caballeros. Their internment was ostentatious, their progress a dignified parade. To the staring inhabitants this spectacle was proof that the dreaded professional army, which they respected as a costly luxury, was not invincible. Rumour spread and magnified the story of the affair in the passes, for, since the inland telegraph was in Castor's hands, rumour had no check. Lossberg, beaten in the Gran Seco, had made a desperate effort to break out, and had been utterly defeated. These prisoners were the advance-guard of a beaten army; the rest were shut in securely behind the bars of the Gran Seco hills.

The effect was instantaneous. The sitters dropped off the fence, and areas which had been lukewarm became the most fervent of all. Presently the sporadic fires met and mingled. Luis's small garrisons in districts which had been apathetic became speedily the nuclei of formidable risings. For week there was no rest for the staff, for at last the concentration could begin. There were desperate problems commissariat and transport to be solved, for most of the rolling stock of the railway was lying idle inside the defensive lines of Olifa city. But every hour brought the armed levies of the south and east nearer to the city, and Castor's poste de commandement was moved from Charcillo to Veiro, where Don Mario found the peaceful routine of his life changed to a succession of excitements which made younger by twenty years.

At the inception of the revolt Luis's first step had been to get possession of the telegraph. The lines were not destroyed, but the points of their debouchment from the city area were held, so that Olifa could not communicate beyond her area. At first the Government had been able to reach Cardanio through the foreign cables, but with the capture of the naval base that avenue was closed. But it was possible to send news into the city, and by various devices the fullest and most startling information about the advance and concentration was at the disposal of President and his Cabinet. There were other ways. Olifa depended a good deal on country produce, and market carts passed daily through its outposts. Agents of the revolt had thus a chance for circulating rumours, and Veiro by the same means was kept informed of most things the befell in the city.

The reports varied. At the start the Government had been confident. The revolt was only a local and filibustering business, for there could be no fuel for any fire. The State was prosperous, taxation was not oppressive, for years there had been no conscription... Then came a shade of anxiety, when it was discovered that Lossberg was silent. His last reports had been excellent, but he was singularly remiss in sending more. It was impossible to stir him up, for they had no wireless at their disposal, the long-distance telephone seemed to have broken down, and their sheaves of telegrams were unanswered... Worse news followed. The Gran Seco railway had been cut by the rebels, there was trouble at Pecos, there was even a wild story that Lossberg had found an outlet in the eastern passes, but that his van had been cut to pieces and that bolt-hole stopped... Then came still wilder tales, of risings in the south, of Alcorta and Cardanio gone over to the enemy, of a great rebel force moving upon the city. The hopes of the Government were still in Lossberg. He and his expert army must soon arrive to save the State. In his last report he had told them that the Gran Seco was conquered and the guerrilleros driven to the mountains. He must be even now on his way down the railway, brushing aside the rebel screen.

What if the line were cut and the road damaged! He had his skilled engineers, and his mechanised battalions, his cavalry and his tanks, his unbeatable infantry. As they looked from the Parliament House over the wide levels to the north they hourly expected to see the dust-cloud which would herald their deliverer.

One evening there was a council of war at Veiro. It took place in Don Mario's dining-room, where the big table had become a council-board and maps covered the ancestral Murillo. Sandy had come from the south, Blenkiron from Santa Ana, where he had left Melville in command, while Luis and Castor had returned from the concentration at Alcorta Junction, where they had received reports from 2 local leaders. Archie, who with Bobby Latimer was responsible for the air reconnaissance, had just arrived from a long flight north of Santa Ana. He had dire forebodings about the petrol supply.

"There's a lamentable lack of juice in this land," he complained. "We've tapped all the supplies and are rationing jealously, but we're well within sight of a shortage. There was a big fire at Cardanio which wasted a lot, and of course there's none coming in at the ports just now. The Government seem to have skinned the country to provision Lossberg. I can't think how Peters is getting on. He must be very near his last gallon, unless he has raided some of Lossberg's stores, and even Lossberg can't go on for ever. It's about time that we were bringing things to a head."

Luis was optimistic. "We are very near the end," he said. "The people have risen at last. His Excellency will tell you what spirit we found to-day. Even the doubters are now convinced, and have become enthusiasts. Senor Sandy, your little affair in the passes has proved the conclusive argument. Now the Oliferos have no fear of Lossberg."

Sandy did not answer. For the past week he had been his old vigorous self, but now his vitality seemed to have ebbed again. He looked tired and preoccupied, and his eyes were always searching Castor's face.

It was the latter who spoke. "Luis is right," he said. "Things are very near a head, but this is the real moment of crisis. We cannot take the city of Olifa by force. We have no siege artillery, and General Bianca has made the defences very strong. The defence, I need not remind you, is in a privileged position with modern weapons. The policy of the Government is simple. They have sufficient troops to police the city and defend their lines against anything can bring. They are waiting for Lossberg, and if Lossberg comes we are beaten."

"I do not agree," Luis interposed. "Lossberg cannot conquer a people in arms."

"I wonder," Sandy spoke at last. "You have a great levy of stout fellows, gallant fellows, but not one in ten knows anything about the business. We are infernally short of machine guns, and we are not too well armed. There's a variety of rifles in our ranks which would stock a museum, and our training is rudimentary. We are mostly third-line troops, and we have far too small a stiffening of first-line stuff. I don't want to croak, but Lossberg could go through us like a knife through blotting-paper. Our only hope is that he won't have the chance."

"Well, he is safely bottled up, isn't he?"

"For the present. But for how long? Peters and Escrick may keep him quiet for the moment, but he is bound to pull himself together and make for Santa Ana. And he is bound to succeed. Therefore—" He paused.

"Therefore?" Luis repeated.

"We must bring things to a head—now. The Government must surrender before he relieves them. How are we going to put on the screw? We are back at the old problem—of cracking their moral... It's probably getting brittle. Bianca is a stiff old warrior, but the others are soft, sedentary fellows. They must be pretty jumpy by now. Is there anything fresh from Hamilton?"

"We had a report this morning," Castor answered. "Undoubtedly their Excellencies are nervous. Also their police. The lower classes are on our side, and there is a perpetual rounding-up of suspects, which makes bad feeling. I am little anxious about the safety of our envoy."

"So am I," said Sandy. "It was a wild escapade, and don't believe we should have allowed it. He's too good a man to lose. How on earth did he get through the lines, and how on earth is he concealing himself?"

Archie laughed. "I'm not worrying about that. He makes the best imitation you ever saw of a sulky drunken Olifero peasant, and he has picked up enough of the lingo to ask for what he wants and see that he gets it. Geordie is a very wise citizen. But I do worry about one thing. He has gone back to his old waterside and backstairs haunts, and what is to prevent him from being done in by one of the Bodyguard ruffians? They might recognise him, and for all we know some of them are in Olifa. More by token, has he seen Lariarty in the city?"

"He doesn't mention him."

"I would like to know where that sportsman has gone. You were too easy with him, Sandy. Lariarty is the kind of lad I would always keep under lock and key."

"May be. I don't know... But to get back to the main question—how can we put the screw on their Excellencies? I've been away for a week. What is the exact position on the Santa Ana railway?"

Blenkiron put his spectacles on his nose and spread out a map and certain papers. He expounded the strength in Santa Ana and the reserves at Pecos—the exact destruction done to the railway—the present position of his posts south of Gabones, and the results of Bobby Latimer's air reconnaissance beyond that point. To the best of his belief, he said, Lossberg was being so extensively worried in the Gran Seco that he was not able yet to look southward. He admitted that the look would come, but he was positive that any advance would be a slow business. He drew a sketch of several parts of the route, which he said could be held for days by a small force against any army.

"That's good as far as it goes," Sandy said. "We have probably a week at least in which to draw our people in upon Olifa and rattle the Government. A week—but not more."

An orderly summoned Blenkiron to the telephone. "Darn those boys," he grumbled, "they're so mighty keen they always want to be passing the time of day. I'm going to call them down."

When he had gone, Luis spoke. He outlined the character of the various ministers from the President downwards. He was not complimentary, for he had the bitterness of the old regime towards the mushroom commercialism of Olifa, and especially towards the renegades of his own class. But he was not unfair. He admitted quality—a coarse toughness of fibre—the obstinacy of men who had been successful beyond their dreams—above all shrewdness. "It is on this last trait," he said, "that we must bank. They will be a little awed by the Gobernador, whom they have always looked upon as a wizard. They will be impressed by the rising of the country, for they know that it is a difficult business to govern the unwilling. We have arguments, perhaps, to convince them, always provided they do not get back Lossberg and his army in time. They are not soldiers and will be afraid of us, but, being civilians, they will also exaggerate the power of Lossberg's professionals, and may be foolish enough to defy us... A little while ago I spoke too confidently. We are still on the razor's edge."

Blenkiron re-entered the room, and without a word made for the table where lay the papers from which he had given his exposition. He picked up his sketch of the section of the Gran Seco railway, where he had located various points A, B, C,

and D. Then, almost violently, he swung Sandy round so that he could see it.

"Lossberg has fooled me good and sure," he said in a voice which he tried to keep level. "It was Melville talking. There's been hell loose up the line. Our post at A was destroyed two hours ago... Yes, cavalry and armoured cars and light field batteries... There's a howling desolation on the railway between A and B, but Melville reckons that B is going to fall before night. He proposes to make a great effort at C and is pushing everything up. But God knows what strength Lossberg is in, and, though it's a darned bad fighting country, numbers are bound to tell. D isn't much in the way of a reserve position. It's my solemn opinion that, if C goes, in two days Lossberg will be in Santa Ana."

There was a moment of complete silence. Then Sandy observed casually, "I said we had a week. It appears we have only two days." Every man in the room knew that one in his voice. Sandy could be explosive and vehement when things went well, but in a crisis he often seemed to be in detached spectator from another planet.

Castor's face did not alter, except for a slight knitting of the brows. Blenkiron was on his feet. "I'd better get back to Santa Ana," he said.

"I don't think so," Sandy drawled, and looked at Castor. "I suggest, sir, that I go instead. I will take my Indians, every man of them. There's going to be a pretty rough-and-tumble on the railway, and that suits me better than Blenkiron. I'll push off at once, by car, and Rogerson can bring on the troops. I hope to be able to send you good news within forty-eight hours. If not—well, the game's with you. I shall be out of it."

"The game is with me," said Castor. "I propose tomorrow to have a talk with the Excelentissimo and his Cabinet."

"No, no," Sandy exclaimed. "I beg your pardon, sir, but not you. You are too valuable. We must send ambassadors. You would be a hostage."

Castor allowed his head to sink on his breast.

"I must go," he said after a pause. "The responsibility is mine. We are playing for high stakes, and I should cast the dice."

"And be a loser from the start! You are our reserve, sir. You must stay here in Veiro, while your plenipotentiaries speak in your name. It is not a question of taking risks. We know you're a glutton for them. It is a question of playing the right hand. Send Luis and Blenkiron. The one can speak for the republic of Olifa and the other can talk business. And meantime get your levies up to the edge of the Olifa lines. The Government have got to yield before Lossberg reaches Santa Ana. If he ever gets there, he must find that the whole country is in our hands. If we head him back, I'll send you word, and that will be a clinching argument. But even if we're scuppered, you may still win... Let 'em know you're coming. No, no! No flag of truce business. Get Archie to fly you to the Plaza de Toros. They'll be hungry to see you. We're gambling on the outer edge of sanity, and the wildest course is the safest. You must impress them—it's their nerves we're gunning for. Good-bye, sir. Good-bye, all of you. If I see Veiro again, we'll be smoking the peace-pipe."

A little before noon Archie brought his plane to a smooth landing in the great dusty amphitheatre which had been the bull-ring of an older Olifa, and was now sports ground and polo ground. The journey had been uneventful, and they had crossed the lines saluted only by a few rifle shots. It appeared that they were not unexpected. The place was empty, but there were pickets at the different entrances. As the travellers climbed out of the plane a squad of soldiers came forward at the double, and they completed their disembarkation in the presence of a substantial military guard. The officer in charge saluted.

"We have come to keep an appointment with their Excellencies," said Luis.

"Their Excellencies await you," was the reply. A big closed car had drawn up beside them, and he motioned them to enter. A minute later they were moving swiftly from the Plaza into the road which led to the Ciudad Nueva. Archie pulled up the blind of the back window and laughed.

"They've got the needle, for they are putting the plane out of action. They must think we're devils of fellows. Well, our boats are burned right enough."

The Avenida de la Paz slept in the noonday sun. On its broad sidewalk there were few of the well-dressed Oliferos whom Archie had seen on his first visit, but many of the riff-raff from the old city. There seemed to be little life in the splendid offices. The headquarters of the Gran Seco administration had no longer sentries at its doors.

Olifa had lost its comfortable bustle and its confidence, and had acquired the air of a city in a crisis. At the street corners there were not police, but soldiers, and as the car swung up the hill towards the great copper dome of the Parliament House, there were frequent halts and the interchange of passwords. Archie reported that a car was following them containing an armed guard. "I feel as if I were in Black Maria," he said. "Have either of you fellows ever been in quod before?"

Their reception in the Grand Court was one of high ceremony. The sentries presented arms at the gate, and they were met at the main door by an aide-de-camp. There were soldiers everywhere, in the great entrance-hall, and at every turn of the broad marble staircase. First they were taken to an ante-room, where on a table light refreshments were laid out. "The senores may be thirsty after their flight," said the aide-de-camp, as he bowed and left them.

"Very handsome," Archie observed.

"Very politic," said Luis. "The Cabinet believe that we have come to treat. No doubt they have their terms ready. It will be a shock to them to learn that our minimum demand is complete surrender."

Blenkiron's eyes had been slowly taking in the magnificence of his surroundings. "We've gotten into the wrong atmosphere," he explained. "The folks that live in a shack like this are bound to think that nothing can go wrong with them. It'll stiffen their backs, for it looks as if it were built for eternity. We should have aimed to shift them somewhere where they could get a sight of Sandy's braves or Melville's roughnecks. You can't scare kings sitting in their palace."

"Dwellers in palaces," said Luis oracularly, "have weaker nerves than dwellers in tents."

The aide-de-camp appeared again. "Their Excellencies are ready to receive you," he announced, and, holding himself very stiff and straight, he opened a door which led to the Council Chamber. It was a vast room, copied, like all the Olifa buildings, from an Old World model—in this case from a room in a Venetian palazzo. The ceiling was painted with nymphs and goddesses, and statues stood in the alcoves of the panelled marble walls. The light was dim, for the sun shutters were partially closed. At a table near the window sat, not the full Cabinet which Archie had expected, but five men. One was the heavy bull-necked President, with on each side of him Vicente Sanfuentes, the Minister of external Affairs, and Aribia, the Minister of Finance. Next to Aribia was General Bianca, and on the Foreign Minister's other side a figure which made Archie stare, for it was Romanes, whom he had last seen in the Tronos del Rey. The President and his colleagues were in their customary black frock-coats and stiff linen, the old General was in uniform, but the Conquistador wore a suit of white drill. There was much bowing, and the three took their seats opposite the five, like witnesses before an official inquiry. A big silver box of cigars stood before the President, which he pushed towards Blenkiron, who shook his head. Archie alone helped himself; he wanted something to occupy his hands.

The five showed no sign of embarrassment or strain. The President had still his air of massive composure, though the pouches under his eyes seemed a little heavier. The two ministers, Sanfuentes with his round shrewd face and Aribia with his well-trimmed beard, looked as if they were at an ordinary board meeting. The old General's thin knotted fingers drummed on the table, but that had always been his habit. Romanes's neat light-cavalry figure seemed more dapper than ever in its cool clothing, and his lean fallow face was as expressionless as the marble at his back.

"Don Luis de Marzaniga we know well," said the President, "and we have the honour of Senor Roylance's acquaintance. You, sir," and he looked towards Blenkiron "I take to be the late Vice-President of the Gran Seco Administration."

Blenkiron did his best to bow. He seemed to find amusement in the scene before him, for his face wore a broad grin.

"You have come, gentlemen," the President continued "to ask for terms."

"No, Excellency," said Luis, "we have come to offer them."

The President frowned slightly, and General Bianca threw up his head.

"It is a trifling change of a word," Luis continued, "but it is well to understand each other clearly from the start. We desire to make peace—on the basis of facts. The republic of Olifa is in our hands, and therefore we are in a position to

dictate the terms of peace.”

The General laughed angrily. He had a long face with finely cut features and very large black eyes. His skin was like ancient yellow parchment. That day he wore all his many orders, and they trembled as he squared his old shoulders.

“You are insolent,” he said, “insolent dreamers. You have been driven out of the Gran Seco, and as a last gambler’s throw you have stirred up trouble in Olifa. Pouf! It signifies nothing. Our army, having finished with the Gran Seco, will presently arrive, and where will your rabble be then?”

His voice was becoming shrill and he was embarking on a fierce tirade when the President checked him. “Have patience, General,” he said. “Let the senores state their case. We can be patient, for we are confident!”

Luis laid a map on the table. “General Lossberg is not happy in the Gran Seco,” he said. “We have still an army there—an army in being, and it is occupying all his attention. I will be candid with your Excellencies. Your General holds the Gran Seco city and the Mines and much of the country, but for the rest we are masters. He is immobilised, for he cannot come to your aid. Already he has tried it. Sixteen days ago he attempted to break out through the passes of the south-east, which he had just discovered. He was beaten back, the door is closed, and some of his troops are our prisoners. As for the railway to Santa Ana, that route has been destroyed, and, as you know well, it is a route which is easily blocked. I do not think that he can come to you by that way.”

“These are lies,” the General shouted. “We have the most expert army of its size on the globe. What can a handful of bandits and guerrilleros do against it? General Lossberg can burst his way through your barrier whenever he pleases. He has the latest guns and tanks—”

“I know, I know,” said Luis soothingly. “But it is too expert an army. It cannot compete with our rude simple ways.”

Aribia laid a hand on the General’s arm. “You have a map, Senor de Marzaniga? You have perhaps something to say about Olifa.”

Luis had much to say. He was dealing with men who knew their own country well, and he spoke as to experts. He took his hearers up and down the land, and explained how far the revolution had prospered in each district. He expounded in detail the revolt of the regular battalions, at Santa Ana, at Pecos, at Alcorta and Cardanio, and what accession of strength they represented. He showed them the position of each railway and railway junction. He gave the names of leaders, and at some of these names the ministers started. He was constantly interrupted with questions, which he patiently answered. He had an air of extreme candour, the air of a man who has nothing to conceal, and who is anxious to give the last tittle of information in his power... Then he expounded the nature of the different concentrations, and the strategy of the advance on the city. “I take you into our innermost confidence,” he said. “That is proof in itself that we believe we are victorious. If we had any doubt, we should not be disclosing our plans.”

The exposition lasted till two o’clock, when there was an adjournment for luncheon. They did not lunch together, for the three ambassadors ate in the ante-room to which they had been taken on their arrival. They talked little at the meal, for a heavy sense of futility had come upon all the three. “You can’t make that bunch understand facts,” said Blenkiron. “That is what comes of living coddled up in this palace. They’re still hanging on to Lossberg’s coat-tails.”

Luis rather wearily agreed. “If Lossberg gets to Santa Ana, and their Excellencies get wind of it in time, our game is up. We won’t be having meals like this. It will be the Old Prison for us, and a very nasty corner of it, and the Gobernador will have to do without our services. I pray God that Sandy can hold the line a little longer.”

Luncheon was followed by a short siesta, and they did not meet again till after four o’clock. The glare of the sun was no longer on the windows, and the green shutters were clamped back, so that the great chamber swam in the mellow light of afternoon. To Archie’s surprise the ministers were notably less rigid than in the morning. The President took the lead in the conversation. He did not deny Luis’s statements, as Aribia had done, but asked for some means of confirmation.

“We offer you whatever you ask,” Luis answered. “This morning our nearest concentration was at Alcorta Junction within ten miles of this city. Appoint your emissaries, Excellency, men whose word you trust. They can go there under a flag of truce, and there they will find Manuel Martinez, and see for themselves. Or is there any other whose word you will take? The telephone service is working well.”

“Is there no loyalist?” the President began.

“I am afraid that what you call a loyalist may be hard to find. We have been too successful, you see. But... there is Don Mario at Veiro—your cousin, Senor,” and he bowed to Sanfuentes. “Don Mario is no politician, and he has never in his life been able to lie. I will give you the password, so that you can telephone to him at Veiro. He knows little of the campaign, but he has eyes in his head, and he will tell you of the forces moving from the east and south.”

“That is good sense,” said the minister, and he left the room. He returned after an absence of half an hour. “I have spoken to Don Mario,” he said shortly. “He is an old man and an innocent.” But it was clear that he had had news which discomposed him.

To Archie the situation was like some preposterous stage play in a dream. He had suddenly an overpowering sense of detachment, so that he seemed to look at the scene before him as at a picture small and far away down an inverted telescope... What on earth was he doing helping to deliver an ultimatum in a theatrical chamber in a hot white city many thousands of miles from home?... He sat a little away from the table, and saw only the back of Luis’s head and half Blenkiron’s profile, but he had the others in full view. The paradox of the scene nearly made him laugh out loud. He was a revolutionary, trying to upset a Government to which his own had accredited a Minister. These solemn five, what did he know about them? They were creatures of a world infinitely remote from his. He studied the President’s large swarthy face,

heavy with the gravity of one accustomed to be obeyed and flattered—stupid and dull, but not without traces of quality. In Sanfuentes he saw the family likeness to Don Mario, as far as an overfed sedentary man can resemble a hard-bitten country squire. He looked a little cunning and self-indulgent, but there was humour somewhere. Aribia was the ordinary business man, with cold shrewd eyes, but he had a pleasant smile... Romanes! It was on him that his eyes chiefly rested. A wash of sunlight seemed to bring every feature into startling prominence. Archie saw the leanness of his head, the odd skull beneath the smooth hair, the curious hollows in his brow, the skin opaque as if no blood ran beneath it. This was Castor's doing; the man had once been Castor's creature, and Castor was their leader!... For a moment he felt some sympathy with the perplexed Cabinet of Olifa.

It was Castor's name which roused Archie to attention. Romanes spoke in his toneless voice for almost the first time. "It would have been well if the Gobernador had accompanied these gentlemen. No doubt they have full power to treat, but it would have been more satisfactory to meet the Commander-in-Chief himself."

"The Commander-in-Chief cannot leave his command," was Luis's answer.

"Naturally. Still... there have been rumours, you know. We do not know if he is indeed in command. We do not know if he is in Olifa at all."

"You can be assured that he is. He is at Veiro."

Archie thought that he saw a flicker of sharp intelligence in Romanes's eyes, but the next second it was gone.

"I think their Excellencies would have welcomed a meeting. For after all, whatever is the destiny of this country, Senor Castor must mean much to it."

"He owes us an explanation," the President growled. "He was our trusted colleague. Whatever he advised was done. Senor Sanfuentes will bear me witness when I say that he had a large share in the external policy of this State. The Administration of the Gran Seco was granted to him as if it was his private domain... Suddenly, with no warning, he becomes our enemy. He must be mad."

"He is not mad. Excellency, but it is permissible for a man to change his mind. The Gobernador has to-day a policy for the Gran Seco and for Olifa itself which conflicts with that of your Excellency. Some of us, independently of the Gobernador, had the same notions. We have been endeavouring for months to persuade you and your colleagues that our views must be accepted. That is why we are here today—to apply, if your Excellency will permit the metaphor, the last little weight to the inclining balance."

After that the five consulted in private, and it was dark before Aribia returned with an announcement.

"We have decided to send representatives to Alcorta Junction to meet Senor Martinez and see for themselves. Do not be offended, please, for, as you yourself have admitted, confirmation is desirable. Will you arrange with Martinez for the reception of our envoys? The party will consist of two of General Bianca's staff-officers and Senor Romanes. They leave to-morrow at daybreak."

So Luis had a busy hour on the telephone and then joined his two companions at dinner. They spent a dismal evening, before they sought their beds in the cheerless state apartments. "This is going to be worse than a League of Nations meeting at Geneva," Blenkiron moaned. "I hoped they'd treat the thing as a business proposition, and I was ready to explain to them just how the Gran Seco should be run, and how it is going to be mighty advantageous to Olifa. They've all got fat bank accounts, and could understand my arguments. But we never got near business. A blind kitten could see that they're not going to let go till they're choked off. There's more sand than I reckoned in that big President."

"They are waiting on Lossberg," said Luis. "They will not give up hope till they are compelled. How in the name of God can we compel them, unless Sandy brings off some colossal stroke?—and that is as likely as snow in summer. Jesucristo! At this moment he is perhaps making a desperate stand in the skirts of Santa Ana!"

The conference was resumed next morning with the half-closed sun shutters again making a green twilight. It was now Blenkiron's turn. Pending the arrival of the envoys from Alcorta Junction, he was permitted to state the views of the Gobernador on the future of the Gran Seco. The discussion was long, and necessitated many calculations, in which Aribia shared. The profits of the State of Olifa from the business need not decline; nay, there was every chance of their increasing, if the organisation were put upon more stable and permanent lines. The arrangements about Indian labour must of course be altered—in any case they would have presently altered themselves. The extreme high-pressure production must be given up; also the Gran Seco must be put outside Olifa politics, except for its scale of contribution to the Olifa exchequer. It must be regarded as a special territory, to be governed under a special charter.

The discussion was amicable. The ministers were all shareholders in the company, and, as an academic proposition, were prepared to consider it on business lines. In the afternoon the envoys returned, and, when after the long midday siesta the conference reassembled, Archie tried hopelessly to detect some change in the air of the ministers. He was disappointed. Romanes for some reason was absent, but the other four seemed in good spirits. Their placidity was unshaken. The President himself touched on the matter.

"Your veracity has been vindicated, Senor de Marzaniga," and he bowed politely, "but not, I fear, your judgment. You have undoubtedly recruited many men, but they are not an army. Our officers report that it is no better than a rabble, ill-armed, ill-disciplined, and led by amateurs."

"It is the people of Olifa," said Luis hotly. "And you have seen only the spear-head—one of the spear-heads. There is a weighty shaft behind it." He spoke of the extent and variousness of the rising... Every class was in it, every condition of life... Among its leaders were representatives of every family that had been great in Olifa's history... Also the chiefs of every

calling, the ranchers, the fruit-growers, the wine-growers, the industrial magnates of Alcora. He was a little carried out of himself, and it was clear that his eloquence had some effect on his hearers.

"We have all Olifa with us," he concluded, "all Olifa that is worthy of the name."

The President laughed, but his laughter did not seem to come easily. "I know my countrymen, Senor de Marzaniga," he said. "They have returned for an hour to the traditional habits which we hoped they had forgotten for ever. But they will not fight—they cannot fight—they have nothing to fight for. The ranches of Senor Martinez could not be more prosperous under a different regime. Ramirez has no complaints from his fruit farms. The Zarranigas breed their fine horses without Government requisitions, unlike the old days. These men are not fools. Presently they will learn wisdom."

"Or be taught it," put in old General Bianca.

Luis had recovered his balance. "There is one thing you forget, Excellency. We are patriots and love our country. Olifa is prosperous, no doubt—but it has no soul. You and your colleagues have made it the appanage of a commercial corporation. We want to be a nation again."

Sanfuentes spoke impatiently. "A nation! What would you have? When your crazy war broke out we were on the eve of taking the leadership of this continent. We would have made Latin America a power in the world."

"I guess I know all about that, sir," said Blenkiron, "You were going to make bad trouble in this continent, but it wasn't for the sake of Olifa. The Gobernador was using you as a pawn in his own game. Well, Mr Castor has thought better of it, and I can't see why in thunder you want to go on alone. Our slogan is Olifa all the time and for its own sake. I advise you gentlemen to listen to reason, for you can't fight against the whole people."

"The whole people," said Aribia sweetly. "But that is precisely the point on which you have failed to convince us."

Presently lamps were brought, and the discussion wandered into a morass of futility. The ministers were waiting, not very confidently perhaps, a little shaken, but determined still to wait. It was the habit of their race, for the Oliferos are not a hasty breed. With a sinking of the heart Archie realised that there would be another day of indecision, while Sandy might be struggling hard to win an extra hour for their inconclusive diplomacy. Any moment the crash might come.

It came about six o'clock when General Bianca was summoned by an aide-de-camp to the telephone. He returned in five minutes, almost at a run.

"News," he cried, "glorious news! Lossberg is in Pecos. I have spoken to his Chief of Staff."

The ministers were on their feet, and the exuberance of their relief showed the depth of their anxiety. They clamoured for details, but the General could give them little.

"I spoke to Olivarez... I recognised his voice at once... He gave his name... What did he say? Only that he was in Pecos, and was coming here without delay... He is evidently pressed—Lossberg's orders no doubt... Where he is, the General must be, and the Chief of Staff is naturally sent on in advance... We have conquered, my brothers. Tomorrow the city will be relieved, and the rebels scattered to the points of the compass... It is the moment for toasts, for much talking has made my throat dry."

The ministers did not forget their manners in their hour of triumph. The three envoys were not asked to witness the toast-drinking, but were conducted ceremoniously to another apartment, where they too were supplied with sweet champagne. Only Archie tasted it, for the two others sat back in their chairs with the faces of broken men. It was at least an hour before they were ready to speak of fresh plans—futile plans, it seemed, for they must now regard themselves as prisoners. As for Archie, he still felt himself living in a crazy world of illusion, but he was so tired by the strain of the day that he fell asleep.

About nine o'clock an aide-de-camp appeared.

"General Olivarez is arriving," he said, and his air was noticeably less civil. "Your presence is required in the Council Chamber."

Once more the three envoys seated themselves at the table. It was obvious that the ministers had dined and dined well. Even Bianca's parchment skin had a colour. Romanes was still absent.

The door opened and General Olivarez was announced. Two men entered. One to Archie's amazement was Alejandro Gedda, a figure like a scarecrow, dusty, dishevelled, grey with fatigue, his ancient dapperness utterly gone. The other was a slight man in the service uniform of Olifa, with a long olive-tinted face, a fleshy nose, and grizzled hair cut en brosse. He too seemed the worse for wear, and he had his left arm in a sling.

It was Gedda who spoke.

"Your Excellencies," he said, "I have been sent to bring General Olivarez to your presence. This morning General Lossberg was decisively defeated in the passes north of Santa Ana. His main army has fallen back, and his advance forces were cut off and taken prisoner. Of this advance General Olivarez was in command. I was ordered by Lord Clanroyden to bring him to you that you might learn from his own lips the position of affairs."

The ministers were silent. Then old Bianca found his voice.

"Is that true, sir?" he rapped out.

"It is unfortunately true," Olivarez spoke in a voice in which weariness left no room for bitterness. "Of the rest of General Lossberg's army I cannot speak. I myself and over nine thousand of my men are prisoners in the enemy's hands."

The President behaved well, for he showed no emotion of any kind. His face was like a stone, and his voice level and toneless. He turned to Luis and bowed. "We accept your terms, Senor," he said. "General Bianca will issue the necessary orders to the city defence force."

The long-drawn fight on the Santa Ana railway was begun in the Gran Seco itself by Peters and Escrick. There was no communication between them and Castor by wireless of telegraph, but there might have been a telepathic understanding, so exactly did they time their operations to meet the crisis in the south. Their aeroplanes were now terribly hampered in their reconnaissance work by shortage of petrol, but one of Grayne's economical nights brought news of Lossberg's movement down the railway with the large part of his field force. At that moment Escrick was north of the city on the road to Fort Castor, and Peters's band were south of the Mines in the neighbourhood of Tulifa. Escrick's first notion was another raid on the city in quest of stores, but Peters, in whose old field of operations the Santa Ana railway had been, urged that it was their business to hang on to Lossberg's skirts. The blockhouse system had made raiding difficult, but he argued that their first duty was to hamper Lossberg's communications with the city which was still his base. Escrick was convinced the more because he was still completely in the dark as to what was going on at the other end of the railway. It might be that Lossberg would have an easy road to the plains of Olifa, in which case their task must be to delay him by fastening on his rear. Under the new blockhouse system they could not hope to cut up any great length of line, so they must make their effort at a single vital point. There was only one such till Gabones was reached, the bridge of San Luca. But it was likely to be the best guarded, for since the first raid Lossberg had supplemented the posts at each end of the abutment with two companies in the valley bottom. The garrisons at the ends, it will be remembered, were at San Luca itself and at the Devil's Ear, the valley was more than half a mile wide, and the bridge had sixteen arches. Two of the central arches had been blown up by Sandy, and the line now ran across the gap on an improvised platform of steel girders.

It was clear that a midnight dash in the old manner would effect nothing, so Escrick decided to make an effort to destroy a part of the bridge but to capture the whole of it, and hold it long enough to alarm Lossberg about his communications. There was now no Pacheco to serve as a base, and all the northern slopes of the southern frontier of the Gran Seco were strongly patrolled; for this was the critical flank of Lossberg's new advance. Roger Grayne reported that the eastern side of the railway up to the frontier was watched like a trench line.

Thereupon Escrick made a bold decision. He resolved to attack from the west side, where a hideous country of scrub and sand and rocky kopjes stretched from the railway to the sea. This area had never been part of the battle-ground, chiefly because of its immense natural difficulties, and because it led to nowhere. So he ordered Peters to slip forth by night from Tulifa, between the Mines and the city, and to join him on the road to Fort Castor.

The concentration was effected on a Monday morning. That day Lossberg was at Gabones, and his advance force under Olivarez was feeling its way south along the devastated line. That night Escrick's whole command, nearly four thousand mounted men with every machine gun it possessed, had made a wide circuit and was in the hills some fifteen miles south-west of San Luca. There they lay during the following day, while with immense care smaller detachments made their way eastward to the ridge of kopjes on each side of the dry valley where stood the bridge. Lossberg's aeroplanes were busy down the railway, and to garrisons at San Luca and the Devil's Ear no warning light or sound came from the baking red cliffs over which they were accustomed to see the sun set. That day, Tuesday, saw Olivarez's great thrust southward. Before night fell he had taken Blenkiron's Post A, where once Toledo's chivalry had been cut up by the Indians, had forced the difficult narrows at Post B, and was threatening Post C, where Melville had brought up every man for a last stand.

During the night of Tuesday Escrick made his attack on the San Luca bridge from the west. It was a far easier task than he had anticipated. Lossberg's advance had switched the attention of the garrisons from defence to transport. Peters's right wing took the Devil's Ear with scarcely a shot, and his left, creeping up the boulder-strewn valley, surprised the post in the hollow with few casualties.

San Luca put up a better fight, but by midnight it was overpowered, and an ammunition train, standing in its siding, was captured. Before the dawn broke there was another huge rent in the bridge, and both abutments were held in force, with a wicked chain of machine-gun nests commanding their approaches from north and south. A big breach had been made, and, what was more, the breach was held, and might be held for days against a considerable army.

The news found Lossberg on the Wednesday morning about to push forward troops to support Olivarez in his last thrust. Already he saw himself in the Olifa plains approaching the capital. He had had no news except Indian rumours, but he had by this time realised that the rebels in the Gran Seco were only a vanguard and that El Obro was now in Olifa. He had beaten the enemy in the Gran Seco, and his place was now in the lowlands. But the news from San Luca made him pause. Part of a mechanised battalion which he had sent back hastily was checked and beaten by Peters at the Devil's Ear. Lossberg halted in deep perplexity. He must explore the situation behind him, before he could support Olivarez with an easy mind. So instead of concentrating in an immediate assault on Post C, which would have given him Santa Ana, he pushed more troops back towards San Luca and ordered Olivarez to postpone his main attack for twelve hours.

It was at this point that Sandy entered the game. He had arrived at Santa Ana during the course of the Tuesday night, and had had his Indians there before ten o'clock on the Wednesday morning. The reports from Melville at Post C were not reassuring. Olivarez was in great force, and once he had his field guns up not all the natural advantages of the place could keep it from destruction. The defence had already tried a night sally, which had been driven back without effecting much. Melville asked for nothing in the way of reinforcements, for he knew that there was nothing to send, since Pecos and Santa Ana were already bare. Feverish efforts were being made to strengthen Post D, the ultimate position, but everyone realised that, if C fell, D would follow.

When Sandy arrived he asked for the last air reports. It was believed that Lossberg was at a point thirty-seven miles south of Gabones, and that a gap of at least fifteen miles separated him from Olivarez and his van. Sandy shrugged his

shoulders and turned to Rogerson. "We're getting implicated in a field action," he said in the mild voice which he reserved for extreme emergencies. "It won't do. If I join Melville, we shall still be outnumbered and outgunned. Latimer had better keep his planes in touch with Melville. I'm going to get to that fifteen-mile gap. Please God, Lossberg is in no hurry this morning. He must be cocksure of success after yesterday, so if I know my man he'll take his time."

Lossberg, as we know, was compelled to delay, but of this Sandy was not aware, and as soon as the Indians had broken bread he had them in the saddle. The eastern side of the railway valley was not practicable for horses, scarcely even for cragsmen, but he had some hopes of the western side.

His expectations were all but doomed to defeat. The total distance of the circuit proposed was some thirty miles, but, after the first twenty, horses became impossible. The local guides were useless, for they led him into a network of barren ravines too far to the west—a route no doubt to Gabones, but separated from the crucial part of the line by an increasing width of rocky mountains. Presently the horses had to be left behind, and under the heat of a tropical sun the way had to be pursued on foot up and down moraines of shale and crumbling precipices and sand-choked hollows. Not all the Indians lasted the course, for many were horsemen by habit and no mountaineers. Of the white men only Sandy and five others found themselves that afternoon looking down upon the railway, with aching limbs, and eyes filmed with weariness, and heads that throbbed and swam in incipient heatstroke. But that part of the railway valley which they saw was empty except for a small body of pioneers repairing the road. They were in time. Lossberg had not yet closed the gap which separated him from his Chief of Staff.

The time was now about four o'clock on the Wednesday afternoon. San Luca was in the hands of Peters and Escrick, Lossberg's first attempt to oust them had failed, and that general, much perplexed, was beginning to move troops northward again. Melville, to his surprise, was managing to hold his own at Post C, since Olivarez, under Lossberg's orders, was not pressing too hard. Blenkiron, Luis, and Archie were sitting in Olifa in their futile conference.

The events which followed have become famous in Olifa history, and they are told fully in the work which young Campanillo has published. Staggering with weariness but goaded on by a sense of the shortness of their time and the magnitude of their chance, Sandy's bleary-eyed following descended from the rocks and took possession of the segment of valley. He had dragged explosives with him across the hills, and with him were men from the Mines who understood their use. Before the hot night descended they had contrived a great destruction, and the early darkness was lit with flame and loud with earthquakes.

Between the cliffs which rimmed the place they achieved a desolation which for days no troops could traverse, except painfully, in single file, on foot. Presently the remainder of his men straggled in, and after a short rest Sandy led his force southward, to where Olivarez's guns could be heard at their noisy bombardment.

The charge of that wild commando at dawn is a tale not for dull prose but for some swinging ballad. The surprise was complete, and most of the batteries were taken in the rear. Olivarez was a stout soldier, and he rallied gallantly, but he was caught between two fires, whose magnitude he could not guess. Melville had heard the explosions of the night and knew what had happened, and he flung every ounce he possessed into the struggle. The defence became an attack, and C was no longer a beleaguered post but the base of a furious offensive. A little after midday Lossberg's van was huddled into a rocky gut, with its own batteries turned on it, and the enemy secure on the circumference. Then came one of those moments of sudden quiet which mean the realisation of defeat on one side and incontestable victory on the other.

Olivarez, like a wise and humane man, surrendered. But his surprise his surrender was received not by Melville, of whom his Intelligence scouts had fully informed him, but by a slight figure with a begrimed face and clothes in rags, who addressed him in perfect Spanish and seemed more embarrassed than himself. He learned with amazement that this was the notorious El Obro. When the guerrillero recalled a former meeting in a Moroccan town, Olivarez stared in bewilderment. "I was called Arbuthnot then," the other said pleasantly. Then recollection awoke the general, and his face lightened. He had heard too much about this man to feel any shame in accepting defeat at his hands.

At night, as we know, Sandy dispatched Olivarez in company with Don Alejandro Gedde to Olifa city. The owing day was spent by the ambassadors in Olifa, and Sandy at Pecos, in adjusting their plans to the new situation. There was an immense amount of work to be accomplished in the minimum of time. The great concentration at Alcora Junction, which was now pushed up to the defence lines of the city, had to be regulated, throughout the republic a stop-gap military Government had to be extemporised. Between the revolution and the ultimate settlement a difficult interregnum must intervene. Manuel Martinez came into the city to consult with Luis, but Castor remained at Veiro, whence he issued orders to the different provinces. So far as possible the work was left in the hands of the Olifero leaders themselves.

Luis was the chief executive officer, and it was Martinez who became temporary governor of Olifa city, and old Ramirez of Cardano and one of the Zarranigas of Alcora who were his lieutenants, while young Miguel de Campanillo carried to Lossberg the instructions of General Bianca. It was wise to keep the foreign element in the background, that Olifa might believe that her redemption had come from herself.

It was a torrid day with thunderstorms grumbling on the horizon, and Sandy, having received reports from the city which announced that all was quiet and orderly, and from Gabones, which told of young Campanillo's arrival on his way to Lossberg's headquarters, flung himself on a bed in the Pecos hotel, and tried to sleep. But sleep he could not, though every bone and muscle cried out for it. It may have been the weather, or it may have been the strain of the past days, but his mind refused to be composed and his thoughts beat a weary treadmill. He had none of the exultation of a victor, none even of the comfort which comes from a task accomplished. He laboured under a heavy sense of oppression, out of which anxiety stood like jags of rock in a stream. He could not believe that the end had been reached, not even when his reason approved that conclusion. Therefore he could not sleep.

An aide-de-camp made a timid appearance, for he was afraid to break in on the siesta of his chief. But it appeared that the occasion was urgent. A man wanted to speak with the General. He had given his name. Sandy looked at the card proffered him, and read "Mr T. S. Lariarty." "Bring him here," he said, "and see that we are not disturbed. Wait... don't be far away, in case I want you." He smoothed his ruffled hair, and sat on the bed awaiting his visitor, and as he waited a ridiculous memory kept recurring—the Eton Beagles in the fields beyond Slough, and himself and Lariarty, both newly become uppers, struggling desperately to keep up with the field, each determined not to be outdone by the other. Much water had passed over Cuckoo Weir since then. The man who presently stood before him would have made no figure in running over English ploughfields.

Lariarty was no more the dapper and inscrutable Conquistador, armoured against a world which he despised. Some spring had broken within him, for he looked like one mortally sick in mind and body. But his eyes were no longer opaque. There was light in them, broken lights, like the eyes of a sick dog.

"You're looking ill, Tim," said Sandy gently.

"I think I am dying... But that does not matter... I must speak to you, Arbuthnot. You have behaved to me like a gentleman, and I pay my debts... You think you have won, but you are wrong... unless..." The man seemed to gulp. "Veiro," he croaked. "The women are at Veiro—and the Gobernador... They will be dead before midnight unless you can save them."

Sandy was on his feet, his lethargy gone. He shouted for his aide-de-camp. "Get through to Veiro," he told the boy, "and to Olifa—to the Ministry of War. Ask for General de Marzaniga... Get a whisky and soda, too—a stiff one."

The drink was brought by an orderly. "Swallow that, Timmy," he said. "You're all out, and it will buck you up."

But the other refused it. "It would kill me," he said. "Never mind my health, Arbuthnot. You won't get through to Veiro... nor to Olifa... My colleagues have made their plans. Veiro will be isolated... Why in the name of God did you leave your friends in that lonely place? They should have been in the midst of an army. When men are desperate, they think only of revenge."

"Who are 'they'? The Conquistadors?"

Lariarty nodded.

"D'Ingraville is there, and Pasquali, and Suvorin, and Romanes—Romanes above all. Larbert is dead, and I have not heard of Calvo. But Romanes—" He choked again "And there are some of the others too... Judson and Radin and Martel, and, I think, Laschallas... They have all death before them, the rope for some and for others a slower torture. Therefore they are mad... Oh, what in God's name are you waiting for? I tell you..."

The aide-de-camp returned. "We cannot get through to Veiro, sir," he said. "There seems to be some break-down on the line. And there is no answer from Olifa."

"So," said Sandy. The grimness had gone out of his face, and he was smiling again. "I want the Rolls, Truelove," he said, "at once. Captain Zarraniga will come with me. Tell him to pick four troopers, with a hundred rounds apiece... I want the two big Daimlers to follow: with eight troopers in each. At once. There is not a moment to lose. Let General Melville know."

Lariarty had drawn himself erect.

"Can I come with you, Arbuthnot?" he stammered.

Sandy looked in his eyes, and he seemed to see behind the sickness and fever and the wreckage of the tragic years a shadow of the boy he remembered.

"Most certainly you are coming with me, Tim." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "It is now a quarter to nine. We shall be

at Veiro by ten. God grant we are in time!"

The night was warm and still, for the thunder had now gone out of the air, though it still grumbled on the horizon. It was a slow business clearing the environs of Pecos, for the roads were congested with transport, owing to the moving of troops from Alcorta Junction. But once the Vulpas valley was left behind, the car swung briskly along the hard, broad roads of the plateau called the Marpas, which is one of Olifa's chief horse-breeding areas. There was only a finger-nail of moon, but the stars were like harbour-lights. Far behind could be seen the broad glow of the head-lamps of the following Daimlers. Sandy at the wheel did not slacken speed at the patches where the road had been ruffled by the winter rains. He drove like a man possessed, looking every now and then at his wrist-watch.

"Half-way," he announced to the young Zarraniga as they passed a farm in a clump of chestnuts. Then the road climbed to a greater elevation and the light of the Daimlers behind seemed to come out of a trough. "Ten miles more," he whispered, and Lariarty, who was jammed among the troopers behind, muttered something that sounded the a prayer. Still the road rose, and then came a long downward incline, and far away on the left a light twinkled.

"Veiros," said young Zarraniga. "Presently the good road will end, and we shall have Don Mario's cart-track. We must be near the ravine of St Paul and the iron bridge."

Three minutes later there was a jarring of brakes and the car came to a stop. A deep narrow cleft lay before em, and where had once been a bridge there hung only drunken girder.

"They have planned it well," said Lariarty.

The men tumbled out of the car, for the great Rolls is as useless as a child's go-cart.

"There are yet four miles," said Zarraniga, as he lowed Sandy down the side of the ravine and the steep overhang of the far bank. "Four miles, and my men are not long-distance runners."

Sandy had squared his shoulders for the race, when Zarraniga halted him. "Half a mile on the right is the home of Pedro Aguilar. He has young horses."

Pedro, who was a tenant of Don Mario's, was roused him his sleep by the sight of seven armed men demanding mounts. Zarraniga he knew, and he trotted obediently towards his stables. "I have not saddles for so many, senor," he explained.

"Saddles be hanged! Give us bridles. Rope halters if in have nothing better." Sandy was already delving furiously among the debris of Pedro's harness-room.

"Two are young beasts and scarcely broken," said the man.

"So much the better," said Sandy. "I will take one and Senor Zarraniga the other."

Within five minutes two scared and angry colts were being hustled out of the corrals by the help of two pairs of Pedro's long-rowelled spurs. Once in the open they found their heads turned firmly to the east, and fled like scared deer they knew not whither. They led by at least a hundred yards, flying the deep sandy scaurs, spuming the ant-heaps, slipping, stumbling, recovering, while the troopers on their more manageable mounts pounded heavily behind. When after the first mile Sandy had his animal under control, he found to his surprise that Lariarty was beside him.

Now they were on the edge of the alfalfa fields and the water-furrows, and before them was the dark loom of trees. They swung to the left, avoiding the road which ran from the railway-station, and making for the line of poplars which hedged the garden. A light twinkled beyond the trees, a light which suddenly went out. And then, with a cry, Lariarty swung round his horse's head and set the beast capering and plunging. He had all but ridden down a woman—a tall girl in black, wearing pink roses at her breast.

The same evening about half past seven Don Alejandro Gedd was taking the air in that part of the Avenida de Paz which adjoined the Parliament House. He had had a busy day. For hours he had sat in consultation in the great Council Chamber, for he had two kinds of knowledge invaluable at the moment—a wide acquaintance with the organisation of the revolution in the provinces, and considerable insight into the psychology of the capital city. He had been of great value to Luis and Blenkiron and Martinez, while they worked out the next moves—the proclamation to the people of Olifa, the demobilisation of the levies, and the preparations for a presidential election. He had also been constantly on the telephone with Castor at Veiro, who was busy with the draft of the new constitution, which was to be embodied in the proclamation. Don Alejandro was contented, exhilarated, but also very weary. He decided that he owed himself a short spell leisure, and resolved to dine alone at the club. But his hopes of a little rest were frustrated. He found himself accosted by a villainous-looking peasant, whose left wrist was bound tip in a dirty handkerchief, and whose mahogany face showed a long shallow scar from right temple to chin, which must have been done recently, for the blood was scarcely dry on it. Also the man appeared to be drunk, for as he clutched his arm he swayed.

"Maister Gedd," came a hoarse whisper, "Maister Gedd! Haud on, for God's sake! Ye ken me? Ye saw me at Charcillo? Hamilton's my name. I was wi' Sir Erchibald. Ye ken Sir Erchibald?... " The scarecrow tottered, and would have fallen had he not leaned heavily against the wall.

Recognition broke in on Don Alejandro's mind. He remembered the square Scots soldier who had been with Lady Roylance in her escape from the Tronos del Rey and who had been Archie's special henchman at Charcillo. He had heard that he had been in Olifa before the city surrendered. Don Alejandro was a man of action. There was a small cafe at hand in a retired side street, and thither he led him. He compelled him to drink a claret glass of liqueur brandy. Obviously there was some story worth hearing. He was just about to begin a leisurely cross-examination, when the soldier seemed to recover his dazed wits and forestalled him.

“What am I sittin’ here for?” he exclaimed. “Come on, sir,” and he struggled to rise. “We maun get haud o’ Sir Erchibald or Maister Lewis. There’s awfu’ things gaun to happen afore the nicht’s oot. It’s Veiro... the twa leddies... and him they ca’ the Gobernador... Oh, sir, let’s oot o’ this and awa’ up to Heidquarters. They’ll let me in if you’re wi’ me. I’ve been tryin’ to win in my lane for the last hour, and the sentries just shoo’d me awa’.”

His earnestness and alarm communicated themselves to Don Alejandro. Then the man seemed to recover his balance, and, leaning forward, clutched Don Alejandro’s knee.

“I’ve been in this toun a’ week. The folks think I’m a native frae some landward bit... I’ve been biding doun near the harbour—it’s an auld haunt o’ mine... Some o’ thae Bodyguard blagyirds is there, and I go chief wi’ ane o’ them... Syne Judson appeared—ye mind him? and he kenned me, and there was a wee bit o’ a turn-up. I had to rin for my life, but I had fund oot what they were ettlin’, and I’ve been jinkin’ about the closes and tryin’ to see Sir Erchibald... This verra nicht... Man, they’re clever. When we’re a’ crackin’ about the grand victory and thinkin’ that there’s nae mair fecht left in the ither side, they’re plannin’ a bloody revenge... Wha’s in it? Judson, for ane, an’ yon lang, black-avised lad they ca’ Laschallas, and some o’ the white-faced gentry that used to manage the Gran Seco... What do they ettle? It canna be ransom, for there’s nae hidy-hole they could carry their prisoners to. It maun be murder—black murder. Oh, haste ye, sir. The blagyirds or now will be well on the road to Veiro. They’ve gotten cars and they’ll no be easy stoppit... What’s the time? Gettin’ on for eight?” The man staggered to his feet with wild eyes. “Is there no an aeroplane?” he cried. “We maun gan by air, for they’ll beat us by the road.”

But when a quarter of an hour later Archie and Blenkiron were roused by the news into violent activity, it was found that there were no aeroplanes to be had in or near the city of Olifa. Also it was discovered that the wires between Olifa and Veiro had been tampered with. It was impossible to communicate even with Alcorta Junction.

That day the life at Veiro had returned to something of its ancient serenity. Castor, indeed, was kept busy with constant telephone calls from the city, and on four occasions messengers came to him by car. But otherwise there was no sign that the place was any kind of headquarters. No garrison was in the house, and no sentries were at the gate, for considerable armies lay between it and the city on one side, and Pecos and the road to the Gran Seco on the other.

Don Mario pottered about the stables and the garden and had a long siesta in the darkened library. Janet also slept, for the strain of the past weeks had fatigued her more than she knew. Barbara wrote letters and went riding in the first cool of the evening. In the dim, musty-smelling rooms, in the sunny courtyard, in the garden where the lawns were beginning to brown under the summer heats, there was an air of calm after storm, of a general relaxing. The feeling was in the atmosphere, but with Janet it was less positive satisfaction than a mere rest from anxiety. She understood now that she and Barbara had been living for a long time on the extreme edge of their nerves. The news that victory had been won brought relief rather than triumph. She had not yet adjusted her world to meet it; she was simply aware that her mind could leave the weary treadmill and be still.

But at dinner she realised that a change was coming over her mood. She felt light-hearted again, and had begun to look into the future. Barbara seemed to have suffered the same change, for she had been singing as she dressed. Don Mario was in his usual placid humour, but Castor was in line with her new temper. His work for the day was finished; he had bathed and got himself into dress-clothes, for some of his kit had been sent out that morning from the city; and now he relaxed into something very like high spirits. Janet had never witnessed this new mood of his, and she found it delightful. Before he had always retained the manner of one in command, one a little apart, for whom friendliness involved a slight descent and unbending. But now he had dropped without effort to the level of ordinary folk, he laughed without constraint, his eyes had in frank companionship.

At dinner he talked to Don Mario of past days in Olifa. He even spoke of his Campanillo grandmother. The old man presently passed from his stilted English into Spanish, which Janet could not easily follow, but it was clear that he was pleased by Castor's questions and was expanding happily on some matter very dear to his heart. Once again Janet saw in the two faces that which she had noted weeks before at Charcillo in the faces of Luis and his young caballeros—something innocently apostolic, the ardour of men in the grip of an idea. She looked across the table at Barbara, who wore pale pink roses on the breast of her black gown. Barbara had spoken little, but there was a pleasant content in her dark eyes—and now, as she caught Janet's glance and followed it to Castor's ardent face, there was also a flicker of amusement.

They drank their coffee in Don Mario's own room, among the spurs and whips and sporting pictures. The French windows were open wide, for the night was warm, but a fine-meshed curtain of gauze hung over them to keep out moths and flying ants. Without the stars burned fiercely, and in their light an ancient baroque group, which adorned the terrace, had the appearance of a knot of eavesdroppers. Barbara had started at her first sight of the statuary.

Castor stood before the empty fireplace which had been filled with a tapestry screen. There were three lamps in the room set on little tables, which illumined the heads of the two women and of Don Mario in his high-backed chair. The face of the Gobernador, being only partially lit, revealed none of the lesser details of age. The fine lines on the forehead, the streaks of grey in beard and hair were unseen; only the trim figure and the noble contour of the head stood out, and these had an air of vital youth. The impression was strengthened by the new note in his voice.

"You are twenty years younger to-night. Excellency," said Don Mario.

"I am beginning life again," was the answer. "I have been middle-aged—I have been old—and now I am young."

"Can one begin life anew?" the old man asked in his precise English. "It is the fashion for people to talk so, but I wonder. It has never been my fate, for I have carried into each new stage of my life heavy burdens from the last stages. But perhaps I was always lazy—lazy and a little timid."

"I have been fortunate," said Castor gravely, "for Fate itself has shut the door on that which I would leave behind."

"But is the door fast? Will nothing creep through?"

"It can be kept fast and well guarded. I do not mean that I must not atone for my blunders. God knows I have made many and I have much folly to expiate. Yet that too is part of my good fortune. I am in a position to mend what I have done wrongly."

The old man shook his head. "You are luckier than I. The blunders I have made were such as did not permit themselves to be atoned for. Witness my error in crossing the Vidas and the Cintra blood. I was warned by my father about the Cintra stock, which he said meant speed but no heart, and in the mares a lamentable barrenness. But I would not listen, and all my life I have paid the penalty."

"I am not a fatalist," was the answer. "That is the blindest of superstitions. The spirit and mind of man are free to shape life if they are resolute enough and wise enough. A man is not the slave of his father's actions, or of his own. Any error can be redeemed on this side of the grave."

Don Mario laughed. "I will not discourage your optimism, Excellency. It is a pleasant gift of youth. I who am old practise humility."

"I too would practise humility," said Castor. "That is what I have learned in the Courts of the Morning. Before, I was arrogant and self-centred and friendless and inhuman. But up in that mountain eyrie I found a juster perspective... Call it a revelation. I was granted a view of life from a great height, and many things, including myself, took different proportions. That I owe to you, Lady Roylance, and to your friends. If I were to die now, I should die happy, for I have become young

again. You opened a door for me, and I have passed through it."

"You are certain that it is closed behind you?" Janet did not know what made her ask the question. The words seemed to come mechanically to her lips.

"Closed and bolted and guarded." There was both solemnity and exhilaration in his tone. Janet never forgot the picture he made in that moment, his head flung back, his eyes looking down under their heavy lids with a glow of something more than friendliness, his voice grave and vibrant and masterful. It challenged Fate, but in the challenge there was no vanity. She felt a sudden kindling of enthusiasm, a longing to follow this man who was born to lead his fellows. The cold Olympian had disappeared, and Prometheus was in his place, Prometheus the pioneer of humanity, the bringer of gifts to men.

In the pause which followed Janet alone caught Barbara's whisper. "Turn your head slowly round... to the window... Watch the group of statues. I saw them move... there are people there."

She obeyed. She saw the edge of the group, where Hercules was engaged with the Hydra, move ever so slightly. She saw, too, a dark blur close to the right of the window, which had not been there before. In an instant she divined the truth. This was Fate's answer to the challenge. The Gobernador had shut the door on his past, but something had forced it ajar and slipped through.

She heard Barbara speaking low and composedly. "They cannot see me. I am behind the light... I will slip out... Go on talking."

Janet's heart seemed to stop, and then resumed its beating, so loudly that she felt that it must drown the ticking of the silver clock behind Castor's head. In a voice so steady that it surprised her, she began to question Don Mario about the coloured print of Eclipse beside his chair. She was aware of a slight stirring in the shadows and knew that Barbara had left the room.

Barbara found herself in a long corridor which had suddenly become very dark, and realised that the lamp in the hall beyond had been put out. Why? It was too early for the servants to have gone to bed. Someone must have entered the house, someone different from the group outside the window. It required all her courage to traverse the corridor and reach the hall. It was in black darkness, and she began to rope her way to the passage beyond, which led to the courtyard... She stopped to listen. There seemed to be a sound coming from the courtyard-servants, perhaps—there were four men indoors, a butler, two footmen, and Don Mario's valet. Outside by the corrals there were the grooms and the cattlemen, hardy peons who might be trusted to defend their master. She must get to them—at my cost she must get to them. She stilled every other thought by clenching her teeth on that purpose.

Presently she was at the foot of the main staircase, a broad shallow thing which led direct to the galleries of the upper floor. Here there was a faint glimmer of light, for the stars were shining through the staircase window. Her eyes were on it when she stumbled over something which lay sprawled across the bottom step. She bit hard into her lips and stood shivering. It was a man's body. She bent, and even in the dim light she saw by the uniform that it was one of the house-servants. He was dead. Her hands, as they touched his shoulder, felt something warm and sticky.

At the same moment sounds, stealthy sounds, reached her ear from the direction of the courtyard. The murderers were there, and that way there was no escape. Scarcely knowing what she did, she stepped over the body and ran up the staircase. She had a blind idea of getting to her own room, as if there she would find sanctuary.

She sped like a hare along the top gallery, and reached her room. At the door she stopped to listen. All seemed quiet on the upper floor. Inside the door there was the same faint sheen of starlight. Barbara sat down on her bed, and struggled against the terrible lassitude which weakened her limbs and dulled her brain.

She forced herself to think. She did not trouble to guess who the enemies were—it was enough for her that they had come for murder. The little party in the room below were unarmed, and one was a girl and another an old man. She must act—at once—rouse the peons—destroy the ruffians outside on the lawn before they had time to shoot. It was the only way, and she tottered to the window.

The room was at the other side of the house from the garden, and the window looked down on some outhouses and part of a little enclosed court. The peons lived beyond the big orchard where the corrals began. She must get to them, and almost before she knew she found herself on the veranda. There was a drop of a few feet to a roof whence she might reach the courtyard... But the courtyard might be a cul-de-sac. It must be, for the enemy would guard all the approaches.

She dropped on to the roof of a shed. The courtyard was empty, but she thought she heard a sound from the gate which led to the stable yard. That was on her left; on her right were other roofs and then a grove of trees; in front a wall ran straight to the edge of the orchard. This last must be her road, and she started climbing along the top of the adobe wall, which was plentifully studded with sharp tiles.

The pain of the traverse seemed to restore her balance. She felt her gown tearing, and her stockings in shreds, and her knees and wrists ached. In her haste she had no time to pick her way, but when the wall suddenly broadened she scrambled to her feet, and the last stage she almost ran.

Now she was at the transverse wall which bounded the orchard. She remembered that the place was walled all round, and that once inside it might be hard to get out. So she still kept to the wall, which continued to be of a fair breadth, and endeavoured to circuit the orchard so as to reach the corrals. But this took her at right angles to her former course, and brought her back again to the edge of the first courtyard.

Suddenly she flung herself flat. There were men in the courtyard. Two men came at a run from the direction of the

house. There must be a back-door there which she had forgotten. The door into the stable yard opened, but they did not pass through. They seemed to be listening. Had they caught sight of her? She lay in a cold terror for several minutes, till she dared to raise her head again. They were gone, and the door into the stable yard was shut.

Barbara did not venture to rise again, but crawled for the rest of the road... Presently she was looking into open ground, the ribbon of rough pasture between the orchard and the alfalfa fields... Her sense of direction had become a little confused, but she thought that the peons' quarters were to her right beyond the orchard.

She dropped off the wall. It was higher than she had thought, and she felt her ankle wrenched. Then she began to run, keeping in the shadow of the orchard wall. The need for haste was urgent, but her legs seemed to have no power and the pain of her ankle sickened her. Also her heart kept hammering so fast that it choked her breathing.

Now she was at the angle of the orchard wall, but there were no peons' quarters before her—only the savannah, with the alfalfa lands on the left, and the rails of a paddock on her right... She turned blindly to the right... ran a few steps... changed her mind... and suddenly found herself almost ridden down by a mounted man.

The face she saw had the pallor of a Conquistador. She had blundered into the enemy. The man had just avoided her, and was now in difficulties with his beast. A second horseman had leaped to the ground at the sight of her, and it was into his arms that she staggered. To her amazement she heard her name spoken, and looked up into Sandy's face.

She clung to him, while she stammered her story.

"Murder," he said quietly. "And they are desperate men with no care for their own lives... Timmy, it's the mercy of God that sent you with us. You're our only hope. You've got to get into the house."

Janet realised that the great crisis of her life had come. Don Mario expounded in his hoarse old voice the merits of the Eclipse print—it was from the Sartorius picture which he preferred to the better known Stubbs—he had picked it up in St. James's Street in '98—no, it must have been '96, when he was in England for the Fitzgibbon sale... And all the time her eyes were on Castor, who still stood before the fireplace. He lit a cigarette and the match made a spurt of light before his face.

Janet did not dare to look towards the window... The only hope was to keep still. Perhaps the cat would linger over the watching of the mouse. Barbara would now be alarming the house-servants; they would get at the arms, which were all in the gun room; probably they would first get in touch with the outdoor peons. That would all take time, and meantime they must let the murderers savour their revenge at ease. For she had no doubt of the meaning of it all. The Conquistadors and the Bodyguard could have no thought but vengeance; ruin and death lay before them, and they had nothing more to hope or fear... She wished the clock did not tick so loudly.

Suddenly Castor turned towards the window. Her eyes were on him, and she saw his face go grim. At the same moment there came a sound, which she knew was the rending of the gauze curtain. Now at last she turned her head, and Don Mario craned his from the depth of his chair.

Outside in the starlight, close up to the sill, were half a dozen men, each with a pistol held to cover the inmates of the room. She saw what she had expected—the rabbit teeth and the weasel face of Judson, Radin with his high cheek-bones and his scar, Suvorin's parched skin and albino hair, Laschallas's thick eyebrows. It was as if a wave of corruption had flowed out of the night, and hung, ready to break, at the window.

One man had entered the room and stood beside Don Mario's chair. She recognised Romanes. But it was a different figure from the trim cavalryman whom she had last seen in the Tronos del Rey. The lamp on the table at his left showed him clearly, and it seemed as if some screw had been removed which had dislocated the whole fabric of his being. He was unshaven and dirty, his clothes were ragged, and there was a long blue weal on his forehead.

She saw the lean, knotted neck, the oddly-shaped skull, the pale, sneering face, as if the soul had wholly mastered the body, and transformed it to an exact reflex. But the eyes, which had once been dull and expressionless, now danced and glowed with a crazy brilliance.

"Good evening, sir," he said, and his voice, once so passionless, had an odd lilt in it, like a parson who intones a litany. "Ah, it is the old horse-breeder, Sanfuentes!... And you, madame! I have been longing to meet you again, for the last time you left in rather a hurry." But he looked not at Janet or Don Mario, but steadily, devouringly, at the Gobernador.

Janet sat very still in her chair, a yard from each. Castor had moved his head and she saw the clock. It must be ten minutes since Barbara had slipped out. She kept her gaze rigidly on its minute-hand, as if by some mental concentration she could hasten its circuit, for she had a notion that if the end did not come for another ten minutes there was hope.

"Good evening," she heard Castor say. "You've an odd way of announcing yourself. You look a little off-colour. Would you like some food?"

The other did not reply. He was smiling, but so close were his lips to his teeth that it looked like a snarl.

"A cigarette anyhow." Castor was about to feel for his case in his pocket, when a pistol barrel confronted him.

"Stay still," said Romanes. "Not a movement. You will stand quite rigid, please, while I say what I have to say."

"Right!" was the answer. "You used to have better manners, Romanes. Let me hear what you want to say. You have come, I suppose, to ask for terms."

The coolness of the Gobernador's tone seemed to move the other to fresh mirth. "Terms!" he cried. "Oh, yes, we ask for terms. A free pardon, of course, and our passage paid to Europe, and five hundred apiece on which to begin a new life. Terms!" and his voice rose almost to a shriek. "Do you not know that there are no terms on God's earth you could offer us?"

"There is nothing I intend to offer you," was the answer.

"No. You are wise. I never underestimated your brains... You have used us, and I think we have given you good service... Now you have changed your plans, and would fling us on the scrap-heap. You have different ambitions now, and your old tools are no longer required. But the tools may have something to say to that."

"True. I am inclined to agree with you. I am not the man to shirk my responsibility." Castor's eyes had made the circuit of the room. He saw the ravening faces at the window, old Don Mario huddled in his chair, Janet below him white-lipped and tense. He saw something else—a new figure which had slipped in by the door, and which he recognised as Lariarty. He saw him before Romanes did, and it was the almost imperceptible start which he gave that caused the other to cast a swift glance to his left. Romanes smiled as he observed the newcomer. "Just in time," he said. "I wondered if you would bring it off. We are going to be offered terms after all. Our old chief says he admits his responsibility."

Lariarty's sick, drawn face made no response, but he moved nearer Romanes, till their elbows almost touched. His hands were empty, but there was a bulge in his side pocket.

"Terms!" Romanes cried again. "You have broken our world in bits, and you speak of recognising your responsibility! You have played with souls, and you are going to find that it is an awkward game. We are dying—dying. Morituri te salutamus. And the way we salute you is to take you with us. There will be no Castor, the regenerator of Olifa, for little boys to read about in their history books. For in about two minutes Castor will be dead."

The man on the hearthrug threw back his head.

"When we worked together, Romanes," he said, "you did not make full use of your opportunities. You cannot know much about me if you think that I can be frightened by threats of death. I am frightened of many things, but not of that... You seem to hold a strong hand. Take me away with you—anywhere—away from this house. Then, if you are determined on it, put a pistol bullet through my head, or put me against a wall for the rest of your gang to have a share in the pleasure of killing me. I accept what Fate sends—I have always accepted it. But why should you bring an old man and a girl into this unpleasant business?"

Romanes thrust his face close to the other's, and to Janet it seemed that it was now the mask of madness. She had forgotten about the slow minute-hand of the clock, for with Lariarty's coming—and coming through the door—she had realised that all hope was gone. But in that moment she did not think of her own danger. What held her gaze was Castor, who seemed to have risen to a strange nobility. There was not a tremor in his face, not a shadow of hesitation in his grave eyes. It was man towering above the beast, humanity triumphing even in its overthrow... These broken things before him were in part his handiwork. They were the world he had left—but he had left it. Yes, whatever happened, he had left it...

"Not so," Romanes was saying. "We are not civilised executioners. We are damned and dying, and our vengeance is the vengeance of the damned. The women go with you—there was another here who must be found. And the old horse-coping fool... After that we will find Rosas... and Clanroyden, curse him... and..."

It was then that Don Mario struck. He had been quietly reaching with his right hand for a loaded riding-whip which was on the rack on the wall beside his chair. Its handle had a heavy metal knob, and, without rising in his seat, he swung it with surprising agility at Romanes's head.

But the eyes of age are not those of youth and he missed his aim. The handle only grazed Romanes's shoulder, glanced off, hit the lamp on the table behind him, and sent it crashing to the ground.

Romanes half turned to his assailant, and as he moved Lariarty leaped on him. As he leaped he cried in a strange, stifled voice the single word "Pecos," the signal which he had agreed upon with Sandy. If he could deal with the tiger within, it was for Sandy to frustrate the wolves without.

But Don Mario's unexpected attack had deranged the plan. Lariarty should have trusted to his pistol; instead, he yielded to that ancient instinct which urges a man to grapple with an enemy who is suddenly unbalanced. The signal which he should have shouted was muffled by his haste, and the watchers at the window were given a moment to act before Sandy could strike. When "Pecos" rang out a second time with a desperate shrillness it was too late.

For Romanes, even in his madness, had judged the situation right. He could make certain of at least part of his vengeance. Castor, too, was upon him, but his right hand was free, and he shot him at close quarters in the neck. The Gobernador fell forward on the sitting Janet, and in the same instant shots were fired from the window.

They may have been meant for Castor, but they found other quarries. Lariarty dropped with a bullet in his brain, and Romanes clutched at space, gasped, and fell beside him.

Janet, struggling to rise, with the shots still like whip-lashes in her ear, heard a second burst of fire. It came from outside the window, and she knew it for rifles. Then there seemed to be a great quiet, and the world disappeared for her—everything except a dying man whom she had laid in her chair...

He was beyond speech, and his eyes were vacant and innocent like a child's. She pressed her face to his and kissed him on the lips... A fresh lamp seemed to have been lit behind her, and by its aid she saw the glazing eyes wake for a second, and through them the soul struggle to send a last message. There was peace in the face...

When Archie arrived ten minutes later his first demand was for Janet. Sandy drew him gently up to the ragged gauze curtain.

"She is safe—by a miracle," he said. "But Castor is dead—he died in her arms. Don't disturb her yet, Archie. A woman can only love one man truly, but many men may love her... Janet was the only love of Castor's life. He died happy with her kiss on his cheek... Let her stay a little longer beside him."

EPILOGUE

The Courts of the Morning had recovered the peace which till a year ago had been theirs since the beginning of time.

Where had once been the busy depot was now only shaggy downland, and a few blackened timbers, over which Nature had begun to spin her web. Choharua looked down again upon meadow and forest as free from human turmoil as the blue spaces of ocean beyond. Only at the head of the seaward gully were there signs of life. A small group of tents had been set up, almost on the spot where Barbara and the Gobernador had first looked down the four thousand feet of green dusk to the land-locked bay. The ruins of the power-house and the chute were already masked with creepers and tall grasses, and only certain scars on the hillside, not made by the winter rains, told that there man had once wrought and striven.

The day was passing from the steady glare of afternoon to the light airs which precede twilight. The sun was nearing a broad belt of amethyst haze which lay on the western horizon, and the face of Choharua was beginning to break up into shadows. The party who occupied the tents had come there by sea, and made their way up the rugged steps of the ravine to the plateau. The reason of their journey was apparent, for between the ravine and the mountain, on a mound which rose like a sentinel above the meadows, could be seen a tall wooden cross. Presently that would be replaced by a stone memorial, to mark the resting-place of him who had been the Gobernador of the Gran Seco.

There was the smoke of a destroyer far below in the gulf. That very day it had brought to this eyrie the new President-elect of the Republic of Olifa. The said President-elect was sitting beside Sandy on the very edge of the ravine, so that he looked down fifty feet of red rock to the tops of tall trees. He was amusing himself with dropping his cigarette ash into the gulf.

"If I slipped off this perch I should certainly break my neck," he observed. "That has been the position of all of us for so long that we have got used to it. I wonder when I shall feel accustomed to being secure?"

Sandy asked about the condition of Olifa.

"It is a marvel. We are a stable people after all, and, having gone a little off the lines, we have now jolted back to the track and are quite content with it... The elections went as pleasantly as a festa... Lossberg is content, for he has Bianca's place, and the army reductions will be made slowly and discreetly. There is a vast amount to be done, but bit by bit we shall remake the machine. I shall have Blenkiron to assist me, praise be to God. Him I have left wallowing in business, while I made the trip here to see you. You, my dear Sandy. For some months the destiny of Olifa has depended on you. I want that to continue."

Sandy did not speak. His eyes were on the downs which ran southward along the scarp, where far off he thought he saw two figures.

"I have come to offer you the post of Gobernador of the Gran Seco," Luis continued briskly. "In effect, as you know well, it will be an independent province. Its problems are not those of Olifa. It cannot be an integral part of the republic. It is tributary, yes—but not dependent. He who governs it must be a strong man and a wise man. And it is of the first importance, for on it rest the wealth and peace of Olifa."

"It is a great charge," said Sandy, but his eyes were still on the distant figures.

"You are already a king among the Indian pueblas. You are a king among the mine-workers. You will have Blenkiron as your lieutenant to direct the industry. We will build you a palace, and up here in the Courts of the Morning you will have your country estate. It is a good watch-tower, señor. Here you will be able to think high thoughts." He laid his hand on the other's arm.

"Consider! Are you the man to go home to Europe and sit down in cities? Will you dabble in your politics, like Sir Archie? I do not think so. You would be restless in an old country where things move slowly and everything is done by long speeches... You are a landowner, are you not? Will you settle down upon your acres, and shoot little birds, and entertain your friends, and in time grow fat? I know the life a little, for I have seen it, and it is pleasant—oh yes. But is it the life for you?"

Luis's air suddenly became very grave. "You are my friend, and I love you more than a brother. Therefore I want you to stay with me. But you are also a great man, and I am jealous that your greatness shall not be wasted. You are a creator, and you cannot escape your destiny. The era of the Old World is over, and it is the turn of the New World to-day. I have often heard you say that the difficulties even of Europe must be settled in the West. Listen to me, señor. The time will come when the problems of the West will be settled between the United States and Olifa. Yes, Olifa. We have wealth, we have won stability, presently we shall have leadership. I cannot do the leading. I can only, as you say, 'carry on.' Castor would have done it if he had lived. Now his mantle awaits you. You will have work worthy of a man, work which will need all your powers of mind and will and body. You will make a name that will live for ever. Will you choose to be a sleepy squire when you might be a king? You are not a provincial, you are not a native of any land. Your country is that which you can make for yourself..."

Sandy shook his head. "I don't think you understand."

"But indeed I understand. I understand you. I have studied you with admiration, and, what is more, with love. I know you better than you know yourself." He smiled. "I said that you could be a king, and I did not speak altogether in metaphor. Forms of government are not eternal things. Olifa is a republic, because republics were in fashion when she began. But some day she may well be a kingdom... Do not laugh. I do not mean any foolish dictatorship. We are a free people. But Olifa demands a leader, and whoever the leader is whom she follows he will be her king." Luis rose. "Think well over what I

have said. I now go to stretch my legs before dinner. Within a day or two I must have your answer."

Sandy remained alone on the pinnacle of rock. The sun was now close to the horizon and the west was like a great flower in blossom. The face of Choharua was rose-red, and the levels below were all purple, a deeper tint than the amethyst of the sea. Out of the circumambient glory Janet appeared, hatless, her hair like an aureole.

"I left Barbara a mile behind," she said. "She wanted to see Geordie Hamilton about one of the vaqueros who is sick. You look pensive, Sandy. A penny for your thoughts."

"I have been talking to Luis... He has just offered me the governorship of the Gran Seco, with apparently the reversion of a kingdom."

"Well?" she asked. She was picking a flower to pieces to hide trembling hands.

"What do you think, Janet? You are the wisest woman in the world. Shall Ulysses settle down in Phaeacia and forget all about Ithaca?"

"That is for Ulysses to say."

"But Ulysses has no ambition left. He never had much, and what little he had is buried up there."

The eyes of both turned eastward to the slim cross on the high ground above the meadows, now dyed blood-red by the setting sun. Against the background of the mountain it stood out like a great calvary.

"I think we saved his soul," he said gravely, "but we also brought him to his death. The glory of the work does not seem to amount to much when it all ends in six feet of earth. And the things that matter more than glory! I can't feel up to them, Janet. I am a very ordinary sort of fellow who shirks responsibility. I am no Castor. I can take a hand in king-making, but a king-maker is never a king."

"Other people think differently. Sandy dear," Janet said softly. "I have had one great moment in my life that I can never forget—when the Army of the Revolution entered Olifa. You, remember, Olifa had got back her old assurance. The Avenida was like a river of white light between two banks of roses... People in masses on both sides, and at all the windows, and on all the house-tops, and everywhere flowers... The Olifa regulars as smart as Aldershot, and the new President in his carriage, and the new ministers... And then, after all the splendour, the lean, dusty fighting men! I cried like a baby when I saw Archie—horribly embarrassed he was, poor darling, not knowing what to do with the flowers that fell on his head and his saddle—rather like a schoolboy being kissed by his mother after a famous innings... But when you came, I stopped crying and my heart stood still. You remember? All the shouting and the flower-scattering seemed to stop when you appeared at the head of your battered commandos. There was a great hush, and for a moment that vast multitude seemed to catch its breath. It was because they saw the man who might be their king... You never moved your head, Sandy, and you stared straight before you as if you were asleep. What were you thinking of?"

"I was thinking of Castor, and longing for him to be alive."

"Only that? Had Ulysses no thought of the vacant throne of Phaeacia—of carrying on a dead man's work?"

"No, by Heaven, he cannot... He couldn't if he wanted to, but he doesn't want to, for his heart isn't in it... I'm an alien here and I'm sick of being an alien... I'm not Castor. I haven't his ambition, I haven't his brains, I don't want to be on a pedestal. Perhaps I'm tired, perhaps I'm getting old, but I want my own people. I've seen Luis and his gallant lads on fire about this country and planning what a great land it is going to be, and it made me sick for my own... Castor too... He had never known a fatherland before, but he found one here... I've got the best in the world, and I'm homesick for it. These last months I've been living with half my mind on my work and half on all kinds of small, ridiculous, homely things. You would laugh if you knew the kind of picture I've had in my head whenever I wasn't engaged on some urgent job... How good the beer at Tap used to taste in a pewter mug... the scent of the hay in the Oxford meadows... bacon and eggs for tea after hunting... the moorburn and the peat reek in April... the beloved old musty smell of the library at Laverlaw and logs crackling on a December evening... I'm sick with longing for my own Border hills... It's no good, Janet. You can't cut adrift from the bands that God has tied. I've had enough of Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus. I'm for the modest little clear streams of Israel."

Janet dropped her flower and looked up smiling. "You are lonely, Sandy."

"I am lonely. That is why I want to get back to companionable things."

A sudden happiness came into the girl's face. She looked away from him and spoke rapidly. "Barbara once went over to Laverlaw with the Manorwaters. Do you remember? You pretended that she annoyed you... I wonder... Less than a year ago we spoke of her in the Regina Hotel. You pretended you couldn't remember her name... I wonder again... Oh, Sandy, you are an old fool..."

He scrambled off his perch and stood above her. He was flushed under his deep sunburn. "Janet, you witch! How did you guess?"

"It wasn't very hard. When a man like you grows tired of wandering and has a sudden longing for home, it is because he is in love with a woman and wants to take her to the place where he belongs."

"You've guessed right. I suppose it has been coming on for a long time, but I didn't know it—not till that awful night at Veiro. When we rode up and I found her in the midst of plunging horses—with her shoes all cut to bits and her ankle twisted, and dropping with fatigue, and yet as brave as a lion—and when I saw the roses on her breast all crushed and torn with her wild scramble—I think I knew. And later, when Archie arrived and his first cry was for you, I remembered that I had nobody to feel like that about... and I wanted someone—her..."

He stopped, for he felt that words were needless in view of a depth of comprehension in Janet's crooked smile.

“I haven’t a chance, I know.” he stammered.

“Not a ghost of a chance,” she said briskly, “but you can always ask her. She’ll be here in about five minutes. I’m going for a walk to look for Luis and the others. We shan’t be back for hours and hours.”

THE END

Castle Gay

John Buchan



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE

CHAPTER 1

TELLS OF A RUGBY THREE-QUARTER

Mr Dickson McCunn laid down the newspaper, took his spectacles from his nose, and polished them with a blue-and-white spotted handkerchief.

"It will be a great match," he observed to his wife. "I wish I was there to see. These Kangaroos must be a fearsome lot." Then he smiled reflectively. "Our laddies are not turning out so bad, Mamma. Here's Jaikie, and him not yet twenty, and he has his name blazing in the papers as if he was a Cabinet Minister."

Mrs McCunn, a placid lady of a comfortable figure, knitted steadily. She did not share her husband's enthusiasms.

"I know fine," she said, "that Jaikie will be coming back with a bandaged head and his arm in a sling. Rugby in my opinion is not a game for Christians. It's fair savagery."

"Hoots, toots! It's a grand ploy for young folk. You must pay a price for fame, you know. Besides, Jaikie hasn't got hurt this long time back. He's learning caution as he grows older, or maybe he's getting better at the job. You mind when he was at the school we used to have the doctor to him every second Saturday night. . . . He was always a terrible bold laddie, and when he was getting dangerous his eyes used to run with tears. He's quit of that habit now, but they tell me that when he's real excited he turns as white as paper. Well, well! we've all got our queer ways. Here's a biography of him and the other players. What's this it says?"

Mr McCunn resumed his spectacles.

"Here it is. 'J. Galt, born in Glasgow. Educated at the Western Academy and St Mark's College, Cambridge . . . played last year against Oxford in the victorious Cambridge fifteen, when he scored three tries. . . . This is his first International . . . equally distinguished in defence and attack. . . . Perhaps the most unpredictable of wing three-quarters now playing . . . ' Oh, and here's another bit in 'Gossip about the Teams.' " He removed his spectacles and laughed heartily. "That's good. It calls him a 'scholar and a gentleman.' That's what they always say about University players. Well, I'll warrant he's as good a gentleman as any, though he comes out of a back street in the Gorbals. I'm not so sure about the scholar. But he can always do anything he sets his mind to, and he's a worse glutton for books than me. No man can tell what may happen to Jaikie yet. . . . We can take credit for these laddies of ours, for they're all in the way of doing well for themselves, but there's just the two of them that I feel are like our own bairns. Just Jaikie and Dougal—and goodness knows what will be the end of that red-headed Dougal. Jaikie's a douce body, but there's a determined daftness about Dougal. I wish he wasn't so taken up with his misguided politics."

"I hope they'll not miss their train," said the lady. "Supper's at eight, and they should be here by seven-thirty, unless Jaikie's in the hospital."

"No fear," was the cheerful answer. "More likely some of the Kangaroos will be there. We should get a telegram about the match by six o'clock."

So after tea, while his wife departed on some domestic task, Mr McCunn took his ease with a pipe in a wicker chair on the little terrace which looked seaward. He had found the hermitage for which he had long sought, and was well content with it. The six years which had passed since he forsook the city of Glasgow and became a countryman had done little to alter his appearance. The hair had indeed gone completely from the top of his head, and what was left was greying, but there were few lines on his smooth, ruddy face, and the pale eyes had still the innocence and ardour of youth. His figure had improved, for country exercise and a sparer diet had checked the movement towards rotundity. When not engaged in some active enterprise, it was his habit to wear a tailed coat and trousers of tweed, a garb which from his boyish recollection he thought proper for a country laird, but which to the ordinary observer suggested a bookmaker. Gradually, a little self-consciously, he had acquired what he considered to be the habits of the class. He walked in his garden with a spud; his capacious pockets contained a pruning knife and twine; he could talk quite learnedly of crops and stock, and, though he never shouldered a gun, of the prospects of game; and a fat spaniel was rarely absent from his heels.

The home he had chosen was on the spur of a Carrick moor, with the sea to the west, and to south and east a distant prospect of the blue Galloway hills. After much thought he had rejected the various country houses which were open to his

purchase; he felt it necessary to erect his own sanctuary, conformable to his modest but peculiar tastes. A farm of some five hundred acres had been bought, most of it pasture-fields fenced by dry-stone dykes, but with a considerable stretch of broom and heather, and one big plantation of larch. Much of this he let off, but he retained a hundred acres where he and his grieve could make disastrous essays in agriculture. The old farm-house had been a whitewashed edifice of eight rooms, with ample outbuildings, and this he had converted into a commodious dwelling, with half a dozen spare bedrooms, and a large chamber which was at once library, smoking-room, and business-room. I do not defend Mr McCunn's taste, for he had a memory stored with bad precedents. He hankered after little pepper-box turrets, which he thought the badge of ancients, and in internal decoration he had an unhallowed longing for mahogany panelling, like a ship's saloon. Also he doted on his vast sweep of gravel. Yet he had on the whole made a pleasing thing of Blawearie (it was the name which had first taken his fancy), for he stuck to harled and whitewashed walls, and he had a passion for green turf, so that, beyond the odious gravel, the lawns swept to the meadows unbroken by formal flowerbeds. These lawns were his special hobby. "There's not a yard of turf about the place," he would say, "that's not as well kept as a putting-green."

The owner from his wicker chair looked over the said lawns to a rough pasture where his cows were at graze, and then beyond a patch of yellowing bracken to the tops of a fir plantation. After that the ground fell more steeply, so that the tree-tops were silhouetted against the distant blue of the sea. It was mid-October, but the air was as balmy as June, and only the earlier dusk told of the declining year. Mr McCunn was under strict domestic orders not to sit out of doors after sunset, but he had dropped asleep and the twilight was falling when he was roused by a maid with a telegram.

In his excitement he could not find his spectacles. He tore open the envelope and thrust the pink form into the maid's face. "Read it, lassie—read it," he cried, forgetting the decorum of the master of a household.

"Coming seven-thirty," the girl read primly. "Match won by single point." Mr McCunn upset his chair, and ran, whooping, in search of his wife.

The historian must return upon his tracks in order to tell of the great event thus baldly announced. That year the Antipodes had despatched to Britain such a constellation of Rugby stars that the hearts of the home enthusiasts became as water and their joints were loosened. For years they had known and suffered from the quality of those tall young men from the South, whom the sun had toughened and tautened—their superb physique, their resourcefulness, their uncanny combination. Hitherto, while the fame of one or two players had reached these shores, the teams had been in the main a batch of dark horses, and there had been no exact knowledge to set a bar to hope. But now Australia had gathered herself together for a mighty effort, and had sent to the field a fifteen most of whose members were known only too well. She had collected her sons wherever they were to be found. Four had already played for British Universities; three had won a formidable repute in international matches in which their country of ultimate origin had entitled them to play. What club, county, or nation could resist so well equipped an enemy? And, as luck decided, it fell to Scotland, which had been having a series of disastrous seasons, to take the first shock.

That ancient land seemed for the moment to have forgotten her prowess. She could produce a strong, hard-working and effective pack, but her great three-quarter line had gone, and she had lost the scrum-half who the year before had been her chief support. Most of her fifteen were new to an international game, and had never played together. The danger lay in the enemy halves and three-quarters. The Kangaroos had two halves possessed of miraculous hands and a perfect knowledge of the game. They might be trusted to get the ball to their three-quarters, who were reputed the most formidable combination that ever played on turf. On the left wing was the mighty Charvill, an Oxford Blue and an English International; on the right Martineau, who had won fame on the cinder-track as well as on the football-field. The centres were two cunning brothers, Clauson by name, who played in a unison like Siamese twins. Against such a four Scotland could scrape up only a quartet of possibles, men of promise but not yet of performance. The hosts of Tuscany seemed strong out of all proportion to the puny defenders of Rome. And as the Scottish right-wing three-quarter, to frustrate the terrible Charvill, stood the tiny figure of J. Galt, Cambridge University, five foot six inches in height and slim as a wagtail.

To the crowd of sixty thousand and more that waited for the teams to enter the field there was vouchsafed one slender comfort. The weather, which at Blawearie was clear and sunny, was abominable in the Scottish midlands. It had rained all the preceding night, and it was hoped that the ground might be soft, inclining to mud—mud dear to the heart of our islanders but hateful to men accustomed to the firm soil of the South.

The game began in a light drizzle, and for Scotland it began disastrously. The first scrimmage was in the centre of the ground, and the ball came out to the Kangaroo scrum-half, who sent it to his stand-off. From him it went to Clauson, and

then to Martineau, who ran round his opposing wing, dodged the Scottish full-back, and scored a try, which was converted. After five minutes the Kangaroos led by five points.

After that the Scottish forwards woke up, and there was a spell of stubborn defence. The Scottish full-back had a long shot at goal from a free kick, and missed, but for the rest most of the play was in the Scottish twenty-five. The Scottish pack strove their hardest, but they did no more than hold their opponents. Then once more came a quick heel out, which went to one of the Clausons, a smart cut-through, a try secured between the posts and easily converted. The score was now ten points to nil.

Depression settled upon the crowd as deep as the weather, which had stopped raining but had developed into a sour haar. Followed a period of constant kicking into touch, a dull game which the Kangaroos were supposed to eschew. Just before half-time there was a thin ray of comfort. The Scottish left-wing three-quarter, one Smail, a Borderer, intercepted a Kangaroo pass and reached the enemy twenty-five before he was brought down from behind by Martineau's marvellous sprinting. He had been within sight of success, and half-time came with a faint hope that there was still a chance of averting a runaway defeat.

The second half began with three points to Scotland, secured from a penalty kick. Also the Scottish forwards seemed to have got a new lease of life. They carried the game well into the enemy territory, dribbling irresistibly in their loose rushes, and hooking and heeling in the grand manner from the scrums. The white uniforms of the Kangaroos were now plentifully soiled, and the dark blue of the Scots made them look the less bedraggled side. All but J. Galt. His duty had been that of desperate defence conducted with a resolute ferocity, and he had suffered in it. His jersey was half torn off his back, and his shorts were in ribbons: he limped heavily, and his small face looked as if it had been ground into the mud of his native land. He felt dull and stupid, as if he had been slightly concussed. His gift had hitherto been for invisibility; his fame had been made as a will-o'-the-wisp; now he seemed to be cast for the part of that Arnold von Winkelreid who drew all the spears to his bosom.

The ball was now coming out to the Scottish halves, but they mishandled it. It seemed impossible to get their three-quarters going. The ball either went loose, or was intercepted, or the holder was promptly tackled, and whenever there seemed a chance of a run there was always either a forward pass or a knock-on. At this period of the game the Scottish forwards were carrying everything on their shoulders, and their backs seemed hopeless. Any moment, too, might see the deadly echelon of the Kangaroo three-quarters ripple down the field.

And then came one of those sudden gifts of fortune which make Rugby an image of life. The ball came out from a heel in a scrum not far from the Kangaroo twenty-five, and went to the Kangaroo stand-off half. He dropped it, and, before he could recover, it was gathered by the Scottish stand-off. He sent it to Smail, who passed back to the Scottish left-centre, one Morrison, an Academical from Oxford who had hitherto been pretty much of a passenger. Morrison had the good luck to have a clear avenue before him, and he had a gift of pace. Dodging the Kangaroo full-back with a neat swerve, he scored in the corner of the goal-line amid a pandemonium of cheers. The try was miraculously converted, and the score stood at ten points to eight, with fifteen minutes to play.

Now began an epic struggle, not the least dramatic in the history of the game since a century ago the Rugby schoolboy William Webb Ellis first "took the ball in his arms and ran with it." The Kangaroos had no mind to let victory slip from their grasp, and, working like one man, they set themselves to assure it. For a little their magnificent three-quarter line seemed to have dropped out of the picture, but now most theatrically it returned to it. From a scrum in the Kangaroo half of the field, the ball went to their stand-off and from him to Martineau. At the moment the Scottish players were badly placed, for their three-quarters were standing wide in order to overlap the faster enemy line. It was a perfect occasion for one of Martineau's deadly runs. He was, however, well tackled by Morrison and passed back to his scrum-half, who kicked ahead towards the left wing to Charvill. The latter gathered the ball at top-speed, and went racing down the touch-line with nothing before him but the Scottish right-wing three-quarter. It seemed a certain score, and there fell on the spectators a sudden hush. That small figure, not hitherto renowned for pace, could never match the Australian's long, loping, deadly stride.

Had Jaikie had six more inches of height he would have failed. But a resolute small man who tackles low is the hardest defence to get round. Jaikie hurled himself at Charvill, and was handed off by a mighty palm. But he staggered back in the direction of his own goal, and there was just one fraction of a second for him to make another attempt. This time he succeeded. Charvill's great figure seemed to dive forward on the top of his tiny assailant, and the ball rolled into touch. For

a minute, while the heavens echoed with the shouting, Jaikie lay on the ground bruised and winded. Then he got up, shook himself, like a heroic, bedraggled sparrow, and hobbled back to his place.

There were still five minutes before the whistle, and these minutes were that electric testing time, when one side is intent to consolidate a victory and the other resolute to avert too crushing a defeat. Scotland had never hoped to win; she had already done far better than her expectations, and she gathered herself together for a mighty effort to hold what she had gained. Her hopes lay still in her forwards. Her backs had far surpassed their form, but they were now almost at their last gasp.

But in one of them there was a touch of that genius which can triumph over fatigue. Jaikie had never in his life played so gruelling a game. He was accustomed to being maltreated, but now he seemed to have been pounded and smothered and kicked and flung about till he doubted whether he had a single bone undamaged. His whole body was one huge ache. Only the brain under his thatch of hair was still working well. . . . The Kangaroo pack had gone down field with a mighty rush, and there was a scrum close to the Scottish twenty-five. The ball went out cleanly to one of the Clausons, but it was now very greasy, and the light was bad, and he missed his catch. More, he stumbled after it and fell, for he had had a punishing game. Jaikie on the wing suddenly saw his chance. He darted in and gathered the ball, dodging Clauson's weary tackle. There was no other man of his side at hand to take a pass, but there seemed just a slender chance for a cut-through. He himself of course would be downed by Charvill, but there was a fraction of a hope, if he could gain a dozen yards, that he might be able to pass to Smail, who was not so closely marked.

His first obstacle was the Kangaroo scrum-half, who had come across the field. To him he adroitly sold the dummy, and ran towards the right touch-line, since there was no sign of Smail. He had little hope of success, for it must be only a question of seconds before he was brought down. He did not hear the roar from the spectators as he appeared in the open, for he was thinking of Charvill waiting for his revenge, and he was conscious that his heart was behaving violently quite outside its proper place. But he was also conscious that in some mysterious way he had got a second wind, and that his body seemed a trifle less leaden.

He was now past the half-way line, a little distance ahead of one of the Clausons, with no colleague near him, and with Charvill racing to intercept him. For one of Jaikie's inches there could be no hand-off, but he had learned in his extreme youth certain arts not commonly familiar to Rugby players. He was a most cunning dodger. To the yelling crowd he appeared to be aiming at a direct collision with the Kangaroo left-wing. But just as it looked as if a two-seater must meet a Rolls-Royce head-on at full speed, the two-seater swerved and Jaikie wriggled somehow below Charvill's arm. Then sixty thousand people stood on their seats, waving caps and umbrellas and shouting like lunatics, for Charvill was prone on the ground, and Jaikie was stolidly cantering on.

He was now at the twenty-five line, and the Kangaroo full-back awaited him. This was a small man, very little taller than Jaikie, but immensely broad and solid, and a superlative place-kick. A different physique would have easily stopped the runner, now at the very limits of his strength, but the Kangaroo was too slow in his tackle to meet Jaikie's swerve. He retained indeed in his massive fist a considerable part of Jaikie's jersey, but the half-naked wearer managed to stumble on just ahead of him, and secured a try in the extreme corner. There he lay with his nose in the mud, utterly breathless, but obscurely happy. He was still dazed and panting when a minute later the whistle blew, and a noise like the Last Trump told him that by a single point he had won the match for his country.

There was a long table below the Grand Stand, a table reserved for the Press. On it might have been observed a wild figure with red hair dancing a war dance of triumph. Presently the table collapsed under him, and the rending of timber and the recriminations of journalists were added to the apocalyptic din.

At eight o'clock sharp a party of four sat down to supper at Blawearry. The McCunns did not dine in the evening, for Dickson declared that dinner was a stiff, unfriendly repast, associated in his mind with the genteel in cities. He clung to the fashions of his youth—ate a large meal at one o'clock, and a heavy tea about half-past four, and had supper at eight from October to May, and in the long summer days whenever he chose to come indoors. Mrs McCunn had grumbled at first, having dim social aspirations, but it was useless to resist her husband's stout conservatism. For the evening meal she was in the habit of arraying herself in black silk and many ornaments, and Dickson on occasions of ceremony was persuaded to put on a dinner jacket; but to-night he had declined to change, on the ground that the guests were only Dougal and Jaikie.

There were candles on the table in the pleasant dining-room, and one large lamp on the sideboard. Dickson had been

stubborn about electric light, holding that a faint odour of paraffin was part of the amenities of a country house. A bright fire crackled on the hearth, for the October evenings at Blawearry were chilly.

The host was in the best of humours. "Here's the kind of food for hungry folk. Ham and eggs—and a bit of the salmon I caught yesterday! Did you hear that I fell in, and Adam had to gaff me before he gaffed the fish? Everything except the loaf is our own providing—the eggs are our hens', the ham's my own rearing and curing, the salmon is my catching, and the scones are Mamma's baking. There's a bottle of champagne to drink Jaikie's health. Man, Jaikie, it's an extraordinary thing you've taken so little hurt. We were expecting to see you a complete lameter, with your head in bandages."

Jaikie laughed. "I was in more danger from the crowd at the end than from the Kangaroos. It's Dougal that's lame. He fell through the reporters' table."

He spoke with the slight sing-song which is ineradicable in one born in the west of Scotland, but otherwise he spoke pure English, for he had an imitative ear and unconsciously acquired the speech of a new environment. One did not think of Jaikie as short, but as slight, for he was admirably proportioned and balanced. His hair was soft and light and unruly, and the small wedge of face beneath the thatch had an air of curious refinement and delicacy, almost of wistfulness. This was partly due to a neat pointed chin and a cherubic mouth, but chiefly to large grey eyes which were as appealing as a spaniel's. He was the incarnation of gentleness, with a hint of pathos, so that old ladies longed to mother him, and fools occasionally despised him—to their undoing. He had the look of one continually surprised at life, and a little lost in it. Tonight his face from much contact with mother earth had something of the blue, battered appearance of a pugilist's, so that he seemed to be a cherub, but a damaged cherub, who had been violently ejected from his celestial home.

The fourth at the table, Dougal Crombie, made a strong contrast to Jaikie's elegance. The aforetime chieftain of the Gorbals Die-hards had grown into a powerful young man, about five feet ten inches in height, with massive shoulders and a fist like a blacksmith's. Adolescence had revised the disproportions of boyhood. His head no longer appeared to be too big for his body; it was massive, not monstrous. The fiery red of his hair had toned down to a deeper shade. The art of the dentist had repaired the irregularities of his teeth. His features were rugged but not unpleasing. But the eyes remained the same, grey-green, deep-set, sullen, smouldering with a fierce vitality. To a stranger there was something about him which held the fancy, as if a door had been opened into the past. Even so must have looked some Pictish warrior, who brewed heather-ale, and was beaten back from Hadrian's Wall; even so some Highland cateran who fired the barns of the Lennox; even so many a saturnine judge of Session and heavy-handed Border laird. Dougal in appearance was what our grandfathers called a "Gothic survival." His manner to the world was apt to be assertive and cynical; he seemed to be everlastingly in a hurry, and apt to jostle others off the footpath. It was unpleasant, many found, to argue with him, for his eye expressed a surly contempt; but they were wrong—it was only interest. Dougal was absorbed in life, and since his absorption was fiercer than other people's, it was misunderstood. Therefore he had few friends; but to those few—the McCunns, Jaikie, and perhaps two others—he was attached with a dog-like fidelity. With them he was at his ease and no longer farouche; he talked less, and would smile happily to himself, as if their presence made him content. They gave him the only home life he had ever known.

Mr McCunn spoke of those who had years before acknowledged Dougal's sway.

"You'll want to have the last news," he said. "Bill's getting on grand in Australia. He's on his own wee farm in what they call a group settlement, and his last letter says that he's gotten all the roots grubbed up and is starting his first ploughing, and that he's doing fine with his hens and his dairy cows. That's the kind of job for Bill—there was always more muscle than brains in him, but there's a heap of common sense. . . . Napoleon's in a bank in Montreal—went there from the London office last July. He'll rise in the world no doubt, for he has a great head for figures. Peter Paterson is just coming out for a doctor, and he has lifted a tremendous bursary—I don't mind the name of it, but it will see him through his last year in the hospitals. Who would have said that Peter would turn out scientific, and him such a through-other laddie? . . . But Thomas Yownie is the big surprise. Thomas, you mind, was all for being a pirate. Well, he'll soon be a minister. He had aye a grand voice, and they tell me his sermons would wile the birds from the trees. . . . That's the lot, except for you and Jaikie. Man, as Chief Die-hard, I'm proud of my command."

Dickson beamed on them affectionately, and they listened with a show of interest, but they did not share his paternal pride. Youth at twenty is full of hard patches. Already to the two young men the world of six years ago and its denizens had become hazy. They were remotely interested in the fates of their old comrades, but no more. The day would come when they would dwell sentimentally on the past: now they thought chiefly of the present, of the future, and of themselves.

"And how are you getting on yourself, Dougal?" Dickson asked. "We read your things in the paper, and we whiles read about you. I see you're running for Parliament."

"I'm running, but I won't get in. Not yet."

"Man, I wish you were on a better side. You've got into an ill nest. I was reading this very morning a speech by yon Tombs—he's one of your big men, isn't he?—blazing away about the sins of the boorjoysee. That's just Mamma and me."

"It's not you. And Tombs, anyway, is a trumpery body. I have no use for the intellectual on the make, for there's nothing in him but vanity. But see here, Mr McCunn. The common people of this land are coming to their own nowadays. I know what they need and I know what they're thinking, for I come out of them myself. They want interpreting and they want guiding. Is it not right that a man like me should take a hand in it?"

Dickson looked wise. "Yes, if you keep your head. But you know fine, Dougal, that those who set out to lead the mob are apt to end by following. You're in a kittle trade, my man. And how do you manage to reconcile your views with your profession? You've got a good job with the Craw papers. You'll be aspiring some day to edit one of them. But what does Mr Craw say to your politics?"

The speaker's eye had a twinkle in it, but Dougal's face, hitherto as urbane as its rugged features permitted, suddenly became grim.

"Craw!" he cried. "Yon's the worst fatted calf of them all. Yon's the old wife. There's no bigger humbug walking on God's earth today than Thomas Carlyle Craw. I take his wages, because I give good value for them. I can make up a paper with any man, and I've a knack of descriptive writing. But thank God! I've nothing to do with his shoddy politics. I put nothing of myself into his rotten papers. I keep that for the Outward every second Saturday."

"You do," said Dickson dryly. "I've been reading some queer things there. What ails you at what you call 'modern Scotland'? By your way of it we've sold our souls to the English and the Irish."

"So we have." Dougal had relapsed again into comparative meekness. It was as if he felt that what he had to say was not in keeping with a firelit room and a bountiful table. He had the air of being a repository of dark things which were not yet ready for the light.

"Anyway, Scotland did fine the day. It's time to drink Jaikie's health."

This ceremony over, Dickson remained with his glass uplifted.

"We'll drink to your good health, Dougal, and pray Heaven, as the Bible says, to keep your feet from falling. It would be a sad day for your friends if you were to end in jyle. . . . And now I want to hear what you two are proposing to do with yourselves. You say you have a week's holiday, and it's a fortnight before Jaikie goes back to Cambridge."

"We're going into the Canonry," said Jaikie.

"Well, it's a fine countryside, the Canonry. Many a grand day I've had on its hill burns. But it's too late for the fishing. . . . I see from the papers that there's a by-election on now. Is Dougal going to sow tares by the roadside?"

"He would like to," said Jaikie, "but he won't be allowed. We'll keep to the hills, and our headquarters will be the Back House of the Garroch. It's an old haunt of ours."

"Fine I know it. Many a time when I've been fishing Loch Garroch I've gone in there for my tea. What's the wife's name now? Catterick? Aye, it was Catterick, and her man came from Sanquhar way. We'll get out a map after supper and you'll show me your road. The next best thing to tramping the hills yourself is to plan out another man's travels. There's grand hills round the Garroch—the Muneraw and the Yirnie and the Calmarton and the Caldron. . . . Stop a minute. Doesn't Mr Craw bide somewhere in the Canonry? Are you going to give him a call in, Dougal?"

"That's a long way down Glen Callowa," said Jaikie. "We mean to keep to the high tops. If the weather holds, there's nothing to beat a Canonry October."

"You're a pair of desperate characters," said Dickson jocosely. "You're going to a place which is thrang with a by-election, and for ordinary you'll not keep Dougal away from politics any more than a tyke from an ash-bucket. But you say you're not heeding the election. It's the high hills for you—but it's past the time for fishing, and young legs like yours will cover every top in a couple of days. I wish you mayna get into mischief. I'm afraid of Dougal with his daftness. He'll be for starting a new Jacobite rebellion. 'Kenmure's on and awa', Willie."

Mr McCunn whistled a stave of the song. His spirits were soaring. "Well, I'll be at hand to bail you out. . . . And remember that I'm old, but not dead-old. If you set up the Standard on Garroch side, send me word and I'll on with my boots and join you."

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCES A GREAT MAN IN ADVERSITY

Fifty-eight years before the date of this tale a child was born in the school-house of the landward parish of Kilmaclavers in the Kingdom of Fife. The schoolmaster was one Campbell Craw, who at the age of forty-five had espoused the widow of the provost of the adjacent seaport of Partankirk, a lady his junior by a single summer. Mr Craw was a Scots dominie of the old style, capable of sending boys direct to the middle class of Humanity at St Andrews, one who esteemed his profession, and wore in the presence of his fellows an almost episcopal dignity. He was recognised in the parish and far beyond it as a “deep student,” and, when questions of debate were referred to his arbitrament, he would give his verdict with a weight of polysyllables which at once awed and convinced his hearers. The natural suspicion which might have attached to such profundity was countered by the fact that Mr Craw was an elder of the Free Kirk and in politics a sound Gladstonian. His wife was a kindred spirit, but, in her, religion of a kind took the place of philosophy. She was a noted connoisseur of sermons, who would travel miles to hear some select preacher, and her voice had acquired something of the pulpit monotone. Her world was the Church, in which she hoped that her solitary child would some day be a polished pillar.

The infant was baptised by the name of Thomas Carlyle, after the sage whom his father chiefly venerated; Mrs Craw had graciously resigned her own preference, which was Robert Rainy, after the leader of her communion. Never was a son the object of higher expectations or more deeply pondered plans. He had come to them unexpectedly; the late Provost of Partankirk had left no offspring; he was at once the child of their old age, and the sole hope of their house. Both parents agreed that he must be a minister, and he spent his early years in an atmosphere of dedication. Some day he would be a great man, and the episodes of his youth must be such as would impress the readers of his ultimate biography. Every letter he wrote was treasured by a fond mother. Each New Year’s Day his father presented him with a lengthy epistle, in the style of an evangelical Lord Chesterfield, which put on record the schoolmaster’s more recent reflections on life: a copy was carefully filed for the future biographer. His studies were minutely regulated. At five, though he was still shaky in English grammar, he had mastered the Greek alphabet. At eight he had begun Hebrew. At nine he had read *Paradise Lost*, Young’s *Night Thoughts*, and most of Mr Robert Pollok’s *Course of Time*. At eleven he had himself, to his parents’ delight, begun the first canto of an epic on the subject of Eternity.

It was the way to produce a complete prig, but somehow Thomas Carlyle was not the ordinary prig. For one thing, he was clearly not born for high scholastic attainments. There was a chronic inaccuracy in him which vexed his father’s soul. He was made to dabble in many branches of learning, but he seemed incapable of exact proficiency in any. When he had finished with the school of Kilmaclavers, he attended for two years the famous academy of Partankirk, which had many times won the first place in the college bursaries. But he was never head boy, or near it, and the bursary which he ultimately won (at Edinburgh) was only a small one, fitted to his place of twenty-seventh in the list. But he was noted for his mental activity. He read everything he could lay his hand on, and remembered a good deal of it. He was highly susceptible to new ideas, which he frequently misunderstood. At first he was unpopular among his contemporaries, because of his incapacity for any game and his disinclination to use his fists, but in each circle he entered he won his way eventually to tolerance if not to popularity. For he was fruitful of notions; he could tell his illiterate comrades wonderful things which he had picked up from his voracious reading; he could suggest magnificent schemes, though in carrying them out he was at the best a camp-follower.

At the age of twenty we find Thomas Carlyle Craw in the last year of his Edinburgh arts course, designing to migrate presently to a theological college. His career has not been distinguished, though he has won a fifth prize in the English Literature class and a medal for an essay on his namesake. But he has been active in undergraduate journalism, and has contributed many pieces to the evening papers. Also he has continued his miscellaneous reading, and is widely if inaccurately informed on every current topic. His chief regret is that he is a miserable public speaker, his few efforts having been attended by instant failure, and this is making him lukewarm about a ministerial career. His true weapon, he feels, is the pen, not the tongue. Otherwise he is happy, for he is never bored—and pleasantly discontented, for he is devouringly ambitious. In two things his upbringing has left an abiding mark. The aura of dedication hangs over him; he regards

himself as predestined to be a great man, though he is still doubtful about the kind of greatness to be attained. Also father and mother have combined to give him a serious view of life. He does not belie his name, for the sage of Ecclefechan has bequeathed him some rags of his mantle. He must always be generalising, seeking for principles, philosophising; he loves a formula rather than a fact: he is heavily weighted with unction; rhetoric is in every fibre. He has a mission to teach the world, and, as he walks the pavements, his head is full of profound aphorisms or moving perorations—not the least being the obituary which some day men will write of him. One phrase in it will be, “He was the Moses who led the people across the desert to the Promised Land”; but what the Promised Land was to be like he would have been puzzled to say.

That winter he suffered his first calamity. For Campbell Crow fell ill of pneumonia and died, and a month later Euphemia, his wife, followed him to Kilmaclavers churchyard. Thomas Carlyle was left alone in the world, for his nearest relative was a cousin in Manitoba whom he had never seen. He was an affectionate soul and mourned his parents sincerely; when his grief dulled a little he wrote a short biography of them, “A Father and a Mother in Israel,” which appeared in the Partankirk Advertiser and was justly admired. He was left now to his own resources, to shape his life without the tender admonitions of the school-house. Long and solemnly he perpended the question of the ministry. It had been his parents’ choice for him, he had been “dedicated” to it, he could not lightly forsake it. But his manifest lack of preaching endowments—he had a weak, high-pitched voice and an extreme nervousness—convinced him that common sense must prevail over filial piety. He discussed the matter with the Minister of Kilmaclavers, who approved. “There’s more ways of preaching than in a pulpit,” was that sage’s verdict.

So Thomas decided upon letters. His parents had bequeathed him nearly three thousand pounds, he had no debts, he was accustomed to live sparingly; on such a foundation it seemed to him that he could safely build the first storey of what should one day be a towering edifice. After taking an undistinguished degree, he migrated to London, according to the secular fashion of ambitious Scottish youth.

His first enterprises were failures. The serious monthlies would have none of his portentous treatises on the conduct of life, and The Times brusquely refused a set of articles on current politics, in the writing of which he had almost wept at his own eloquence. But he found a niche in a popular religious weekly, where, under the signature of “Simon the Tanner,” he commented upon books and movements and personalities.

Soon that niche became a roomy pulpit, from which every week he fulminated, argued, and sentimentalised with immense acceptance. His columns became the most popular feature of that popular journal. He knew nothing accurately about any subject in the world, but he could clothe his ignorance in pontifical vestments and give his confusion the accents of authority. He had a remarkable flair for discerning and elaborating the tiny quantum of popular knowledge on any matter. Above all, he was interesting and aggressively practical. He took the hand of the half-educated and made them believe that he was leading them to the inner courts of wisdom. Every flicker of public emotion was fanned by him into a respectable little flame. He could be fiercely sarcastic in the manner of his namesake, he could wallow in the last banalities of sentiment, he could even be jocose and kittenish, but he knew his audience and never for a moment lost touch with it. “Helpful” was the epithet most commonly applied to him. He was there to encourage and assist, and his answers to correspondents began to fill a large space in his chosen journal.

So at the age of twenty-four Thomas was making a good income, and was beginning to be much in request by uplift societies. He resolutely refused to appear in public: he was too wise to let his halting utterance weaken the impression of his facile pen. But a noble discontent was his, and he marshalled his forces for another advance. Generations on his mother’s side of small traders in Partankirk had given him considerable business acumen, and he realised that the way to fortune did not lie in writing for other men. He must own the paper which had its vogue from his talents, and draw to himself the whole profits of exploiting the public taste. Looking about him, he decided that there was room for a weekly journal at a popular price, which would make its appeal to the huge class of the aspiring half-baked, then being turned out by free education. They were not ardent politicians; they were not scholars; they were homely, simple folk, who wanted a little politics, a little science, a little religion, set to a domestic tune. So he broke with his employers, and, greatly daring, started his own penny weekly. He had considerably added to his little fortune, for he had no extravagant tastes, and he had made many friends in the circles of prosperous nonconformity. There was a spice of the gambler in Thomas, for every penny he possessed or could borrow he put into the new venture.

The Centre-Forward was a success from the first. The name was a stroke of genius; being drawn from the popular sport of football, it was intelligible to everyone, and it sounded a new slogan. The paper would be in the van of progressive

thought, but also in the centre of the road, contemptuous alike of right-hand reaction and left-hand revolution. It appeared at that happy time in the 'nineties, when the world was comfortable, mildly progressive, and very willing to be amused by toys. And Thomas was an adroit editor. He invented ingenious competitions, and offered prizes of a magnitude hitherto unknown in British journalism. He discovered three new poets—poetry was for the moment in fashion—and two new and now completely forgotten humorists, and he made each reader share in the discovery and feel that he too was playing the part of a modest Mæcenas. He exposed abuses with a trenchant pen, when his lawyers had convinced him that he was on safe legal ground. Weekly he addressed the world, under his own signature, on every conceivable topic and with an air of lofty brotherhood, so that the humblest subscriber felt that the editor was his friend. The name of Thomas Carlyle Craw might be lightly regarded by superfine critics, but by some hundreds of thousands of plain Britons it was extolled and venerated.

Thomas proved an acute man of business. The Centre-Forward was never allowed to languish for lack of novelties; it grew in size, improved in paper and type, carried a great weight of advertisements, and presently became a pioneer in cheap pictures. Every detail of its manufacture and distribution, in which it struck out many new lines, he personally supervised. Also it became the parent of several offspring. It was the time when the gardening craze was beginning in England, and *The Country-Dweller* was founded, a sumptuously produced monthly which made a feature of its illustrations. This did no more than pay its way, but a children's halfpenny made a big hit, and an unctuous and snobbish penny weekly for the home made a bigger. He acquired also several trade journals, and put them on a paying basis.

When the South African War broke out Thomas was a wealthy man, piling up revenue yearly, for he still lived in two rooms in Marylebone and spent nothing on himself. The war more than doubled his profits. In the Centre-Forward he had long been a moderate exponent of the new imperialism, and his own series of articles "The Romance of Empire" had had a large sale when issued as a book. Now he became a fervent patriot. He exposed abuses in the conduct of the campaign—always on the best legal advice, he had much to say about inefficient generals, he appeared before the world as the soldiers' friend. The result was a new paper, *Mother England*, price one penny, which was the Centre-Forward adapted to lower strata of democracy—a little slangy and vulgar, deliberately sensational, but eminently sound at heart. Once a month Thomas Carlyle Craw compelled the motley array of its subscribers to view the world from his own lofty watch-tower.

Fortune treated him kindly. After the war came the Liberal revival, and he saw his chance. His politics now acquired a party character, and he became the chief Free Trade trumpet in the generally Protectionist orchestra of the Press. Once again he took a bold step, for he started a new halfpenny daily. For the better part of a year it hovered on the brink of failure, and the profits on Thomas's other publications went into its devouring maw. Then, suddenly, it turned the corner, and raced up the slope to the pinnacle of public favour. The View fed an appetite the existence of which Thomas alone had divined. It was bright and fresh and admirably put together; large sums were spent on special correspondence; its picture pages were the best of their kind; every brand of notable, at high fees, enlivened its pages. But above all it was a paper for the home and the home-maker, and the female sex became its faithful votaries. Much of this success was due to Thomas himself. He made himself the centre of the paper and the exponent of its policy. Once a week, in the View, as in the Centre-Forward, he summarised the problems of immediate interest and delivered his weighty judgments.

He was compelled to change his simple habits of life. He was compelled, indeed, elaborately to seek seclusion. There was no other alternative for one who had no gift of utterance and had hitherto gone little into society. With hundreds daily clamouring for interviews, demanding his help in cash or influence, urging policies and persons upon his notice, he must needs flee to sanctuary. In the palatial offices which he built in the neighbourhood of Fleet Street he had a modest flat, where he occasionally passed a night behind a barbed-wire entanglement of secretaries. But for the rest he had no known abode, though here I am privileged to say that he kept suites at several hotels, English and foreign, in the name of his principal aide-de-camp.

He escaped the publicity given to most press magnates by the Great War, for he used the staffs of his many papers as a bodyguard for his anonymity. The Prime Minister might summon him to urgent conferences, but Thomas did not attend—he sent an editor. New Year and Birthday honours were offered and curtly declined. Yet Thomas was only physically in retreat; spiritually he held the forefront of the stage. His signed articles had a prodigious vogue. Again, as fifteen years before, he was the friend of the men in the trenches; his criticisms of generals and politicians were taken seriously, for they were in accord with the suspicions and fears of the ordinary man. On the whole the Craw Press played a useful part in the great struggle. Its ultimatums were at any rate free from the charge of having any personal motive, and it preserved a

reasonable standard of decency and good sense. Above all it was sturdily optimistic even in the darkest days.

The end of the War found Thomas with fifteen successful papers under his control, including a somewhat highbrow Sunday publication, an immense fortune rapidly increasing by judicious investment, and a commanding if ill-defined position in the public eye. He permitted himself one concession to his admirers. His portrait now appeared regularly in his own prints. It showed a middle-aged, baldish man, with a round head and a countenance of bland benevolence. His eyes were obscured by large tortoise-shell spectacles, but they had a kindly gleam, and redeemed for suavity the high cheekbones and the firmly compressed lips. A suspicion of a retreating chin helped to produce the effect of friendliness, while the high forehead augured wisdom. It was the face which the public had somehow always imagined, and it did much to define Thomas's personality in his readers' eyes.

The step had its importance, for he had now become a figure of almost international note. Weekly he emerged from the shadows where he lived to give counsel and encouragement to humanity. He was Optimism incarnate, Hope embodied not in a slim nymph but in a purposeful and masculine Colossus. His articles were printed in all his papers and syndicated in the American and Continental press. *Sursum Corda* was his motto. A Browning in journalese, his aim was to see the bright side of everything, to expound partial evil as universal good. Was there a slump in the basic industries? It was only the prelude to an industrial revival, in which Britain would lead the world in new expert trades. Was there unrest among the workers? It was a proof of life, that "loyal unrest" inseparable from Freedom. High-speed motoring, jazz music, and the odd habits of the young were signs of a new Elizabethan uplift of spirit. Were the churches sparsely attended? It only meant that mankind was reaching after a wider revelation. For every difficulty Thomas Carlyle Craw had his happy solution. The Veiled Prophet was also the Smiling Philosopher. Cheerfulness in his hands was not a penny whistle but a trumpet.

He had of course his critics. Rude persons declared that his optimism was a blend of Martin Tupper and the worst kind of transatlantic uplift-merchant. Superfine people commented upon the meagreness of his thought and the turgidity of his style. Reformers in a hurry considered his soothing syrup a deadly opiate. The caustic asked who had made this tripe-merchant a judge in Israel. Experts complained that whenever he condescended to details he talked nonsense. But these were the captious few; the many had only admiration and gratitude. In innumerable simple homes, in schoolrooms, in village clubs, in ministers' studies, the face of Thomas Carlyle Craw beamed benevolently from the walls. He had fulfilled the old ambition both of his parents and himself; he spoke from his pulpit *urbi et orbi*; he was a Moses to guide his people to the Promised Land.

The politics of the Craw Press were now generally Conservative, but Thomas kept himself aloof from party warfare. He supported, and mildly criticised, whatever Government was in power. In foreign affairs alone he allowed himself a certain latitude. His personal knowledge of other lands was confined to visits to familiar Riviera resorts, when he felt that he needed a little rest and sunshine. But he developed an acute interest in Continental politics, and was in the habit of sending out bright young men to act as private intelligence-officers. While mildly supporting the League of Nations, he was highly critical of the settlement made at Versailles, and took under his wing various countries which he considered to have a grievance. On such matters he permitted himself to write with assurance, almost with truculence. He was furiously against any recognition of Russia, but he demanded that judgment on the Fascist régime in Italy should be held in abeyance, and that the world should wait respectfully on the results of that bold experiment.

But it was in the hard case of Evallonia that he specially interested himself. It will be remembered that a republic had been established there in 1919, apparently with the consent of its people. But rifts had since appeared within the lute. There was a strong monarchist party among the Evallonians, who wished to reinstate their former dynasty, at present represented by an attractive young Prince, and at the same time insisted on the revision of Evallonian boundaries. To this party Thomas gave eloquent support. He believed in democracy, he told his millions of readers, and a kingdom (teste Britain) was as democratic a thing as a republic: if the Evallonians wanted a monarch they should be allowed to have one: certain lost territories, too, must be restored, unless they wished to see Evallonia Irredenta a permanent plague-spot. His advocacy made a profound impression in the south and east of Europe, and to Evallonian monarchists the name of Craw became what that of Palmerston was once to Italy and Gladstone to Bulgaria. The mildness of his published portraits did not damp them; they remembered that the great Cavour had looked like Mr Pickwick. A cigar, a begonia, a new scent, and a fashionable hotel in the Evallonian capital were named in his honour.

Such at the date of this tale was the position of Thomas Carlyle Craw in the world of affairs. He was an illustrious

figure, and a self-satisfied, though scarcely a happy, man. For he suffered from a curious dread which the scientific call agoraphobia. A master of publicity, he shrank from it in person. This was partly policy. He had the acumen to see that retirement was his chief asset; he was the prophet, speaking from within the shrine, a voice which would lose its awfulness if it were associated too closely with human lineaments. But there was also timidity, a shrinking of the flesh. He had accustomed himself for thirty years to live in a shell, and he had a molluscan dread of venturing outside it. A lion on paper, he suspected that he would be a rabbit in personal intercourse. He realised that his vanity would receive cruel wounds, that rough hands would paw his prophetic mantle. How could he meet a rampant socialist or a republican Evallonian face to face? The thought sent a shiver down his spine

So his sensitiveness became a disease, and he guarded his seclusion with a vestal jealousy. He had accumulated a personal staff of highly paid watch-dogs, whose business was not only the direction of the gigantic *Craw Press* but the guardianship of the shrine consecrated to its master. There was his principal secretary, Freddy Barbon, the son of a bankrupt Irish peer, who combined the duties of grand vizier and major-domo. There was his general manager, Archibald Bamff, who had been with him since the early days of the *Centre-Forward*. There was Sigismund Allins, an elegant young man who went much into society and acted, unknown to the world, as his chief's main intelligence-officer. There was Bannister, half valet, half butler, and Miss Elena Cazenove, a spinster of forty-five and the most efficient of stenographers. With the exception of Bamff, this entourage attended his steps—but never together, lest people should talk. Like the police in a Royal procession, they preceded or followed his actual movements and made straight the path for him. Among them he ruled as a mild tyrant, arbitrary but not unkindly. If the world of men had to be kept at a distance lest it should upset his poise and wound his vanity, he had created a little world which could be, so to speak, his own personality writ large.

It is the foible of a Scot that he can never cut the bonds which bind him to his own country. Thomas had happy recollections of his childhood on the bleak shores of Fife, and a large stock of national piety. He knew in his inmost heart that he would rather win the approval of Kilmaclavers and Partankirk than the plaudits of Europe. This affection had taken practical form. He had decided that his principal hermitage must be north of the Tweed. Fife and the East coast were too much of a home country for his purpose, the Highlands were too remote from London, so he settled upon the south-west corner, the district known as the Canonry, as at once secluded and accessible. He had no wish to cumber himself with land, for Thomas desired material possessions as little as he desired titles; so he leased from Lord Rhynns (whose wife's health and declining fortune compelled him to spend most of the year abroad) the ancient demesne of Castle Gay. The place, it will be remembered, lies in the loveliest part of the glen of the Callowa, in the parish of Knockraw, adjoining the village of Starr, and some five miles from the town of Portaway, which is on the main line to London. A high wall surrounds a wild park of a thousand acres, in the heart of which stands a grey stone castle, for whose keep Bruces and Comyns and Macdowalls contended seven centuries ago. In its cincture of blue mountains it has the air of a place at once fortified and forgotten, and here Thomas found that secure retirement so needful for one who had taken upon himself the direction of the major problems of the globe. The road up the glen led nowhere, the fishing was his own and no tourist disturbed the shining reaches of the Callowa, the hamlet of Starr had less than fifty inhabitants, and the folk of the Canonry are not the type to pry into the affairs of eminence in retreat. To the countryside he was only the Castle tenant—"yin *Craw*, a newspaper body frae England." They did not read his weekly pronouncements, preferring older and stronger fare.

But at the date of this tale a thorn had fixed itself in Thomas's pillow. Politics had broken in upon his moorland peace. There was a by-election in the Canonry, an important by-election, for it was regarded as a test of the popularity of the Government's new agricultural policy. The Canonry in its seaward fringe is highly farmed, and its uplands are famous pasture; its people, traditionally Liberal, have always been looked upon as possessing the toughest core of northern common sense. How would such a region regard a scheme which was a violent departure from the historic attitude of Britain towards the British farmer? The matter was hotly canvassed, and, since a General Election was not far distant, this contest became the cynosure of political eyes. Every paper sent a special correspondent, and the candidates found their halting utterances lavishly reported. The Canonry woke up one morning to find itself "news."

Thomas did not like it. He resented this publicity at his doorstep. His own press was instructed to deal with the subject in obscure paragraphs, but he could not control his rivals. He was in terror lest he should be somehow brought into the limelight—a bogus interview, perhaps—such things had happened—there were endless chances of impairing his carefully constructed dignity. He decided that it would be wiser if he left the place till after the declaration of the poll. The necessity gave him acute annoyance, for he loved the soft bright October weather at Castle Gay better than any other season of the

year. The thought of his suite at Aix—taken in the name of Mr Frederick Barbon—offered him no consolation.

But first he must visit Glasgow to arrange with his builders for some reforms in the water supply, which, with the assent of Lord Rhynns, he proposed to have installed in his absence. Therefore, on the evening of the Kangaroo match already described, his discreet and potent figure might have been seen on the platform of Kirkmichael as he returned from the western metropolis. It was his habit to be met there by a car, so as to avoid the tedium of changing trains and the publicity of Portaway station.

Now, as it chanced, there was another election in process. The students of the western capital were engaged in choosing their Lord Rector. On this occasion there was a straight contest; no freak candidates, nationalist, sectarian, or intellectual, obscured the issue. The Conservative nominee was a prominent member of the Cabinet, the Liberal the leader of the Old Guard of that faith. Enthusiasm waxed high, and violence was not absent—the violence without bitterness which is the happy mark of Scottish rectorial contests. Already there had been many fantastic doings. The Conservative headquarters were decorated by night with Liberal red paint, prints which set the law of libel at nought were sold in the streets, songs of a surprising ribaldry were composed to the discredit of the opposing candidates. No undergraduate protagonist had a single physical, mental, or moral oddity which went unadvertised. One distinguished triumph the Liberals had won. A lanky Conservative leader had been kidnapped, dressed in a child's shorts, blouse, socks, and beribboned sailor hat, and attached by padlocked chains to the college railings, where, like a culprit in the stocks, for a solid hour he had made sport for the populace. Such an indignity could not go unavenged, and the Conservatives were out for blood.

The foremost of the Liberal leaders was a man, older than the majority of students, who, having forsaken the law, was now pursuing a belated medical course. It is sufficient to say that his name was Linklater, for he does not come into this story. The important thing about him for us is his appearance. He looked older than his thirty-two years, and was of a comfortable figure, almost wholly bald, with a round face, tightly compressed lips, high cheek-bones and large tortoiseshell spectacles. It was his habit to wear a soft black hat of the kind which is fashionable among statesmen, anarchists, and young careerists. In all these respects he was the image of Thomas Carlyle. His parental abode was Kirkmichael, where his father was a Baptist minister.

On the evening in question Thomas strode to the door of the Kirkmichael booking-office, and to his surprise found that his car was not there. It was a drizzling evening, the same weather which that day had graced the Kangaroo match. The weather had been fine when he left Castle Gay in the morning, but he had brought a light raincoat with which he now invested his comfortable person. There were no porters about, and in the dingy station yard there was no vehicle except an antique Ford.

His eye was on the entrance to the yard, where he expected to see any moment the headlights of his car in the wet dusk, when he suddenly found his arms seized. At the same moment a scarf was thrown over his head which stopped all utterance. . . . About what happened next he was never quite clear, but he felt himself swung by strong arms into the ancient Ford. Through the folds of the scarf he heard its protesting start. He tried to scream, he tried to struggle, but voice and movement were forbidden him . . .

He became a prey to the most devastating fear. Who were his assailants? Bolsheviks, anarchists, Evallonian Republicans, the minions of a rival press? Or was it the American group which had offered him two days ago by cable ten millions for his properties? . . . Whither was he bound? A motor launch on the coast, some den in a city slum? . . .

After an hour's self-torture he found the scarf switched from his head. He was in a car with five large young men in waterproofs, each with a muffler covering the lower part of his face. The rain had ceased, and they seemed to be climbing high up on to the starlit moors. He had a whiff of wet bracken and heather.

He found his voice, and with what resolution he could muster he demanded to know the reason of the outrage and the goal of his journey.

"It's all right, Linklater," said one of them. "You'll know soon enough."

They called him Linklater! The whole thing was a blunder. His incognito was preserved. The habit of a lifetime held, and he protested no more.

CHAPTER 3

THE BACK HOUSE OF THE GARROCH

The road to the springs of the Garroch water, a stream which never descends to the lowlands but runs its whole course in the heart of mossy hills, is for the motorist a matter of wide and devious circuits. It approaches its goal circumspectly, with an air of cautious reconnaissance. But the foot-traveller has an easier access. He can take the cart-road which runs through the heather of the Clachlands glen and across the intervening hills by the Nick of the Threshes. Beyond that he will look into the amphitheatre of the Garroch, with the loch of that name dark under the shadow of the Caldron, and the stream twining in silver links through the moss, and the white ribbon of highway, on which wheeled vehicles may move, ending in the yard of a moorland cottage.

The Blawearie car had carried Jaikie and Dougal swiftly over the first fifteen miles of their journey. At about three o'clock of the October afternoon they had reached the last green cup where the Clachlands has its source, and were leisurely climbing the hill towards the Nick. Both had ancient knapsacks on their shoulders, but it was their only point of resemblance. Dougal was clad in a new suit of rough tweed knickerbockers which did not fit him well; he had become very hot and carried his jacket on his arm, and he had no hat. Jaikie was in old flannels, for he abominated heavy raiment, and, being always more or less in training, his slender figure looked pleasantly cool and trim. Sometimes they sauntered, sometimes they strode, and now and then they halted, when Dougal had something to say. For Dougal was in the first stage of holiday, when to his closest friend he had to unburden himself of six months' store of conversation. It was as inevitable as the heat and discomfort which must attend the first day's walk, before his body rid itself of its sedentary heaviness. Jaikie spoke little; his fate in life was to be a listener.

It is unfair to eavesdrop on the babble of youth when its flow has been long pent up. Dougal's ran like Ariel over land and sea, with excursions into the upper air. He had recovered his only confidant, and did not mean to spare him. Sometimes he touched upon his daily task—its languors and difficulties, the harassments of the trivial, the profound stupidity of the middle-aged. He defended hotly his politics, and drew so many fine distinctions between his creed and those of all other men, that it appeared that his party was in the loyal, compact, and portable form of his single self. Then ensued torrential confessions of faith and audacious ambition. He was not splashing—he was swimming with a clean stroke to a clear goal. With his pen and voice he was making his power felt, and in time the world would listen to him. His message? There followed a statement of ideals which was nobly eclectic. Dougal was at once nationalist and internationalist, humanitarian and man of iron, realist and poet.

They were now in the Nick of the Threshes, where, in a pad of green lawn between two heathery steepes, a well bubbled among mosses. The thirsty idealist flung himself on the ground and drank deep. He rose with his forelock dripping.

"I sometimes think you are slipping away from me, Jaikie," he said. "You've changed a lot in the last two years. . . . You live in a different kind of world from me, and every year you're getting less and less of a Scotsman. . . . And I've a notion, when I pour out my news to you and haver about myself, that you're criticising me all the time in your own mind. Am I not right? You're terribly polite, and you never say much, but I can feel you're laughing at me. Kindly, maybe, but laughing all the same. You're saying to yourself, 'Dougal gets dafter every day. He's no better than a savage.'"

Jaikie regarded the flushed and bedewed countenance of his friend, and the smile that broadened over his small face was not critical.

"I often think you daft, Dougal. But then I like daftness."

"Anyway, you've none of it yourself. You're the wisest man I ever met. That's where you and I differ. I'm always burning or freezing, and you keep a nice, average, normal temperature. I take desperate likes and dislikes. You've something good to say about the worst scallywag, and, if you haven't, you hold your tongue. I'm all for flinging my cap over the moon, while you keep yours snug on your head. No. No"—he quelled an anticipated protest. "It's the same in your football. It was like that yesterday afternoon. You never run your head against a stone wall. You wait till you see your chance, and then you're on to it like forked lightning, but you're determined not to waste one atom of your strength."

"That's surely Scotch enough," said Jaikie laughing. "I'm economical."

"No, it's not Scotch. We're not an economical race. I don't know what half-wit invented that libel. We spend ourselves—we've always spent ourselves—on unprofitable causes. What's the phrase— *perfervidum ingenium*? There's not much of the *perfervid* about you, Jaikie."

"No?" said the other, politely interrogatory.

"No. You've all the pluck in creation, but it's the considering kind. You remember how Alan Breck defined his own courage—'Just great penetration and knowledge of affairs.' That's yours. . . . Not that you haven't got the other kind too. David Balfour's kind— 'auld, cauld, dour, deidly courage.'"

"I've no courage," said Jaikie. "I'm nearly always in a funk."

"Aye, that's how you would put it. You've picked up the English trick of understatement—what they call *meiosis* in the grammar books. I doubt you and me are very unlike. You'll not catch me understating. I want to shout both my vices and my virtues on the house-tops. . . . If I dislike a man I want to hit him on the head, while you'd be wondering if the fault wasn't in yourself. . . . If I want a thing changed I must drive at it like a young bull. If I think there's dirty work going on I'm for starting a revolution. . . . You don't seem to care very much about anything, and you're too fond of playing the devil's advocate. There was a time . . ."

"I don't think I've changed," said Jaikie. "I'm a slow fellow, and I'm so desperately interested in things that I feel my way cautiously. You see, I like so much that I haven't a great deal of time for hating. I'm not a crusader like you, Dougal."

"I'm a poor sort of crusader," said Dougal ruefully. "I get into a tearing passion about something I know very little about, and when I learn more my passion ebbs away. But still I've a good hearty stock of dislikes and they keep me from boredom. That's the difference between us. I'm for breaking a man's head, and I probably end by shaking hands. You begin by shaking hands. . . . All the same, God help the man or woman or creed or party that you make up your slow mind to dislike. . . . I'm going to make a stir in the world, but I know that I'll never be formidable. I'm not so sure about you."

"I don't want to be formidable."

"And that's maybe just the reason why you will be—some day. But I'm serious, Jaikie. It's a sad business if two ancient friends like you and me are starting to walk on different sides of the road. Our tracks are beginning to diverge, and, though we're still side by side, in ten years we may be miles apart. . . . You're not the good Scotsman you used to be. Here am I driving myself mad with the sight of my native land running down the brae—the cities filling up with Irish, the countryside losing its folk, our law and our letters and our language as decrepit as an old wife. Damn it, man, in another half-century there will be nothing left, and we'll be a mere disconsidered province of England. . . . But you never bother your head about it. Indeed, I think you've gone over to the English. What was it I heard you saying to Mr McCunn last night?— that the English had the most political genius of any people because they had the most humour?"

"Well, it's true," Jaikie answered. "But every day I spend out of Scotland I like it better. When I've nothing else to do I run over in my mind the places I love best—mostly in the Canonry—and when I get a sniff of wood smoke it makes me sick with longing for peat-reek. Do you think I could forget that?"

Jaikie pointed to the scene which was now spread before them, for they had emerged from the Nick of the Threshes and were beginning the long descent to the Garroch. The October afternoon was warm and windless, and not a wisp of cloud broke the level blue of the sky. Such weather in July would have meant that the distances were dim, but on this autumn day, which had begun with frost, there was a crystalline sharpness of outline in the remotest hills. The mountains huddled around the amphitheatre, the round bald forehead of the Yirnie, the twin peaks of the Caldron which hid a tarn in their corrie, the steel-grey fortress of the Calmarton, the vast menacing bulk of the Muneraw. On the far horizon the blue of the sky seemed to fade into white, and a hill shoulder which rose in one of the gaps had an air of infinite distance. The bog in the valley was a mosaic of colours like an Eastern carpet, and the Garroch water twined through it like some fantastic pictured stream in a missal. A glimpse could be had of Loch Garroch, dark as ink in the shadow of the Caldron. There were many sounds, the tinkle of falling burns far below, a faint calling of sheep, an occasional note of a bird. Yet the place had an overmastering silence, a quiet distilled of the blue heavens and the primeval desert. In that loneliness lay the tale of ages since the world's birth, the song of life and death as uttered by wild living things since the rocks first had form.

The two did not speak for a little. They had seen that which touched in both some deep elemental spring of desire.

Down on the level of the moss, where the green track wound among the hags, Dougal found his tongue.

"I would like your advice, Jaikie," he said, "about a point of conduct. It's not precisely a moral question, but it's a

matter of good taste. I'm drawing a big salary from the Craw firm, and I believe I give good value for it. But all the time I'm despising my job, and despising the paper I help to make up, and despising myself. Thank God, I've nothing to do with policy, but I ask myself if I'm justified in taking money from a thing that turns my stomach."

"But you're no more responsible for the paper than the head of the case-room that sets the type. You're a technical expert."

"That's the answer I've been giving myself, but I'm not sure that it's sound. It's quite true that my leaving Craw's would make no difference—they'd get as good a man next day at a lower wage— maybe at the same wage, for I will say that for them, they're not skinflints. But it's a bad thing to work at something you can't respect. I'm condescending on my job, and that's ruin for a man's soul."

"I see very little harm in the Craw papers," said Jaikie. "They're silly, but they're decent enough."

"Decent!" Dougal cried. "That's just what they are not. They're the most indecent publications on God's earth. They're not vicious, if that's what you mean. They would be more decent if they had a touch of blackguardism. They pander to everything that's shoddy and slushy and third-rate in human nature. Their politics are an opiate to prevent folk thinking. Their endless stunts, their competitions and insurances and country-holiday schemes—that's the ordinary dodge to get up their circulation, so as to raise their advertisement prices. I don't mind that, for it's just common business. It's their uplift, their infernal uplift, that makes my spine cold. Oh, Lord! There's not a vulgar instinct, not a half-baked silliness, in the whole nation that they don't dig out and print in leaded type. And above all, there's the man Craw!"

"Did you ever meet him?" Jaikie asked.

"Never. Who has? They tell me he has a house somewhere in the Canonry, when he gets tired of his apartments in foreign hotels. But I study Craw. I'm a specialist in Craw. I've four big press-cutting books at home full of Craw. Here's some of the latest."

Dougal dived into a pocket and produced a batch of newspaper cuttings.

"They're mostly about Evallonia. I don't worry about that. If Craw wants to be a kingmaker he must fight it out with his Evallonians. . . . But listen to some of the other titles. 'Mr Craw's Advice to Youth!' 'Mr Craw on the Modern Drama.'—He must have sat in the darkness at the back of a box, for he'd never show up in the stalls.—'Mr Craw on Modern Marriage.'—A fine lot he knows about it!—'Mr Craw warns the Trade Unions.'—The devil he does!—'Mr Craw on the Greatness of England.' 'Mr Craw's Open Letter to the President of the U.S.A.' Will nobody give the body a flea in his ear? . . . I could write a book about Craw. He's perpetually denouncing, but always with a hopeful smirk. I've discovered his formula. 'This is the best of all possible worlds, and everything in it is a necessary evil.' He wants to be half tonic and half sedative, but for me he's just a plain emetic."

Dougal waved the cuttings like a flag.

"The man is impregnable, for he never reads any paper but his own, and he has himself guarded like a gun-factory. But I've a notion that some day I'll get him face to face. Some day I'll have the chance of telling him just what I think of him, and what every honest man—"

Jaikie by a dexterous twitch got possession of the cuttings, crumpled them into a ball, dropped it in a patch of peat, and ground it down with his heel.

"What's that you've done?" Dougal cried angrily. "You've spoiled my Craw collection."

"Better that than spoiling our holiday. Look here, Dougal, my lad. For a week you've got to put Craw and all his works out of your head. We are back in an older and pleasanter world, and I won't have it wrecked by your filthy journalism"

For the better part of five minutes there was a rough-and-tumble on the green moor-road, from which Jaikie ultimately escaped and fled. When peace was made the two found themselves at a gate in a dry-stone dyke.

"Thank God," said Dougal. "Here is the Back House at last. I want my tea."

Their track led them into a little yard behind the cottage, and they made their way to the front, where the slender highway which ascended the valley of the Garroch came to an end in a space of hill gravel before the door. The house was something more than a cottage, for fifty years ago it had been the residence of a prosperous sheep-farmer, before the fashion of "led" farms had spread over the upland glens. It was of two storeys and had a little wing at right angles, the corner between being filled with a huge bush of white roses. The roof was slated, the granite walls had been newly

whitewashed, and were painted with the last glories of the tropæolum. A grove of scarlet-berried rowans flanked one end, beyond which lay the walled garden of potatoes and gooseberry bushes, varied with golden-rod and late-flowering phloxes. At the other end were the thatched outhouses and the walls of a sheepfold, where the apparatus for boiling tar rose like a miniature gallows above the dipping-trough. The place slept in a sunny peace. There was a hum of bees from the garden, a slow contented clucking of hens, the echo of a plashing stream descending the steepes of the Caldron, but the undertones made by these sounds were engulfed in the dominant silence. The scent of the moorlands, compounded of miles of stone and heather and winds sharp and pure as the sea, made a masterful background from which it was possible to pick out homelier odours—peat-reek, sheep, the smell of cooking food. To ear, eye, and nostril the place sent a message of intimate and delicate comfort.

The noise of their feet on the gravel brought someone in haste to the door. It was a woman of between forty and fifty, built like a heroine of the Sagas, deep-bosomed, massive, straight as a grenadier. Her broad comely face was brown like a berry, and the dark eyes and hair told of gipsy blood in her ancestry. Her arms were bare, for she had been making butter, and her skirts were kilted, revealing a bright-coloured petticoat, so that she had the air of a Highland warrior.

But in place of the boisterous welcome which Jaikie had expected, her greeting was laughter. She stood in the doorway and shook. Then she held up a hand to enjoin silence, and marched the two travellers to the garden gate out of earshot of the house.

“Did you get my postcard, Mrs Catterick?” Jaikie asked, when they had come to a standstill under a rowan tree.

“Aye, I got your postcaird, and I’m blithe to see ye baith. But ye come at an unco time. I’ve gotten anither visitor.”

“We don’t want to inconvenience you,” Jaikie began. “We can easily go down the water to the Mains of Garroch. The herd there will take us in.”

“Ye’ll dae nae siccan thing. It will never be said that Tibby Catterick turned twae auld freends frae her door, and there’s beds to spare for ye baith. . . . But ye come at an unco time and ye find me at an unco job. I’m a jyler.”

“A what?”

“A jyler. I’ve a man inbye, and I’m under bond no to let him stir a fit frae the Back House till the morn’s morn. . . . I’ll tell ye the gospel truth. My guid-brither’s son—him that’s comin’ out for a minister—is at the college, and the morn the students are electin’ what they ca’ a Rector. Weel, Erchie’s a stirrin’ lad and takes muckle ado wi their politics. It seems that there was a man on the ither side that they wanted to get oot o’ the road—it was fair eneugh, for he had pitten some terrible affronts on Erchie. So what maun the daft laddie dae but kidnap him? How it was done I canna tell, but he brocht him here late last nicht in a cawr, and pit me on my aith no to let him leave the place for thirty ‘oors. . . . So you see I’m turned jyler.” Mrs Catterick again shook with silent merriment.

“Have you got him indoors now?”

“He’s ben the hoose in the best room. I kinnled a fire for him, for he’s a cauldfrife body. What’s he like? Oh, a fosity wee man wi’ a bald heid and terrible braw claithe. Ye wad say he was ower auld to be a student, but Erchie says it takes a lang time to get through as a doctor. Linklater, they ca’ him.”

“Has he given you any trouble?” Dougal asked anxiously. He seemed to long to assist in the task of gaoler.

“No him. My man’s awa wi’ the crocks to Gledmouth, and, as ye ken, we hae nae weans, but I could manage twa o’ him my lane. But he never offered to resist. Just ate his supper as if he was in his ain hoose, and spak nae word except to say that he likit my scones. I lent him yin o’ John’s sarks for a nicht-gown and this mornin’ he shaved himsel’ wi’ John’s razor. He’s a quiet, saft-spoken wee body, but there’s nae crack in him. He speaks wi’ a kind o’ English tongue and he ca’s me Madam. I doot that deil Erchie maun be in the wrang o’ it, but kin’s kin and I maun tak the wyte o’ his cantrips.”

Again Jaikie became apologetic and proposed withdrawal, and again his proposal was rejected.

“Ye can bide here fine,” said Mrs Catterick, “now that ye ken the truth. I couldna tell it ye at the door-cheek, for ye were just forenent his windy. . . . Ye’ll hae your meat wi’ me in the kitchen, and ye can hae the twa beds in the loft. . . . Ye’d better no gang near Linklater, for he maybe wadna like folk to ken o’ this performance—nor Erchie neither. He has never stirred frae his room this day, and he’s spak no word except to speir what place he was in and how far it was frae Glen Callowa. . . . Now I think o’t, that was a queer thing to speir, for Erchie said he brocht him frae Kirkmichael. . . . Oh, and he was wantin’ to send a telegram, but I tell’t him there was nae office within saxteen miles and the post wadna be up the water till the morn. . . . I’m just wonderin’ how he’ll get off the morn, for he hasna the buits for walkin’. Ye never saw sic

snod, wee, pappymashy things on a man's feet. But there's twa bicycles, yin o' John's and yin that belongs to the young herd at the west hirsle. Wi' yin o' them he'll maybe manage down the road. . . . But there's nae sense in crossin' brigs till ye come to them. I've been thrang wi' the kirnin', but the butter's come, and the kettle's on the boil. Your tea will be ready as sune as ye've gotten your faces washed."

Half an hour later Jaikie and Dougal sat in the kitchen, staying a hearty hunger with farles of oatcake and new-baked scones, and a healthier thirst with immense cups of strong-brewed tea. Their hostess, now garbed somewhat more decorously, presided at the table. She apologised for the delay.

"I had to gie Linklater his tea. He's gettin' terrible restless, puir man. He's been tryin' to read the books in the best room, but he canna fix his mind, and he's aye writin' telegrams. He kens ye're here, and speired whae ye were, and I telled him twa young lads that were trampin' the country. I could see that he was feared o' ye, and nae wonder. It would be sair on a decent body if folk heard that he had been kidnapped by a deil like Erchie. I tried to set his mind at rest about the morn, and telled him about John's bicycle."

But the meal was not the jovial affair which Jaikie remembered of old. Mrs Catterick was preoccupied, and did not expand, as was her custom, in hilarious gossip. This new task of gaoler lay heavy on her shoulders. She seemed always to be listening for sounds from the farther part of the house. Twice she left the table and tiptoed along the passage to listen at the door.

"He's awfu' restless," she reported. "He's walkin' about the floor like a hen on a het girdle. I wish he mayna loss his reason. Dod, I'll warm Erchie's lugs for this ploy when I get a haud o' him. Sic a job to saddle on a decent wumman!"

Then for a little there was peace, for a question of Jaikie's led their hostess to an account of the great April storm of that year.

"Thirty and three o' the hill lambs deid in ae nicht. . . . John was oot in the snaw for nineteen 'oors and I never looked to see him mair. Puir man, when he cam in at last he couldna eat—just a dram o' whisky in het milk—and he sleepit a round o' the clock. . . . I had fires in ilka room and lambs afore them in a' the blankets I possessed. . . . Aye, and it was waur when the snaw went and the floods cam. The moss was like a sea, and the Caldron was streikit wi' roarin' burns. We never saw the post for a week, and every brig atween here and Portaway gaed down to the Solway. . . . Wheesht!"

She broke off and listened. A faint cry of "Madam" came from the other end of the house.

"It's him. It's Linklater. 'Madam' he ca's me. Keep us a'!"

She hurried from the kitchen, shutting the door carefully behind her.

When she returned it was with a solemn face.

"He's wonderin' if ane o' you lads wad take a telegram for him to the office. He's terrible set on't. 'Madam,' he says wi' his Englishy voice, 'I assure you it's a matter of the first importance.'"

"Nonsense," said Dougal. "Sixteen miles after a long day's tramp! He can easily wait till the morning. Besides, the office would be closed before we got there."

"Aye, but hearken." Mrs Catterick's voice was hushed in awe. "He offers twenty punds to the man that will dae his will. He's gotten the notes in his pooch."

"Now where on earth," said Dougal, "did a medical student get twenty pounds?"

"He's no like a student. The mair I look at him the better I see that he's nane o' the rough clan that Erchie rins wi'. He's yin that's been used wi' his comforts. And he's aulder than I thocht— an aulder man than John. I wadna say but that blagyird Erchie has kidnapped a Lord Provost, and whaur will we a' be then?"

"We had better interview him," said Dougal. "It's a shame to let him fret himself."

"Ane at a time," advised Mrs Catterick, "for he's as skeery as a cowl. You gang, Dougal. Ye ken the ways o' the college lads."

Dougal departed and the two left behind fell silent. Mrs Catterick's instinct for the dramatic had been roused, and she kept her eye on the door, through which the envoy would return, as if it had been the curtain of a stage play. Even Jaikie's placidity was stirred.

"This is a funny business, Mrs Catterick," he said. "Dougal and I come here for peace, and we find the Back House of the Garroch turned into a robbers' den. The Canonry is becoming a stirring place. You've an election on, too."

“So I was hearin’, and the post brings us papers about it. John maun try and vote, if he can get an orra day atween the sales. He votit last time, honest man, but we never heard richt whae got in. We’re ower far up the glens for poalitics. Wheesht! Is that Dougal?”

It was not. He did not return for nearly half an hour, and when he came it was to put his head inside the door and violently beckon Jaikie. He led him out of doors to the corner of the garden, and then turned on him a face so excited and portentous that the appropriate utterance should have been a shout. He did not shout: he whispered hoarsely.

“Do you mind our talk coming up the road? . . . Providence has taken me at my word. . . . Who do you think is sitting ben the house? It’s the man Craw!”



CHAPTER 4

THE RECONNAISSANCE OF CASTLE GAY

The westering sun was lighting up the homely furniture of Mrs Catterick's best room—the sheepskins on the floor, the framed photographs decorated with strings of curlews' eggs on the walls— when Dougal and Jaikie entered the presence of the great man. Mr Craw was not at the moment an impressive figure. The schoolmaster's son of Kilmaclavers had been so long habituated to the attentions of an assiduous valet that he had found some difficulty in making his own toilet. His scanty hair was in disorder, and his spruce blue suit had attracted a good deal of whitewash from the walls of his narrow bedroom. Also he had lost what novelists call his poise. He sat in a horsehair-covered arm-chair drawn up at a table, and strove to look as if he had command of the situation, but his eye was uncertain and his fingers drummed nervously.

"This is Mr Galt, sir," said Dougal, adding, "of St Mark's College, Cambridge."

Mr Craw nodded.

"Your friend is to be trusted?" and his wavering eyes sought Jaikie. What he saw cannot have greatly reassured him, for Jaikie was struggling with a strong inclination to laugh.

"I have need to be careful," he said, fixing his gaze upon a photograph of the late Queen Victoria, and picking his words. "I find myself, through no fault of my own, in a very delicate position. I have been the subject of an outrage on the part of— of some young men of whom I know nothing. I do not blame them. I have been myself a student of a Scottish University. . . . But it is unfortunate—most unfortunate. It was apparently a case of mistaken identity. Happily I was not recognised. . . . I am a figure of some note in the world. You will understand that I do not wish to have my name associated with an undergraduate—'rag,' I think, is the word."

His two hearers nodded gravely. They were bound to respect such patent unhappiness.

"Mr—I beg your pardon—Crombie?—has told me that he is employed on one of my papers. Therefore I have a right to call upon his assistance. He informs me that I can also count on your goodwill and discretion, sir," and he inclined his head towards Jaikie. "It is imperative that this foolish affair should never be known to the public. I have been successful in life, and therefore I have rivals. I have taken a strong stand in public affairs, and therefore I have enemies. My position, as you are no doubt aware, is one of authority, and I do not wish my usefulness to be impaired by becoming the centre of a ridiculous tale."

Mr Craw was losing his nervousness and growing fluent. He felt that these two young men were of his own household, and he spoke to them as he would have addressed Freddy Barbon, or Sigismund Allins, or Archibald Bamff, or Bannister, his butler, or that efficient spinster Miss Elena Cazenove.

"I don't think you need be afraid, sir," said Dougal. "The students who kidnapped you will have discovered their mistake as soon as they saw the real Linklater going about this morning. They won't have a notion who was kidnapped, and they won't want to inquire. You may be sure that they will lie very low about the whole business. What is to hinder you sending a wire to Castle Gay to have a car up here tomorrow, and go back to your own house as if nothing had happened? Mrs Catterick doesn't know you from Adam, and you may trust Jaikie and me to hold our tongues."

"Unfortunately the situation is not so simple." Mr Craw blinked his eyes, as if to shut out an unpleasing picture, and his hands began to flutter again. "At this moment there is a by-election in the Canonry—a spectacular by-election. . . . The place is full of journalists—special correspondents—from the London papers. They were anxious to drag me into the election, but I have consistently refused. I cannot embroil myself in local politics. Indeed, I intended to go abroad, for this inroad upon my rural peace is in the highest degree distasteful. . . . You may be very certain that these journalists are at this moment nosing about Castle Gay. Now, my household must have been alarmed when I did not return last night. I have a discreet staff, but they were bound to set inquiries on foot. They must have telephoned to Glasgow, and they may even have consulted the police. Some rumours must have got abroad, and the approaches to my house will be watched. If one of these journalists learns that I am here—the telegraph office in these country parts is a centre of gossip—he will follow up the trail. He will interview the woman of this cottage, he will wire to Glasgow, and presently the whole ridiculous business will

be disclosed, and there will be inch headlines in every paper except my own."

"There's something in that," said Dougal. "I know the ways of those London journalists, and they're a dour crop to shift. What's your plan, sir?"

"I have written a letter." He produced one of Mrs Catterick's disgraceful sheets of notepaper on which her disgraceful pen had done violence to Mr Craw's neat commercial hand. "I want this put into the hand of my private secretary, Mr Barbon, at once. Every hour's delay increases the danger."

"Would it not be best," Dougal suggested, "if you got on to one of the bicycles—there are two in the outhouse, Mrs Catterick says— and I escorted you to Castle Gay this very night. It's only about twenty miles."

"I have never ridden a bicycle in my life," said Mr Craw coldly. "My plan is the only one, I fear. I am entitled to call upon you to help me."

It was Jaikie who answered. The first day's walk in the hills was always an intoxication to him, and Mrs Catterick's tea had banished every trace of fatigue.

"It's a grand night, Dougal," he said, "and there's a moon. I'll be home before midnight. There's nothing I would like better than a ride down Garroch to the Callowa. I know the road as well as my own name."

"We'll go together," said Dougal firmly. "I'm feeling fresher than when I started. . . . What are your instructions, sir?"

"You will deliver this letter direct into Mr Barbon's hands. I have asked him to send a car in this direction tomorrow before midday, and I will walk down the glen to meet it. It will wait for me a mile or so from this house. . . . You need not say how I came here. I am not in the habit of explaining my doings to my staff."

Mr Craw enclosed his letter in a shameful envelope and addressed it. His movements were brisker now and he had recovered his self-possession. "I shall not forget this, Mr Crombie," he said benignly. "You are fortunate in being able to do me a service."

Dougal and Jaikie betook themselves to the outhouse to examine the bicycles of John Catterick and the herd of the west hirsels.

"I eat the man's bread," said the former, "so I am bound to help him, but God forbid that I should ever want to accept his favours. It's unbelievable that we should spend the first night of our holiday trying to save the face of Craw. . . . Did you ever see such an image? He's more preposterous even than I thought. But there's a decency in all things, and if Craw's bones are to be picked it will be me that has the picking of them, and not those London corbies."

But this truculence did not represent Dougal's true mind, which presently became apparent to his companion as they bumped their way among the heather bushes and flood-gravel which composed the upper part of the Garroch road. He was undeniably excited. He was a subaltern officer in a great army, and now he had been brought face to face with the general-in-chief. However ill he might think of that general, there was romance in the sudden juxtaposition, something to set the heart beating and to fire the fancy. Dougal regarded Mr Craw much as a stalwart republican might look on a legitimate but ineffectual monarch; yet the stoutest republican is not proof against an innocent snobbery and will hurry to a street corner to see the monarch pass. Moreover, this general-in-chief was in difficulties; his immediate comfort depended upon the humble subaltern. So Dougal was in an excited mood and inclined to babble. He was determined to do his best for his chief, but he tried to salve his self-respect by a critical aloofness.

"What do you think of the great Craw?" he asked Jaikie.

"He seems a pleasant fellow," was the answer.

"Oh, he's soft-spoken enough. He has the good manners of one accustomed to having his own way. But, man, to hear him talk was just like hearing a grandfather-clock ticking. He's one mass of artifice."

Dougal proceeded to a dissection of Mr Craw's mind which caused him considerable satisfaction. He proved beyond question that the great man had no brains of his own, but was only an echo, a repository for other men's ideas. "A cistern, not a spring," was his conclusion. But he was a little dashed by Jaikie, who listened patiently to the analysis, and then remarked that he was talking rubbish.

"If a man does as much in the world as Craw, and makes himself as important, it's nonsense to say he has no brains. He must have plenty, though they may not be the kind you like. You know very well, Dougal, that you're mightily pleased to have the chance of doing the great man a favour. And maybe rather flattered."

The other did not reply for a moment. "Perhaps I am," he said at length. "We're all snobs in a way—all but you. You're the only true democrat I know. What's the phrase—'Fellow to a beggar and brother to a king, if he be found worthy'? It's no credit to you—it's just the way you're made."

After that it was impossible to get a word out of Jaikie, and even Dougal drifted by way of monosyllables into silence, for the place and the hour had their overmastering enchantments. There was no evening mist, and in the twilight every hill stood out clean-cut in a purple monochrome. Soon the road skirted the shores of the Lower Loch Garroch, twining among small thickets of birch and hazel, with the dark water on its right lapping ghostly shingle. Presently the glen narrowed and the Garroch grumbled to itself in deep linns, appearing now and then on some rockshelf in a broad pool which caught the last amethyst light of day. There had been no lamps attached to the bicycles of John Catterick and the herd of the west hirsle, so the travellers must needs move circumspectly. And then the hills fell back, the glen became a valley, and the Garroch ran free in wild meadows of rush and bracken.

The road continued downstream to the junction with the Callowa not far from the town of Portaway. But to reach Castle Gay it was necessary to break off and take the hill-road on the left, which crossed the containing ridge and debouched in the upper part of Glen Callowa. The two riders dismounted, and walked the road which wound from one grassy howe to another till they reached the low saddle called the Pad o' the Slack, and looked down upon a broader vale. Not that they had any prospect from it—for it was now very dark, the deep autumn darkness which precedes moonrise; but they had an instinct that there was freer space before them. They remounted their bicycles, and cautiously descended a road with many awkward angles and hairpin bends, till they found themselves among trees, and suddenly came on to a metalled highway.

"Keep to the right," Jaikie directed. "We're not more than two miles from the Castle gates."

The place had the unmistakable character of a demesne. Even in the gloom it had an air of being well cared for, and the moon, which now began to send a shiver of light through the darkness, revealed a high wall on the left—no dry-stone dyke but a masoned wall with a coping. The woods, too, were not the scrub of the hills, but well-grown timber trees and plantations of fir. Then the wall fell back, there were two big patches of greensward protected by chains and white stones, and between them a sweep of gravel, a castellated lodge, and vast gates like a portcullis. The Lord Rhynns of three generations ago had been unhappily affected by the Gothic Revival.

"Here's the place," said Dougal. "It's a mighty shell for such a wee body as Craw."

The gates were locked. There was a huge bell pendant from one of the pillars and this Jaikie rang. It echoed voluminously in the stillness, but there was no sign of life in the lodge. He rang again and yet again, making the night hideous, while Dougal hammered at the massive ironwork of the gate.

"They're all dead or drunk," the latter said. "I'm positive there's folk in the lodge. I saw a bit of a light in the upper window. What for will they not open?"

Jaikie had abandoned the bell and was peering through the ironwork.

"Dougal," he whispered excitedly, "look here. This gate is not meant to open. Look what's behind it. It's a barricade. There's two big logs jammed between the posts. The thing would keep a Tank out. Whoever is in there is terrified of something."

"There's somebody in the lodge watching us. I'm certain of that. What do they mean by behaving as if they were besieged? I don't like it, Jaikie. There's something here we don't understand—and Craw doesn't understand. How can they expect to defend as big a space as a park? Any active man could get over the wall."

"Maybe they want to keep out motors. . . . Well, we needn't waste time here. That letter has got to be delivered, and there's more roads than the main road."

"Is there another entrance?"

"Yes. This is the main one, but there's a second lodge a mile beyond Starr—that's the village—on the Knockraw road. But we needn't worry about that. We can leave our bicycles, and get into the park at the Callowa bridge."

They remounted and resumed their course along the highway. One or two cottages were passed, which showed no sign of life, since the folk of these parts rise early and go early to bed. But in an open space a light was visible from a larger house on the slope to the right. Then came a descent and the noise of a rapid stream.

The bicycles were shoved under a hawthorn bush, and Jaikie clambered on to the extreme edge of the bridge parapet.

"We can do it," he reported. "A hand traverse for a yard or two and then a ten-foot drop. There's bracken below, so it will be soft falling."

Five minutes later the two were emerging from a bracken covert on to the lawn-like turf which fringed the Callowa. The moon was now well up in the sky, and they could see before them the famous wild park of Castle Gay. The guide-books relate that in it are both red deer and fallow-deer, and in one part a few of the ancient Caledonian wild cattle. But these denizens must have been asleep, for as Jaikie and Dougal followed the river they saw nothing but an occasional rabbit and a belated heron. They kept to the stream side, for Jaikie had once studied the ordnance map and remembered that the Castle was close to the water.

The place was so magical that one of the two forgot his errand. It was a cup among high hills, but, seen in that light, the hills were dwarfed, and Jaikie with a start realised that the comb of mountain, which seemed little more than an adjacent hillock, must be a ridge of the great Muneraw, twenty miles distant. The patches of wood were black as ink against the pale mystery of the moonlit sward. The river was dark too, except where a shallow reflected the moon. The silence was broken only by the small noises of wild animals, the ripple of the stream, and an occasional splash of a running salmon.

Then, as they topped a slope, the house lay before them. It stood on its own little plateau, with the ground falling from it towards the park and the stream, and behind it the fir-clad Castle Hill. The moon turned it into ivory, so that it had the air of some precious Chinese carving on a jade stand. In such a setting it looked tiny, and one had to measure it with the neighbouring landscape to realise that it was a considerable pile. But if it did not awe by its size, it ravished the eyes with its perfection. Whatever may have been crude and ugly in it, the jerry-building of our ancestors, the demented reconstruction of our fathers, was mellowed by night into a classic grace. Jaikie began to whistle softly with pure delight, for he had seen a vision.

The practical Dougal had his mind on business. "It's past eleven o'clock, and it looks as if they were all in their beds. I don't see a light. There'll be gardens to get through before we reach the door. We'd better look out for dogs too. The folk here seem a bit jumpy in their nerves."

But it was no dog that obstructed them. Since they had come in sight of their goal they had moved with circumspection, and, being trained of old to the game, were as noiseless as ferrets. They had left the wilder part of the park, had crossed a piece of meadowland from which an aftermath of hay had lately been taken, and could already see beyond a ha-ha the terraces of a formal garden. But while they guarded against sound, their eyes were too much on their destination to be wary about the foreground.

So it befell that they crossed the ha-ha at the very point where a gentleman was taking his ease. Dougal fell over him, and the two travellers found themselves looking at the startled face of a small man in knickerbockers.

His pipe had dropped from his mouth. Jaikie picked it up and presented it to him. "I beg your pardon, sir," he said, "I hope you're not hurt." In the depths of the ha-ha there was shadow, and Jaikie took the victim of Dougal's haste for someone on the Castle staff.

"What are you doing here?" The man's air was at once apologetic and defiant. There was that in his tone which implied that he might in turn be asked his business, that he had no prescriptive right to be sitting smoking in that ha-ha at midnight.

So Jaikie answered: "Just the same as you. Taking the air and admiring the view."

The little man was recovering himself.

"You gave me quite a start when you jumped on the top of me. I thought it was one of the gamekeepers after a poacher." He began to fill his pipe. "More by token, who are you?"

"Oh, we're a couple of undergraduates seeing the world. We wanted a look at the Castle, and there's not much you can see from the highroad, so we got in at the bridge and came up the stream. . . . We're strangers here. There's an inn at Starr, isn't there? What sort of a place is it?"

"Nothing to write home about," was the answer. "You'd better go on to Portaway. . . . So you're undergraduates? I thought that maybe you were of my own profession, and I was going to be a bit jealous. I'm on the staff of the Live Wire."

Dougal's hand surreptitiously found Jaikie's wrist and held it tight.

"I suppose you're up here to cover the by-election," he observed, in a voice which he strove to keep flat and uninterested.

“By-election be hanged! That was my original job, but I’m on to far bigger business. Do you know who lives in that house?”

Two heads were mendaciously shaken.

“The great Craw! Thomas Carlyle Craw! The man that owns all the uplift papers. If you’ve never heard of Craw, Oxford’s more of a mausoleum than I thought.”

“We’re Cambridge,” said Jaikie, “and of course we’ve heard of Craw. What about him?”

“Simply that he’s the mystery man of journalism. You hear of him but you never see him. He’s a kind of Delphic oracle that never shows his face. The Wire doesn’t care a hoot for by-elections, but it cares a whole lot about Craw. He’s our big rival, and we love him as much as a cat loves water. He’s a go-getter, is Craw. There’s a deep commercial purpose behind all his sanctimonious bilge, and he knows how to rake in the shekels. His circulation figures are steadily beating ours by at least ten per cent. He has made himself the idol of his public, and, till we pull off the prophet’s mantle and knock out some of the sawdust, he has us licked all the time. But it’s the deuce and all to get at him, for the blighter is as shy as a wood nymph. So, when this election started, my chief says to me: ‘Here’s our chance at last,’ he says. ‘Off you go, Tibbets, and draw the badger. Get him into the limelight somehow. Show him up for the almighty fool he is. Publicity about Craw,’ he says, ‘any kind of publicity that will take the gilt off the image. It’s the chance of your life!’”

“Any luck?” Dougal asked casually.

Mr Tibbets’s voice became solemn. “I believe,” he said, “that I am on the edge of the world’s biggest scoop. I discovered in half a day that we could never get Craw to mix himself up in an election. He knows too much. He isn’t going to have the Wire and a dozen other papers printing his halting utterances verbatim in leaded type, and making nice, friendly comments. . . . No, that cock won’t fight. But I’ve found a better. D’you know what will be the main headline in tomorrow’s Wire? It will be ‘Mysterious Disappearance of Mr Craw—Household Distracted.’—And by God, it will be true—every word of it. The man’s lost.”

“How do you mean?”

“Just lost. He never came back last night.”

“Why should he? He has probably offed it abroad—to give the election a miss.”

“Not a bit of it. He meant to go abroad tomorrow, and all the arrangements were made—I found out that from standing a drink to his second chauffeur. But he was expected back last night, and his car was meeting him at Kirkmichael. He never appeared. He has a staff like Buckingham Palace, and they were on the telephone all evening to Glasgow. It seems he left Glasgow right enough. . . . I got that from the chauffeur fellow, who’s new and not so damned secretive as the rest. So I went to Kirkmichael this morning on a motorbike, and the ticket collector remembered Craw coming off the Glasgow train. He disappeared into the void somewhere between here and Kirkmichael at some time after 7.15 last night. Take my word for it, a judgment has fallen upon Craw.”

“Aren’t you presuming too much?” Jaikie asked. “He may have changed his mind and be coming back tomorrow—or be back now—or he’s wiring his servants to meet him somewhere. Then you and the Wire will look rather foolish.”

“It’s a risk, no doubt, but it’s worth taking. And if you had seen his secretary’s face you wouldn’t think it much of a risk. I never saw a chap so scared as that secretary man. He started off this afternoon in a sports-model at eighty miles an hour and was back an hour later as if he had seen his father’s ghost. . . . What’s more, this place is in a state of siege. They wouldn’t let me in at the lodge gates. I made a long detour and got in by the back premises, and blessed if I hadn’t to run for my life! . . . Don’t tell me. The people in that house are terrified of something, and Craw isn’t there, and they don’t know why Craw isn’t there. . . . That’s the mystery I’m out to solve, and I’ll get to the bottom of it or my name isn’t Albert Tibbets.”

“I don’t quite see the point,” said Jaikie. “If you got him on a platform you might make capital out of his foolishness. But if some accident has happened to him, you can’t make capital out of a man’s misfortunes.”

“We can out of Craw’s. Don’t you see we can crack the shell of mystery? We can make him NEWS—like any shop-girl who runs away from home or city gent that loses his memory. We can upset his blasted dignity.”

Dougal got up. “We’ll leave you to your midnight reveries, Mr Tibbets. We’re for bed. Where are your headquarters?”

“Portaway is my base. But my post at present is in and around this park. I’m accustomed to roughing it.”

“Well, good night and good luck to you.”

The two retraced their steps down the stream.

“This letter will have to wait till the morn’s morn,” said Dougal. “Craw was right. It hasn’t taken long for the opposition Press to get after him. It’s our business, Jaikie my man, to make the Wire the laughing-stock of British journalism. . . . Not that Tibbets isn’t a dangerous fellow. Pray Heaven he doesn’t get on the track of the students’ rag, for that’s just the kind of yarn he wants. . . . They say that dog doesn’t eat dog, but I swear before I’ve done with him to chew yon tyke’s ear. . . . I’m beginning to think very kindly of Craw.”



CHAPTER 5

INTRODUCES A LADY

Jaikie was roused next morning in his little room in the Westwater Arms by Dougal sitting down heavily on his toes. He was a sound sleeper, and was apt to return but slowly to a waking world. Yet even to his confused perceptions' the state of the light seemed to mark an hour considerably later than that of seven a.m. which had been the appointed time. He reached for his watch and saw that it was nearly nine o'clock.

"You never called me," he explained apologetically.

"I did not, but I've been up since six myself. I've been thinking hard. Jaikie, there's more in this business than meets the eye. I've lain awake half the night considering it. But first I had to act. We can't let the Wire's stuff go uncontradicted. So I bicycled into Portaway and called up the office on the telephone. I caught Tavish just as he was going out to his breakfast. I had to take risks, so I said I was speaking from Castle Gay on Mr Craw's behalf. . . . Tavish must have wondered what I was doing there. . . . I said that Mr Craw had left for the Continent yesterday and would be away some weeks, and that an announcement to that effect was to appear in all the Craw papers."

"Did he raise any objection?"

"I thought he would, for this is the first time that Craw has advertised his movements, and I was prepared with the most circumstantial lies. But I didn't need to lie, for he took it like a lamb. Indeed, it was piper's news I was giving him, for he had had the same instructions already. What do you think of that?"

"He got them from Barbon the secretary?"

"Not a bit of it. He had had no word from Castle Gay. He got them yesterday afternoon from London. Now, who sent them?"

"The London office."

"I don't believe it. Bamff, the General Manager, is away in Canada over the new paper contracts. Don't tell me that Craw instructed London to make the announcement before he was bagged by the students. It isn't his way. . . . There's somebody else at work on this job, somebody that wants to have it believed that Craw is out of the country."

Jaikie shook a sceptical head.

"You were always too ingenious, Dougal. You've got Craw on the brain, and are determined to find melodrama. . . . Order my breakfast like a good chap. I'll be down in twenty minutes."

Jaikie bathed in the ancient contrivance of wood and tin, which was all that the inn provided, and was busy shaving when Dougal returned. The latter sat himself resolutely on the bed.

"The sooner we're at the Castle the better," he observed, as if the remark were the result of a chain of profound reasoning. "The more I think of this affair the less I like it. I'm not exactly in love with Craw, but he's my chief, and I'm for him every time against his trade rivals. Compared to the Wire crowd, Craw is respectable. What I want to get at is the state of mind of the folk in the Castle. They're afraid of the journalists, and they've cause. A fellow like Tibbets is as dangerous as nitro-glycerine. They've lost Craw, and they want to keep it quiet till they find him again. So far it's plain sailing. But what in Heaven's name did they mean by barricading the gate at the big lodge?"

"To prevent themselves being taken by surprise by journalists in motor-cars or on motor-bicycles," said Jaikie, who was now trying to flatten out his rebellious hair.

"But that's not sense. To barricade the gate was just to give the journalists the kind of news they wanted. 'Mr Craw's House in a State of Siege.' 'Amazing Precautions at Castle Gay'—think of the headlines! Barbon and the rest know everything about newspaper tricks, and we must assume that they haven't suddenly become congenital idiots. . . . No, Jaikie my lad, they're afraid—blind afraid—of something more than the journalists, and the sooner we find out what it is the better for you and me and Craw. . . . I'll give you twenty minutes to eat your breakfast, and then we take the road. It'll be by the bridge and the water-side, the same as last night."

It was a still hazy autumn morning with the promise of a warm midday. The woods through which the two sped were

loud with pheasants, the shooting of which would be at the best perfunctory, for the tenant at the Castle never handled a gun. No one was on the road, except an aged stonebreaker in a retired nook. They hid their bicycles with some care in a mossy covert, for they might be for some time separated from them, and, after a careful reconnaissance to see that they were unobserved, entered the park by way of the bridge parapet, the traverse and the ten-foot drop. This time they had not the friendly night to shield them, and they did not venture on the lawn-like turf by the stream side. Instead they followed a devious route among bracken hollows, where they could not be seen from any higher ground. The prospect from the highway was, they knew, shut out by the boundary wall.

Dougal moved fast with a sense of purpose like a dog on a scent. He had lost his holiday discursiveness, and had no inclination to linger in bypaths earthly or spiritual. But Jaikie had his familiar air of detachment. He did not appear to take his errand with any seriousness or to be much concerned with the mysteries which filled Dougal's thoughts. He was revelling in the sounds and scents of October in that paradise which possessed the charm of both lowland and highland. The film of morning was still silver-grey on rush and grass and heather, and the pools of the Callowa smoked delicately. The day revealed some of the park's features which night had obscured. In particular there was a tiny lochan, thronged with wildfowl, which was connected by a reedy burn with the Callowa. A herd of dappled fallow-deer broke out of the thicket, and somewhere near a stag was belling.

The house came suddenly into sight at a slightly different angle from that of the night before. They were on higher ground, and had a full view of the terrace, where even now two gardeners were trimming the grass edges of the plots. That seemed normal enough, and so did the spires of smoke ascending straight from the chimneys into the windless air. They stood behind a gnarled, low-spreading oak, which must have been there as a seedling when steel-bonneted reivers rode that way and the castle was a keep. Dougal's hand shaded his eyes, and he scanned warily every detail of the scene.

"We must push forward," he said. "If anyone tries to stop us we can say we've a letter to Mr Barbon from Mr Craw. Knowing Barbon's name will be a sort of passport. Keep your eyes skinned for Tibbets, for he mustn't see us. I daresay he'll be at his breakfast in Portaway—he'll be needing it if he has been hunkering here all night. We haven't . . ."

He broke off, for at that instant two animals precipitated themselves against his calves, thereby nearly unbalancing him. They were obviously dogs, but of a breed with which Dougal was unfamiliar. They had large sagacious heads, gentle and profoundly tragic eyes, and legs over which they seemed to have no sort of control. Over Dougal they sprawled and slobbered, while he strove to evade their caresses.

Then came a second surprise, for a voice spoke out of the tree above them. The voice was peremptory and it was young. It said, "Down, Tactful! Down, Pensive!" And then it added in a slightly milder tone: "What are YOU doing here?"

These last words were so plainly addressed to the two travellers that they looked up into the covert, half green, half russet, above their heads. There, seated in a crutch made by two branches, they beheld to their amazement a girl.

Her face was visible between the branches, but the rest of her was hidden, except one slim pendant brown leg ending in a somewhat battered shoe. The face regarded them solemnly, reprovingly, suspiciously. It was a pretty face, a little sunburnt, not innocent of freckles, and it was surmounted by a mop of tawny gold hair. The eyes were blue and stern. The beagle pups, having finished their overtures to Dougal, were now making ineffective leaps at her shoe.

"How did you get up that tree?" The question was wrung from Jaikie, a specialist in such matters, as he regarded the branchless bole and the considerable elevation of the bough on which she sat.

"Quite easily," was the answer. "I have climbed much harder trees than this. But that is not the question. What are you two doing here?"

"What are you?"

"I have permission to go anywhere in the Castle grounds. I have a key for the gates. But you are trespassers, and there will be an awful row if Mackillop catches you."

"We're not," said Dougal. "We're carrying a letter from Mr Craw to Mr Barbon. I have it in my pocket."

"Is that true?" The eyes were sceptical, but also startled.

For answer Dougal drew the missive from his inner pocket. "There it is: 'The Honourable Frederick Barbon.' Look for yourself!"

The girl peered down at the superscription. The degraded envelope of Mrs Catterick's did not perhaps carry conviction, but something in the two faces below persuaded her of their honesty. With a swift movement she wriggled out

of the crutch, caught a bough with both hands, and dropped lightly to the ground. With two deft kicks she repelled the attentions of Tactful and Pensive, and stood before the travellers, smoothing down her short skirt. She was about Jaikie's height, very slim and straight, and her interrogation was that of a general to his staff.

"You come from Mr Craw?"

"Yes."

"When did you leave him?"

"Last night."

"Glory be! Let's sit down. There's no hurry, and we must move very carefully. For I may as well let you know that the Devil has got into this place. Yes. The Devil. I don't quite know what form he has taken, but he's rampant in Castle Gay. I came here this morning to prospect, for I feel in a way responsible. You see it belongs to my father, and Mr Craw's our tenant. My name is Alison Westwater."

"Same name as the pub in Starr?" asked Dougal, who liked to connect his knowledge organically.

She nodded. "The Westwater Arms. Yes, that's my family. I live at the Mains with my aunt, while Papa and Mamma are on the Continent. I wouldn't go. I said, 'You can't expect me after a filthy summer in London to go ramping about France wearing tidy clothes and meeting the same idiotic people.' I had a year at school in Paris and that gave me all the France I want in this life. I said, 'Castle Gay's my home, though you've chosen to let it to a funny little man, and I'm not going to miss my whack of Scotland.' So I hopped it here at the end of July, and I've been having a pretty peaceful time ever since. You see, all the outdoor people are OUR people, and Mr Craw has been very nice about it, and lets me fish in the Callowa and all the lochs and treat the place as if he wasn't there."

"Do you know Mr Craw well?" Dougal asked.

"I have seen him three times and talked to him once—when Aunt Harriet took me to tea with him. I thought him rather a dear, but quite helpless. Talks just like a book, and doesn't appear to understand much of what you say to him. I suppose he is very clever, but he seems to want a lot of looking after. You never saw such a staff. There's a solemn butler called Bannister. I believe Bannister washes Mr Craw's face and tucks him into bed. . . . There's a typewriting woman by the name of Cazenove with a sharp nose and horn spectacles, who never takes her eyes off him, and is always presenting him with papers to read. It's slavery of some kind, but whether she's his slave or he's her slave I don't know. I had to break a plate at tea, just to remind myself that there was such a thing as liberty. . . . Then there is Mr Allins, a very glossy young man. You've probably come across him, for he goes about a lot. Mr Allins fancies himself the perfect man of the world and a great charmer. I think if you met him you would say he wasn't quite a gentleman." She smiled confidentially at the two, as if she assumed that their standards must coincide with hers.

"Mr Barbon?" Dougal asked.

"And of course there's Freddy. There's nothing wrong with Freddy in that way. He's some sort of cousin of ours. Freddy is the chief of the staff and has everything on his shoulders. He is very kind and very anxious, poor dear, and now the crash has come! Not to put too fine a point on it, for the last twenty-four hours Freddy has gone clean off his head . . ."

She stopped at an exclamation from Jaikie. He had one of those small field-glasses which are adapted for a single eye, with which he had been examining the approaches to the castle.

"Tibbets can't have had much of a breakfast," he announced. "I see him sitting in that trench place."

"Who is Tibbets?" she demanded.

"He's a journalist, on the Live Wire, one of Mr Craw's rivals. We ran into him late last night, and that's why we couldn't deliver the letter."

"Little beast! That's the first of Freddy's anxieties. This place has been besieged by journalists for a week, all trying to get at Mr Craw. . . . Then the night before last Mr Craw did not come home. YOU know where he is, but Freddy doesn't, so that's the second of his troubles. Somehow the fact of Mr Craw's disappearance has leaked out, and the journalists have got hold of it, and yesterday it almost came to keeping them off with a gun. . . . And out of the sky dropped the last straw."

She paused dramatically.

"I don't know the truth about it, for I haven't seen Freddy since yesterday morning. I think he must have had a letter, for he rushed to the Mains and left a message for Aunt Harriet that she was on no account to let any stranger into the

house or speak to anybody or give any information. He can't have meant the journalists only, for we knew all about them. . . . After that, just after luncheon, while I was out for a walk, I saw a big car arrive with three men in it. It tried to get in at the West Lodge, but Jameson—that's the lodge-keeper—wouldn't open the gate. I thought that odd, but when I went riding in the evening I couldn't get in at the West Lodge either. They had jammed trunks of trees across. That means that Freddy is rattled out of his senses. He thinks he is besieged. Is there any word for that but lunacy? I can understand his being worried about the journalists and Mr Craw not coming home. But this! Isn't it what they call persecution-mania? I'm sorry about it, for I like Freddy."

"The man's black afraid of something," said Dougal, "but maybe he has cause. Maybe it's something new—something we know nothing about."

The girl nodded. "It looks like it. Meantime, where is Mr Craw? It's your turn to take up the tale."

"He's at the Back House of the Garroch, waiting for Barbon to send a car to fetch him."

Miss Westwater whistled. "Now how on earth did he get there? I know the place. It's on our land. I remember the shepherd's wife. A big, handsome, gipsy-looking woman, isn't she?"

Dougal briefly but dramatically told the story of the rape of Mr Craw. The girl listened with open eyes and an astonishment which left no room for laughter.

"Marvellous!" was her comment. "Simply marvellous! That it should happen to Mr Craw of all people! I love those students. . . . What by the way are you? You haven't told me."

"Jaikie here is an undergraduate—Cambridge."

"Beastly place! I'm sorry, but my sympathies are all with Oxford."

"And I'm a journalist by trade. I'm on one of the Craw papers. I've no sort of admiration for Craw, but of course I'm on his side in this row. The question is—"

Jaikie, who had been busy with his glass, suddenly clutched the speaker by the hair and forced him down. He had no need to perform the same office for Miss Westwater, for at his first movement she had flung herself on her face. The three were on a small eminence of turf with thick bracken before and behind them, and in this they lay crouched.

"What is it?" Dougal whispered.

"There's a man in the hollow," said Jaikie. "He's up to no good, for he's keeping well in cover. Wait here, and I'll stalk him."

He wriggled into the fern, and it was a quarter of an hour before he returned to report. "It's a man, and he's wearing a queer kind of knicker-bocker suit. He hasn't the look of a journalist. He has some notion of keeping cover, for I could get no more than a glimpse of him. He's trying to get to the house, so we'll hope he'll tumble over Tibbets in the ditch, as Dougal and I did last night."

"The plot thickens!" The girl's eyes were bright with excitement. "He's probably one of the strangers who came in the car. . . . The question is, what is to be done next? Mr Craw is at the Back House of the Garroch, twenty miles away, and no one knows it but us three. We have to get him home without the unfriendly journalists knowing about it."

"We have also to get him out of the country," said Dougal. "There was some nonsense in the Wire this morning about his being lost, but all the Craw papers will announce that he has left for the Continent. . . . But the first thing is to get him home. We'd better be thinking about delivering that letter, Jaikie."

"Wait a moment," said the girl. "How are you going to deliver the letter? Freddy won't let you near him, even though you say you come from Mr Craw. He'll consider it a ruse de guerre, and small blame to him. I don't know what journalists look like as a class, but I suppose you bear the mark of your profession."

"True. But maybe he wouldn't suspect Jaikie."

"He'll suspect anyone. He has journalists on the brain just now."

"But he'd recognise the handwriting."

"Perhaps, if the letter got to him. But it won't. . . . Besides, that man in the ha-ha—what do you call him—Tibbets?—will see you. And the other man who is crawling down there. All the approaches to the house on this side are as bare as a billiard table. At present you two are dark horses. The enemy doesn't connect you with Mr Craw, and that's very important, for you are the clue to Mr Craw's whereabouts. We mustn't give that card away. We don't want Tibbets on your track, for it

leads direct to the Back House of the Garroch.”

“That’s common sense,” said Dougal with conviction. “What’s your plan, then?”

The girl sat hunched in the fern, with her chin on one hand, and her eyes on the house and its terraces, where the gardeners were busy with the plots as if nothing could mar its modish tranquillity.

“It’s all very exciting and very difficult. We three are the only people in the world who can do anything to help. Somehow we must get hold of Freddy Barbon and pool our knowledge. I’m beginning to think that he may not be really off his head—only legitimately rattled. What about getting him to come to the Mains? I could send a message by Middlemas—that’s our butler—he wouldn’t suspect him. Also we could get Aunt Harriet’s advice. She can be very wise when she wants to. And—”

She broke off.

“Mother of Moses!” she cried, invoking a saint not known to the Calendar. “I quite forgot. There’s an Australian cousin coming to stay. He’s arriving in time for luncheon. He should be a tower of strength. His name is Charvill—Robin Charvill. He’s at Oxford and a famous football player. He played in the international match two days ago.”

“I saw him,” said Jaikie.

“He’s marvellous, isn’t he?”

“Marvellous.”

“Well, we can count him in. That makes four of us—five if we include Aunt Harriet. A pretty useful support for the distraught Freddy! The next thing to do is to get you inconspicuously to the Mains. I’ll show you the best way.”

Dougal, who had been knitting his brows, suddenly gave a shout.

“What like was the man you stalked down there?” he demanded of Jaikie.

“I didn’t see much of him. He was wearing queer clothes—tight breeches and a belt round his waist.”

“Foreign looking?”

“Perhaps.”

He turned to the girl.

“And the men you saw yesterday in the car? Were they foreigners?”

She considered. “They didn’t look quite English. One had a short black beard. I remember that one had a long pale face.”

“I’ve got it,” Dougal cried. “No wonder Barbon’s scared. It’s the Evallonian Republicans! They’re after Craw!”



CHAPTER 6

THE TROUBLES OF A PRIVATE SECRETARY

The pleasant dwelling, known as the Mains of Starr, or more commonly the Mains, stands on a shelf of hillside above the highway, with a fine prospect over the park of Castle Gay to the rolling heathy uplands which form the grouse-moor of Knockraw. From it indeed had shone that light which Jaikie and Dougal had observed the previous night after they left the barricaded lodge. It is low and whitewashed; it has a rounded front like the poop of a three-decker; its gables are crow-stepped; its air is resolutely of the past.

As such it was a fitting house for its present occupant. In every family there are members who act as guardians of its records and repositories of its traditions. Their sole distinction is their family connection, and they take good care that the world shall not forget it. In Scotland they are usually high-nosed maiden ladies, and such a spinsterhood might well have seemed to be the destiny of Harriet Westwater. But, on a visit to Egypt one winter, she had met and espoused a colonel of Sappers, called Brisbane-Brown, and for a happy decade had followed the drum in his company. He rose to be a major-general before he died of pneumonia (the result of a bitter day in an Irish snipe-bog), and left her a well-dowered widow.

The marriage had been a success, but the change of name had been meaningless, for the lady did not cease to be a Westwater. It used to be the fashion in Scotland for a married woman to retain her maiden name even on her tombstone, and this custom she had always followed in spirit. The Brisbane-Browns gave her no genealogical satisfaction. They were Browns from nowhere, who for five generations had served in the military forces of the Crown and had spent most of their lives abroad. The "Brisbane" was not a link with the ancient Scottish house of that ilk; the General's father had been born in the capital of Queensland, and the word had been retained in the family's nomenclature to distinguish it from innumerable other Browns. As wife and widow she remained a Westwater, and the centre of her world was Castle Gay.

Her brother, Lord Rhynds, did not share her creed, for increasing financial embarrassments had made him a harsh realist; but, though acutely aware of his imperfections, she felt for him, as head of the family, the reverence with which the devout regard a Prince of the Church. Her pretty invalidish sister-in-law—a type which she would normally have regarded with contempt—shared in the same glamour. But it was for their only child, Alison, that her family loyalty burned most fiercely. That summer, at immense discomfort to herself, she had chaperoned the girl in her first London season. Her house was Alison's home, and she strove to bring her up in conformity with the fashions of her own childhood. She signally failed, but she did not repine, for behind her tartness lay a large, tolerant humour, which gave her an odd kinship with youth. The girl's slanginess and tom-boyishness were proofs of spirit—a Westwater characteristic; her youthful intolerance was not unpleasing to a laudator of the past; her passionate love of Castle Gay was a variant of her own clannishness. After the experience of a modern season she thanked her Maker that her niece was not one of the lisping mannequins who flutter between London nightclubs and the sands of Deauville or the Lido.

To the tenant of the Castle she was well disposed. She knew nothing of him except that he was a newspaper magnate and very rich, but he paid her brother a large rent, and did not, like too many tenants nowadays, fill the house with noisy underbred parties, or outrage the sense of decency of the estate servants. She respected Mr Craw for his rigid seclusion. On the occasion of her solitary visit to him she had been a little shocked by the luxury of his establishment, till she reflected that a millionaire must spend his money on something, and that three footmen and a horde of secretaries were on the whole innocent extravagances. But indeed Mr Craw and the world for which he stood scarcely came within the orbit of her thoughts. She was no more interested in him than in the family affairs of the Portaway grocer who supplied her with provisions.

Politics she cared nothing for, except in so far as they affected the families which she had known all her life. When there was a chance of Cousin Georgie Whitehaven's second boy being given a post in the Ministry, she was much excited, but she would have been puzzled to name two other members of that Ministry, and of its policy she knew nothing at all. She read and reread the books which she had loved from of old, and very occasionally a new work, generally a biography, which was well spoken of by her friends. She had never heard of Marcel Proust, but she could have passed a stiff examination in Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Walter Scott. Morris and Burne-Jones had once enchained her youthful fancy; she could repeat a good deal of the more decorous parts of Swinburne; she found little merit in recent painting,

except in one or two of Sargent's portraits. Her only musician was Beethoven, but she was a learned connoisseur of Scottish airs.

In her small way she was a notable administrator. The Edinburgh firm of Writers to the Signet who managed her affairs had cause to respect her acumen. Her banker knew her as a shrewd judge of investments. The household at the Mains ran with a clockwork precision, and all the servants, from the butler, Middlemas, to the kitchenmaid, were conscious of her guiding hand. Out of doors an ancient gardener and a boy from the village wrought under her supervision, for she was a keen horticulturist, and won prizes at all the local flower shows for her sweet-peas and cauliflowers. She had given up her carriage, and refused to have a motor-car; but she drove two fat lazy ponies in a phaeton, and occasionally a well-bred grey gelding in a high dogcart. The older folk in the countryside liked to see her pass. She was their one link with a vanished world which they now and then recalled with regret.

Mrs Brisbane-Brown was a relic, but only the unthinking would have called her a snob. For snobbishness implies some sense of insecurity, and she was perfectly secure. She was a specialist, a specialist in kindred. Much has been made in history and fiction of the younger son, but we are apt to forget the younger daughters— the inconspicuous gentlewomen who cling loyally to the skirts of their families, since their birth is their chief title to consideration, and labour to preserve many ancient trifling things which the world today holds in small esteem. Mrs Brisbane-Brown loved all that had continuance, and strove to rivet the weakening links. She kept in touch with the remotest members of her own house, and, being an indefatigable letter writer, she constituted herself a trait d'union for a whole chain of allied families. She was a benevolent aunt to a motley of nephews and nieces who were not nephews and nieces by any recognised table of affinity, and a cousin to many whose cousinship was remote even by Scottish standards. This passion for kinship she carried far beyond her own class. She knew every ascendant and descendant and collateral among the farmers and cottagers of the countryside. Newcomers she regarded with suspicion, unless they could link themselves on to some of the Hislops and Blairs and Macmichaels whom she knew to be as long descended as the Westwaters themselves. Her aristocracy was wholly of race; it had nothing to do with position or wealth; it was a creed belated, no doubt, and reactionary, but it was not vulgar.

Jaikie and Dougal made a stealthy exit from the park by the gate in the wall which Alison unlocked for them. Then, with a promise to appear at the Mains for luncheon at one o'clock, they sought the inn at Starr, where they had left their knapsacks, recovering on the road their bicycles from the hazel covert. They said little to each other, for both their minds were full of a new and surprising experience. Dougal was profoundly occupied with the Craw problem, and his own interpretation of its latest developments. Now and then he would mutter to himself, "It's the Evallonians all right. Poor old Craw has pulled the string of the shower-bath this time." Jaikie, it must be confessed, was thinking chiefly of Alison. He wished he was like Charvill, and could call her cousin.

As they made their way to the Mains they encountered Tibbets on his motor-bicycle, a dishevelled figure, rather gummy about the eyes. He dismounted to greet them.

"Any luck?" Dougal asked.

He shook his head. "Not yet. I'll have to try other tactics. I'm off to Portaway to get today's Wire. And you?"

"We're continuing our travels. The Wire will keep us informed about your doings, no doubt. Good-bye."

Tibbets was off with a trail of dust and petrol fumes. Dougal watched him disappear round a corner.

"Lucky he doesn't know yet what a chance he has. God help Craw if Tibbets once gets on to the Evallonians!"

With this pious thought they entered the gate of the Mains, and pushed their bicycles up the steep avenue of sycamores and horse-chestnuts. The leaves were yellowing with the morning frosts, and the fallen nuts crackled under the wheels, but, when they reached the lawn, plots and borders had still a summer glory of flowers. Great banks of Michaelmas daisies made a glow like an autumn sunset, and multi-coloured dahlias stood stiffly like grenadiers on parade. The two followed Middlemas through the shadowy hall with a certain nervousness. It seemed odd to be going to luncheon in a strange house at the invitation of a girl whom they had seen that morning for the first time.

They were five minutes late owing to Tibbets, and the mistress of the house was a precisian in punctuality. Consequently they were ushered into the dining-room, where the meal had already begun. It was a shy business, for Alison did not know their names. She waved a friendly hand. "These are my friends, Aunt Hatty," she began, when she was interrupted by a tall young man who made a third at the table.

"Great Scot!" he cried, after one stare at Jaikie. "It's Galt! Whoever would have thought of seeing you here!" And he seized Jaikie's hand in a massive fist. "You're entertaining a first-rate celebrity, Aunt Harriet. This is the famous John Galt, the greatest Rugby three-quarter playing today. I'm bound to say that in self-defence, for he did me in most nobly on Wednesday."

The lady at the head of the table extended a gracious hand. "I am very glad to see you, Mr Galt. You bear a name which is famous for other things than football. Was it a kinsman who gave us the *Annals of the Parish*?"

Jaikie, a little confused, said no, and presented Dougal, who was met with a similar genealogical probing. "I used to know Crombies in Kincardine. One commanded a battalion of the Gordons when I was in India. You remind me of him in your colouring."

These startling recognitions had the effect of putting Dougal more at his ease. He felt that he and Jaikie were being pleasantly absorbed into an unfamiliar atmosphere. Jaikie on the contrary was made slightly unhappy, the more so as the girl beside whom he sat turned on him reproachful eyes.

"You ought to have told me you played in the match," she said, "when I spoke about Cousin Robin. I might have made an awful gaffe."

"We were talking about more solemn things than football," he replied; adding, "I thought Mr Barbon would be here."

"He is coming at three. Such a time we had getting hold of him! They wouldn't let Middlemas in—he only managed it through one of our maids who's engaged to the second footman. . . . But we mustn't talk about it now. My aunt forbids disagreeable topics at lunch, just as she won't let Tactful and Pensive into the dining-room."

Mrs Brisbane-Brown had strong views about the kind of talk which aids digestion. It must not be argumentative, and it must not be agitating. It was best, she thought, when it was mildly reminiscent. But her reminiscences were not mildly phrased; as a rule they pointed with some acerbity the contrast between a dignified past and an unworthy present. She had been brought up in the school of straight backs, and she sat as erect as a life-guardsman. A stiff net collar held her head high, a head neat and poised like that of a superior bird of prey. She had the same small high-bridged nose as her niece, and that, combined with a slight droop at the corners of her mouth, gave her an air of severity which was redeemed by her bright, humorous brown eyes. Her voice was high and toneless, and, when she was displeased, of a peculiar, detached, insulting flatness, but this again was atoned for by a very pleasant, ready, girlish laugh. Mrs Brisbane-Brown was a good example of the art of ageing gracefully. Her complexion, always a little high coloured from being much out of doors, would have done credit to a woman of twenty-five; her figure had the trimness of youth; but the fine wrinkles about her eyes and the streak of grey in her hair told of the passage of time. She looked her fifty-seven years; but she looked what fifty-seven should be at its happiest.

The dining-room was of a piece with its mistress. It was full of pictures, most of them copies of the Rhynns family portraits, done by herself, and one fine Canaletto which she had inherited from her mother. There was a Rhynns with long love-locks and armour, a Rhynns in periwig and lace, a Rhynns in a high-collared coat and cravat, and the original Sir Andrew Westwater, who had acquired Castle Gay by a marriage with the Macdowall heiress, and who looked every inch the ruffian he was. There were prints, too, those mellow mezzotints which are the usual overflow of a great house. The room was sombre and yet cosy, a place that commemorated the past and yet was apt for the present. The arrogant sheen of the mahogany table, which mirrored the old silver and the great bowl of sunflowers (the Westwater crest), seemed to Dougal to typify all that he publicly protested against and secretly respected.

The hostess was cross-examining Mr Charvill about his knowledge of Scotland, which, it appeared, was confined to one visit to a Highland shooting lodge.

"Then you know nothing about us at all," she declared firmly. "Scotland is the Lowlands. Here we have a civilisation of our own, just as good as England, but quite different. The Highlands are a sad, depopulated place, full of midges and kilted haberdashers. I know your Highland lodges—my husband had an unfortunate craze for stalking—gehennas of pitch-pine and deer's hair—not a bed fit to sleep in, and nothing for the unfortunate women to do but stump in hobnails between the showers along boggy roads!"

Charvill laughed. "I admit I was wet most of the time, but it was glorious fun. I never in my life had so much hard exercise."

"You can walk?"

"A bit. I was brought up pretty well on horseback, but since I came to England I have learned to use my legs."

"Then you are a fortunate young man. I cannot think what is to become of the youth of today. I was staying at Glenavelin last year, and the young men when they went to fish motored the half-mile to the river. My cousin had a wire from a friend who had taken Machray forest, begging him to find somebody over fifty to kill his stags, since his house was full of boys who could not get up the hills. You two," her eyes passed from Dougal to Jaikie, "are on a walking tour. I'm very glad to hear it. That is a rational kind of holiday."

She embarked on stories of the great walkers of a century ago— Barclay of Urie, Horatio Ross, Lord John Kennedy. "My father in his youth once walked from Edinburgh to Castle Gay. He took two days, and he had to carry the little spaniel that accompanied him for the last twenty miles. We don't breed such young men today. I daresay they are more discreet and less of an anxiety to their parents, and I know that they don't drink so much. But they are a feeble folk, like the conies. They never want to fling their caps over the moon. There is a lamentable scarcity of wild oats of the right kind."

"Aunt Harriet," said the girl, "is thinking of the young men she saw at balls this summer."

Mrs Brisbane—Brown raised her hands. "Did you ever know such a kindergarten? Pallid infants with vacant faces. It was cruel to ask a girl to waste her time over them."

"You asked ME, you know, in spite of my protests."

"And rightly, my dear. It is a thing every girl must go through— her form of public-school education. But I sincerely pitied you, my poor child. When I was young and went to balls I danced with interesting people—soldiers, and diplomats, and young politicians. They may have been at the balls this season, but I never saw them. What I did see were hordes upon hordes of children—a sort of crèche—vapid boys who were probably still at school or only just beginning the University. What has become of the sound English doctrine that the upbringing of our male youth should be monastic till at least twenty-one? We are getting as bad as the Americans with their ghastly coeducation."

Jaikie was glad when they rose from table. He had wanted to look at Alison, who sat next him, but that meant turning his head deliberately, and he had been too shy. He wished that, like Dougal, he had sat opposite her. Yet he had been cheered by Mrs Brisbane—Brown's diatribes. Her condemnation of modern youth excluded by implication the three who lunched with her. She approved of Charvill, of course. Who wouldn't? Charvill with his frank kindness, his height, his orthodox good looks, was the kind of person Jaikie would have envied, had it been his nature to envy. But it would appear that she had also approved of Dougal and himself, and Jaikie experienced a sudden lift of the heart.

Now he was free to look at Alison, as she stood very slim and golden in the big sunlit drawing-room. It was the most beautiful room Jaikie had ever beheld. The chairs and sofas were covered with a bright, large-patterned chintz, all roses, parrots, and hollyhocks; the carpet was a faded Aubusson, rescued from a bedroom in Castle Gay; above the mantelpiece, in a gilt case, hung a sword of honour presented to the late General Brisbane—Brown, and on the polished parts of the floor, which the Aubusson did not reach, lay various trophies of his marksmanship. There was a huge white fleecy rug, and between that and the fire a huge brass fender. There were vitrines full of coins and medals and Roman lamps and flint arrows and enamelled snuff-boxes, and cabinets displaying Worcester china and Leeds earthenware. On the white walls were cases of miniatures, and samplers, and two exquisite framed fans, and a multitude of water-colours, all the work of Mrs Brisbane—Brown. There were views from the terraces of Florentine villas, and sunsets on the Nile, and dawns over Indian deserts, and glimpses of a dozen strange lands. The series was her travel diary, the trophy of her wanderings, just as a man will mount heads on the walls of his smoking-room. But the best picture was that presented by the two windows, which showed the wild woods and hollows of the Castle park below, bright in the October afternoon, running to the dim purple of the Knockraw heather.

In this cheerful and gracious room, before Middlemas had finished serving coffee, before Jaikie had made up his mind whether he preferred Alison in her present tidiness or in the gipsydom of the morning, there appeared a figure which effectually banished its complacent tranquillity.

Mr Frederick Barbon entered by an open window, and his clothes and shoes bore the marks of a rough journey. Yet neither clothes nor figure seemed adapted for such adventures. Mr Barbon's appearance was what old-fashioned people would have called "distinguished." He was very slim and elegant, and he had that useful colouring which does not change between the ages of thirty and fifty; that is to say, he had prematurely grizzled locks and a young complexion. His features were classic in their regularity. Sometimes he looked like a successful actor; sometimes, when in attendance on his master,

like a very superior footman in mufti who had not got the powder out of his hair; but there were moments when he was taken for an eminent statesman. It was his nervous blue eyes which betrayed him, for Mr Barbon was an anxious soul. He liked his little comforts, he liked to feel important and privileged, and he knew only too well what it was to be a poor gentleman tossed from dilemma to dilemma by the unsympathetic horns of destiny. Since the war—when he had held a commission in the Foot Guards—he had been successively, but not successfully, a land-agent (the property was soon sold), a dealer in motor-cars (the business went speedily bankrupt), a stockbroker on half-commission, the manager of a tourist agency, an advertisement tout, and a highly incompetent society journalist. From his father, the aged and penniless Clonkilty, he could expect nothing. Then in the service of Mr Craw he had found an undreamed of haven; and he was as determined as King Charles the Second that he would never go wandering again. Consequently he was always anxious. He was an admirable private secretary, but he was fussy. The dread that haunted his dreams was of being hurled once more into the cold world of economic strife.

He sank wearily into a chair and accepted a cup of coffee.

“I had to make a detour of nearly three miles,” he explained, “and come down on this place from the hill. I daren’t stop long either. Where is Mr Craw’s letter?”

Dougal presented the missive, which Mr Barbon tore open and devoured. A heavy sigh escaped him.

“Lucky I did not get this sooner and act on it,” he said. “Mr Craw wants to come back. But the one place he mustn’t come near is Castle Gay.”

Dougal, though very hungry and usually a stout trencherman, had not enjoyed his luncheon. Indeed he had done less than justice to the excellent food provided. He was acutely aware of being in an unfamiliar environment, to which he should have been hostile, but which as a matter of plain fact he enjoyed with trepidation. Unlike Jaikie he bristled with class-consciousness. Mrs Brisbane–Brown’s kindly arrogance, the long-descended air of her possessions, the atmosphere of privilege so secure that it need not conceal itself—he was aware of it with a half-guilty joy. The consequence was that he was adrift from his moorings, and not well at ease. He had not spoken at table except in answer to questions, and he now stood in the drawing-room like a colt in a flower— garden, not very certain what to do with his legs.

The sight of the embarrassed Barbon revived him. Here was something he could understand, a problem in his own world. Craw might be a fool, but he belonged to his own totem, and this Barbon man (of his hostess’s world) was clearly unfit to deal with the web in which his employer had entangled himself. He found his voice. He gave the company a succinct account of how Mr Craw had come to be in the Back House of the Garroch.

“That’s all I have to tell. Now you take up the story. I want to hear everything that happened since Wednesday night, when Mr Craw did not come home.”

The voice was peremptory, and Mr Barbon raised his distinguished eyebrows. Even in his perplexity he felt bound to resent this tone.

“I’m afraid . . . I . . . I don’t quite understand your position, Mr—?”

“My name’s Crombie. I’m on one of the Craw papers. My interest in straightening things out is the same as yours. So let’s pool our knowledge and be quick about it. You began to get anxious about Mr Craw at half-past eight on Wednesday, and very anxious by ten. What did you do?”

“We communicated with Glasgow—with Mr Craw’s architect. He had accompanied him to the station and seen him leave by the six-five train. We communicated with Kirkmichael station, and learned that he had arrived there. Then I informed the police—very confidentially of course.”

“The journalists got wind of that. They were bound to, since they sit like jackdaws on the steps of the telegraph office. So much for Wednesday. What about yesterday?”

“I had a very anxious day,” said Mr Barbon, passing a weary hand over his forehead and stroking back his thick grizzled hair. “I hadn’t a notion what to think or do. Mr Craw, you must understand, intended to go abroad. He was to have left this morning, catching the London express at Gledmouth. Miss Cazenove and I were to have accompanied him, and all arrangements had been made. It seemed to me that he might have chosen to expedite his departure, though such a thing was very unlike his usual custom. So I got the London office to make inquiries, and ascertained that he had not travelled south. You are aware of Mr Craw’s dislike of publicity. I found myself in a very serious quandary. I had to find out what had become of him. Anything might have happened—an accident, an outrage. And I had to do this without giving any clue to

those infernal reporters.”

“Practically impossible,” said Dougal. “No wonder you were in a bit of a stew. I suppose they were round the house like bees yesterday.”

“Like wasps,” said Mr Barbon tragically. “We kept them at arm’s length, but they have defeated us.” He produced from his pocket and unfolded a copy of a journal. “We have special arrangements at the Castle for an early delivery of newspapers, and this is today’s Live Wire. Observe the headings.”

“I know all about that,” said Dougal. “We ran across the Wire man— Tibbets they call him—and he was fair bursting with his news. But this will only make the Wire crowd look foolish if they can’t follow it up. That’s what we’ve got to prevent. I took the liberty this morning of speaking to Tavish in Glasgow on the telephone, and authorising him—I pretended I was speaking for Mr Craw—to announce that Mr Craw had left for the Continent. That will give us cover to work behind.”

“You might have spared yourself the trouble,” said Mr Barbon, unfolding another news-sheet. “This is today’s issue of the View. It contains that announcement. It was inserted by the London office. Now who authorised it?”

“I heard of that from Tavish. Could it have been Mr Craw?”

“It was not Mr Craw. That I can vouch for, unless he sent the authorisation after half-past seven on Wednesday evening, which on your story is impossible. It was sent by some person or persons who contrived to impress the London office with their authority, and who wished to have it believed that Mr Craw was out of the country. For their own purpose. Now, what purpose?”

“I think I can make a guess,” said Dougal eagerly.

“There is no need of guess-work. It is a matter of certain and damning knowledge. Mr Craw left for Glasgow on Wednesday before his mail arrived. In that mail there was a registered letter. It was marked ‘most confidential’ and elaborately sealed. I deal with Mr Craw’s correspondence, but letters marked in such a way I occasionally leave for him to open, so I did not touch that letter. Then, yesterday morning, at the height of my anxieties, I had a telephone message.”

Mr Barbon paused dramatically. “It was not from London. It was from Knockraw House, a place some five miles from here. I knew that Knockraw had been let for the late autumn, but I had not heard the name of the tenant. It is the best grouse-moor in the neighbourhood. The speaker referred to a confidential letter which he said Mr Craw had received on the previous day, and he added that he and his friends proposed to call upon Mr Craw that afternoon at three o’clock. I said that Mr Craw was not at home, but the speaker assured me that Mr Craw would be at home to him. I did not dare to say more, but I asked for the name. It was given me as Casimir—only the one word. Then I think the speaker rang off.”

“I considered it my duty,” Mr Barbon continued, “to open the confidential letter. When I had read it, I realised that instead of being in the frying pan we were in the middle of the fire. For that letter was written in the name of the inner circle of the—”

“Evallonian Republicans,” interjected Dougal, seeking a cheap triumph.

“It was not. It was the Evallonian Monarchists.”

“Good God!” Dougal was genuinely startled, for he saw suddenly a problem with the most dismal implications.

“They said that their plans were approaching maturity, and that they had come to consult with their chief well-wisher. There was an immense amount of high-flown compliment in it after the Evallonian fashion, but there was one thing clear. These people are in deadly earnest. They have taken Knockraw for the purpose, and they have had the assurance to announce to the world Mr Craw’s absence abroad so that they may have him to themselves without interruption. They must have had private information about his movements, and his intention of leaving Scotland. I don’t know much about Evallonian politics—they were a personal hobby of Mr Craw’s—but I know enough to realise that the party who wish to upset the republic are pretty desperate fellows. It was not only the certain notoriety of the thing which alarmed me, though that was bad enough. Imagine the play that our rivals would make with the story of Mr Craw plotting with foreign adventurers to upset a Government with which Britain is in friendly relations! It was the effect upon Mr Craw himself. He hates anything to do with the rough-and-tumble of political life. He is quite unfit to deal with such people. He is a thinker and an inspirer—a seer in a watch-tower, and such men lose their power if they go down into the arena.”

This was so manifestly an extract from the table-talk of Mr Craw that Dougal could not repress a grin.

"You laugh," said Mr Barbon gloomily, "but there is nothing to laugh at. The fortunes of a great man and a great Press are at this moment on a razor-edge."

"Jaikie," said Dougal in a whisper, "Mr McCunn was a true prophet. He said we were maybe going to set up the Jacobite standard on Garroch side. There's a risk of another kind of Jacobite standard being set up on Callowa side. It's a colossal joke on the part of Providence."

Mr Barbon continued his tale.

"I felt utterly helpless. I did not know where Mr Craw was. I had the threatening hordes of journalists to consider. I had those foreign desperadoes at the gates. They must not be allowed to approach Castle Gay. I had no fear that Casimir and his friends would take the journalists into their confidence, but I was terribly afraid that the journalists would get on to the trail of Casimir. An Eastern European house-party at Knockraw is a pretty obvious mark. . . . I gave orders that no one was to be admitted at either lodge. I went further and had the gates barricaded, in case there was an attempt to force them."

"You lost your head there," said Dougal. "You were making the journalists a gift."

"Perhaps I did. But when one thinks of Eastern Europe one thinks of violence. Look at this letter I received this morning. Note that it is addressed to me by my full name."

The writer with great simplicity and in perfect English informed the Honourable Frederick Barbon, M.C., that it was quite futile to attempt to deny his friends entrance to Castle Gay, but that they had no wish to embarrass him. Tomorrow at 11 a.m. they would wait upon Mr Craw, and if they were again refused they would take other means of securing an audience.

Dougal whistled. "The writer of this knows all about the journalists. And he knows that Mr Craw is not at the Castle, but believes that you are hiding him somewhere. They've a pretty useful intelligence department."

Mrs Brisbane-Brown, who had listened to Mr Barbon's recital with composure, now entered the conversation.

"You mustn't let your nerves get the upper hand of you, Freddy. Try to take things more calmly. I'm afraid that poor Mr Craw has himself to thank for his predicament. Why will newspaper owners meddle with things they don't understand? Politics should be left to those who make a profession of them. But we must do our best to help him. Mr Crombie," she turned to Dougal, whose grim face was heavy with thought, "you look capable. What do you propose?"

The fire of battle had kindled in Dougal's eyes, and Jaikie saw in them something which he remembered from old days.

"I think," he said, "that we're in for a stiff campaign, and that it must be conducted on two fronts. We must find some way of heading off those Evallonians, and it won't be easy. When a foreigner gets a notion into his head he's apt to turn into a demented crusader. They're all the same—Socialists, Communists, Fascists, Republicans, Monarchists—I daresay Monarchists are the worst, for they've less inside their heads to begin with. . . . And we must do it without giving the journalists a hint of what is happening. We must suppress Tibbets by force, if necessary."

"Perhaps the Evallonians will do that for you," suggested Alison.

"Very likely they will. . . . The second front is wherever Mr Craw may be. At all costs he must be kept away from here. Now, he can't stay at the Back House of the Garroch. The journalists will very soon be on to the Glasgow students, and they'll hear about the kidnapping, and they'll track him to the Back House. I needn't tell you that it's all up with us if any reporter gets sight of Mr Craw. I think he had better be smuggled out of the country as quickly as possible."

Mr Barbon shook his head.

"Impossible!" he murmured. "I've already thought of that plan and rejected it. The Evallonians will discover it and follow him, and they will find him in a foreign land without friends. I wonder if you understand that Mr Craw will be terrified at the thought of meeting them. Terrified! That is his nature. I think he would prefer to risk everything and come back here rather than fall into their hands in another country than his own. He has always been a little suspicious of foreigners."

"Very well. He can't come back here, but he needn't go abroad. He must disappear. Now, how is that to be managed?"

"Jaikie," he said, after a moment's reflection, "this is your job. You'll have to take charge of the Craw front."

Jaikie opened his eyes. He had not been attending very carefully, for the preoccupations of the others had allowed him to stare at Alison, and he had been wondering whether her hair should be called red or golden. For certain it had no

connection with Dougal's . . . Also, why a jumper and a short tweed skirt made a girl look so much more feminine than flowing draperies . . .

"I don't quite understand," he said.

"It's simple enough. We're going to have some difficult work on the home front, and the problem is hopeless if it's complicated by the presence of Mr Craw. One of us has to be in constant attendance on him, and keep him buried . . ."

"But where?"

"Anywhere you like, as long as you get him away from the Back House of the Garroch. He'll not object. He's not looking for any Evallonians. You've the whole of Scotland, and England too, to choose from. Pick your own hidy-hole. He'll not be difficult to hide, for few people know him by sight and he looks a commonplace little body. It's you or me—and better you than me, for you're easy tempered, and I doubt Mr Craw and I would quarrel the first day."

Jaikie caught Alison's eyes and saw in them so keen a zest for a new, exciting adventure that his own interest kindled. He would have immensely preferred to be engaged on the home front, but he saw the force of Dougal's argument. He had a sudden vision of himself, tramping muddy roads in October rain, putting up at third-rate inns, eating bread and cheese in the heather—and by his side, a badly scared millionaire, a fugitive leader of the people. Jaikie rarely laughed aloud, but at the vision his face broke into a slow smile.

"I'll need a pair of boots," he said, "not for myself—for Mr Craw. The things he is wearing would be knocked to pieces in half a day."

Mr Barbon, whose dejection had brightened at the sound of Dougal's crisp mandates, declared that the boots could be furnished. He suggested other necessities, which Jaikie ultimately reduced to a toothbrush, a razor, spare shirts, and pyjamas. A servant from the Castle would deliver them a mile up the road.

"You'd better be off," Dougal advised. "He'll have been ranging round the Back House these last four hours like a hyena, and if you don't hurry we'll have him arriving here on his two legs. . . You'll have to give us an address for letters, for we must have some means of communication."

"Let it be Post Office, Portaway," said Jaikie; and added, in reply to the astonished stare of the other, "Unless there's a reflector above, the best hiding place is under the light."



CHAPTER 7

BEGINNING OF A GREAT MAN'S EXILE

Jaikie had not a pleasant journey that autumn afternoon over the ridge that separates Callowa from Garroch and up the latter stream to the dark hills of its source. To begin with, he was wheeling the bicycle which Dougal had ridden, for that compromising object must be restored as soon as possible to its owner; and, since this was no easy business on indifferent roads, he had to walk most of the way. Also, in addition to the pack on his back, he had Dougal's, which contained the parcel duly handed over to him a mile up the road by a Castle Gay servant. . . . But his chief discomfort was spiritual.

From his tenderest years he had been something of a philosopher. It was his quaint and placid reasonableness which had induced Dickson McCunn, when he took in hand the destinies of the Gorbals Diehards, to receive him into his own household. He had virtually adopted Jaikie, because he seemed more broken to domesticity than any of the others. The boy had speedily become at home in his new environment, and with effortless ease had accepted and adapted himself to the successive new worlds which opened to him. He had the gift of living for the moment where troubles were concerned and not anticipating them, but in pleasant things of letting his fancy fly happily ahead. So he accepted docilely his present task, since he was convinced of the reason for it; Dougal was right—he was the better person of the two to deal with Craw. . . . But the other, the imaginative side of him, was in revolt. That morning he had received an illumination. He had met the most delightful human being he had ever encountered. And now he was banished from her presence.

He was not greatly interested in Craw. Dougal was different; to Dougal Craw was a figure of mystery and power; there was romance in the midge controlling the fate of the elephant. To Jaikie he was only a dull, sententious, elderly gentleman, probably with a bad temper, and he was chained to him for an indefinite number of days. It sounded a bleak kind of holiday. . . . But at Castle Gay there were the Evallonians, and Mrs Brisbane—Brown, and an immense old house now in a state of siege, and Alison's bright eyes, and a stage set for preposterous adventures. The lucky Dougal was there in the front of it, while he was condemned to wander lonely in the wings.

But, as the increasing badness of the road made riding impossible, and walking gave him a better chance for reflection, the prospect slowly brightened. It had been a fortunate inspiration of his, the decision to keep Craw hidden in the near neighbourhood. It had been good sense, too, for the best place of concealment was the unexpected. He would not be too far from the main scene of conflict, and he might even have a chance of a share in it. . . . Gradually his interest began to wake in the task itself. After all he had the vital role. If a man-hunt was on foot, he had charge of the quarry. It was going to be a difficult business, and it might be exciting. He remembered the glow in Alison's eyes, and the way she had twined and untwined her fingers. They were playing in the same game, and if he succeeded it was her approval he would win. Craw was of no more interest to him than the ball in a Rugby match, but he was determined to score a try with him between the posts.

In this more cheerful mood he arrived at the Back House about the hour of seven, when the dark had fallen. Mrs Catterick met him with an anxious face and the high lilt of the voice which in her type is the consequence of anxiety.

"Ye're back? Blithe I am to see ye. And ye're your lane? Dougal's awa on anither job, says you? Eh, man, ye've been sair looked for. The puir body ben the hoose has been neither to haud nor to bind. He was a mile down the road this mornin' in his pappymashy buits. He didna tak a bite o' denner, and sin' syne he's been sittin' glunchin' or lookin' out o' the windy." Then, in a lowered voice, "For guid sake, Jaikie, do something, or he'll loss his reason."

"It's all right, Mrs Catterick. I've come back to look after him. Can you put up with us for another night? We'll be off tomorrow morning."

"Fine that. John'll no be hame or Monday. Ye'll hae your supper thegither? It's an ill job a jyler's. Erchie will whistle lang ere he sees me at it again."

Jaikie did not at once seek Mr Craw's presence. He spread his map of the Canonry on the kitchen table and brooded over it. It was only when he knew from the clatter of dishes that the meal was ready in the best room that he sought that chamber.

He found the great man regarding distastefully a large dish of bacon and eggs and a monstrous brown teapot enveloped in a knitted cosy of purple and green. He had found John Catterick's razor too much for him, for he had not shaved that morning, his suit had acquired further whitewash from the walls of his bedroom, and his scanty hair was innocent of the brush. He had the air of one who had not slept well and had much on his mind.

The eyes which he turned on Jaikie had the petulance of a sulky child.

"So you've come at last," he grumbled. "Where is Mr Crombie? Have you brought a car?"

"I came on a bicycle. Dougal—Mr Crombie—is staying at Castle Gay."

"What on earth do you mean? Did you deliver my letter to Mr Barbon?"

Jaikie nodded. He felt suddenly rather dashed in spirits. Mr Craw, untidy and unshaven and as cross as a bear, was not an attractive figure, least of all as a companion for an indefinite future.

"I had better tell you exactly what happened," he said, and he recounted the incidents of the previous evening up to the meeting with Tibbets. "So we decided that it would be wiser not to try to deliver the letter last night."

Mr Craw's face showed extreme irritation, not unmingled with alarm.

"The insolence of it!" he declared. "You say the Wire man has got the story of my disappearance, and has published it in today's issue? He knows nothing of the cause which brought me here?"

"Nothing. And he need never know, unless he tracks you to this place. The Wire stands a good chance of making a public goat of itself. Dougal telephoned to your Glasgow office and your own papers published today the announcement that you had gone abroad."

Mr Craw looked relieved. "That was well done. As a matter of fact I had planned to go abroad today, though I did not intend to announce it. It has never been my habit to placard my movements like a court circular. . . . So far good, Mr Galt. I shall travel south tomorrow night. But what possessed Barbon not to send the car at once? I must go back to Castle Gay before I leave, and the sooner the better. My reappearance will spike the guns of my journalistic enemies."

"It would," Jaikie assented. "But there's another difficulty, Mr Craw. The announcement of your going abroad today was not sent to your papers first by Dougal. It was sent by very different people. The day before yesterday, when you were in Glasgow, these same people sent you a letter. Yesterday they telephoned to Mr Barbon, wanting to see you, and then he opened the letter. Here it is." He presented the missive, whose heavy seals Mr Barbon had already broken.

Mr Craw looked at the first page, and then subsided heavily into a chair. He fumbled feverishly for his glasses, and his shaking hand had much ado to fix them on his nose. As he read, his naturally ruddy complexion changed to a clayey white. He finished his reading, and sat staring before him with unseeing eyes, his fingers picking nervously at the sheets of notepaper. Jaikie, convinced that he was about to have a fit, and very much alarmed, poured him out a scalding cup of tea. He drank a mouthful, and spilled some over his waistcoat.

It was a full minute before he recovered a degree of self-possession, but self-possession only made him look more ghastly, for it revealed the perturbation of his mind.

"You have read this?" he stammered.

"No. But Mr Barbon told us the contents of it."

"Us?" he almost screamed.

"Yes. We had a kind of conference on the situation this afternoon. At the Mains. There was Mr Barbon, and Miss Westwater, and her aunt, and Dougal and myself. We made a sort of plan, and that's why I'm here."

Mr Craw clutched at his dignity, but he could not grasp it. The voice which came from his lips was small, and plaintive, and childish, and, as Jaikie noted, it had lost its precise intonation and had returned to the broad vowels of Kilmaclavers.

"This is a dreadful business. . . . You can't realise how dreadful. . . . I can't meet these people. I can't be implicated in this affair. It would mean absolute ruin to my reputation. . . . Even the fact of their being in this countryside is terribly compromising. Supposing my enemies got word of it! They would put the worst construction on it, and they would make the public believe it. . . . As you are aware, I have taken a strong line about Evallonian politics—an honest line. I cannot recant my views without looking a fool. But if I do not recant my views, the presence of those infernal fools will make the world believe that I am actually dabbling in their conspiracies. I, who have kept myself aloof from the remotest semblance of political intrigue! Oh, it is too monstrous!"

"I don't think the Wire people will get hold of it very easily," was Jaikie's attempt at comfort.

"Why not?" he snapped.

"Because the Evallonians will prevent it. They seem determined people, determined to have you to themselves. Otherwise they wouldn't have got your papers to announce that you had gone abroad."

This was poor comfort for Mr Craw. He ejaculated "Good God!" and fell into a painful meditation. It was not only his repute he was thinking of, but his personal safety. These men had come to coerce him, and their coercion would not stop at trifles. I do not know what picture presented itself to his vision, but it was probably something highly melodramatic (for he knew nothing at first hand of foreign peoples)—dark sinister men, incredibly cunning, with merciless faces and lethal weapons in every pocket. He groaned aloud. Then a thought struck him.

"You say they telephoned to Castle Gay," he asked wildly. "Where are they?"

"They are at Knockraw. They have taken the place for the autumn. Mr Barbon, as I told you, refused to let them in. They seemed to know about your absence from the Castle, but they believe that he can put his hand on you if he wants. So they are going there at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning, and they say they will take no denial."

"At Knockraw!" It was the cry of a fugitive who learns that the avenger of blood is in the next room.

"Yes," said Jaikie. "We've got the Recording Angel established in our back garden on a strictly legal tenure. We must face that fact."

Mr Craw seemed disinclined to face it. He sunk his face in his hands and miserably hunched his shoulders. Jaikie observed that the bacon and eggs were growing cold, but the natural annoyance of a hungry man was lost in pity for the dejected figure before him. Here was one who must have remarkable talents—business talents, at any rate, even if he were not much of a thinker or teacher. He was accustomed to make men do what he wanted. He had the gift of impressing millions of people with his strength and wisdom. He must often have taken decisions which required nerve and courage. He had inordinate riches, and to Jaikie, who had not a penny, the acquisition of great wealth seemed proof of a rare and mysterious power. Yet here was this great man, unshaven and unkempt, sunk in childish despair, because of a situation which to the spectator himself seemed simple and rather amusing.

Jaikie had a considerable stock of natural piety. He hated to see human nature, in which he profoundly believed, making a discreditable exhibition of itself. Above all he hated to see an old man—Mr Craw seemed to him very old, far older than Dickson McCunn—behaving badly. He could not bring himself to admit that age, which brought success, did not also bring wisdom. Moreover he was by nature kindly, and did not like to see a fellow-being in pain. So he applied himself to the duties of comforter.

"Cheer up, Mr Craw," he said. "This thing is not so bad as all that. There's at least three ways out of it."

There was no answer, save for a slight straightening of the shoulders, so Jaikie continued:

"First, you can carry things with a high hand. Go back to Castle Gay and tell every spying journalist to go to blazes. Sit down in your own house and be master there. Your position won't suffer. If the Wire gets hold of the story of the students' rag, what does it matter? It will be forgotten in two days, when the next murder or divorce comes along. Besides, you behaved well in it. You kept your temper. It's not a thing to be ashamed of. The folk who'll look foolish will be Tibbets with his bogus mysteries, and the editor who printed his stuff. If I were you I'd put the whole story of your adventure in your own papers and make a good yarn of it. Then you'll have people laughing with you, not at you."

Mr Craw was listening. Jaikie understood him to murmur something about the Evallonians.

"As for the Evallonians," he continued, "I'd meet them. Ask the whole bally lot to luncheon or dinner. Tell them that Evallonia is not your native land, and that you'll take no part in her politics. Surely a man can have his views about a foreign country without being asked to get a gun and fight for it. If they turn nasty, tell them also to go to the devil. This is a free country, and a law-abiding country. There's the police in the last resort. And you could raise a defence force from Castle Gay itself that would make yon foreign bandits look silly. Never mind if the thing gets into the papers. You'll have behaved well, and you'll have reason to be proud of it."

Jaikie spoke in a tone of extreme gentleness and moderation. He was most anxious to convince his hearer of the desirability of this course, for it would remove all his own troubles. He and Dougal would be able with a clear conscience to continue their walking tour, and every minute his distaste was increasing for the prospect of taking the road in Mr Craw's company.

But that moderation was an error in tactics. Had he spoken harshly, violently, presenting any other course as naked cowardice, it is possible that he might have struck an answering spark from Mr Craw's temper, and forced him to a declaration from which he could not have retreated. His equable reasonableness was his undoing. The man sitting hunched up in the chair considered the proposal, and his terrors, since they were not over-ridden by anger, presented it in repulsive colours to his reason.

"No," he said, "I can't do that. It is not possible. . . . You do not understand. . . . I am not an ordinary man. My position is unique. I have won an influence, which I hold in trust for great public causes. I dare not impair it by being mixed up in farce or brawling."

Jaikie recognised the decision as final. He also inferred from the characteristic stateliness of the words and the recovered refinement of the accent, that Mr Craw was beginning to be himself again.

"Very well," he said briskly. "The second way is that you go abroad as if nothing had happened. We can get a car to take you to Gledmouth, and Mr Barbon will bring on your baggage. Go anywhere you like abroad, and leave the Evallonians to beat at the door of an empty house. If their mission becomes known, it won't do you any harm, for you'll be able to prove an alibi."

Mr Craw's consideration of this project was brief, and his rejection was passionate. Mr Barbon had been right in his forecast.

"No, no," he cried, "that is utterly and eternally impossible. On the Continent of Europe I should be at their mercy. They are organised in every capital. Their intelligence service would discover me—you admit yourself that they know a good deal about my affairs even in this country. I should have no protection, for I do not believe in the Continental police."

"What are you afraid of?" Jaikie asked with a touch of irritation. "Kidnapping?"

Mr Craw assented darkly. "Some kind of violence," he said.

"But," Jaikie argued in a voice which he tried to keep pleasant, "how would that serve their purpose? They don't need you as a hostage. They certainly don't want you as leader of an armed revolution. They want the support of your papers, and the influence which they think you possess with the British Government. You're no use to them except functioning in London."

It was a second mistake in tactics, for Jaikie's words implied some disparagement of Craw the man as contrasted with Craw the newspaper proprietor. There was indignation as well as fear in the reply.

"No. I will not go abroad at such a time. It would be insanity. It would be suicide. You must permit me to judge what is politic in such circumstances. I assure you I do not speak without reflection."

"Very well," said Jaikie, whose spirits had descended to his boots. "You can't go back to Castle Gay. You won't go abroad. You must stay in this country and lie low till the Evallonians clear out."

Mr Craw said nothing, but by his silence he signified an unwilling assent to this alternative.

"But when?" he asked drearily after a pause. "When will the Evallonians give up their mission? Have we any security for their going within a reasonable time? You say that they have taken Knockraw for the season. They may stay till Christmas."

"We've left a pretty effective gang behind us to speed their departure."

"Who?"

"Well, there's Mrs Brisbane-Brown. I wouldn't like to be opposed to yon woman."

"The tenant of the Mains. I scarcely know her."

"No, she said that when she met you you looked at her as if she were Lady Godiva. Then there's her niece, Miss Westwater."

"The child I have seen riding in the park? What can she do?"

Jaikie smiled. "She might do a lot. And there's your staff at the Castle, Mr Barbon and the rest. And most important of all, there's Dougal."

Mr Craw brightened perceptibly at the last name. Dougal was his own henchman, an active member of the great Craw brotherhood. From him he could look for loyal and presumably competent service. Jaikie saw the change in expression, and improved the occasion.

"You don't know Dougal as I know him. He's the most determined fellow on earth. He'll stick at nothing. I'll wager he'll shift the Evallonians, if he has to take to smoke bombs and poison gas. . . . Isn't it about time that we had supper? I'm famished with hunger."

The bacon and eggs had to be sent back to be heated up, and Mrs Catterick had to make a fresh brew of tea. Under the cheering influence of the thought of Dougal Mr Craw made quite a respectable meal. A cigar would have assisted his comfort, but he had long ago emptied his case, and he was compelled to accept one of Jaikie's cheap Virginian cigarettes. His face remained a little clouded, and he frequently corrugated his brows in thought, but the black despair of half an hour ago had left him.

When the remains of supper had been cleared away he asked to see Jaikie's map, which for some time he studied intently.

"I must reach the railway as soon as possible," he said. "On the other side from Castle Gay, of course. I must try to walk to some place where I can hire a conveyance."

"Where did you think of going?" Jaikie asked.

"London," was the reply. "I can find privacy in the suite in my office."

"Have you considered that that will be watched? These Evallonians, as we know, are careful people who mean business, and they seem to have a pretty useful intelligence system. You will be besieged in your office just as badly as if you were at Castle Gay. And with far more publicity."

Mr Craw pondered ruefully. "You think so? Perhaps you are right. What about a quiet hotel?"

Jaikie shook his head. "No good. They will find you out. And if you go to Glasgow or Edinburgh or Manchester or Bournemouth it will be the same. It doesn't do to underrate the cleverness of the enemy. If Mr Craw goes anywhere in these islands as Mr Craw some hint of it will get out, and they'll be on to it like a knife."

Despair was creeping back into the other's face. "Have you any other course to suggest?" he faltered.

"I propose that you and I go where you're not expected, and that's just in the Canonry. The Evallonians will look for you in Castle Gay and everywhere else except in its immediate neighbourhood. It's darkest under the light, you see. Nobody knows you by sight, and you and I can take a quiet saunter through the Canonry without anybody being the wiser, while Dougal finishes the job at the Castle."

Mr Craw's face was a blank, and Jaikie hastened to complete his sketch.

"We'll be on a walking tour, the same as Dougal and I proposed, but we'll get out of the hills. An empty countryside like this is too conspicuous. . . . I know the place, and I'll guarantee to keep you well hidden. I've brought Dougal's pack for you. In it there's a suit of pyjamas and a razor and some shirts and things which I got from Mr Barbon . . ."

Mr Craw cried out like one in pain.

". . . And a pair of strong boots," Jaikie concluded soothingly. "I'm glad I remembered that. The boots you have on would be in ribbons the first day on these stony roads."

It was Jaikie's third error in tactics. Mr Craw had experienced various emotions, including terror, that evening, and now he was filled with a horrified disgust. He had created for himself a padded and cosseted life; he had scaled an eminence of high importance; he had made his daily existence a ritual every item of which satisfied his self-esteem. And now this outrageous young man proposed that he should scrap it all and descend to the pit out of which thirty years ago he had climbed. Even for safety the price was far too high. Better the perils of high politics, where at least he would remain a figure of consequence. He actually shivered with repulsion, and his anger gave him a momentary air of dignity and power.

"I never," he said slowly, "never in my life listened to anything so preposterous. You suggest that I—I—should join you in wandering like a tramp through muddy Scottish parishes and sleeping in mean inns! . . . To-morrow I shall go to London. And meantime I am going to bed."



CHAPTER 8

CASIMIR

Miss Alison Westwater rose early on the following morning, and made her way on foot through the now unbarricaded lodge-gates to the Castle. The fateful meeting with the Evallonians, to which she had not been bidden, was at eleven, and before that hour she had much to do.

She was admitted by Bannister. "I don't want to see Mr Barbon," she said. "I want to talk to you." Bannister, in his morning undress, bowed gravely, and led her into the little room on the left side of the hall where her father used to keep his boots and fishing-rods.

Bannister was not the conventional butler. He was not portly, or sleek, or pompous, or soft-voiced, though he was certainly soft-footed. He was tall and lean, with a stoop which, so far from being servile, was almost condescending. He spoke the most correct English, and was wont to spend his holidays at a good hotel in this or that watering place, where his well-cut clothes, his quiet air, his wide knowledge of the world, and his somewhat elaborate manners caused him to be taken in the smoking-room for a member of the Diplomatic Service. He had begun life in a famous training-stable at Newmarket, but had been compelled to relinquish the career of a jockey at the age of eighteen owing to the rate at which he grew. Thereafter he had passed through various domestic posts, always in the best houses, till the age of forty-seven found him butler to that respected but ineffective statesman, the Marquis of Oronsay. At the lamented death of his patron he had passed to Mr Craw, who believed that a man who had managed four different houses for an irascible master with signal success would suit his own more modest requirements. He was right in his judgment. Bannister was a born organiser, and would have made an excellent Quartermaster-General. The household at Castle Gay moved on oiled castors, and Mr Craw's comfort and dignity and his jealous retirement suffered no jar in Bannister's hands. Mr Barbon might direct the strategy, but it was the butler who saw to the tactics.

The part suited him exactly, for Bannister was accustomed to generous establishments—ubi multa supersunt—and he loved mystery. It was meat and drink to him to be the guardian of a secret, and a master who had to be zealously shielded from the public eye was the master he loved to serve. He had acquired the taste originally from much reading of sensational fiction, and it had been fostered by the circumstances of his life. He had been an entranced repository of many secrets. He knew why the Duke of Mull had not received the Garter; why the engagement between Sir John Rampole and the Chicago heiress was broken off—a tale for which many an American paper would have gladly paid ten thousand dollars; almost alone he could have given a full account of the scandals of the Braddisdale marriage; he could have explained the true reason for the retirement from the service of the State of one distinguished Ambassador, and the inexplicable breakdown in Parliament of a rising Under-Secretary. His recollections, if divulged, might have made him the humble Greville of his age. But they were never divulged—and never would be. Bannister was confidential, because he enjoyed keeping a secret more than other men enjoy telling one. It gave him a sense of mystery and power.

There was only one thing wanting to his satisfaction. He had a profound—and, as he would have readily admitted, an illogical—liking for the aristocracy. He wished that his master had accepted a peerage, like other Press magnates; in his eyes a new title was better than none at all. For ancient families with chequered pasts he had a romantic reverence. He had studied in the county histories the story of the house of Rhynns, and it fulfilled his most exacting demands. It pleased him to dwell in a mansion consecrated by so many misdeeds. He wished that he could meet Lord Rhynns in the flesh. He respected the household at the Mains as the one link between himself and the older nobility. Mrs Brisbane-Brown was his notion of what a middle-aged gentlewoman should be; and he had admired from afar Alison galloping in the park. She was like the Ladies Ermyntrude and Gwendolen of whom he had read long ago, and whom he still cherished as an ideal, in spite of a lifetime of disillusionment. There was a fount of poetry welling somewhere in Bannister's breast.

"I've come to talk to you, Bannister," the girl began, "about the mess we're in. It concerns us all, for as long as Mr Craw lives in Castle Gay we're bound to help him. As you are aware, he has disappeared. But, as you may have heard, we have a rough notion of where he is. Well, we've got to straighten out things here while he is absent. Hold the fort, you know."

The butler bowed gravely.

"First, there's the foreigners, who are coming here at eleven."

"If I might hazard a suggestion," Bannister interrupted. "Are you certain, Miss, that these foreigners are what they claim to be?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is it not possible that they are a gang of international crooks who call themselves Evallonians, knowing Mr Craw's interest in that country, and wish to effect an entry into the castle for sinister purposes?"

"But they have taken Knockraw shooting."

"It might be a blind."

The girl considered. "No," she said emphatically. "That is impossible. You've been reading too many detective stories, Bannister. It would be imbecility for a gang of crooks to take the line they have. It would be giving themselves away hopelessly. . . . These people are all right. They represent the Evallonian Monarchist party, which may be silly but is quite respectable. Mr Barbon knows all about them. One is Count Casimir Muresco. Another is Prince Odalisque, or some name like that. And there's a Professor Something or other, who Mr Crombie says has a European reputation for something. No doubt about it. They're tremendous swells, and we've got to treat them as such. That's one of the things I came to speak to you about. We're not going to produce Mr Craw, which is what they want, but, till we see our way clear, we must snow them under with hospitality. If they are sportsmen, as they pretend to be, they must have the run of the Callowa, and if Knockraw is not enough for them we must put the Castle moors at their disposal. Oh, and the Blae Moss. They're sure to want to shoot snipe. The grouse is only found in Britain, but there must be plenty of snipe in Evallonia. You know that they're all coming to dine here to-night?"

"So Mr Barbon informed me."

"Well, it must be a Belshazzar. That's a family word of ours for a regular banquet. You must get the chef to put his best foot forward. Tell him he's feeding Princes and Ministers and he'll produce something surprising. I don't suppose he knows any special Evallonian dishes, so the menu had better have a touch of Scotland. They'll appreciate local colour. We ought to have a haggis as one of the entrées, and grouse of course, and Mackillop must dig a salmon out of the Callowa. I saw a great brute jumping in the Dirt Pot. . . . Plenty of flowers, too. I don't know what your cellar is like?"

"I can vouch for it, Miss. Shall the footmen wear their gala liveries? Mr Craw made a point of their possessing them."

"Certainly. . . . We have to make an impression, you see. We can't produce Mr Craw, but we must impress them with our importance, so that they will take what we tell them as if it came from Mr Craw. Do you see what I mean? We want them to go away as soon as possible, but to go away satisfied and comfortable, so that they won't come back again."

"What will be the party at dinner?"

"The three Evallonians—the Count, and the Prince, and the Herr Professor. You can get the names right from Mr Barbon. Mr Barbon and Mr Crombie, of course, who are staying in the house. My aunt and Mr Charvill and myself. It's overweighted with men, but we can't help that."

"May I ask one question, Miss? Mr Crombie, now. He is not quite what I have been accustomed to. He is a very peremptory gentleman. He has taken it upon himself to give me orders."

"Obey them, Bannister, obey them on your life. Mr Crombie is one of Mr Craw's trusted lieutenants. You may consider him the leader of our side. . . . That brings me to the second thing I wanted to say to you. What about the journalists?"

"We have had a visit from three already this morning." There was the flicker of a smile on the butler's face. "I made a point of interviewing them myself." He drew three cards from a waistcoat pocket, and exhibited them. They bore the names of three celebrated newspapers, but the Wire was not among them. "They asked to see Mr Craw, and according to my instructions I informed them that Mr Craw had gone abroad. They appeared to accept my statement, but showed a desire to engage me in conversation. All three exhibited money, which I presume they intended as a bribe. That, of course, led to their summary dismissal."

"That's all right," the girl declared, "that's plain sailing. But I don't like Tibbets keeping away. Mr Crombie says that he's by far the most dangerous. Look here, Bannister, this is your very particular job. You must see that none of these reporters get into the Castle, and that nobody from the Castle gossips with them. If they once get on the trail of the Evallonians we're done. The lodge-keeper has orders not to admit anybody who looks like a journalist. I'll get hold of

Mackillop and tell him to clear out anybody found in the policies. He can pretend they're poachers. I wonder what on earth Tibbets is up to at this moment?"

Dougal could have provided part of the answer to that question. The night before, when it was settled that he should take up his quarters in the Castle, he had wired to his Glasgow lodgings to have his dress clothes sent to him by train. That morning he had been to Portaway station to collect them, in a car hired from the Westwater Arms, and in a Portaway street he had run across Tibbets. The journalist's face did not show, as he had hoped, embarrassment and disappointment. On the contrary the light of victorious battle was in his eye.

"I thought you were off for good," was his greeting, to which Dougal replied with a story of the breakdown of his bicycle and his compulsory severance from his friend. "I doubt I'll have to give up this expedition," Dougal said. "How are you getting on yourself? I read your thing in the Wire last night."

"Did you see the Craw papers? They announce that Craw has gone abroad. It was Heaven's own luck that they only got that out the same day as my story, and now it's bloody war between us, for our credit is at stake. I wired to my chief, and I've just got his reply. What do you think it is? Craw never left the country. Places were booked for him in the boat train yesterday in the name of his man Barbon, but he never used them. Our information is certain. That means that Craw's papers are lying. Lying to cover something, and what that something is I'm going to find out before I'm a day older. I'm waiting here for another telegram, and then I'll go up the Callowa to comfort Barbon."

Dougal made an inconspicuous exit from the station, after satisfying himself that Tibbets was not about. He left his suit-case at the Starr inn, with word that it would be sent for later, for he did not wish to publish his connection with the Castle any sooner than was needful. He entered the park by the gate in the wall which he opened with Alison's key, and had immediately to present his credentials—a chit signed by Barbon—to a minion of Mackillop's, the head keeper, who was lurking in a covert. He was admitted to the house by Bannister at ten minutes to eleven, five minutes after Alison had left on her quest of Mackillop and a Callowa salmon.

The party from Knockraw was punctual. Mr Barbon and Dougal received them in the library, a vast apartment on the first floor, lit by six narrow windows and commanding a view of the terrace and the windings of the river. The seventh Lord Rhynns had been a collector, and from the latticed shelves looked down an imposing array of eighteenth-century quartos and folios. Various pieces of classical sculpture occupied black marble pedestals, and a small, richly carved sarcophagus, of a stone which looked like old ivory, had a place of honour under the great Flemish tapestry, which adorned the only wall free of books. The gilt baroque clock on the mantelpiece had not finished chiming when Bannister ushered in the visitors.

They bowed from their hips at the door, and they bowed again when they were within a yard of Barbon. One of the three spoke. He was a tall man with a white face, deep-set brown eyes, and short curly brown hair. Except for his nose he would have been theatrically handsome, but his nose was a pronounced snub. Yet this imperfection gave to his face a vigour and an attractiveness which more regular features might have lacked. He looked amazingly competent and vital. His companions were a slim, older man with greying hair, and a burly fellow with spectacles and a black beard. All three were ceremoniously garbed in morning coats and white linen and dark ties. Dougal wondered if they had motored from Knockraw in top hats. "Permit me to make the necessary introductions," said the spokesman. "I am your correspondent, Count Casimir Muresco. This is Prince Odalchini, and this is the Herr Doctor Jagon of the University of Melina. We are the chosen and accredited representatives of the Nationalist Party of Evallonia."

Barbon had dressed himself carefully for the occasion, and his flawless grey suit made a painful contrast to Dougal's ill-fitting knickerbockers. He looked more than ever like an actor who had just taken his cue in a romantic Victorian comedy.

"My name is Barbon," he said, "Frederick Barbon. As you are no doubt aware, I am Mr Craw's principal confidential secretary."

"You are the second son of Lord Clonkilty, is it not so?" said the Prince. "You I have seen once before—at Monte Carlo."

Barbon bowed. "I am honoured by your recollection. This is Mr Crombie, one of Mr Craw's chief assistants in the management of his newspapers."

The three strangers bowed, and Dougal managed to incline his stiff neck.

"You wish to see Mr Craw. Mr Craw unfortunately is not at home. But in his absence my colleague and I are here to do

what we can for you.”

“You do not know where Mr Craw is?” inquired Count Casimir sharply.

“Not at this moment,” replied Barbon truthfully. “Mr Craw is in the habit of going off occasionally on private business.”

“That is a misfortune, but it is temporary. Mr Craw will no doubt return soon. We are in no hurry, for we are at present residents in your beautiful country. You are in Mr Craw’s confidence, and therefore we will speak to you as we would speak to him.”

Barbon motioned them to a table, where were five chairs, and ink, pens, and blotting paper set out as for a board meeting. He and Dougal took their seats on one side, and the three Evallonians on the other.

“I will be brief,” said Count Casimir. “The movement for the restoration of our country to its ancient rights approaches fruition. I have here the details, which I freely offer to you for your study. The day is not yet fixed, but when the word is given the people of Evallonia as one man will rise on behalf of their Prince. The present misgovernors of our land have no popular following, and no credit except among international Jews.”

Mr Barbon averted his eyes from the maps and papers which the other pushed towards him.

“That is what they call a Putsch, isn’t it?” he said. “They haven’t been very successful, you know.”

“It is no foolish thing like a Putsch,” Count Casimir replied emphatically. “You may call it a coup d’état, a bloodless coup d’état. We have waited till our cause is so strong in Evallonia that there need be no violence. The hated republic will tumble down at a touch like a rotten branch. We shall take the strictest precautions against regrettable incidents. It will be the sudden uprising of a nation, a thing as irresistible as the tides of the sea.”

“You may be right,” said Barbon. “Obviously we cannot argue the point with you. But what we want to know is why you come to us. Mr Craw has nothing to do with Evallonia’s domestic affairs.”

“Alas!” said Prince Odalchini, “our affairs are no longer domestic. The republic is the creation of the Powers, the circumscription of our territories is the work of the Powers, the detested League of Nations watches us like an elderly and spectacled governess. We shall succeed in our revolution, but we cannot maintain our success unless we can assure ourselves of the neutrality of Europe. That is why we come to Britain. We ask her—how do you say it?—to keep the ring.”

“To Britain, perhaps,” said Barbon. “But why to Mr Craw?”

Count Casimir laughed. “You are too modest, my friend. It is the English habit, we know, to reverence historic forms even when the power has gone elsewhere. But we have studied your politics very carefully. The Herr Professor has studied them profoundly. We know that in these days with your universal suffrage the fount of authority is not in King or Cabinet, or even in your Parliament. It lies with the whole mass of your people, and who are their leaders? Not your statesmen, for you have lost your taste for oratory, and no longer attend meetings. It is your newspapers that rule you. What your man in the street reads in his newspaper he believes. What he believes he will make your Parliament believe, and what your Parliament orders your Cabinet must do. Is it not so?”

Mr Barbon smiled wearily at this startling version of constitutional practice.

“I think you rather exaggerate the power of the printed word,” he said.

Count Casimir waved the objection aside.

“We come to Mr Craw,” he went on. “We say, ‘You love Evallonia. You have said it often. You have ten—twenty millions of readers who follow you blindly. You will say to them that Evallonia must be free to choose her own form of government, for that is democracy. You will say that this follows from your British principles of policy and from that Puritan religion in which Britain believes. You will preach it to them like a good priest, and you will tell them that it will be a very great sin if they do not permit to others the freedom which they themselves enjoy. The Prime Minister will wake up one morning and find that he has what you call a popular mandate, which if he does not obey he will cease to be Prime Minister. Then, when the day comes for Evallonia to declare herself, he will speak kind words about Evallonia to France and Italy, and he will tell the League of Nations to go to the devil.’”

“That’s all very well,” Barbon protested. “But I don’t see how putting Prince John on the throne will help you to get back your lost territories.”

“It will be a first step. When we have once again a beloved King, Europe will say, ‘Beyond doubt Evallonia is a great

and happy nation. She is too good and happy a nation to be so small.”

“We speak in the name of democracy,” said the Professor in a booming voice. He spoke at some length, and developed an intricate argument to show the true meaning of the word “self-determination.” He dealt largely with history; he had much to say of unity of culture as opposed to uniformity of race; he touched upon Fascism, Bolshevism, and what he called “Americanism”; he made many subtle distinctions, and he concluded with a definition of modern democracy, of which he said the finest flower would be an Evallonia reconstituted according to the ideas of himself and his friends.

Dougal had so far maintained silence, and had studied the faces of the visitors. All three were patently honest. Casimir was the practical man, the schemer, the Cavour of the party. The Prince might be the prophet, the Mazzini—there was a mild and immovable fanaticism in his pale eyes. The Professor was the scholar, who supplied the ammunition of theory. The man had written a famous book on the British Constitution and had a European reputation; but this was Dougal’s pet subject, and he suddenly hurled himself into the fray.

It would have been well if he had refrained. For half an hour three bored and mystified auditors were treated to a harangue on the fundamentals of politics, in which Dougal’s dialectical zeal led him into so many overstatements that to the scandalised Barbon he seemed to be talking sheer anarchism. Happily to the other two, and possibly to the Professor, he was not very intelligible. For just as in the excitement of debate the Professor lost hold of his careful English and relapsed into Evallonian idioms, so Dougal returned to his ancestral language of Glasgow.

The striking of a single note by the baroque clock gave Count Casimir a chance of breaking off the interview. He gathered up his papers.

“We have opened our case,” he said graciously. “We will come again to expand it, and meantime you will meditate. . . . We dine with you to-night at eight o’clock? There will be ladies present? So?”

“One word, Count,” said Barbon. “We’re infernally plagued with journalists. There’s a by-election going on now in the neighbourhood, and they all want to get hold of Mr Craw. I needn’t tell you that it would be fatal to your cause if they got on to your trail—and very annoying to us.”

“Have no fear,” was the answer. “The official tenant of Knockraw is Mr Williams, a Liverpool merchant. To the world we are three of Mr Williams’s business associates who are enjoying his hospitality. All day we shoot at the grouse like sportsmen. In the evening our own servants wait upon us, so there are no eavesdroppers.”

Mr Craw had entertained but little in Castle Gay, but that night his representatives made up for his remissness. The party from the Mains arrived to find the hall blazing with lights, Bannister with the manner of a Court Chamberlain, and the footmen in the sober splendour of their gala liveries. In the great drawing-room, which had scarcely been used in Alison’s recollection, Barbon and Dougal were holding in play three voluble gentlemen with velvet collars to their dress-coats and odd bits of ribbon in their buttonholes. Their presentation to the ladies reminded Alison of the Oath of the Tennis Court or some other high and disposed piece of history, and she with difficulty preserved her gravity. Presently in the dining-room, which was a remnant of the old keep and vaulted like a dungeon, they sat down to a meal which the chef was ever afterwards to refer to as his masterpiece.

The scene was so bright with flowers and silver, so benignly backgrounded by the mellow Westwater portraits, that it cast a spell over the company and made everyone content—except Dougal. The Evallonians did not once refer to their mission. They might have been a party of county neighbours, except that their talk was of topics not commonly discussed by Canonry sportsmen. The Prince spoke to Mrs Brisbane–Brown of her own relations, for he had been a secretary of legation in London and had hunted several seasons with the Cottessmore. The Professor oraculated on letters, with an elephantine deference to his hearers’ opinions, withdrawing graciously his first judgment that Shakespeare was conspicuously inferior to Mr Bernard Shaw when he saw Mrs Brisbane–Brown’s scandalised face. Count Casimir endeavoured to propitiate Dougal, and learned from him many things about the Scottish race which are not printed in the books. All three, even the Professor, understood the art of social intercourse, and the critical Alison had to admit to herself that they did it well. It appeared that the Prince was a keen fisherman, and Count Casimir an ardent snipe shot, and the offer of the Callowa and the Blae Moss was enthusiastically received.

Dougal alone found the evening a failure. He felt that they were wasting time. Again and again he tried to lead the talk to the position of the Press in Britain, in the hope that Mrs Brisbane–Brown, with whom the strangers were obviously impressed, would enlighten them as to its fundamental unimportance. But Mrs Brisbane–Brown refused his lead. Indeed

she did the very opposite, for he heard her say to the Professor: "We have new masters today. Britain still tolerates her aristocracy as a harmless and rather ornamental pet, but if it tried to scratch it would be sent to the stables. Our new masters don't do it badly either. When my brother lived here this was a shabby old country house, but Mr Craw has made it a palace."

"It is the old passion for romance," the Professor replied. "The sense of power is generally accompanied by a taste for grandeur. Ubi magnitudo ibi splendor. That, I believe, is St Augustine."

Late that night, in the smoking-room at Knockraw, there was a consultation. "Things go well," said Casimir. "We have prepared the way, and the Craw entourage will not be hostile. I do not like the red-haired youth. He is of the fanatic student type, and his talk is flatulence. Him I regard as an enemy. But Barbon is too colourless and timid to oppose us, and we have won favour, I think, with the high-nosed old woman and the pretty girl. They, as representatives of an ancient house, have doubtless much weight with Craw, who is of the lesser bourgeoisie. With them in view, I think it may be well to play our trump card now. His Royal Highness arrives today in London, and is graciously holding himself at our disposal."

"That thought was in my own mind," said Prince Odalchini, and the Professor concurred.

At the same hour Dougal at Castle Gay was holding forth to Barbon. "Things couldn't be worse," he said. "The dinner was a big mistake. All that magnificence only increases their belief in Craw's power. We've got to disillusion them. I can't do it, for I can see fine that they think me a Bolshevik. You can't do it, for they believe that you would do anything for a quiet life, and they discount your evidence accordingly. What we want is some real, representative, practical man who would come down like a sledge hammer on their notions—somebody they would be compelled to believe—somebody that they couldn't help admitting as typical of the British nation."

"I agree. But where are we to find him without giving Mr Craw away?"

"There's one man," said Dougal slowly. "His name's McCunn—Dickson McCunn—and he lives about fifty miles from here. He was a big business man in Glasgow—but he's retired now. I never met his equal for whinstone common sense. You've only to look at him to see that what he thinks about forty million others think also. He is the incarnate British spirit. He's a fine man, too, and you could trust him with any secret."

"How old?" Barbon asked.

"A few years older than Craw. Not unlike him in appearance. The morn's Sunday and there's no train where he lives. What about sending a car with a letter from me and bringing him back, if he'll come? I believe he'd do the trick."

Barbon, who was ready to seek any port in the storm, and was already in the grip of Dougal's fierce vitality, wearily agreed. The pleasantness of the dinner had for a little banished his anxieties, but these had now returned and he foresaw a sleepless night. His thoughts turned naturally to his errant master.

"I wonder where Mr Craw is at this moment?" he said.

"I wonder, too. But if he's with Jaikie I bet he's seeing life."



CHAPTER 9

THE FIRST DAY OF THE HEJIRA—THE INN AT WATERMEETING

The October dawn filled the cup of the Garroch with a pale pure light. There had been no frost in the night, but the heather of the bogs, the hill turf, and the gravel of the road had lost their colour under a drench of dew. The mountains were capped with mist, and the air smelt raw and chilly. Jaikie, who, foreseeing a difficult day, had prepared for it by a swim in the loch and a solid breakfast, found it only tonic. Not so Mr Craw, who, as he stood before the cottage, shivered, and buttoned up the collar of his raincoat.

Mrs Catterick scornfully refused payment. "Is it likely?" she cried. "Ye didna come here o' your ain wull. A body doesna tak siller for bein' a jyler."

"I will see that you are remunerated in some other way," Mr Craw said pompously.

He had insisted on wearing his neat boots, which his hostess had described as "pappymashy," and refused those which Jaikie had brought from Castle Gay. Also he made no offer to assume Dougal's pack, with the consequence that Jaikie added it to his own, and presented the appearance of Christian at the Wicket-gate in some old woodcut from the Pilgrim's Progress. Mr Craw even endued his hands with a pair of bright wash-leather gloves, and with his smart Homburg hat and silver-knobbed malacca looked exactly like a modish elderly gentleman about to take a morning stroll at a fashionable health-resort. So incongruous a figure did he present in that wild trough of the hills, that Mrs Catterick cut short her farewells and politely hid her laughter indoors.

Thus fantastically began the great Hejira.

Mr Craw was in a bad temper, and such a mood was new to him, for in his life small berufflements had been so rare that his ordinary manner was a composed geniality. Therefore, besides being cross, he was puzzled, and a little ashamed. He told himself that he was being scandalously treated by Fate, and for the first half-mile hugged his miseries like a sulky child. . . . Then he remembered that officially he had never admitted the existence of Fate. In how many eloquent articles had he told his readers that man was the maker of his own fortunes, the captain of his soul? He had preached an optimism secure against the bludgeonings of Chance! . . . This would never do. He cast about to find an attitude which he could justify.

He found it in his intention to go straight to London. There was vigour and decision in that act. He was taking up arms against his sea of troubles. As resolutely as he could he shut out the thought of what might happen when he got to London—further Evallonian solicitations with a horrid chance of publicity. London was at any rate familiar ground, unlike this bleak, sodden wilderness. He had never hated anything so much as that moorland cottage where for two days and three nights he had kept weary vigil. Still more did he loathe the present prospect of sour bent, gaping hags, and mist low on the naked hills.

"How far is it to the nearest railway station?" he asked the burdened figure at his side.

"It's about twelve miles to Glendonan," Jaikie answered.

"Do you know anything about the trains?"

"It's a branch line, but there's sure to be an afternoon train to Gledmouth. The night mail stops there about eleven, I think."

Twelve miles! Mr Craw felt some sinking of the heart, which was succeeded by a sudden consciousness of manhood. He was doing a bold thing, the kind of thing he had always admired. He had not walked twelve miles since he was a boy, but he would force himself to finish the course, however painful it might be. The sight of the laden Jaikie woke a momentary compunction, but he dared not cumber himself with the second pack. After all he was an elderly man and must husband his strength. He would find some way of making it up to Jaikie.

The road, after leaving the Back House of the Garroch, crossed a low pass between the Caldron and a spur of the great Muneraw, and then, after threading a patch of bog, began to descend the upper glen of a burn which joined a tributary of the distant Gled. Mr Craw's modish boots had been tolerable on the fine sand and gravel of the first mile. They had become very wet in the tract of bog, where the heather grew thick in the middle of the road, and long pools of inky water filled the

ruts. But as the path began its descent they became an abomination. The surface was cut by frequent rivulets which had brought down in spate large shoals of gravel. Sometimes it was deep, fine scree, sometimes a rockery of sharp-pointed stones. The soles of his boots, thin at the best, and now as sodden as a sponge, were no protection against the unyielding granite. His feet were as painful as if he was going barefoot, and his ankles ached with constant slips and twists.

He was getting warm, too. The morning chill had gone out of the air, and, though the sky was still cloudy, there was a faint glow from the hidden sun. Mr Craw began by taking off his gloves. Then he removed his raincoat, and carried it on his arm. It kept slipping and he trod on its tail, the while he minced delicately to avoid the sharper stones.

The glen opened and revealed a wide shallow valley down which flowed one of the main affluents of the Gled. The distances were hazy, but there was a glimpse of stubble fields and fir plantations, proof that they were within view of the edge of the moorlands. Mr Craw, who for some time had been walking slowly and in evident pain, sat down on the parapet of a little bridge and lifted his feet from the tormenting ground.

"How many miles more?" he asked, and when told "Seven," he groaned.

Jaikie unbuckled his packs.

"It's nonsense your wearing these idiotic things," he said firmly. "In another hour you'll have lamed yourself for a week." From Dougal's pack he extracted a pair of stout country boots and from his own a pair of woollen socks. "If you don't put these on, I'll have to carry you to Glendonan."

Mr Craw accepted the articles with relief. He bathed his inflamed and aching feet in the burn, and encased them in Jaikie's homespun. When he stood up he regarded his new accoutrements with disfavour. Shooting boots did not harmonise with his neat blue trousers, and he had a pride in a natty appearance. "I can change back at the station," he observed, and for the first time that day he stepped out with a certain freedom.

His increased comfort made him magnanimous.

"You had better give me the second pack," he volunteered.

"I can manage all right," was Jaikie's answer. "It's still a long road to Glendonan."

Presently, as the track dipped to the levels by the stream side, the surface improved, and Mr Craw, relieved of his painful bodily preoccupation, and no longer compelled to hop from stone to stone, returned to forecasting the future. Tomorrow morning he would be in London. He would go straight to the office, and, the day being Sunday, would have a little time to think things out. Bamff, his manager, was in America. He could not summon Barbon, who had his hands full at Castle Gay. Allins—Allins was on holiday—believed to be in Spain—he might conceivably get hold of Allins. There were others, too, who could assist him—his solicitor, Mr Merkins, of Merkins, Thrawn & Merkins—he had no secrets from him. And Lord Wassell, whom he had recently brought on to the board of the View—Wassell was a resourceful fellow, and deeply in his debt.

He was slipping into a better humour. It had been a preposterous adventure—something to laugh over in the future—meminisse juvabit—how did the tag go?—he had used it only the other day in one of his articles. . . . He felt rather hungry—no doubt the moorland air. He ought to be able to get a decent dinner in Gledmouth. What about his berth in the sleeping-car? It was the time of year when a good many people were returning from Scotland. Perhaps he had better wire about it from Glendonan. . . . And then a thought struck him, which brought him to a halt and set him feeling for his pocket-book.

It was Mr Craw's provident habit always to carry in his pocket-book a sum of one hundred pounds in twenty-pound notes as an insurance against accidents. He opened the pocket-book with anxiety, and the notes were not there.

He remembered only too well what had happened. The morning he had gone to Glasgow he had emptied the contents of his pocket-book on his dressing-table in order to find the card with his architect's address. He had not restored the notes, because they made the book too bulky, and he had proposed to get instead two fifty-pound notes from Barbon, who kept the household's petty cash. He had forgotten to do this, and now he had nothing on his person but the loose change left from his Glasgow journey. It lay in his hand, and amounted to twelve shillings, a sixpence, two threepenny bits, and four pennies.

To a man who for the better part of a lifetime has taken money for granted and has never had to give a thought to its importance in the conduct of life, a sudden shortage comes as a horrid surprise. He finds it an outrage alike against decency and dignity. He is flung neck and crop into a world which he does not comprehend, and his dismay is hysterical.

"I have no money," he stammered, ignoring the petty coins in his palm.

Jaikie slid the packs to the ground.

"But you offered Dougal and me twenty pounds to go to Castle Gay," he protested.

Mr Craw explained his misadventure. Jaikie extracted from an inner pocket a skimpy leather purse, while the other watched his movements with the eyes of a hungry dog who believes that there is provender going. He assessed its contents.

"I have two pounds, thirteen and ninepence," he announced. "I didn't bring much, for you don't spend money in the hills, and I knew that Dougal had plenty."

"That's no earthly use to me," Mr Craw wailed.

"I don't know. It will buy you a third-class ticket to London and leave something for our meals today. You're welcome to it."

"But what will you do?"

"I'll go back to Mrs Catterick, and then I'll find Dougal. I can wire for some more. I'm pretty hard up just now, but there's a few pounds left in my allowance. You see, YOU can't get any more till you get to London."

Mr Craw's breast was a maelstrom of confused emotions. He was not without the quality which in Scotland is called "mense," and he was reluctant to take advantage of Jaikie's offer and leave that unfortunate penniless. Moreover, the thought of travelling third-class by night roused his liveliest disgust. Fear, too—for he would be mixed up in the crowd, without protection against the enemies who now beset his path. He shrank like a timid spinster from rough contacts. Almost to be preferred was this howling wilderness to the chances of such sordid travel.

"There's another way," said the helpful Jaikie. He wanted to get rid of his companion, but he was aware that it was his duty, if possible, to detain that companion at his side, and to detain him in the Canonry. The conclave at the Mains had instructed him to keep Mr Craw hidden, and he had no belief in London as a place of concealment. So, "against interest," as the lawyers say, he propounded an alternative.

"We could stay hereabouts for a couple of days, and I could borrow a bicycle and slip over to Castle Gay and get some money."

Mr Craw's face cleared a little. He was certain now that the moors of the Canonry were better than a third-class in the London train. He brooded a little and then announced that he favoured the plan.

"Good," said Jaikie. "Well, we needn't go near Glendonan. We'd better strike south and sleep the night at Watermeeting. It's a lonely place, but there's quite a decent little inn, and it's on the road to Gledmouth. To-morrow I'll try to raise a bicycle and get over to Castle Gay, and with luck you may be in London on Monday morning. We needn't hurry, for it's not above ten miles to Watermeeting, and it doesn't matter when we turn up."

"I insist on carrying one of the packs," said Mr Craw, and, his future having cleared a little, and being conscious of better behaviour, he stepped out with a certain alacrity and ease.

Presently they left the road, which descended into the Gled valley, and took a right-hand turning which zigzagged up the containing ridge and came out on a wide benty moor, once the best black-game country in Scotland, which formed the glaxis of the chief range of the hills. A little after midday they lunched beside a spring, and Mr Craw was moved to commend Mrs Catterick's scones, which at breakfast he had despised. He accepted one of Jaikie's cigarettes. There was even a little conversation. Jaikie pointed out the main summits among a multitude which had now become ominously blue and clear, and Mr Craw was pleased to show a certain interest in the prospect of the Muneraw, the other side of which, he said, could be seen from the upper windows of Castle Gay. He became almost confidential. Landscape, he said, he loved, but with a temperate affection; his major interest was reserved for humanity. "In these hills there must be some remarkable people. The shepherds, for instance—"

"There's some queer folk in the hills," said Jaikie. "And I doubt there's going to be some queer weather before this day is out. The wind's gone to the south-west, and I don't like the way the mist is coming down on the Black Dod."

He was right in his forecast. About two o'clock there came a sudden sharpness into the air, the hills were blotted out in vapour, and a fine rain descended. The wind rose; the drizzle became a blast, and then a deluge, the slanting, drenching downfall of October. Jaikie's tattered burberry and Mr Craw's smart raincoat were soon black with the rain, which soaked the legs of their trousers and trickled behind their upturned collars. To the one this was a common experience, but to the other it was a revelation, for he had not been exposed to weather for many a year. He thought darkly of rheumatism, the

twinges he had suffered from two years ago and had gone to Aix to cure. He might get pneumonia— it was a common complaint nowadays—several of his acquaintances had fluffed out like a candle with it—healthy people, too, as healthy as himself. He shivered, and thought he felt a tightness in his chest. “Can we not shelter?” he asked, casting a woeful eye round the wet periphery of moor.

“It’ll last the day,” said Jaikie. “We’d better step out, and get under cover as soon as we can. There’s no house till Watermeeting.”

The thought of Watermeeting did not console Mr Craw. A wetting was bad enough, but at the end of it there was no comforting hot bath and warm dry clothes, and the choice between bed and a deep armchair by a fire. They would have to pig it in a moorland inn, where the food would certainly be execrable, and the bed probably damp, and he had no change of raiment. Once again Mr Craw’s mind became almost hysterical. He saw sickness, possibly death, in the near future. His teeth were chattering, and, yes—he was certain he had a pain in his side.

Something loomed up in the haze, and he saw that it was a man with, in front of him, a bedraggled flock of sheep. He was a loutish fellow, much bent in the shoulders, with leggings, which lacked most of the buttons, over his disreputable breeks. By his side padded a big ruffianly collie, and he led by a string a miserable-looking terrier, at which the collie now and then snapped viciously.

The man did not turn as they came abreast. He had a bag slung on his shoulders by a string, from which protruded the nose of a bottle and the sodden end of a newspaper. The peak of his cap hid the upper part of his face; the lower part was composed of an unshaven chin, a gap-toothed mouth, and a red ferrety nose.

“Ill weather,” said Jaikie.

“Hellish,” was the answer. A sharp eye stole a sidelong glance and took in Mr Craw’s prosperous but water-logged garments. The terrier sniffed wistfully at Jaikie’s leg. Jaikie looked like the kind of person who might do something for him.

“Hae ye a smoke?” the drover asked. Jaikie reluctantly parted with a cigarette, which the other lit by making a shelter of his cap against the wind. The terrier, in order to avoid the collie, wove its string round his legs and received a savage kick.

“Where are you bound for?” Jaikie asked.

“Near by. I’ve brocht thae sheep frae Cumnock way.” Then, as an overflow of water from the creases of his cap reached his unwashed neck, he broke into profanity about the weather, concluding with a malediction on the unhappy terrier, who showed signs of again entangling his lead. The dog seemed to be a cross between wire-haired and Sealyham, a wretched little fellow with a coat as thick as a sheep’s, a thin piebald face, whiskers streaked backwards by the wet, and a scared eye. The drover brought his stick down hard on its hind quarters, and as it jumped howling away from him the collie snapped at its head. It was a bad day for the terrier.

“That’s a nice little beast,” said Jaikie.

“No bad. Pure-bred Solomon. He’s yours if ye’ll pay my price.”

“I’ve no use for a dog. Where did you get him?”

“A freend bred him. I’m askin’ a couple o’ quid. I brocht him along wi’ me to sell. What about the other yin o’ ye? He’d be the better o’ a dug.”

Mr Craw did not look as if such an acquisition would ease his discomfort. He was glancing nervously at the collie which had turned on him an old-fashioned eye. Jaikie quickened his pace, and began to circumvent the sheep.

“Haud on,” said the drover. “I turn up the next road. Gie’s your crack till the turn.”

But Jaikie had had enough of him, and the last they heard was the whining of the terrier, who had again been maltreated.

“Is that one of the hill shepherds?” Mr Craw asked.

“Hill shepherd! He’s some auction-ring tout from Glasgow. Didn’t you recognise the tongue? I’m sorry for that little dog. He stole it, of course. I hope he sells it before he kills it.”

The high crown of the moorland now began to fall away into a valley which seemed to be tributary to the Gled. The two were conscious that they were descending, but they had no prospect beyond a yard or two of dripping roadside heather.

Already the burns were rising, and tawny rivulets threaded the road, all moving in the direction they were going. Jaikie set a round pace, for he wanted to save his companion from a chill, and Mr Craw did his best to keep up with it. Sometimes he stopped, put his hand to his side, and gasped—he was looking for the pain which was the precursor of pneumonia. Soon he grew warm, and his breath came short, and there had to be frequent halts to relieve his distress. In this condition of physical wretchedness and the blackest mental gloom Mr Craw became aware of a roaring of flooded waters and a bridge which spanned a porter-coloured torrent. The sight of that wintry stream combined with the driving rain and the enveloping mist to send a chill almost of terror to Mr Craw's heart. He was terribly sundered from the warm kindly world which he knew. Even so, from an icy shore, might some lost Arctic explorer have regarded the approach of the Polar night.

"That's the Gryne burn," said Jaikie reverentially. "It's coming down heavy. It joins the Water of Stark out there in the haugh. The inn's not a hundred yards on."

Presently they reached a low building, a little withdrawn from the road, on which a half-obliterated sign announced that one Thomas Johnston was licensed to sell ale and tobacco. Jaikie's memory was of a sunny place visited once in a hot August noon, when he had drunk ginger beer on the settle by the door, and amid the sleepy clucking of hens and the bleating of sheep had watched the waters of Gryne and Stark beginning their allied journey to the lowlands. Now, as it came into view through the veils of rain, it looked a shabby place, the roughcast of the walls blotched and peeling, the unthatched stacks of bog-hay sagging drunkenly, and a disconsolate up-ended cart with a broken shaft blocking one of the windows. But at any rate here was shelter, and the smell of peat reek promised a fire.

In the stone-flagged kitchen a woman was sitting beside a table engaged in darning socks—a thin-faced elderly woman with spectacles. The kitchen was warm and comfortable, and, since she had been baking earlier in the day, there was an agreeable odour of food. On the big old-fashioned hearth a bank of peats glowed dully, and sent out fine blue spirals.

The woman looked them over very carefully in response to Jaikie's question.

"Bide the nicht? I'm sure I dinna ken. My man's lyin'—he rickit his back bringin' hame the peats, and the doctor winna let him up afore the morn. It's a sair business lookin' after him, and the lassie's awa' hame for her sister's mairriage. Ye'll no be wantin' muckle?"

"That's a bad job for you," said Jaikie sympathetically. "We won't be much trouble. We'd like to get dry, and we want some food, and a bed to sleep in. We're on a walking tour and we'll take the road again first thing in the morning."

"I could maybe manage that. There's just the one room, for the ceiling's down in the ither, and we canna get the masons out from Gledmouth to set it right. But there's twa beds in it . . ."

Then spoke Mr Craw, who had stripped off his raiment and flung it from him, and had edged his way to the warmth of the peats.

"We must have a private room, madam. I presume you have a private sitting-room. Have a fire lit in it as soon as possible."

"Ye're unco partic'lar," was the answer. "What hinders ye to sit in the kitchen? There's the best room, of course, but there hasna been a fire in the grate since last New Year's Day, and I doot the stirlins have been biggin' in the lum."

"The first thing," said Jaikie firmly, "is to get dry. It's too early to go to bed. If you'll show us our room we'll get these wet things off. I can manage fine in pyjamas, but my friend here is not so young as me, and he would be the better of something warmer. You couldn't lend him a pair of breeks, mistress? And maybe an old coat?"

Jaikie, when he chose to wheedle, was hard to resist, and the woman regarded him with favour. She also regarded Mr Craw appraisingly. "He's just about the size o' my man. I daresay I could find him some auld things o' Tam's. . . . Ye'd better tak off your buits here and I'll show ye your bedroom."

In their wet stocking-soles the travellers followed their hostess up an uncarpeted staircase to a long low room, where were two beds and two wash-stands and little else. The rain drummed on the roof, and the place smelt as damp as a sea-cave. She brought a pail of hot water from the kitchen kettle, and two large rough towels. "I'll be gettin' your tea ready," she said. "Bring down your wet claithe, and I'll hang them in the kitchen."

Jaikie stripped to the skin and towelled himself violently, but Mr Craw hung back. He was not accustomed to baring his body before strangers. Slowly and warily he divested himself of what had once been a trim blue suit, the shirt which was now a limp rag, the elegant silk underclothing. Then he stood irresolute and shamefaced, while Jaikie rummaged in the packs and announced gleefully that their contents were quite dry. Jaikie turned to find his companion shivering in the blast

from the small window which he had opened.

"Tuts, man, this will never do," he cried. "You'll get your death of cold. Rub yourself with the towel. Hard, man! You want to get back your circulation."

But Mr Craw's efforts were so feeble that Jaikie took the matter in hand. He pummelled and slapped and scrubbed the somewhat obese nudity of his companion, as if he had been grooming a horse. He poured out a share of the hot water from the pail, and made him plunge his head into it.

In the midst of these operations the door was half opened and a bundle of clothes was flung into the room. "That's the best I can dae for ye," said the voice of the hostess.

Jaikie invested Mr Craw with a wonderful suit of pale blue silk pyjamas, and over them a pair of Mr Johnston's trousers of well-polished pepper-and-salt homespun, and an ancient black tailed coat which may once have been its owner's garb for Sabbaths and funerals. A strange figure the great man presented as he stumbled down the stairs, for on his feet were silk socks and a pair of soft Russia leather slippers—provided from Castle Gay—while the rest of him was like an elderly tradesman who has relinquished collar and tie in the seclusion of the home. But at any rate he was warm again, and he felt no more premonitions of pneumonia.

Mrs Johnston met them at the foot of the stairs and indicated a door. "That's the best room. I've kinnled a fire, but I doot it's no drawin' weel wi' thae stirlins."

They found themselves in a small room in which for a moment they could see nothing because of the volume of smoke pouring from the newly-lit fire of sticks and peat. The starlings had been malignly active in the chimney. Presently through the haze might be discerned walls yellow with damp, on which hung a number of framed photographs, a mantelpiece adorned with china mugs and a clock out of action, several horsehair-covered chairs, a small, very hard sofa, and a round table decorated with two photograph albums, a book of views of Gledmouth, a workbox, and a blue-glass paraffin lamp.

Jaikie laboured with the poker at the chimney, but the obstruction was beyond him. Blear-eyed and coughing, he turned to find Mr Craw struggling with a hermetically-sealed window.

"We can't stay here," he spluttered. "This room's uninhabitable till the chimney's swept. Let's get back to the kitchen. Tea should be ready by now."

Mrs Johnston had spread a clean cloth on the kitchen table, and ham and eggs were sizzling on the fire. She smiled grimly when she saw them.

"I thocht ye would be smooored in the best room," she said. "Thae stirlins are a perfect torment. . . . Ay, ye can bide here and welcome. I aye think the kitchen's the nicest bit in the hoose. . . . There's a feck o' folk on the road the day, for there's been anither man here wantin' lodgings! I telled him we were fou' up, and that he could mak a bed on the hay in the stable. I didna like the look o' him, but a keeper o' a public daurna refuse a body a meal. He'll hae to get his tea wi' you."

Presently she planted a vast brown teapot on the table, and dished up the ham and eggs. Then, announcing that she must see to her husband, she left the kitchen.

Jaikie fell like a famished man on the viands, and Mr Craw, to his own amazement, followed suit. He had always been a small and fastidious eater, liking only very special kinds of food, and his chef had often a difficult task in tempting his capricious appetite. It was years since he had felt really hungry, and he never looked forward to the hour of dinner with the gusto of less fortunate mortals. But the hard walking in the rain, and the rough towelling in the bedroom, had awakened some forgotten instinct. How unlike the crisp shavings of bacon and the snowy puff-balls of eggs to which he was accustomed was this dish swimming in grease! Yet it tasted far better than anything he had eaten for ages. So did the thick oat-cakes and the new scones and the butter and the skim-milk cheese, and the strong tea sent a glow through his body. He had thought that he could tolerate nothing but the best China tea and little of that, and here he was drinking of the coarsest Indian brew. . . . He felt a sense of physical wellbeing to which he had long been a stranger. This was almost comfort.

The door opened and there entered the man they had met driving sheep. He had taken off his leggings, and his wet trouser ends flapped over his grimy boots. Otherwise he had made no toilet, except to remove his cap from his head and the bag from his shoulder. His lank black hair straggled over his eyes, and the eyes themselves were unpleasant. There must have been something left in the bottle whose nose had protruded from the bag.

He dropped into a chair and dragged it screamingly after him along the kitchen floor till he was within a yard of the table. Then he recognised the others.

"Ye're here," he observed. "Whit was a' your hurry? Gie's a cup o' tea. I'm no wantin' nae meat."

He was obviously rather drunk. Jaikie handed him a cup of tea, which, having dropped in four lumps of sugar, he drank noisily from the saucer. It steadied him, and he spread a scone thick with butter and jelly and began to wolf it. Mr Craw regarded him with extreme distaste and a little nervousness.

"Whit about the Solomon terrier?" he asked. "For twa quid he's yours."

The question was addressed to Mr Craw, who answered coldly that he was not buying dogs.

"Ay, but ye'll buy this dug."

"Where is it?" Jaikie asked.

"In the stable wi' the ither yin. Toff doesna like the wee dug, so I've tied them up in separate stalls, or he'd hae it chowed up."

The rest of the meal was given up to efforts on the part of the drover to effect a sale. His price came down to fifteen shillings and a glass of whisky. Questioned by Jaikie as to its pedigree, he embarked on a rambling tale, patently a lie, of a friend who bred Solomons and had presented him with this specimen in payment of a bet. Talk made the drover thirsty. He refused a second cup of tea and shouted for the hostess, and when Mrs Johnston appeared he ordered a bottle of Bass.

Jaikie, remembering the plans for the morrow, asked if there was such a thing as a bicycle about the place, and was told that her man possessed one. She saw no objection to his borrowing it for half a day. Jaikie had found favour in her eyes.

The drover drank his beer morosely and called for another bottle. Mrs Johnston glanced anxiously at Jaikie as she fulfilled the order, but Jaikie gave no sign. Now beer on the top of whisky is bad for the constitution, especially if little food has accompanied it, and soon the drover began to show that his case was no exception. His silence gave place to a violent garrulity. Thrusting his face close to the scandalised Mr Craw, he announced that that gentleman was gorily well going to buy the Solomon—that he had accepted the offer and that he would be sanguinarily glad to see the immediate colour of his money.

Mr Craw withdrew his chair, and the other lurched to his feet and came after him. The profanity of the drover, delivered in a hoarse roar, brought Mrs Johnston back in alarm. The seller's case was far from clear, but it seemed to be his argument that Mr Craw had taken delivery of a pup and was refusing payment. He was working himself into a fury at what he declared to be a case of strongly qualified bilk.

"Can ye dae naething wi' him?" the hostess wailed to Jaikie.

"I think we've had enough of him," was the answer. Then he lifted up his voice. "Hold on, man. Let's see the dog. We've never had a proper look at it."

But the drover was past caring about the details of the bargain. He was pursuing Mr Craw, who, he alleged, was in possession of monies rightly due to him, and Mr Craw was retreating from the fire to the vacant part of the floor where Jaikie stood.

Then suddenly came violent happenings. "Open the door, mistress," cried Jaikie. The drover turned furiously towards the voice, and found himself grabbed from behind and his arms forced back. He was a biggish fellow and managed to shake himself free. There was a vicious look in his eye, and he clutched the bread-knife from the table. Now, Mrs Johnston's rolling-pin lay on the dresser, and with this Jaikie hit him smartly on the wrist, causing the knife to clatter on the floor. The next second Jaikie's head had butted his antagonist in the wind, and, as he stumbled forward gasping, Jaikie twisted his right arm behind his back and held it in a cruel lock. The man had still an arm loose with which he tried to clutch Jaikie's hair, and, to his own amazement, Mr Craw found himself gripping this arm, and endeavouring to imitate Jaikie's tactics, the while he hammered with his knee at the drover's hind quarters. The propulsion of the two had its effect. The drover shot out of the kitchen into the rain, and the door was locked by Mrs Johnston behind him.

"He'll come back," Mr Craw quavered, repenting of his temerity.

"Not him," said Jaikie, as he tried to smooth his hair. "I know the breed. I know the very Glasgow close he comes out of. There's no fight in that scum. But I'm anxious about the little dog."

The kitchen was tidied up, and the two sat for a while by the peats. Then Mr Craw professed a desire for bed. Exercise and the recent excitement had made him weary; also he was still nervous about the drover and had a longing for sanctuary.

By going to bed he would be retiring into the keep of the fortress.

Jaikie escorted him upstairs, helped him to get out of Mr Johnston's trousers, borrowed an extra blanket from the hostess, and an earthenware hot bottle which she called a "pig," and saw him tucked up comfortably. Then Jaikie disappeared with the lamp, leaving him to solitude and darkness.

Mr Craw for a little experienced the first glimmerings of peace which he had known since that fateful hour at Kirkmichael when his Hejira began. He felt restful and secure, and as his body grew warm and relaxed he had even a moment of complacency. . . . He had, unsolicited, helped to eject a ruffian from the inn kitchen. He had laid violent hands upon an enemy. The thing was so novel in his experience that the memory of it sent a curious, pleasant little shiver through his frame. He had shown himself ready in a crisis, instant in action. The thinker had proved himself also the doer. He dwelt happily with the thought. . . . Strange waters surrounded him, but so far his head was above the waves. Might there not be a purpose in it all, a high purpose? All great teachers of mankind had had to endure some sojourn in the wilderness. He thought of Mahomet and Buddha, Galileo in prison, Spinoza grinding spectacles. Sometimes he had wondered if his life were not too placid for a man with a mission. These mishaps— temporary, of course—might prove a stepping-stone from which to rise to yet higher things.

Then he remembered the face of the drover as he had last seen him, distorted and malevolent. He had incurred the enmity of a desperate man. Would not his violence be terribly repaid? Even now, as the drunkenness died in him, his enemy would be planning his revenge. To-morrow—what of tomorrow? Mr Craw shuddered, and, as the bedroom door opened and a ray of candlelight ran across the ceiling, he almost cried aloud.

It was only Jaikie, who carried in his arms a small dog. Its thick fleece, once white, was matted in dry mud, and the finer hair of its face and legs, streaked down with wet, gave these parts of it so preposterous an air of leanness, that it looked like a dilapidated toy dog which had lost its wheels. But it appeared to be content. It curled itself at the foot of Jaikie's bed, and, before beginning its own toilet, licked his hand.

"I've bought that fellow's dog," Jaikie announced. "It must have been stolen, but it has come through a lot of hands. I beat him down to four shillings."

"Were you not afraid?" gasped Mr Craw.

"He's practically sober now," Jaikie went on. "You see, he barged into the cart beside the door and got a crack on the head that steadied him. There was nothing to be afraid of except his brute of a collie."

As Jaikie wriggled into bed he leaned forward and patted the head of his purchase. "I'm going to call him Woolworth," he said, "for he's as woolly as a sheep, and he didn't cost much."



CHAPTER 10

THE SECOND DAY OF THE HEJIRA—THE FORD CAR

The storm blew itself out in the night, and the travellers awoke to a morning of soft lights and clear, rain-washed distances. They awoke also to the pea-hen call of their hostess at the foot of the stairs.

"Megsty me!" ran the plaint. "D'ye ken what has happened? The body in the stable is off or I was up, and he's never paid for his supper. . . . Waur nor that!" (the voice rose to a keen) "He's ta'en yae pair o' the breeks that was dryin' afore the fire. The best pair! The blue yins!"

These last words drew Mr Craw precipitately from his bed. He thrust a scared head out of the bedroom door.

"What do you say, woman? My trousers!"

"Aye. Your trousers! Sorrow and disgrace yon blagyard has brocht on this hoose! Whae wad keep a public? But we'll set the pollis on him. As soon as my man's up, he'll yoke the gig an' get the pollis."

Jaikie added his voice to the clamour.

"I'll be down in a jiffey, mistress, and I'll go after him on your man's bicycle."

"Ye daurna. He'll kill ye. He's a desperate blagyard."

"Give me my flannel bags," said Jaikie, "and I'll be on the road in ten minutes. He can't be many miles ahead."

But when the two descended to the kitchen—Mr Craw chastely habited in the trousers of Mr Johnston—they were met by a wild-eyed hostess and an apple-cheeked servant girl.

"Waur and waur!" wailed the former. "The scoondrel has stole Tam's bicycle, and he didna tak the Glendonan road, but the road to Gledmouth, and that's maistly doun hill. This lassie was bicyclin' back frae her mither's, and at the foot o' the Kirklaw brae she seen something by the roadside. She seen it was a bicycle, and she kent it for Tam's bicycle, and it was a' bashed to bits. The body maun hae run into the brig."

"How far off?" Jaikie asked.

"The better pairt o' fower miles. Na, ye'll no make up on him. Yon's the soupple blagyard, and he'll be hidin' in a Gledmouth close long or ye gat near him. Wae's me for Tam's guid new bicycle that cost ten pund last Martinmas."

"Is it much damaged?" Jaikie asked the girl.

"Dung a' to smithers," was the answer. "The front wheel's the shape o' a peesweep's egg, and the handle-bars are like a coo's horn."

"Heard ye ever the like?" Mrs Johnston lamented. "And the pollis will never get him, and if they did he wad gang to jyle, but he couldna pay the price o' the bicycle. It's an unco blow, for Tam has nae siller to spare."

It is to Mr Craw's credit that he did not think only of the bearing of this disaster on his own affairs.

"I am very sorry for the misfortune," he told his hostess. "At the moment I am travelling light and have little money. But I am not without means, and I will see that you receive the sum of ten pounds within a week."

He was met by a solemn stare. Certainly with his borrowed trousers, much stained collar, and draggled tie (for Jaikie had forgotten to bring from Castle Gay these minor adornments), he did not look like a moneyed man. "Thank ye kindly," she said, but it was obvious that she put no trust in his promise.

Breakfast was an uncomfortable meal, hurriedly served, for Mrs Johnston was busy upstairs, preparing for the emergence of her husband from his sick room. Beside Jaikie sat Woolworth, his new purchase, very hungry, but not yet certain how far he dared to presume. He pirouetted about on his lengthy hind legs, and then slapped Jaikie's arm with an urgent paw. Jaikie prepared for him a substantial meal of scraps, which was devoured in a twinkling. "I wonder when that beast last saw food," he observed.

Then he borrowed an old dishcloth and a piece of soap, and retired with Woolworth to the pump. When Mr Craw joined them the terrier, shivering violently, and with a face of woe, had been thoroughly scrubbed, and now was having his thick fleece combed with a gap-toothed instrument which Jaikie had discovered in the stable. Followed a drastic dressing down with a broken brush, while Jaikie made the same hissing sounds that had accompanied his towelling of Mr Craw the

previous evening. Jaikie had said no word of plans at breakfast. He seemed to be waiting for his companion to make the first comment on a shattering miscarriage.

"I cannot go to London in these clothes," said Mr Craw, looking down at the well-worn grey breeks.

Jaikie's eyes left Woolworth and regarded him critically. He was certainly a different figure from the spruce gentleman who, twenty-four hours ago, had left the Back House of the Garroch. He was not aggressively disreputable, but the combination of trousers, blue jacket, and dirty collar made him look like a jobbing carpenter, or a motor mechanic from some provincial garage. The discordant element in the picture was his face, which belied his garb, for it was the face of a man accustomed to deference, mildly arrogant, complacent for all the trouble in his eyes. Such a face never belonged to a mechanic. Jaikie, puzzled to find a name for the apparition, decided that Mr Craw had become like the kind of man who spoke on Sunday in Hyde Park, a politician from the pavement. He remembered a Communist orator in Glasgow who had had something of the same air.

"I can't get to Castle Gay without a bicycle, and be back in time," was all he said.

"That means postponing still further my journey to London," said Mr Craw. The curious thing was that he did not say it dolefully. Something had changed in him this morning. His tone was resigned, almost philosophic. A sound sleep after a day of hard exercise had given him a novel sense of physical well-being. He had just eaten, with a hearty appetite, a very plain breakfast, at which his chef would have shuddered. The tonic air of the upland morning put vigour into his blood. He was accustomed to start his day with a hot bath, and emerge from warm rooms with his senses a little dulled. This morning he had had no bath of any kind, yet he felt cleaner than usual, and his eyes and nostrils and ears seemed to be uncommonly awake. He had good long-distance sight, so he discarded his spectacles, which for the moment were useless, and observed with interest the links of the two flooded streams with some stray cocks of moorland hay bobbing on their current. . . . There were golden plover whistling on the hill behind the inn; he heard them with a certain delight in the fitness of their wild call to that desert. . . . He sniffed the odour of wet heather and flood water and peat reek—and something else, homely and pleasant, which recalled very distant memories. That was, of course, the smell of cows; he had forgotten that cows smelt so agreeably.

"Have you anything to propose?" he asked in a tone which was quite amiable.

Jaikie looked up sharply, and saw that in his companion's face which he had not seen before, and scarcely expected.

"I doubt there's nothing for it but to make our way round the butt-end of the hills towards Portaway. That will bring us near Castle Gay, and I'll find a chance to see Dougal and Barbon and get some money. . . . It's at least twenty-seven miles to Portaway, but we needn't get there to-night. I know most of the herds, and we can easily find a place to stop at when we get tired. It's a grand day for the hills."

"Very well," said Mr Craw, and his tone was rather of contentment than of resignation.

They paid their modest bill, and put a luncheon of scones and cheese in their packs, one of which Mr Craw insisted on shouldering. He reiterated his promise to pay for the bicycle, and Mrs Johnston, assured of his good will if not of his means, shook his hand. The voice of the convalescent husband cut short their leave-takings, and their last recollection of the place was a confused noise within, caused by that husband, with many appeals to his Maker, beginning a cautious descent of the stairs.

Almost at once they left the Gledmouth highway and turned up a green loaning, an old drove-road which zigzagged along the face of a heather hill. Woolworth at first trotted docilely at Jaikie's heels, but soon, lured by various luscious scents, he took to investigating the environs. There was not a cloud in the sky, and the firmament was the palest blue, infinitely clear, with a quality of light which made the lowlands to the south and east seem like some background in an Italian primitive. There was little sound but the scrunch of their boots on the patches of scree, and a great crying of birds, but from very far away came an echo of bells, ringing to kirk in some distant clachan. Except for an occasional summons to Woolworth Jaikie spoke no word, for he was not much given to speech. Mr Craw, too, was silent. He was thinking his own thoughts.

He was thinking about Death, an odd subject for a shining morning. At the back of his mind he had a great fear of death, against which the consolations were void of that robust philosophy which he preached in public. His fear took a curious shape. He had made for himself a rich environment of money and houses and servants and prestige. So long as he lived he was on a pinnacle above the crowd, secure from all common ills. But when he died he would be no more than a

tramp in a ditch. He would be carried out naked from his cosy shelter to lie in the cold earth, and his soul—he believed in the soul—would go shivering into the infinite spaces. Mr Craw had often rebuked himself for thinking in such materialist terms of the ultimate mystery, but whatever his reason might say his fancy kept painting the same picture. Stripped cold and bare! The terror of it haunted him, and sometimes he would lie awake at night and grapple with it. . . . He felt that men who led a hard life, the poor man with famine at his threshold, the sailor on the sea, the soldier in the trench, must think of death with more complacency. They had less to lose, there was less to strip from them before the chilly journeying. . . . Sometimes he had wished that he could be like them. If he could only endure discomfort and want for a little—only feel that the gap was narrower between his cosseted life and the cold clay and the outer winds! . . . Now he had a feeling that he was bridging the gap. He was exposed to weather like any tinker, he was enduring fatigue and cold and occasional hunger, and he was almost enjoying it. To this indoor man the outdoor world was revealing itself as something strange and wild and yet with an odd kindness at the heart of it. Dimly there was a revelation at work, not only of Nature but of his own soul.

Jaikie's voice woke him out of his dreams. He had halted, and was pointing to a bird high up in the sky.

"There's a buzzard," he cried. "Listen. You're a great writer, Mr Craw, but I think that most writers go wrong about birds. How would you describe that sound?"

"Mewing," was the answer.

"Right. People talk about a buzzard screaming, but it mews like a sick cat. . . . I've heard a kestrel scream, but not a buzzard. Listen to that, too. That's a raven."

A bird was coasting along the hill-side, with its mate higher up on a bank of shingle.

"They say a raven croaks. It's sharper than that. It's a bark. . . . Words are good things, if you get them right."

Mr Craw was interested. Words were his stock in trade, out of which he had won fortune. Was there not capital to be made out of these novel experiences? He saw himself writing with a new realism. He never read criticisms, but he was aware that he had his critics. Here was a chance to confound them.

"I thought that you might want to write," Jaikie went on, "so I brought something in my pack. Barbon said you had a special kind of envelope in which you sent your articles, and that these envelopes were opened first in the mail at your office. I got a batch of them from him, and some paper and pencils. He said you always wrote with a pencil."

Mr Craw was touched. He had not expected such consideration from this taciturn young man. He was also flattered. This youth realised that his was an acquisitive and forward-looking mind, which could turn a harsh experience into a message of comfort for the world. His brain began to work happily at the delightful task of composition. He thought of vivid phrases about weather, homely idioms heard in the inn, word-pictures of landscapes, tough shreds of philosophy, and all coloured with a fine, manly, out-of-doors emotion. There was a new manner waiting for him. When they sat down to lunch by a well-head very near the top of the Callowa watershed, he felt the cheerfulness of one on the brink of successful creation.

Munching his scones and cheese, he became talkative.

"You are a young man," he said. "I can remember when I also was twenty. It was a happy time, full of dreams. It has been my good fortune to carry those dreams with me throughout my life. Yes, I think I was not yet twenty when I acquired my philosophy. The revelation came to me after reading Thomas Carlyle's 'Characteristics.' Do you know the essay?"

Jaikie shook his head. He was an omnivorous reader, but he had found Carlyle heavy going.

"Ah, well! That great man is too little read today, but his turn will come again. I learned from him not to put too high a value upon the mere intellect. He taught me that the healthy life is the unconscious life, and that it is in man's dim illogical instincts that truth often lies. We are suffering today, Mr Galt, from a surfeit of clever logicians. But it is the biologist rather than the logician or the mathematician to whom we should look for guidance. The infinite power and value of the unreasoned has always been one of my master principles."

"I know," said Jaikie. He remembered various articles above Mr Craw's signature which had appealed to what he called "the abiding instincts of the people," and he had wondered at the time how any man could be so dogmatic about the imponderable.

"From that principle," the other went on, "I deduce my optimism. If we live by reason only we must often take a dark view of the world and lose hope. But the irrational instinct is always hopeful, for it is the instinct to live. You must have observed the astonishing cheerfulness of the plain man, when the intellectual despairs. It was so in the War. Optimism is

not a precondition of thought, but it is a precondition of life. Thus mankind, which has the will to continue, 'never turns its back, but marches breast-forward.'" He filled his chest and delivered the full quotation from Browning.

Jaikie, to whom Browning had always seemed like a slightly intoxicated parson, shifted uncomfortably.

"I hope you do not affect pessimism," said Mr Craw. "I believe it is often a foolish pose of youth. Dishonest, too."

"I don't know," was the answer. "No. I'm not a pessimist. But I haven't been through bad enough times to justify me in being an optimist. You want to have been pretty hardly tried before you have any right to say that the world is good."

"I do not follow."

"I mean that to declare oneself an optimist, without having been down into the pit and come out on the other side, looks rather like bragging."

"I differ profoundly. Personal experience is not the decisive factor. You have the testimony of the ages to support your faith."

"Did you ever read *Candide*?" Jaikie asked.

"No," said Mr Craw. "Why?"

But Jaikie felt that it would take too long to explain, so he did not answer.

The drove-road meandered up and down glens and across hill-shoulders till it found itself descending to the valley of one of the Callowa's principal tributaries, in which ran a road from Gledmouth to Portaway. The travellers late in the afternoon came to the edge of that road, which on their left might be seen winding down from the low moorish tableland by which it had circumvented the barrier of the high mountains. On their right, a quarter of a mile away, it forked, one branch continuing down the stream to Portaway, twelve miles distant, while the other kept west around a wooded spur of hill.

Mr Craw squatted luxuriously on a dry bank of heather. He had not a notion where he had got to, but spiritually he was at ease, for he felt once again master of himself. He had stopped forecasting the immediate future, and had his eye on the articles which he was going to write, the fresh accent he would bring to his messages. He sat in a bush like a broody hen, the now shapeless Homburg hat squashed over his head, the image of a ruminating tramp.

Jaikie had gone down to the road fifty yards away, where a stream fell in pools. He was thirsty, since, unlike his companion, he had not drunk copiously of wayside fountains. As he knelt to drink, the noise of an approaching car made him raise his head, and he watched an ancient Ford pass him and take the fork on the left, which was the road to Portaway. It was clearly a hired car, presumably from Gledmouth. In it sat the kind of driver one would expect, a youth with a cap on one side of his brow and an untidy mackintosh. The other occupant was a young man wearing a light grey overcoat and a bowler hat, a young man with a high-coloured face, and a small yellow moustache. It was a lonely place and an unfrequented road, but to his surprise he knew the traveller.

He watched the car swing down the valley towards Portaway, and was busy piecing together certain recollections, when he was recalled to attention by the shouts of Mr Craw from the hill-side. Mr Craw was in a state of excitement. He ran the fifty yards towards Jaikie with surprising agility.

"Did you see that?" he puffed. "The man in the car. It's my secretary, Sigismund Allins. I tried to stop him, but I was too late. He was on holiday in Spain, and was not expected back for another fortnight. I can only assume that Barbon has recalled him by wire. What a pity we missed him, for he could have provided us with the money we need. At any rate he could have arranged for sending it and my clothes from Castle Gay without troubling you to go there. . . . I am relieved to think Allins is back. He is a very resourceful man in an emergency."

"You are sure it was he?"

"Absolutely certain. I had a good look at him as the car passed, but I found my voice too late. I may be trusted to recognise the inmates of my own household."

Jaikie too had recognised the man, though he did not know his name. His memory went back to an evening in Cambridge a year before, when he had dined in what for him was strange company—the Grey Goose Club, a fraternity of rich young men who affected the Turf. It had been the day before the Cambridgeshire, and the talk had been chiefly of Newmarket. Among the guests had been a brisk gentleman who was not an undergraduate and who had been pointed out to him as a heroic and successful plunger. "He's got the View in his pocket," his host had told him, "and that, of course,

means that he gets the best tips.” He remembered that he had not liked the guest, whose talk sounded to him boastful and indecent. He had set him down as a faux bonhomme, noting the cold shiftiness of his light eyes. What was it that Alison had said of Mr Allins? “If you met him you would say that he wasn’t quite a gentleman.” He certainly would go thus far.

The last stage of the day’s walk in the purple October dusk was for Mr Craw a pleasant experience. He was agreeably tired. He was very hungry and had Jaikie’s promise of a not too distant meal, and his mind—this was always a factor in his comfort—was working busily. The sight of his secretary had assured him that his proper world could be readily recaptured when he wished, but he was content to dwell a little longer in the new world to which he had been so violently introduced. About six o’clock they reached the shepherd’s house of the Black Swire, some eight miles from Portaway, the eastern hirsell on the Knockraw estate. There Jaikie was given an effusive welcome by his old friends, the shepherd and his wife, and, since the house was new and commodious, they had a bedroom far superior to Mrs Catterick’s or that of the Watermeeting inn. Mr Craw faced without blenching a gigantic supper of the inevitable ham and eggs, and drank three cups of tea. At the meal he condescended affably, and discoursed with the shepherd, who was a stout Radical, on the prospects of the Canonry election. Jaikie had introduced him as a friend from London, and it pleased him to cultivate his anonymity, when by a word he might have set the shepherd staring.

The host and hostess went early to bed, after the fashion of countryfolk, and the two travellers were left alone by the fire. Mr Craw felt wakeful, so he had out the foolscap from Jaikie’s pack, and composed an article which, when it appeared two days later, gave pleasure to several million readers. Its subject was the value of the simple human instincts, too often overlaid by the civilised, the essential wisdom of the plain man. Just as a prophet must sojourn occasionally in the wilderness, so it was right for culture now and then to rub shoulders with simplicity, as Antæus drew his strength from contact with his mother, the Earth.

Jaikie sat by the peats, Woolworth’s head against his knee, and brooded. What he had seen that evening had altered his whole outlook. . . . Allins was not bound for Castle Gay. He had not mentioned it to his companion, but the road to Castle Gay was the right fork, and the car had taken the left. It was less than eight miles to Castle Gay by the straight road at the point where they had seen the car, but it was seventeen by Portaway. . . . Why should Allins go to Portaway when he was supposed to be on holiday? He did not believe for one moment that he had been recalled by Barbon, who had spoken of him coldly. He was Mr Craw’s protégé, not Barbon’s. . . . He must have come from Gledmouth, probably arriving there by the 6.30 train from the south. Why had he chosen that route to Portaway? It was longer than by the coast, and a most indifferent road. But it was lonely, and his only reason must have been that he wanted to be unobserved. . . . Jaikie had a very clear picture of Allins that night at the Grey Goose Club. Was that the sort of fox to be safely domesticated by an innocent like Craw?

The innocent in question was busy at his article, sometimes sucking the end of his pencil, sometimes scribbling with a happy smirk, sometimes staring into the fire. Jaikie, as his eyes dwelt on him, had a sudden conviction about two things. One was that he liked him. The other was that this business was far more complicated than even Dougal realised. It was more than protecting the privacy of a newspaper proprietor and saving his face. There were darker things to be looked for than rival pressmen and persistent Evallonians.

As this conviction became firm in his mind, Jaikie felt an immense access of cheerfulness. There was going to be some fun in the business after all.



CHAPTER 11

THE TROUBLES OF A JOURNALIST

Mr Albert Tibbets, after his meeting with Dougal in Portaway, spent an unprofitable day. He duly received the second wire from his chief, confirming him in his view of the Craw mystery, and urging an instant and unrelenting quest. Fired with these admonitions, he proceeded to Castle Gay to carry out his intention of “comforting Barbon.” But he found many difficulties in his path. He was refused admission, as he expected, at both the lodge gates. When, after a good deal of trouble and considerable loss of skin, he twice made his way into the park, he was set upon by the satellites of Mackillop and rudely ejected. The second time, indeed, he received so rough a handling that even his hardy spirit was daunted. He retired to the inn at Starr to write out his notes and perpend the situation.

He was convinced that Mr Craw had been lost, and that he had not travelled south. But it was possible that by this time he was back at the Castle. In that case it was his business to find out the reason why the Castle itself had been so gravely perturbed. There was a mystery somewhere, and it behoved him, for the credit of his paper, to unriddle it. If he could come on the secret, he might use it to compel an interview with Mr Craw, which would be a triumph of a high order. But nothing could be done by daylight with those watchful myrmidons. Mr Tibbets, like other conspirators, waited for the darkness.

He had no particular plans when, fortified by a good dinner, he set out on his motor-bicycle at the hour of half-past seven. Rather aimlessly he made his way to the principal lodge near the Mains, and set himself down opposite it to smoke a pipe and consider his tactics. Almost immediately he was rewarded by a remarkable sight. A big closed car slid up the road and stopped at the lodge. Apparently it was expected, for the gates were at once opened. It passed through, and the bars fell behind it, but not before Mr Tibbets had had a glimpse of its occupants. He saw that they were men, and one at least was in evening dress, for he caught a glimpse of a white shirt-front.

This was news with a vengeance. This party had come to dine at the Castle—not to stay, for there was no luggage on the car. In time they would return, and it was his business to wait for them and follow them.

For more than three hours he kept his chilly vigil. Nothing passed him on the road except a dog-cart going up the valley, and two farm lads on bicycles. He remembered the other lodge, and had a moment’s fear that the visitors might leave by that. Finally, about twenty minutes past eleven, he saw the glow of headlights rising beyond the park walls, the gates opened, and the car swung into the highway. Mr Tibbets, with very stiff limbs but an eager heart, mounted his machine and followed it.

It was an easy task, for the car travelled slowly, as if driven by a man not accustomed to the twisting Canonry roads. It turned to the left before Starr village and passed the other lodge. Then it climbed through a mile of fir-woods to an open moor, where Mr Tibbets prudently fell some distance behind. Once again he found himself in tortuous roads among pasture-fields, and, coming too quickly round a corner, all but ran into the car, which had halted at another lodge. He subsided quietly into a ditch, and watched the car disappear into a dark avenue of beeches. He noticed that, as at Castle Gay, the lodge-keeper locked the gates behind it.

Mr Tibbets’s investigations had given him a fair general idea of the neighbourhood. He recognised the place as Knockraw, which he understood had been let to shooting tenants. His ardour for the quest rose like a rocket. If Craw was still lost, these people must be mixed up in the business, for the anxious Barbon would not ask them to dine as a matter of ordinary hospitality. If Craw had returned, what did he want with the strangers—Craw, who notoriously never dined out and led a cloistered life? Who were they? Craw was no sportsman, and could have no interest in sporting neighbours. . . . Mr Tibbets had a stout heart and he determined not to lose the scent. He decided that he had better prospect the immediate neighbourhood of Knockraw. He had a vision of a smoking-room window, perhaps open a little, where he might view the party at close quarters and haply overhear their talk.

He carefully disposed of his bicycle behind a clump of broom and entered the modest demesne of Knockraw. This was easy enough, for only a wire fence separated it from the road. The moon was up by now, the Hunters’ Moon shining in a clear sky, and it guided him through the beechwood and a plantation of young spruces to the corner of a walled kitchen

garden. Beyond it he saw the rambling whitewashed house, and the square of gravel by the front door. He had run fast and by the shortest road, and as he came in sight of the door the car had only just turned and was making its way to the garage. The household was still awake, for there were half-a-dozen lit windows.

Mr Tibbets, still possessed by the idea of a smoking-room window, began a careful circuit of the dwelling. Keeping strictly in cover, he traversed a lawn with flower-beds, an untidy little rose garden, and a kind of maze composed of ill-clipped yews. The windows on this side were all dark. Then, rounding a corner of the house, he found himself on another rough lawn, cut by two gravelled paths and ending in a shrubbery and some outhouses. There was light haze, but it was clearly the kitchen and servants' quarters, so he turned on his tracks, and went back to the front door. He was convinced that the living-rooms, if the party had not gone to bed, must be on the other side of the house, where it abutted on the heathery slopes of Knockraw Hill. This meant a scramble to avoid a dense thicket of rhododendrons, but presently he had passed the corner, and looked down on what was the oldest part of the dwelling. Sure enough there was a lit window—open, too, for the night was mild. He saw an arm draw the curtain, and it was the arm of a man in evening dress.

The sleuth in Mr Tibbets was now fully roused. There was a ledge to the window which would give him cover, and he crawled down the slope towards it. There was a gap in the curtains, and he was able to peep into the room. He saw the back of one man, and noticed that his dress-coat had a velvet collar; the bearded profile of another; and the hand of a third which held a tumbler. They were talking, but in some foreign tongue which Mr Tibbets did not understand. Try as he might, he could get no better view. He had raised himself and was peering through the gap, when a movement towards him made him drop flat. A hand shut the windows and fastened the catch. Then he heard a general movement within. The light was put out and the door was closed. The three men had gone to bed.

Bitterly disappointed, Mr Tibbets got to his feet and decided that there was nothing more to be done for the moment. All he had found out was that the three diners at Castle Gay were foreigners, and that one had a black beard. He had studied the bearded profile so carefully that he thought he should know its owner if he met him again. He remounted the slope, intending to pass the rhododendron clump on its upper side. With a dormant household behind him, as he believed, it is possible that he may have gone carelessly. For as he rounded the rhododendrons he was suddenly challenged by a voice from above.

He yielded to the primeval instinct and ran. But he did not run far. He was making for the highroad and his motor-bicycle, but he travelled barely fifty yards. For something of an incredible swiftness was at his heels, and he found himself caught by the knees so that he pitched head foremost down the slope towards the front door. Dazed and winded, he found the something sitting on his stomach and holding his throat with unpleasing strictness. His attempts to struggle only tightened the constriction, so he gave up the contest.

After that he scarcely knew what happened to him. His captor seemed to have multiplied himself by two or three, and he felt himself being bundled on to men's shoulders. Then he was borne into darkness, into light, into darkness, and again into bright light. When he returned to full possession of his wits, he was in what seemed to be a cellar, with his wrists and ankles tightly corded and nothing to recline on but a cold stone floor.

Count Casimir Muresco, while completing a leisurely Sunday-morning toilet, was interrupted by Jaspar, the butler, a man who in the service of Prince Odalchini had acquired a profound knowledge of many lands and most human conundrums. Jaspar reported that the previous night the two footmen, who were also from the Prince's Evallonian estates, having been out late in pursuance of some private business, had caught a poacher in the garden, and, according to the best Evallonian traditions, had trussed him up and deposited him for the night in a cellar, which was the nearest equivalent they could find to the princely dungeons.

Casimir was perturbed by the news, for he was aware that the Evallonian methods were not the British, and he had no desire to antagonise the countryside. He announced that at eleven o'clock he would himself interview the prisoner, and that in the meantime he should be given breakfast.

The interview, when it took place, effectually broke up the peace of mind of the Knockraw establishment. For instead of a local poacher, whom Casimir had intended to dismiss with an admonition and a tip, the prisoner proved to be a journalist in a furious temper. Mr Tibbets had passed a miserable night. The discomfort of his bonds had prevented him from sleeping, and in any case he had only the hard floor for a couch. The consequence was that he had spent the night watches in nursing his wrath, and, having originally been rather scared, had ended by becoming very angry. Patriotism

added fuel to his fires. He had been grossly maltreated by foreigners, and he was determined to make his wrongs a second case of Jenkins's Ear, and, in the words of that perjured mariner, to "commend his soul to God and his cause to his country." He was convinced that he had fallen into a den of miscreants, who were somehow leagued with Craw, and professional rivalry combined with national prejudices and personal grievances to create a mood of righteous wrath. He had told Jaspar what he thought of him when the butler had removed his bonds that morning, and he had in no way been mollified by a breakfast of hot rolls and excellent coffee. Consequently, when Casimir appeared at eleven o'clock, he found himself confronted with the British Lion.

Casimir had the wit to see the gravity of the blunder. This was one of the journalists whom at all costs he must avoid—Barbon and Dougal had dinned that into him. He was apparently the most dangerous, for, being a student of the British Press, Casimir had a lively respect for the power of the Wire. The fellow had been gravely affronted, and was in the most truculent temper.

Casimir was a man of action. He relapsed into broken English. He apologised profusely—he even wept. The ways of his own land (he did not, of course, mention Evallonia) were different from Scotland, and his servants had been betrayed unwittingly into a grievous fault. Not for the gold of Croesus would he have been party to an insult to the so-great British Press. But let Mr Tibbets picture the scene—the darkness, the late hour, servants accustomed to predatory and revolutionary peasants, servants knowing nothing of the free and equal British traditions. There was room for an innocent mistake, but he cast ashes on his head that it should have happened to Mr Tibbets. Then Casimir's English began to fail him. He could not explain. He could not make atonement. Let the resources of the establishment be placed at his guest's disposal. A hot bath? Then a car would await him, while his bicycle would be retained and sent on to Portaway.

Casimir overflowed with obscure apologies. He conducted Mr Tibbets himself to a bedroom and prepared his bath. A bed was ready, with pyjamas laid out, and a pleasant fire burning. The journalist began to thaw, for he was very sleepy. He would do as Casimir suggested; afterwards, he told himself, he would pump these penitent foreigners on the subject of Mr Craw. He bathed and retired to rest, and, though he did not know it, the bedroom door was locked and the key in Casimir's pocket.

After a consultation with his colleagues Casimir rang up Castle Gay and poured his difficulties into the sympathetic ear of Barbon. There was now no defect in his English. "The man will go away full of suspicion," he said. "I distrust him. He has not forgiven us, and will make journalistic capital out of his adventures. . . . No. He does not know who we are, but he will make inquiries, and he may find out. . . . You say he is the chief journalistic enemy of Mr Craw. I have a suggestion. He has been trying to enter Castle Gay, and has failed. Let me send him to you. I will say that we cannot express adequately our apologies, but that my good friend Barbon will do that for us. By entering Castle Gay he will be placated. . . . There is no difficulty, for Mr Craw is not there. You will receive him as an English friend of mine who desires to add his apologies to ours."

Mr Barbon's response was not encouraging, but Casimir continued to press his case, and at last prevailed. "I don't want to be mixed up in this business," Barbon said, "but Mr Crombie might manage it. He could talk to him as one journalist to another." Barbon's voice gradually became more cordial. He was beginning to think that such a visit might help with his own problem. If Tibbets came to Castle Gay, and was well received, and saw for himself that the master of the house was absent, he might be choked off his present dangerous course. There was no reason why he should not write a story for his paper about Castle Gay. It would all tend to show that they had nothing to conceal.

Tibbets slept till half-past three. Then he arose, to find shaving things laid out for him and all the necessities of the toilet. At the first sign of movement Jaspar had been instructed to unlock the bedroom door. Presently came a modest tap, and Casimir appeared, with ungrammatical hopes that his guest had slept well. Tibbets was conducted downstairs, where he ate an excellent luncheon, while Casimir entertained him with accounts of the Knockraw sport and questions revealing an abysmal ignorance of British politics. "My car is waiting for you," he said; "to take you wherever you wish to go. But I should be glad if you would permit it to take you first to Castle Gay. I have not been able to express to you our full contrition, but I have asked my friend Mr Barbon, through whose kind offices I took this place, to speak for me and say how little I desire to wound the heart of so eminent an Englishman. I and my friends are, so to say, guests in your country, and we would die sooner than be guilty of a breach of hospitality."

"That's all right, Count," said Tibbets. (His host had introduced himself as Count Anton Muratsky and had hinted at a Styrian domicile.) "We'll say no more about last night. I can see that it was a servant's blunder, and, anyway, I had no

business to be wandering about so late close to your house. I lost my road trying to take a short cut. I'll be very glad to look in at Castle Gay. I don't know Mr Barbon, but I'd be pleased to meet him."

Privately, he exulted. The Fates had done well by him, and had opened the gates of the Dark Tower. He would not be worth much if he couldn't get a good story out of Barbon, whom he had seen from afar and written down as a nincompoop.

He reached Castle Gay in the Knockraw car just about five o'clock. He was obviously expected, for Bannister greeted him with a smiling face—"From Knockraw, sir?"—and led him upstairs and along a corridor to the library where the day before the Evallonian delegates had been received in conference. Mr Tibbets stared with interest at the vast apartment, with the latticed book-laden shelves lining three walls, the classic sculptures, and the great Flemish tapestry. The room was already dusky with twilight, but there were lights before the main fireplace, and a small table set out for tea. There sat a short elderly gentleman in brown tweeds, who rose at his approach and held out a welcoming hand.

"Come away, Mr Tibbets," he said, "and have your tea. I'm fair famished for mine."

The journalist had the surprise of a not uneventful life. He had entered the palace for an appointment with a major-domo and instead had been ushered into the Presence. He had never seen Mr Craw in the flesh, but his features were well known to the world, since weekly his portrait surmounted his articles. Before him beyond doubt was the face that had launched a thousand ships of journalism—the round baldish head, the bland benevolent chin, the high cheek-bones, the shrewdly pursed lips. The familiar horn spectacles were wanting, but they lay beside him on the floor, marking a place in a book. Now that he had Mr Craw not a yard away from him, he began hurriedly to revise certain opinions he had entertained about that gentleman. This man was not any kind of fool. The blue eyes which met his were very wide awake, and there was decision and humour in every line of that Pickwickian countenance.

His breath stopped short at the thought of his good fortune. To be sure the Craw mystery had proved to be nonsense, and he had been barking loudly up the wrong tree. But that stunt could easily be dropped. What mattered was that he was interviewing Craw—the first man in the history of journalism who had ever done it. He would refuse to be bound over to silence. He had got his chance, and nothing could prevent him taking it. . . . But he must walk very warily.

Dickson McCunn had been to church in the morning, and on returning had found Dougal's letter awaiting him, brought by a Castle Gay car. He decided at once to accept the call. The salmon fishing in his own stream was nearly over, the weather was fine, and he felt stirring in him a desire for movement, for enterprise, for new sights and new faces. This longing always attacked him in the spring, but it usually came also in the autumn, just before he snuggled down into the warm domesticity of winter. So he had packed a bag, and had been landed at Castle Gay a little after four o'clock, when Barbon had concluded his telephone conversation with Knockraw.

At once a task had been set him. Dougal declared that he was the man to pacify Tibbets. "I don't want to appear in the thing, nor Barbon either, for the chap is an enemy. He won't make anything of you—just that you're a friend of the family—and you can pitch him a yarn about the innocent foreigners at Knockraw and how they haven't enough English to explain their penitence. If he asks you about yourself you can say you have just arrived on a visit, and if he starts on Craw you can say you know nothing about him—that he's away on holiday, and that you're a friend of Barbon's—your niece married his cousin—any lie you like. You've got just the kind of manner to soothe Tibbets, and make him laugh at his troubles and feel rather ashamed of having made so much fuss."

Dickson lost no time in fulfilling his mission.

"Those poor folk at Knockraw," he said. "They've made an awful mess of it, but a man like you can see for yourself that they meant no harm. The Count's a friend of Mr Barbon's and a great sportsman, and it seems they haven't any grouse in their own country—I'm not just sure what it is, but it's somewhere near Austria—so they were determined to take a Scotch moor. The mistake was in bringing a lot of wild heathen servants, when they could have got plenty of decent folk here to do their business. The Count was lamenting on the telephone, thinking you'd set the police and the Procurator-fiscal on him or make a rumpus in the newspapers. But I knew you were not that kind of man, and I told him so." Dickson beamed pleasantly on his companion.

But Tibbets scarcely appeared to be listening. "Oh, that business!" he said. "Of course, it was all a mistake, and I'll never say another word about it."

"That's fine!" said Dickson heartily. "I knew you would take it like a sensible fellow. I needn't tell you I've a great admiration for you journalists, and I daresay I often read you in the papers!"

"You read the Wire?" asked the startled Tibbets. Mr Craw was generally supposed to look at no papers but his own.

"Not regularly. But I often pick it up. I like a turn at the Wire. You've grand pictures, and a brisk way of putting things. I always say there's not a livelier paper in this land than the Wire. It keeps a body from languor."

A small note-book and a pencil had emerged from Tibbets's pocket. Dickson observed them unperturbed. The man was a journalist and must be always taking notes.

"Your praise of the Wire will give enormous satisfaction," said Tibbets, and there was almost a quaver in his voice. He neglected the cup of tea which had been poured out for him, and sat gazing at his companion as a hopeful legatee might gaze at a lawyer engaged in reading a will.

"You only arrived today, sir?" he asked.

"Just an hour ago. I've been in Carrick. A fine country, Carrick, none better, but the fishing in my water there is just about over. The Callowa here goes on for another fortnight. You're not an angler, Mr Tibbets? A pity that, for I might have got Mr Barbon to arrange a day on the Callowa for you."

Tibbets wrote. Mr Craw as a fisherman was a new conception, for he was commonly believed to be apathetic about field sports.

"Would you care to say anything about the Canonry election, sir?" he asked deferentially.

Dickson laughed and poured himself out a third cup of tea. "To tell you the truth," he said, "I know nothing about it. I'm a poor hand at politics. I suppose I'm what you call a Tory, but I often get very thrawn with the Tories. I don't trust the Socialists, but whiles I think they've a good deal to say for themselves. The fact is, I'm just a plain Scotsman and a plain business man. I'm terrible fond of my native country, but in these days it's no much a man like me can do for her. I'm as one born out of due season, Mr Tibbets. I would have been more use when the job was to hunt the English back over the Cheviots or fight the French. I like straight issues."

"You believe in a business Government, sir?" Tibbets asked, for this was the Wire's special slogan.

"I believe in the business spirit—giving plain answers to plain questions and finding what's the right job to do and taking off your coat to it. We're all smothered nowadays with fine talk. There's hardly a man in public life with a proper edge to his mind. They keep blazing away about ideals and principles, when all they're seeking is just to win seats at the next election, and meantime folk stand hoasting at the street-corners with no chance of a job. This country, Mr Tibbets, is suffering from nobility of language and ignobility of practice. There's far too much damned uplift abroad, and far too little common sense. In the old days, when folk stuck closer to the Bible, there was the fear of hell-fire to remind them that faith without works was dead."

Dickson said much more, for it was one of his favourite topics. He expanded on the modern lack of reverence for the things that mattered and the abject veneration for trash. He declared that the public mind had been over-lubricated, that discipline and logic were out of fashion, and that the prophets as a fraternity had taken to prophesying smooth things. He just checked himself in time, remembering where he was, for he almost instanced Mr Craw as a chief sinner.

Tibbets scribbled busily, gulped down his cup of now lukewarm tea, and rose to go. He had got an interview which was the chief professional triumph of his career. The Knockraw car was still at his disposal. He could be in Portaway in time to write out his story and send it by the mail which reached London at 4.30 a.m. and so catch the later editions of his paper. Meantime he would telephone to his chief and prepare him for the thunderbolt.

He bowed over Dickson's hand. "I am honoured to have met you, sir. I can only hope that it is a privilege which may be repeated."

Dickson sought out Dougal and Barbon in the smoking-room. "Yon's a pleasant-spoken fellow," he said. "I made it all right about Knockraw, and sent him away as crouse as a piper. We had a fine crack, and he wrote down what I said in a wee book. I suppose I've been interviewed, and that's the first time in my life."

A sudden suspicion awoke in Dougal's eye.

"What kind of thing did you give him?" he asked.

Dickson sketched the main lines of his conversation, and Dougal's questions became more peremptory till he had extracted all of Tibbets's interrogatories and Dickson's answers. Then he lay back in his chair and laughed.

"He left in a hurry, you say. No wonder. He has a story that will keep the Wire busy for a fortnight. . . . No, no, you're

not to blame. It's my fault that I never guessed what might happen. Tibbets is a proud man to-night. He took you for Craw, and he's got in his pocket the first interview that Craw ever gave to mortal man. . . . We're in the soup this time, right enough, for you've made the body blaspheme every idol he worships."



CHAPTER 12

PORTAWAY—THE GREEN TREE

The eight miles to Portaway were taken by the travellers at a leisurely pace, so that it was noon before they came in sight of the Canonry's capital. There had been some frost in the night, and, when they started, rime had lain on the stiffened ruts of the road and the wayside grasses. Presently the sun burned it up, and the shorn meadows and berry-laden hedges drowsed under a sky like June. The way, after they had left the Knockraw moors, was mostly through lowlands—fat farms with full stackyards, and woods loud with the salutes of pheasants. Now and then at a high place they stopped to look back to the blue huddle of the great uplands.

"Castle Gay lies yonder." Jaikie directed his companion's eyes. "Yon's the Castle Hill."

Mr Craw viewed the prospect with interest. His home had hitherto been for him a place without environment, like a walled suburban paradise where a city man seeks his repose. He had enjoyed its park and gardens, but he had had no thought of their setting. Now he was realising that it was only a little piece of a vast and delectable countryside. He had come down from bleak hills into meadows, and by contrast the meadows seemed a blessed arcady. . . . His mind was filled with pleasant and fruitful thoughts. The essence of living lay in its contrasts. The garden redoubled its charm if it marched with heather; the wilderness could be a delight if it came as a relief from a world too fatted and supine. . . . Did not the secret of happiness lie in the true consciousness of environment? Castle Gay was nothing if the thought of it was confined to its park walls. The mind must cultivate a wide orbit, an exact orientation, for the relief from trouble lay in the realisation of that trouble's narrow limits. Optimism, a manly optimism, depended only upon the radius of the encircling soul. He had a recollection of Browning: "Somewhere in the distance Heaven is blue above Mountains where sleep the unsunn'd tarns." . . . On this theme he saw some eloquent articles ahead of him.

He was also feeling very well. Autumn scents had never come to his nostrils with such aromatic sharpness. The gold and sulphur and russet of the woods had never seemed so marvellous a pageant. He understood that his walks had hitherto, for so many years, been taken with muffled senses—the consequence of hot rooms, too frequent meals, too heavy a sequence of little indoor duties. To-day he was feeling the joys of a discoverer. Or was it rediscovery? By the time they had come to the beginnings of Portaway he was growing hungry, and in the narrow street of the Eastgate, as it dropped to the Callowa bridge, they passed a baker's shop. He stared at the window and sniffed the odour from the doorway with an acuteness of recollection which was almost painful. In the window was a heap of newly-baked biscuits, the kind called "butter biscuits," which are still made in old-fashioned shops in old-fashioned Scots towns. He remembered them in his childhood—how he would flatten his nose of a Saturday against a baker's window in Partankirk, when he had spent his weekly penny, and his soul hungered for these biscuits' delicate crumbly richness. . . . He must find a way to return to this shop, and for auld lang syne taste a butter biscuit again.

Jaikie's mind on that morning walk had been differently engaged. He was trying to find a clue through the fog of suspicions which the sight of Sigismund Allins had roused in him. Allins was a confidential secretary of Mr Craw. He was also a gambler, and a man who bragged of his power with the Craw Press. Allins was, therefore, in all likelihood a dweller in the vicinity of Queer Street. If he had money troubles—and what more likely?—he would try to use his purchase with Craw to help him through. But how? Jaikie had a notion that Mr Craw would not be very tolerant towards Allins's kind of troubles.

Allins had gone off on holiday before the present crisis began, and was not expected back for another fortnight. He had obviously nothing to do with the persecution of Craw by the journalists—there was no profit for him that way. But what about the Evallonians? They had known enough of Craw's ways and had had sufficient power to get his papers to print the announcement of his going abroad. Barbon had assumed that they had an efficient intelligence service. Was it not more likely that they had bought Allins? Why should Allins not be—for a consideration—on their side?

But in that case why had he returned prematurely from his holiday? The wise course, having got his fee, was to stay away till the Evallonians had done their business, in order that he might be free from any charge of complicity. But he had returned secretly by a roundabout road. He could have gone direct to Portaway, for the train which had deposited him at

Gledmouth stopped also at that station. He wanted to be in the neighbourhood, unsuspected, to watch developments. It was a bold course and a dangerous. There must be some compelling motive behind it.

Jaikie questioned Mr Craw about Allins, and got vague answers, for his companion's thoughts were on higher things. Allins had been recommended to him by some business friends; his people were well known in the city; he had been private secretary to Lord Wassell; he was a valuable man, because he went a great deal into society, unlike Barbon, and could always find out what people were talking about. He had been with him two years. Yes, most useful and diplomatic and an excellent linguist. He had often accompanied him abroad, where he seemed to know everybody. Did Barbon like him? Certainly. They were a happy family, with no jealousies, for each had his appointed business. Well off? Apparently. He had a substantial salary, but must spend a good deal beyond it. Undoubtedly he had private means. No, Allins had nothing to do with the management of the papers. He was not seriously interested in politics or literature. His study was mankind. Womenkind, too, perhaps. It was necessary for one like himself, who had heavy intellectual preoccupations, to provide himself with eyes and ears. "Allins is what you call a man of the world," said Mr Craw. "Not the highest type of man, perhaps, but for me indispensable."

"I don't think he has gone to Castle Gay," said Jaikie. "I'm certain he is in Portaway. It is very important that he should not see you."

Mr Craw asked why.

"Because the game would be up if you were recognised in Portaway, and it would be too dangerous for you to be seen speaking to one of your own secretaries. As you are just now, it wouldn't be easy for anyone to spot you—principally because no one is expecting you, and there isn't the right atmosphere for recognition. But if you and Allins were seen together, that might give the clue."

Mr Craw accepted the reasoning. "But I must have money—and clothes," he added.

"I'm going to send a line to Dougal as soon as we get to Portaway."

"And I must post the article I wrote last night."

"There's something else," said Jaikie. "You'll have to be in Portaway for at least twenty-four hours, and your rig won't quite do. It's all right except the jacket, which gives you away. We must get you a ready-made jacket to match Johnston's breeks."

So at a small draper's, almost next door to the baker's shop, a jacket of rough tweed was purchased—what is known to the trade as a "sports" line, suitable for the honest man who plays bowls or golf after his day's work. Mr Craw was apparently stock-size for this class of jacket, for one was found which fitted him remarkably well. Also two soft collars were purchased for him. Jaikie looked with satisfaction on his handiwork. The raincoat and the hat were now battered by weather out of their former glossiness. Clad in well-worn grey trousers and a jacket of cheap tweed, Mr Craw was the image of the small tradesman on holiday. Having no reading to do, he had discarded his spectacles, and the sun and wind had given him a healthy colouring. Moreover, he had relapsed a little from his careful speech to the early idiom of Kilmaclavers. He would be a clever man, thought Jaikie, who could identify this homeliness with the awful dignity of him who had sat in Mrs Catterick's best room.

The town of Portaway lies on both banks of the Callowa, which there leaves its mountain vale and begins its seven miles of winding through salty pastures to the Solway. The old town is mostly on the left shore; on the right has grown up a suburb of villas and gardens, with one flaring Hydropathic, and a large new Station Hotel, which is the resort of golfers and anglers. The capital of the Canonry is half country market town, half industrial centre, for in the hills to the south-east lie the famous quarries, which employ a large and transient population. Hence the political activities of the constituency centre in the place. The countryside is Tory or Liberal; among the quarrymen is a big Socialist majority, which its mislikers call Communist. As Jaikie and Mr Craw descended the Eastgate the posters of all three candidates flaunted in shop windows and on hoardings, and a scarlet rash on a building announced the Labour committee rooms.

In a back street stood the ancient hostelry of the Green Tree, once the fashionable county inn where in autumn the Canonry Club had its dinners, but now the resort only of farmers and the humbler bagman. Jaikie had often slept there on his tramps, and had struck up a friendship with Mrs Fairweather, its buxom proprietress. To his surprise he found that the election had not congested it, for the politicians preferred the more modern hotels across the bridge. He found rooms without trouble, in one of which was a writing-table, for the itch of composition was upon Mr Craw. They lunched

satisfactorily in an empty coffee-room, and there at a corner table he proceeded to compose a letter. He wrote not to Dougal but to Alison. Dougal might be suspect, and unable to leave the Castle, while Alison was free as the winds. He asked for money and a parcel of Mr Craw's clothing, but he asked especially for an interview at the Green Tree, fixing for it the hour of 11 a.m. the next day. There were various questions he desired to ask which could only be answered by someone familiar with the Castle ménage. It thrilled him to be writing to the girl. He began, "Dear Miss Westwater," and then changed it to "Dear Miss Alison." There had been something friendly and confidential about her eyes which justified the change. His handwriting was vile, and he regarded the address on the envelope with disfavour. It looked like "The Horrible Alison Westwater." He tried to amend it, but only made it worse.

Mr Craw proposed to remain indoors and write. This intention was so clear that Jaikie thought it unnecessary to bind him down with instructions. So, depositing the deeply offended Woolworth in his bedroom, Jaikie left the inn and posted his letter to Alison and arranged for the despatch of Mr Craw's precious article by the afternoon train. Then he crossed the Callowa bridge to the new part of the town. He proposed to make a few private inquiries.

He thought it unlikely that Allins would be at the Station Hotel. It was too public a place, and he might be recognised. But he had stayed there once himself, and, according to his fashion, had been on good terms with the head-porter, so, to make assurance sure, he made it his first port of call. It was as he expected. There was no Sigismund Allins in the register, and no one remotely resembling him staying in the house. The most likely place was the Hydropathic, which had famous electric baths and was visited by an odd assortment of humanity. Thither Jaikie next directed his steps.

The entrance was imposing. He passed a garage full of cars, and the gigantic porch seemed to be crowded with guests drinking their after-luncheon coffee. He had a vision of a hall heaped with golf clubs and expensive baggage. The porter was a vast functionary in blue and gold, with a severe eye. Jaikie rather nervously entered the hall, conscious that his clothes were not in keeping with its grandeur, and asked a stately lady in the bureau if a Mr Allins was living in the house. The lady cast a casual eye at a large volume and told him "No."

It was the answer he expected, but he saw that further inquiries were going to be difficult. The porter was too busy and too proud—no chance of establishing confidential relations there. Jaikie emerged from the portals, and finding the Gods unfriendly, decided to appeal to Acheron. He made his way round to the back regions, which had once been stables and coach-houses, and housed now the electric plant and a repairing shop for cars. There was a kind of courtyard, with petrol pumps and water pumps, and at the corner to mark the fairway several white stones which in old days had been the seat of relaxing ostlers. On two of these sat two men, both in mechanic's overalls, hotly disputing.

A kind fate had led him that way, for as he sauntered past them he heard the word "Kangaroos" several times repeated. He heard the names of Morrison and Smail and Charvill—he heard his own, joined to a blasphemous epithet which seemed to be meant as commendation. He sidled towards the speakers.

"What I say," said one, speaking slowly and with great emphasis, "is that them that selected oor team should be drooned like kittens in a bucket. It wasna representative. I say it wasna representative. If it had been, we micht hae dung yon Kangaroos a' to hell."

"Ye're awfu' clever, Wulkie. How wad ye hae seleckit it?"

"I wad hae left Morrison oot, and I wad hae played"—here followed sundry names of no interest to the reader. "And I wad hae played Galt at stand-off half. It was fair manslaughter pittin' him at wing three-quarter. He hasna the pace nor the wecht."

"He's a dam fine wee felly," said the other. "Ye ken weel he won the match."

"But he'd have won it better at stand-off. Yon Sneddon was nae mair use than a tattie-bogle. Ye canna pit Galt higher than I pit him, but the richt use wasna made o' him. That's why I wad droon the selectors."

"I think I would let them live a little longer," Jaikie interposed. "After all, we won against odds. Sneddon was better than you think."

"Did ye see the match?" the man called Wilkie demanded fiercely.

"Yes," said Jaikie. "And I still feel it in my bones. You see, I was playing in it."

The two regarded him wildly, and then a light of recollection awoke in Wilkie's eye. "By God, it's Galt," he cried. "It's J. Galt." He extended a dirty palm. "Pit it there. I'm prood to shake hands wi' ye. Man, the wee laddies in Glesca the day are worshipping bits o' your jersey."

"It's an occasion to celebrate wi' a drink," said the other man solemnly. "But we're baith busy, and there's nae drink to be had in this dam teetotal shop. Will ye no meet us in the Briar Bush the nicht? There's mony a man in this toun wad be blithe to see J. Galt."

The ice was now broken, and for five minutes there was a well-informed discussion on the subtler aspects of Rugby football. Then Jaikie gently insinuated his own purpose. He wanted to find out who was living in the Hydropathic, and he did not want to trouble the higher functionaries.

"Nae wonder," said Wilkie. "There's a penitit Jezebel in yon bewry that wad bite a body's heid off."

Was there no one, Jaikie asked, no friend of his friends inside the building with whom he could have a friendly talk?

"There's Tam Grierson, the heid-porter," he was told. "He's a decent body, though he looks like a bubbly-jock. He'll be comin' off duty for his tea in ten minutes. He bides at the lodge ayont the big garage. I'll tak ye doun and introduce ye. Tam will be set up to see ye, for he's terrible keen on fitba."

So presently Jaikie found himself drinking tea with the resplendent personage, who had removed his braided frock-coat for comfort in his own dwelling. Mr Grierson off duty was the soul of friendliness. They spoke of the match, they spoke of Rugby heroes of old days. They spoke of Scotland's chances against England. Then Jaikie introduced the subject of his quest. "There's a man whose name I'm not very sure about," he said, "something like Collins or Allen. My friend, with whom I'm on a walking tour, is anxious to know if he's staying here." He described in great detail the appearance of Mr Allins, his high colour, his pale eyes, his small yellow moustache.

"Ho!" said the head-porter. "I ken him fine! He arrived last night. I don't just mind his name. He's a foreigner, anyway, though he speaks English. I heard him jabberin' a foreign langwidgie wi' the others."

"What others?"

"The other foreigners. There's generally a lot o' queer folk bidin' in the Hydro, and a lot o' them's foreigners. But the ones I mean came by the London mail last night, and your freend arrived about dinner-time. He seemed to be very thick wi' them. There's seven o' them a'thegither. Four has never stirred outbye the day. One gaed off in a cawr after lunch, and your freend and the other are down in Portaway. Ye can come back wi' me and see if ye can get a glisk o' them."

Presently the head-porter resumed his braided frock-coat, and, accompanied by Jaikie, returned to the scene of his labours, and incidentally to the grand manner. Jaikie was directed to an inconspicuous seat at the back of the porch, while the head-porter directed the activities of boots and waiters. At first there was a lull. The tea-drinkers had finished their meal and for the most part gone indoors, and on the broad sweep of gravel the dusk descended. The head-porter spared an occasional moment for conversation, but for the most part Jaikie was left to himself to smoke cigarettes and watch the lights spring out in the valley below.

About half-past five the bustle began. The Hydropathic omnibuses began to roll up and discharge new guests, and they were followed by several taxi-cabs and one ancient four-wheeler. "It's the train frae the south," he was informed by Grierson, who was at once swept into a whirl of busyness. His barrack-room voice—he had once been a sergeant in the K.O.S.B.—echoed in porch and hall, and he had more than one distinguished passage of arms with a taxi-driver. Jaikie thought he had forgotten him, till suddenly he heard his hoarse whisper in his ear, "There's your gentry," and looked up to see two men entering the hotel.

One was beyond doubt Sigismund Allins, the man whom Mr Craw had recognised yesterday in the Gledmouth motor, the man whom he himself had dined opposite at the Grey Goose Club. He was dressed in a golfing suit of crotal tweeds, and made an elegant symphony in brown. Jaikie's eye passed to his companion, who was the more conspicuous figure. He was short and square and had a heavy shaven face and small penetrating eyes which were not concealed by his large glasses. He wore an ulster of a type rarely seen on these shores, and a small green hat pushed back from a broad forehead. As the light of the porch fell on him Jaikie had a sudden impression of an enormously vigorous being, who made Allins by his side seem like a wisp of straw.

He had another impression. The two men were talking eagerly in a foreign tongue, and both seemed to be in a state of high excitement. Allins showed it by his twitching lips and nervous hands, the other by his quick purposeful stride and the way he stuck his chin forward. Within the last half-hour they had seen something which had strongly moved them.

This was also the opinion of Grierson, delivered confidentially, as he superintended the moving of some baggage. "They maun hae been doun meetin' the train," he whispered, "and they've gotten either guid news or ill news."

There was no reason why he should stay longer, so Jaikie took his departure, after asking his friend the head-porter to keep an eye on the foreigners. "I've my reasons," he said, "which I'll tell you later. I'll be up some time tomorrow to have another crack with you."

At the lodge-gates he encountered the man called Wilkie returning from the town. "How did ye get on wi' Grierson? Fine? I thocht ye would. Tam's a rare auld-fashioned character, and can be desperate thrawn if ye get the wrang side o' him, but when he's in gude fettle ye'll no find a nicer man. . . . I've been doun at the station. I wanted a word wi' the Knockraw shover."

"Knockraw?"

"Aye. The folk in Knockraw have hired twae cars from us for the month, but they brocht their ain shover wi' them. A Frenchie. Weel, there was something wrong wi' the clutch o' ane o' them, and they wrote in about it. I saw the cawr in the town, so I went to the station to speak to the man. He was meetin' the express."

"Was he meeting anyone?"

"Aye, a young lad cam off the train, a lang lad in a blue top-coat. The shover was in a mighty hurry to get on the road and he wadna stop to speak to me—said he would come back the morn. At least, I think he said that, but his English is ill to follow."

"Did the new arrival speak to anyone at the station?"

"No a word. He just banged into the cawr and off."

Jaikie, having a good deal to think about, walked slowly back to the Green Tree. Another Evallonian had arrived to join the Knockraw party. Allins and his friend had been at the station and must have seen him, but they had not accosted him. Was he wrong in his suspicions, and had Allins nothing to do with the Evallonians? . . . Yet the sight of something had put him and his companion into a state of profound excitement. The mystery was getting deeper.

He purchased at the station copies of that day's View and Wire as an offering for Mr Craw. He also ascertained from a porter, whom he had known of old, that a guest had arrived for Knockraw. "I should have cairried his bag, but yon foreign shover was waitin' for him, and the twae were out o' the station and into their cawr afore ye could blaw your nose. Ugh, man! since this damned election sterted Portaway's been a fair penny waddin'. Half the folk that come here the noo should be in a menawgerie."

Mr Craw was seated by his bedroom fire, writing with great contentment. He announced that he also had been for a walk. Rather shamefacedly he confessed that he had wanted to taste a butter biscuit again, and had made his way to the baker's shop. "They are quite as good as I thought," he said. "I have kept two for you."

He had had an adventure in a small way, for he had seen Mr Allins. Alone, and wearing the russet clothes which Jaikie had observed at the Hydropathic. He had seen him coming up the Eastgate, and, remembering Jaikie's caution, had retired down an alley, whence he had had a good view of him. There was no doubt on the matter; it was Sigismund Allins, the member of his secretariat.

Jaikie presented him with the two papers and sat down to reflect. Suddenly he was startled by the sound which a small animal might make in heavy pain. Mr Craw was reading something in the Wire which made him whimper. He finished it, passed a hand over his brow, and let the paper fall to the ground.

On the front page, with inch headlines, was the triumph of Tibbets. "Mr Craw Speaks to the World!" was the main heading, and there were a number of juicy subsidiaries. The prophet was unveiled with a vengeance. He preached a mercantile and militant patriotism, a downright, heavy-handed, man-of-the-world, damn-your-eyes, matter-of-fact philosophy. Tibbets had done his work well. Everything that the Wire had urged was now fathered on the Wire's chief rival. The thing was brilliantly staged—the dim library at Castle Gay, and the robust and bright-eyed sage scintillating among its ancient shadows. Tibbets had behaved well, too. There was not a hint of irony in his style; he wrote as convert and admirer; he suggested that the nation had been long in travail, and had at last produced a Man. The quondam sentimentalist and peacemaker stood revealed as the natural leader of the red-bloods and the die-hards.

"What will they think of me?" the small voice wailed. "Those who have trusted me?"

What indeed! thought Jaikie. The field-marshal who flings his baton into the ash-bin and announces that the enemy have all the virtues, the prophet who tells his impassioned votaries that he has been pulling their leg, the priest who parodies his faith's mysteries—of such was Mr Craw. Jaikie was himself so blankly astonished that he did not trouble to

think how, during the last feverish days, that interview could have been given.

He was roused by the injured man getting to his feet. Mr Craw was no longer plaintive—he was determined and he was angry.

“There has been infamous treachery somewhere,” he announced in a full loud voice. “Have the goodness to order a car. I start at once for Castle Gay, and there I am going to—to—to wring somebody’s neck.”



CHAPTER 13

PORTAWAY—RED DAVIE

Jaikie lifted his head in astonishment. This was a Craw whom he had not met before—a man of purpose, with his hackles up. He was proposing to take that bold course which Jaikie himself had urged at the Back House of the Garroch, to loose the entangling knot by cutting it. But, strangely enough, Jaikie was now averse to that proposal, for he had come to suspect that business was afoot which made it desirable that Mr Craw should keep at a distance from Castle Gay.

“That’s a pretty good score for YOU,” he said.

“What do you mean? It’s an outrage. It must be at once repudiated.”

“The Wire has been hoaxed. You’ve got them in your hand. They’ll have to eat humble pie. But I’m blessed if I know how it happened. Tibbets is no fool, and he would not have printed the stuff unless he believed it to be genuine. Who has been pulling his leg? It can’t have been Dougal—he must have known that it was too dangerous.”

“I shall find out at Castle Gay.”

“There’s no need to go there—at least there’s no hurry. Telegraph to the View telling them to announce that the interview in the Wire is bogus. I’ll take it round to the office before it closes.”

Mr Craw was in the mood for action. He at once drafted a telegram, signing it with the code-word which he employed in emergencies and which would secure the instant attention of his editor. Jaikie took it and departed. “Remember to order a car,” Mr Craw called after him, but got no reply.

But when he reached the Post Office Jaikie did not send the telegram as originally drafted. It was borne in on him that this bogus interview was a disguised blessing. If it went uncontradicted it would keep Tibbets quiet; it had changed that menacing creature from an enemy to an ally. So on his own responsibility he altered the telegram to “Do not repudiate Wire interview for the moment,” and signed it with Mr Craw’s codeword. That would prevent any premature disavowal from Castle Gay.

Jaikie despatched the wire and walked slowly back. His mind was busy with a problem which each hour seemed to develop new ramifications.

There was first the question of Sigismund Allins. Jaikie was firmly resolved that Allins was a rogue, and his chief evidence was his own instinct. There was something fishy about the man’s behaviour—his premature and secret return from holiday, his presence at the Hydropathic under another name, his association with the strange foreigners. But above all he remembered Allins’s face and manner of speech, which had inspired him with profound mistrust. A hard and a varied life had made Jaikie a good impressionist judge of character. He remembered few occasions when he had been wrong.

That morning he had reached a conclusion. Mr Allins—for a consideration—had brought the Evallonians to Knockraw, and had arranged for the announcement of Mr Craw’s journey abroad. He was a gambler, and probably hard up. Mr Craw’s disappearance, if he was aware of it, must have upset his calculations, but that, after all, was the Evallonians’ concern: Allins’s task had probably only been to get them into Craw’s vicinity. There might be a contingent payment due to him if the Evallonians succeeded in their mission, and in that case it was to his interest to further their efforts. But he could scarcely do that at Castle Gay, for his connivance might leak out. No. It was quite clear that Allins had every reason to be absent during their visit.

Why, then, had he returned? To advise the Evallonians and earn his contingent payment at a safe distance? That was intelligible enough, though dangerous. There must be people in Portaway who knew him by sight, and a rumour of his arrival might reach Castle Gay. He had not disguised himself, except by posing as a foreigner, and he was walking about brazenly in the streets. . . . The more Jaikie thought about it, the less reason he could find for Allins’s return. It was a risk which no discreet blackguard would take, and he believed Allins to be discreet. No, there must be some overmastering motive which he could not guess at.

His mind turned to the foreigners at the Hydropathic. Were they Evallonians, a reserve summoned to wait in the

background? Jaikie regretted that his ignorance of foreign tongues had prevented his identifying their speech. He could think of no reason for their presence. The business was very secret and did not require numbers. The three plenipotentiaries at Knockraw were abundantly adequate. . . . They had behaved oddly, too. Allins and another had visited the station and witnessed the arrival of a visitor for Knockraw. They had not spoken to him or to the Knockraw chauffeur, and the visitor had left in a mighty hurry, as if anxious to be unobserved. But the sight of him had put Allins and his friend into a state of considerable excitement. He remembered their eager talk at the Hydropathic door.

His reflections came to a sudden halt, for an idea had struck him, an idea so startling that for the moment he could not compass it. He needed more information. The last part of his return journey was almost a canter.

He found Mr Craw still fuming over the Wire.

"I didn't send your telegram," he said. "As long as the interview goes unrepudiated it will keep Tibbets quiet, so I think we'd better let it alone for a day or two."

Mr Craw disregarded this act of indiscipline.

"Have you ordered a car?" he asked crossly.

Jaikie pulled a chair up to the small fire, which had been lit by his order, and regarded his companion seriously.

"I don't think you should go back to Castle Gay to-night," he said. "You'll only fall into the thick of that Evallonian mess. Perhaps Barbon and Dougal have got it settled, and it would be a pity to spoil their game. By eleven o'clock tomorrow morning we'll know the position, and I think that you should wait at least till then. There's no need to hurry. You've got the Wire in a cleft stick."

Mr Craw's ire was slightly ebbing.

"I shall not rest," he answered, "till I have run the author to ground and exposed the whole shameful affair. It is the most scandalous breach of the comity of journalism that I have ever heard of."

"I agree. But it won't do you any harm. It will only make the Wire look foolish. You don't mean to give them any chance to get back on you through the Evallonian business. Up to now you've won all along the line, for they've had to confess their mistake in their mystery stunt about your disappearance, and soon they'll have to climb down about the interview. Don't spoil your success by being in a hurry."

As I have said, Mr Craw's first fine rapture of wrath was cooling. He saw the good sense of Jaikie's argument. Truth to tell, he had no desire to face the Evallonians, and he was beginning to see that fortune had indeed delivered his rivals into his hands. He did not answer, but he crumpled the Wire and tossed it to Jaikie's side of the fireplace. It was a token of his reluctant submission.

"I want to ask you something," Jaikie continued. "It's about Evallonia."

"I prefer not to discuss that hateful subject."

"I quite understand. But this is really rather important. It's about the Evallonian Republic. What sort of fellows run it?"

"Men utterly out of tune with the national spirit. Adventurers who owe their place to the injudicious patronage of the Great Powers!"

"But what kind of adventurers? Are they the ordinary sort of middle-class republicans that you have, for example, in Germany?"

"By no means. Very much the contrary. My information is that the present Evallonian Government is honeycombed with Communism. I have evidence that certain of its members have the most sinister relations with Moscow. No doubt they speak fair to foreign Powers, but there is reason to believe that they are only waiting to consolidate their position before setting up an imitation of the Soviet régime. One of their number, Mastrovin, is an avowed Communist, who might turn out a second Bela Kun. That is one of the reasons why Royalism is so living a force in the country. The people realise that it is their only protection against an ultimate anarchy."

"I see." Jaikie tapped his teeth with the nail of his right forefinger, a sure proof that he had got something to think about.

"Have you met any of those fellows? Mastrovin, for example?"

"I am glad to say that I have not."

"You know some of the Royalists?"

"Not personally. I have always in a matter like this avoided personal contacts. They warp the judgment."

"Who is their leader? I mean, who would sit on the throne if a Royalist revolution succeeded?"

"Prince John, of course."

"What's he like?"

"I never met him. My reports describe him as an exemplary young man, with great personal charm and a high sense of public duty."

"How old?"

"Quite young. Twenty-six or twenty-seven. I have seen his portraits, and they reminded me of our own Prince Charles Edward. He is very fair, for his mother was a Scandinavian Princess."

"I see." Jaikie asked no more questions, for he had got as much information as for the moment he could digest. He picked up the despised Wire, straightened it out, and read the famous interview, which before he had only skimmed.

He read it with a solemn face, for he was aware that Mr Craw's eye was upon him, but he wanted badly to laugh. The thing was magnificent in its way, the idiomatic revelation of a mind at once jovial and cynical. Tibbets could not have invented it all. Where on earth had he got his material?

One passage especially caught his notice.

"I asked him, a little timidly, if he did not think it rash to run counter to the spirit of the age."

"In reply Mr Craw relapsed smilingly into the homely idiom of the countryside. 'The Spirit of the Age!' he cried. 'That's a thing I wouldn't give a docken for.'"

Jaikie was a little startled. He knew someone who was in the habit of refusing to give dockens for things he despised. But that someone had never heard of Tibbets or Castle Gay, and was far away in his modest home of Blawearry.

That day the two travellers escaped from the tyranny of ham and eggs. They ate an excellent plain dinner, cooked especially for them by Mrs Fairweather. Then came the question of how to spend the rest of the evening. Mr Craw was obviously unsettled, and apparently had no desire to cover foolscap in his bedroom, while the mystery afoot in Portaway made Jaikie anxious to make further explorations in the town. The polling was only a few days off, and there was that ferment in the air which accompanies an election. Jaikie proposed a brief inquisition into the politics of the place, and Mr Craw consented.

A country town after dark has a more vivid life than a great city, because that life is more concentrated. There is no business quarter to become a sepulchre after business hours, since the domestic and the commercial are intermingled. A shopkeeper puts up his shutters, has his supper upstairs, and presently descends to join a group on the pavement or in a neighbouring bar parlour. The children do not seem to retire early to bed, but continue their games around the lamp-posts. There are still country carts by the kerbs, stray sheep and cattle are still moving countrywards from the market, and long-striding shepherds butt their way through the crowd. There is a pleasant smell of cooking about, and a hum of compact and contented life. Add the excitement of an election, and you have that busy burghal hive which is the basis of all human society—a snug little commune intent on its own affairs, a world which for the moment owes allegiance to no other.

It was a fine evening, setting to a mild frost, when Jaikie and Mr Craw descended the Eastgate to the cobbled market place where stood the Town Hall. There it appeared from gigantic blue posters that the Conservative candidate, one Sir John Cowden, was holding forth, assisted by a minor member of the Government. The respectable burghers now entering the door did not promise much amusement, so the two turned up the Callowa into the oldest part of the old town, which in other days had been a nest of Radical weavers. Here their ears were greeted by the bray of a loud-speaker to which the wives by their house-doors were listening, and, having traced it to its lair, they found a beaky young man announcing the great Liberal Rally to be held that night in the new Drill Hall and to be addressed by the candidate, Mr Orlando Greenstone, assisted by no less a personage than his leader, the celebrated Mr Foss Jones.

"Let's go there," said Jaikie. "I have never seen Foss Jones. Have you?"

"No," was the answer, "but he tried several times to make me a peer."

They had to retrace their steps, cross the Callowa bridge, and enter a region of villas, gardens, and ugly new kirks. There could be no doubt about the attraction of Mr Foss Jones. The road was thronged with others on the same errand as

theirs, and when they reached the Drill Hall they found that it was already crowded to its extreme capacity. An excited gentleman, wearing a yellow rosette, was advising the excluded to go to the hall of a neighbouring church. There an overflow meeting would be held, to which Mr Foss Jones's speech would be relayed, and the great man himself would visit it and say a word.

Jaikie found at his elbow the mechanic from the Hydropathic called Wilkie.

"I'm no gaun to sit like a deaf man listenin' to an ear trumpet," he was announcing. "Hullo, Mr Galt! Weel met! I was sayin' that it's a puir way to spend your time sittin' in a cauld kirk to the rumblin' o' a tin trumpet. What about a drink? Or if it's poalitics ye're seekin', let's hear what the Socialists has to say. Their man the nicht is in the Masons' Hall. They say he's no much o' a speaker, but he'll hae a lively crowd aboot him. What d'ye say? . . . Fine, man. We'll a' gang thegither. . . . Pleased to meet ye, Mr Carlyle. . . . Ony relation o' Jock Carlyle, the horse-doctor?"

"Not that I am aware of," said Mr Craw sourly. He was annoyed at the liberty taken by Jaikie with his surname, though he realised the reason for it.

To reach the Masons' Hall they had to recross the Callowa and penetrate a mesh of narrow streets east of the market square. The Labour party in Portaway made up for their lack of front-bench oratory by their enthusiasm for their local leaders. Jaikie found himself wedged into a back seat in a hall, which was meant perhaps to hold five hundred and at the moment contained not less than eight. On the platform, seen through a mist of tobacco smoke, sat a number of men in their Sunday clothes and wearing red favours, with a large, square, solemn man, one of the foremen at the Quarries, in the chair. On his right was the Labour candidate, a pleasant-faced youth with curly fair hair, who by the path of an enthusiasm for boys' clubs in the slums had drifted from Conservative pastures into the Socialist fold. He was at present engaged in listening with an appreciative grin to the oratorical efforts of various members of his platform, for that evening's meeting seemed to have been arranged on the anthology principle—a number of short speeches, testifying from different angles to the faith.

"We'll now hear Comrade Erchie Robison," the chairman announced. Comrade Robison rose nervously to his feet, to be received with shouts of "Come awa, Erchie! Oot wi't, man. Rub their noses in't." But there was no violence in Comrade Erchie, who gave them a dull ten minutes, composed mainly of figures which he read from a penny exercise book. He was followed by Comrade Jimmy Macleish, who was likewise received with favour by the audience and exhorted to "pu' up his breeks and gie them hell." But Jimmy, too, was a wet blanket, confining himself to a dirge-like enunciation of Tory misdeeds in various foreign places, the pronunciation of which gave him pain. "Whaur did ye say that happened?" said a voice. "Tchemshooershoo," said Jimmy. "Man, there couldna be sic a place. Ye've got a cauld in your heid, Jimmy," was the verdict. The only exception to this dismal decorum was a woman, who had a real gift of scolding rhetoric. Her theme was "huz puir folk," and she announced that she came from a "Glesca stair-heid." She was vigorous and abusive, but she had a voice like a saw, and five minutes of her were a torment to the ear.

Then the candidate rose. He was elegant, he was wholesome, and he was young; he had not made the mistake of dressing down to his part; in that audience of grim faces, worn with toil and weather, he looked as out of place as a flamingo among crows. His speech, which he delivered with the fluency born of frequent repetition, was an emotional appeal for the under-dog. He deprecated bitterness, he repudiated any intent of violence; such arguments as he gave were a plea rather for a change of heart than a change of the social fabric. He was earnest, he was eloquent, he was transparently honest, and there was something in his youthful candour which attracted his hearers, for his periods were punctuated with loud applause. But from the man on Jaikie's right they evoked only heartbroken groans.

Jaikie looked at this neighbour and recognised him. He was a middle-aged man, with a good deal of hair and beard plentifully streaked with grey. His features were regular and delicate, and his whole air was of breeding and cultivation—all but his eyes, which were like live coals under his shaggy brows. His name was David Antrobus, a name once famous in Latin scholarship, till the War suddenly switched his attention violently on to public affairs. He had been a militant pacifist, and had twice gone to gaol for preaching treason. In 1920 he had visited Russia and had returned a devout votary of Lenin, whose mission it was to put alcohol into the skim milk of British Socialism. In Glasgow he was known as Red Davie, and Jaikie had met him there in Dougal's company, when he had been acutely interested to hear a creed of naked nihilism expounded in accents of the most scholarly precision. He had met him in Cambridge, too, the preceding term. Mr Antrobus had been invited to lecture to a group of young iconoclasts, and Jaikie, in company with certain Rugby notables, had attended. There had been a considerable row, and Jaikie, misliking the manner of Mr Antrobus's opponents, had,

along with his friends, entered joyfully into the strife, and had helped to conduct the speaker safely to his hotel and next morning to the station.

The man returned Jaikie's glance, and there was recognition in his eyes. "Mr Galt, isn't it?" he asked. "I am very glad to see you again. Have you come to spy out the nakedness of the land?"

"I came to be amused," was the answer. "I have no politics."

"Amused!" said Mr Antrobus. "That is the right word. This man calls himself a Socialist candidate, but his stuff is the merest bleating of the scared bourgeois sheep. Evils, for which the only remedy is blood and steel and the extreme rigour of thought, he would cure with a penny bun."

"Are you here to help him?"

"I am here to break him," was the grim answer. "My business is to hunt down that type of humbug and keep it out of Parliament. Answer me. Would it not terrify you to think that such a thing as that was fighting BESIDE YOU in the day of battle? His place is among our enemies, to be food for our powder."

Mr Antrobus would have said more, but his attention was distracted by the neighbour on his other side, who asked him a question. He bent his head deferentially to listen, and over the back of it Jaikie saw the strong profile and the heavy jaw of the man whom a few hours before he had observed with Allins at the Hydropathic door.

There was a short colloquy between the two, and then Mr Antrobus inclined again towards Jaikie. The man was courtesy incarnate, and he seemed to think that the debt he owed Jaikie for his escape at Cambridge must be paid by a full confession of faith. He enlarged on the folly of British Socialism, the ineptitude and dishonesty of official Labour. "Toryism," he said, "is our enemy—a formidable enemy. We respect it and some day will slay it. Liberalism is an antique which we contemptuously kick out of the road. But Labour is treason, treason to our own cause, and its leaders will have the reward of traitors."

Jaikie put his mouth close to his ear: "Who is the man on your right?" he asked. "I fancy I have seen him before."

"Abroad?"

"Abroad," Jaikie mendaciously agreed.

"It must have been abroad, for this is his first visit to Britain. It would not do to advertise his name, for he is travelling incognito. But to you I can tell it, for I can trust you. He is a very great man, one of the greatest living. Some day soon all the world will ring with his deeds. To me he is an old friend, whom I visit several times each year for counsel and inspiration. He is the great Anton Mastrovin. You have heard of him?"

"Yes. And I must have seen him—perhaps in Vienna. One does not easily forget that face."

"It is the face of a maker of revolutions," said Mr Antrobus reverentially.

But at that moment the great man rose, having no doubt had enough, and Mr Antrobus docilely followed him. Jaikie sat tight through the rest of the candidate's speech, and did not squeeze out till the proposing of the resolutions began. But it may be assumed that he did not pay very strict attention to the candidate's ingenious attempt to identify the latest Labour programme with the Sermon on the Mount. He had something more urgent to think about.



CHAPTER 14

PORTAWAY—ALISON

Jaikie rose next morning with the light of a stern purpose in his eye. He had thought a good deal about his troubles before he fell asleep, and had come to certain conclusions. . . . But he must go cannily with Mr Craw. That gentleman was in an uncomfortable humour and at breakfast showed every sign of being in a bad temper. The publication of Tibbets's interview had roused a very natural wrath, and, though he had apparently acquiesced in Jaikie's refusal to send his telegram or transport him to Castle Gay, his aspect had been rebellious. At breakfast he refused to talk of the Labour meeting the night before, except to remark that such folly made him sick. Jaikie fore-bore to disclose his main suspicion. The news of other Evallonians in the field, Evallonians of a darker hue than those at Knockraw, would only scare him, and Jaikie preferred an indignant Craw to a panicky one.

Yet it was very necessary to smooth him down, so after breakfast Jaikie and Woolworth went out into the street. At a newsagent's he bought a copy of that morning's View, and to his relief observed that Mr Craw's article was on the leader page. There it was, with half-inch headlines—The Abiding Human Instincts. That would keep him quiet for a little. He also visited a chemist and purchased two small bottles.

Mr Craw seized avidly on the paper, and a glimmer of satisfaction returned to his face. Jaikie took advantage of it.

"Mr Craw," he said with some nervousness, "I found out some queer things yesterday, which I'll tell you when I'm a little more certain about them. But one thing I can tell you now. Your man Allins is a crook."

Mr Craw raised his head from tothing his own eloquence.

"Stuff and nonsense! What evidence have you?"

"A great deal. Allins has come back mysteriously when he wasn't expected: he has not gone near Castle Gay: he is at the Hydropathic here under an assumed name, passing as a foreigner: and he is spending his time with the very foreigners who are giving you trouble. Isn't that enough?"

Mr Craw looked perturbed. At the moment he had a healthy dislike of Jaikie, but he believed him to be honest.

"Are you sure of that?"

"Absolutely sure. I suspect a great deal more, but what I'm giving you is rock-bottom fact. . . . Now, it's desperately important that Allins shouldn't recognise you. You can see for yourself how that would put the lid on it. So I don't want you to go much about in the daytime. You can stay here and write another of your grand articles. I hope to get money and clothes for you today, and then you can carry out your original plan. . . . Would you mind if, just for extra security, I touched up your face a little? You see, in these clothes even Allins wouldn't recognise you, especially with the fine complexion the weather has given you. But when you get your proper clothes from Castle Gay it will be different, and we can't afford to run any risks."

It took a good deal of coaxing for Jaikie to accomplish his purpose, but the reading of his own article, and the near prospect of getting his own garments, had mollified Mr Craw, and in the end he submitted.

Jaikie, who as a member of the Cambridge A.D.C. knew something about making up, did not overdo it. He slightly deepened Mr Craw's complexion, turning it from a weather-beaten red to something like a gipsy brown, and he took special pains with the wrists and hands and the tracts behind the ears. He darkened his greying eyebrows and the fringe of hair which enclosed his baldness. But especially he made the lines deeper from the nose to the corner of the mouth, and at the extremity of the eyes. The result was that he did away with the air of Pickwickian benevolence. Mr Craw, when he looked at himself in the mirror, saw a man not more than forty, a hard man who might have been a horse-coper or a cattle-dealer, with a good deal of cynicism in his soul and his temper very ready to his hand— which was exactly how he felt. Short of a tropical deluge to wash off the stain, it would not be easy to recognise the bland lineaments which at that moment were confronting the world from the centre of his article in the View.

This done, Jaikie proceeded to reconnoitre. He was convinced that Alison would answer his summons and come at eleven o'clock to the Green Tree. He was equally convinced that she would not ask for him, so it was his duty to be ready for her arrival. He found that from the staircase window he had a view of the stable yard and the back door of the inn, and

there he set himself to watch for her.

At two minutes before eleven a girl on a pony rode into the yard. He saw her fling her bridle to the solitary stable-boy, and be welcomed by Mrs Fairweather like a long-lost child. She talked to the hostess for a minute or two, while her eyes ran over the adjacent windows. Then she turned, and with a wave of her hand walked towards the street.

Jaikie snatched his hat and followed. He saw her moving towards the Eastgate—a trim figure, booted and spurred, wearing a loose grey coat and a grey felt hat with a kestrel's feather. She never looked behind her, but walked with a purposeful air, crossed the Eastgate, and took a left-hand turning towards the Callowa. Then at last she turned her head, saw Jaikie, and waited for him. There was a frank welcome in her eyes. Jaikie, who for the last few days had been trying to picture them in his mind, realised that he had got them all wrong; they were not bright and stern, but of the profound blue that one finds in water which reflects a spring sky.

"I've brought the money," she said. "Fifty pounds. I got it from Freddy." And she handed over a wad of notes.

"And the clothes?"

"Mother of Moses, I forgot the clothes! They can't really matter. What does Mr Craw want with more clothes?"

"He is wearing some pretty queer ones at present. And he wants to go to London."

"But he mustn't be allowed to go to London. You said yourself that he was safest under the light—here or hereabouts. London would be horribly dangerous."

"Of course it would. I don't want him to go to London. I'm glad you forgot the clothes."

"Where is he?"

"Sitting in his room at the Green Tree reading an article he's written in the View. He's getting rather difficult to manage."

"You must keep him there—lock him up, if necessary—for I can tell you that things at Castle Gay are in a pretty mess."

She paused to laugh merrily.

"I don't know where to begin. Well, first of all, Dougal—Mr Crombie—imported a friend of his on Sunday from somewhere in Carrick. His name is Dickson McCunn, and he's the world's darling, but what use Dougal thought he was going to be is beyond me. There was rather a mishap at Knockraw—your friend Tibbets got locked up as a poacher—and Count Casimir was in an awful stew, and sent him over to us to be pacified. Mr McCunn received him, and Tibbets took him for Mr Craw, and wrote down what he said, and published it in an interview in yesterday's Wire. Dougal says that the things he said pretty well knock the bottom out of Mr Craw's public form."

"So that was it," said Jaikie. "I very nearly guessed that it was Dickson. Mr Craw didn't like it, but I persuaded him not to get his papers to repudiate it. You see, it rather wipes off Tibbets from our list of enemies."

"Just what I said," replied the girl. "Freddy wanted to wire at once about it, but I stopped him. We can disavow it later when we're out of this mess. . . . Now for the second snag. Count Casimir has also imported an ally, and who do you think it is? Prince John of Evallonia."

No exclamation could have done justice to Jaikie's emotion. In a flash he saw the explanation of what he had been fumbling after. But all he said was, "Whatever for?"

"Heaven knows! To impress Mr Craw when they find him. To impress us all. Perhaps to make me fall in love with him. They seem to think I'm rather an important person."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes. We all dined at Knockraw last night. The Prince is an agreeable young man, as tall as Robin Charvill, but much slimmer."

"Handsome?" Jaikie asked with a pang at his heart.

"Extremely. Like an elegant Viking, says Freddy, who doesn't know anything about Vikings. Like the Young Pretender, says Aunt Hatty."

"Have you fallen in love with him?" The words had not passed his lips before Jaikie repented his audacity.

But the girl only laughed. "Not a bit of it. I'm not attracted by film stars. He's terribly good-looking, but he's as dull as an owl. I can see that he is going to add considerably to our troubles, for he seems quite content to settle down at Knockraw till he can bring his charms to bear on Mr Craw."

"We must get him shifted out of that," said Jaikie grimly. "Now you must hear my story. First of all, that man Allins is a blackguard."

He recounted briefly the incidents of the past days, dwelling lightly on their travels in the hills, but more fully on the events since their coming to Portaway. The girl listened with widening eyes.

"You see how it is," he concluded. "Allins has double-crossed the people at Knockraw. He arranged for their coming here to see Mr Craw, and no doubt got paid for it. That in itself was pretty fair disloyalty to his chief. But he has arranged with the Republicans to catch the Royalists at work, and with their Prince there, too. He must have suspected that they would play the Prince as their trump card. No wonder he was excited when he saw who arrived at the station last night. It'll be jam for the Republicans to find their enemies in the act of plotting with a magnate of the British Press. The Royalists will be blown out of the water—and Mr Craw too. I can tell you the Republicans at the Hydropathic are not innocents, such as you describe the people at Knockraw. They're real hard citizens, and they mean business. They've got a man among them who is the toughest Communist in Europe."

The girl twined her hands. "Jaikie," she said, "things are getting deliciously exciting. What shall we do next?"

He thrilled at the Christian name.

"There's only you and I that can do anything. The first thing is to get Casimir and his friends away from Knockraw."

"That won't be easy. They're feeling too comfortable. You see, they've made a devout ally of Mr McCunn. Dougal brought him to Castle Gay because he thought he would talk sense to them—he said he was a typical Briton and would soon convince them that Britain wasn't interested in their plans. Instead of that he has fallen completely under the spell of the Prince. He would talk about nothing else last night coming home—said it was a sin and a shame that such a fine lad should be kept from his rights by a wheen blue-spectacled dominies." She gave a very good imitation of Dickson's robust accents.

"Just what he'd do. He was always desperately romantic. I think Dougal must have taken leave of his senses. What does Dougal say about things?"

"Chiefly oaths," said the girl. "He argues with Casimir and the Professor and makes no more impression than a toothpick on a brick wall. You might say that the situation at Castle Gay was out of hand. The question is, what are you and I going to do?"

The assumption of alliance warmed Jaikie's heart.

"I must get somehow to Knockraw," he said. "It had better be tomorrow morning early. There are six of the Republicans here, and this election has brought some queer characters into the town. You may be certain that they're keeping a pretty good watch up the water. The first thing to make sure of is that the Prince does not stir out of doors. You must get Casimir on the telephone and put the fear of God into him about that. Pitch it high enough to scare him. . . . Then you must meet me at Knockraw tomorrow morning. Say eight o' clock. I can tell them all I know, and there's a lot they can tell me that I don't know. But they won't believe me unless you're there to back me up."

He looked down to find a small dog standing on its hind legs with its paws on his arm.

"What's that?" Alison asked.

"That's Woolworth—the terrier I bought from the drover. I told you about him."

The girl bent to fondle the dog's head, upon which Woolworth laid muddy paws on the skirts of her coat. "He must be introduced to Tactful and Pensive," she said. "He seems to belong to the same school of thought. . . . I had better get back at once and alarm Knockraw. . . . It's all right. I usually leave my pony at the Green Tree, so there's nothing unusual in my going there. But we'd better not arrive together."

Jaikie, unwilling to leave her side, accompanied her as far as the Eastgate. But just before they reached it, he stopped short and whistled on Woolworth. He had seen Allins advancing towards them, and Allins had seen the girl. Apparently the latter desired to avoid a meeting, for he turned sharply and dived up a side street.

"What is it?" said Alison, who had been interrupted in the middle of a sentence.

"It's Allins. He saw us both. That's a pity. He and I are bound to have a meeting sooner or later, and I didn't want him to connect me with Castle Gay."

It was significant of Jaikie's state of mind that, though he allowed five minutes to elapse between Alison's entering the stable yard and his own approach to the inn, the first thing he did when he was inside the door was to rush to the staircase

window, where he was rewarded by the sight of a slim figure on a black pony leaving the gate, pursued by Mrs Fairweather's farewells.

As luck would have it the rain began after luncheon, and there was no temptation for Mr Craw to go out of doors. A fire was again lit in his bedroom, and Jaikie sought a bookseller's and purchased him a selection of cheap reprints of the English classics, a gift which was received without gratitude.

"I have got fifty pounds for you," he told him. "I saw Miss Westwater this morning."

Mr Craw showed little interest. The mild satisfaction due to reading and rereading his own article had ebbed, and he was clearly in a difficult temper.

"But she forgot to bring the clothes. I'm so sorry, Mr Craw, but I'm afraid you can't go to London to-night."

"I have no intention of going to London tonight," was the cold answer.

Jaikie regarded him curiously. He thought he realised the reason for this change of purpose. The interview had awakened some long-dormant spirit in Mr Craw. He felt that he was being taken advantage of, that his household gods and his inner personality were being outraged, and he was determined to fight for them. That would have been all to the good four days ago, but now it was the very deuce. Jaikie did not dare to tell him the true story of the interview: the thought of Dickson, innocently masquerading as his august self, would only infuriate him. What he wanted was to get back to Castle Gay, and that at all costs must be prevented. So Jaikie imparted a little judicious information.

"I heard from Miss Westwater that Prince John of Evallonia arrived at Knockraw last night. They all went to dinner there to meet him."

"Good God!" exclaimed Mr Craw. He was startled at last out of his dumps. "That is a terrible blunder—a terrible calamity. They won't be able to keep his visit secret. I shall be credited—" His eyes told the kind of unpleasant thing with which he would be credited.

"Cheer up, sir," said Jaikie. "We'll find a way out. But you see how impossible it is for you to go to Castle Gay. . . . And how important it is that nobody should recognise you here. . . . If all goes well, you can disavow the interview, and the world will think you have been all the time out of the country."

Mr Craw said nothing. He had started morosely upon the Essays of Addison, and the big glasses adorning his weather-beaten face gave him the air of a pious bookmaker.

Jaikie went out into the rain and made a few calls. He visited the lounge of the Station Hotel in the hope of finding a thirsty Evallonian comforting himself after the drought of the Hydropathic. But he found nobody there except a stray bagman and one or two rainbound golfers. Then he proceeded to the Hydropathic, where he had a few words with the head-porter. The foreigners were all abroad; they had departed after breakfast in two cars; whither the deponent did not know. Their habits? Well, there was always one or two of them on the road. The young man seemed to spend a lot of time in the town, and Wilkie had reported that he had seen him with some queer-looking folk. "He's maybe a poalitian," he added. "There's a heap o' that trash in Portaway the noo."

Jaikie penetrated to the back parts of the establishment, and found Wilkie in the boiler house, too much occupied to talk.

"Yon was a dreich show last night, Mr Galt," was all he found time to say. "I've tried a' three pairties and there's no ane to mend the ither. My faither used to say that in the auld days an election in Portaway was one lang, bluidy battalation. This time I don't believe there'll be a single broken heid. Folks nowadays hae lost a' spunk and pith. There's twa-three Communists in the town, and there's plenty of them among the lads at the Quarries. Maybe they'll brichten up things afore the polling-day."

"When is that?" Jaikie asked, and was told "Friday." "It'll be a big day in Portaway," Wilkie added, "for, forby being the nicht o' the poll, it's the Callowa Club Ball. Fancy dress, nae less. It used to be in the auld Assembly Rooms, but that's a furniture depository noo, so they haud it in the big room at the Station Hotel. I've seen fifty cairriages and pairs in Portaway that nicht, but noo it's a' motors."

Jaikie returned about tea-time, to find that Mr Craw had fallen asleep over Addison. Mercifully he slept for several hours, and awoke in a better temper, and, having had no tea, with a considerable appetite for dinner. He must be given air and exercise, so, after that meal, the rain having ceased, Jaikie proposed a saunter in the town. Mr Craw consented. "But I will go to no more political meetings," he said. "I am not interested in this local dog-fight."

It was a fresh night, with a south-west wind drifting cloud galleons up from the Solway. They walked down the Callow side, along the miniature quays, till they were almost outside the town limits, and could see dimly, beyond the last houses, the wide machars which stretched to the salt water and gave Portaway its famous golf course. Presently one of the causes of Mr Craw's oppression became evident. He had caught a cold. He sneezed repeatedly, and admitted, in reply to Jaikie's anxious inquiries, that he had a rawness in the back of his throat and a congested feeling in his head.

"This won't do," said Jaikie. "I'm going to take you straight home and put you to bed. But first we'll stop at a chemist's and get you a dose of ammoniated quinine. That generally cures my colds, if I take it at the start."

They returned to the foot of the Eastgate, just where it joined the market square, and at the corner found a chemist's shop. The owner was about to put up his shutters, but the place had still the dazzling brightness which is associated with the sale of drugs. Mr Craw was accommodated with a small beaker of the bitter compound prescribed by Jaikie, and, as he swallowed it with many grimaces, Jaikie saw a face at the street door looking in on him. It was the face of Allins.

Mr Craw saw it, too, in the middle of his gasping, and, being taken unawares, it is probable that an involuntary recognition entered his eyes before Jaikie could distract his attention. At any rate Jaikie saw on Allins's face, before it disappeared, an unpleasing smile.

He paid for the mixture and hustled Mr Craw out of the shop. Allins did not appear to be in the immediate neighbourhood. "You saw that?" he whispered. "I believe he recognised you. We've got to give him the slip. Very likely he's watching us."

Mr Craw, nervous and flustered, found himself hurried up the Eastgate, to the right, to the left, to the left again—it was like the erratic course of a bolted rabbit. Twice Jaikie stopped, darted into the middle of the street, and looked behind. The third time he did this he took his companion's arm and dragged him into a run. "The man's following us," he said.

At all costs the pursuit must be baffled, for till they had thrown it off it was impossible to return to their inn. Once again Jaikie stopped to reconnoitre, and once again his report was bad. "I see his grey hat. He's not above twenty yards behind."

Suddenly they found that the people were thicker on the pavement. There was some kind of movement towards a close on their left, as if it led to a meeting. Jaikie resolved to take the chance. Allins would never think they would go indoors, he argued, for that would be to enter a trap. He would follow on past the close mouth, and lose their trail.

He drove Mr Craw before him into a narrow passage, which was pretty well crowded. Then they entered a door, and started to climb a long stair. The meeting, whatever it was, was at the top of it. It took them some minutes to get up, and at the top, at the door of the hall, Jaikie looked back. . . . To his disgust he saw the hat of Allins among the throng at the bottom.

It was Jaikie's rule, when cornered at football or anything else, to play the boldest game, on the theory that it was what his opponent would least expect. The hall was not large, and it was very full, but at the far end was a platform which still held some vacant seats. In the chair was Red Davie, now engaged in making introductory remarks. In an instant Jaikie had come to a decision. It was impossible to prevent Allins in that narrow hall seeing Mr Craw at close quarters. But he must not have speech with him, and he must see him under circumstances utterly foreign to his past life. This latter was the essence of true bluff. So he marched him boldly up the central passage and ascended the platform, where he saw two seats empty behind the chairman. He interrupted Red Davie to shake hands effusively, and to introduce Mr Craw. "My friend, Mr Carlyle," he said. "He's one of you. Red hot."

Red Davie, in his gentle earnest voice and his precise scholarly accents, was delivering a reasoned denunciation of civilised society. He was the chairman, but he was obviously not the principal speaker. Jaikie asked in a whisper of a man behind him who was expected, and was told Alec Stubber, a name to conjure with. "But his train's late and he'll no be here for twenty minutes. They'll be gey sick o' Antrobus or then."

Jaikie looked down on the upturned faces. He saw Allins standing at the back of the hall near the door, with his eyes fixed on the platform and a half-smile on his face. Was that smile one of recognition or bewilderment? Happily Mr Craw was well hidden by the chairman. . . . He saw row upon row of faces, shaven and bearded, young and old, but mostly middle-aged. These were the Communists of the Canonry, and very respectable folk they looked. The Scottish Communist is a much misunderstood person. When he is a true Caledonian, and not a Pole or an Irishman, he is simply the lineal descendant of the old Radical. The Scottish Radical was a man who held a set of inviolable principles on which he was

entirely unable to compromise. It did not matter what the principles were; the point was that they were like the laws of Sinai, which could not be added to or subtracted from. When the Liberal party began to compromise, he joined Labour; when Labour began to compromise, by a natural transition he became a Communist. Temperamentally he has not changed. He is simply the stuff which in the seventeenth century made the unyielding Covenanter, and in the eighteenth the inflexible Jacobite. He is honesty incarnate, but his mind lacks flexibility.

It was an audience which respected Red Davie, but could not make much of him, and Red Davie felt it himself. The crowd had come to hear Alec Stubber, and was growing a little restless. The chairman looked repeatedly at his watch, and his remarks became more and more staccato. . . . Allins had moved so that he now had a full view of Mr Craw, and his eyes never left him.

Then Jaikie had an inspiration. He whispered fiercely to his neighbour: "Allins is watching you. There's only one way to put him off the scent. You've got to speak. . . . Denounce the Labour party, as you've often done in the papers. Point out that their principles lead logically to Communism. . . . And, for God's sake, speak as broad as you can. You must. It's the only way."

Mr Craw would certainly have refused, but he was given no time. Jaikie plucked the chairman's elbow. "My friend here," he whispered, "could carry on for a little. He'd be glad of the chance. He's from Aberdeen, and a great worker in the cause."

Red Davie caught at the straw. "Before Comrade Stubber arrives," he said, "and that must be in a very few minutes, you will have the privilege of hearing a few words from Comrade Carroll, who brings to us the fraternal greetings of our Aberdeen comrades. No man in recent years has worked more assiduously for the triumph of the proletariat in that unpromising quarter of Scotland. I call on Comrade Carroll."

He turned round, beamed on Mr Craw, and sat down.

It was perhaps the most difficult moment of that great man's life. Crisis had come upon him red-handed. He knew himself for one of the worst speakers in the world, and he—he who had always had a bodyguard to shield him from rough things—who was the most famous living defender of the status quo—was called upon to urge its abolition, to address as an anarchist a convention of anarchists. His heart fluttered like a bird, he had a dreadful void in the pit of his stomach, his legs seemed to be made of cotton-wool.

Yet Mr Craw got to his feet. Mr Craw opened his mouth and sounds came forth. The audience listened.

More—Mr Craw said the right things. His first sentences were confused and stuttering, and then he picked up some kind of argument. He had often in the View proved with unassailable logic that the principles of Socialism were only halfhearted Communism. He proved it now, but with a difference. For by some strange inspiration he remembered in what company he was, and, whereas in the View he had made it his complaint against Labour that it was on the logical road to an abyss called Communism, his charge now was that Labour had not the courage of its principles to advance the further stage to the Communist paradise. . . . It was not a good speech, for it was delivered in a strange abstracted voice, as if the speaker were drawing up thoughts from a very deep well. But it was not ill received. Indeed, some of its apophthegms were mildly applauded.

Moreover, it was delivered in the right accent. Jaikie's injunction to "speak broad" was unconsciously followed. For Mr Craw had not lifted up his voice in public for more than thirty years, not since those student days at Edinburgh, when he had been destined for the ministry and had striven to acquire the arts of oratory. Some chord of memory awoke. He spoke broadly, because in public he had never spoken in any other way. Gone were the refinements of his later days, the clipped vowels, the slurred consonants. The voice which was speaking at Jaikie's ear had the aboriginal plaint of the Kingdom of Fife.

Jaikie, amazed, relieved, delighted, watched Allins, and saw the smile fade from his face. This being who stammered a crude communism in the vernacular was not the man he had suspected. He shrugged his shoulders and jostled his way out of the hall.

As he left, another arrived. Jaikie saw a short square man in a bowler hat and a mackintosh enter and push his way up the middle passage.

An exclamation from the chairman, and the applause of the meeting, told him that the great Stubber had appeared at last. Mr Craw, in deference to a tug from Jaikie, sat down, attended by an ovation which was not meant for his efforts.

The two sat out that meeting to its end, and heard many remarkable things from Comrade Stubber, but Jaikie hurried Mr Craw away before he could be questioned as to the progress of Communism in Aberdeen. He raced him back to the Green Tree, and procured from Mrs Fairweather a tumbler of hot whisky and water, which he forced him to drink. Then he paid his tribute.

“Mr Craw,” he said, “you did one of the bravest things to-night that I ever heard of. It was our only chance, but there’s not one man in a million could have taken it. You’re a great man. I offer you my humble congratulations.”

Mr Craw blushed like a boy. “It was rather a dreadful experience,” he said, “but it seems to have cured my cold.”



CHAPTER 15

DISAPPEARANCE OF MR CRAW

Next morning Jaikie arose at six, and, having begged of an early-rising maid a piece of oatcake and two lumps of sugar (a confection to which he was partial), set out on foot for Knockraw. He proposed to make part of his route across country, for he had an idea that the roads in that vicinity, even thus early in the morning, might be under observation. Mr Craw descended at half-past eight to find a pencilled message from Jaikie saying that he would be absent till luncheon and begging him to keep indoors. Mr Craw scarcely regarded it. He had slept like a top, he ate a hearty breakfast, and all the time he kept talking to himself. For he was being keyed up to a great resolution.

A change had come over him in these last days, and he was slowly becoming conscious of its magnitude. At the Back House of the Garroch he had been perplexed and scared, and had felt himself the undeserving sport of Fortune. His one idea had been to hide himself from Fortune's notice till such time as she changed her mind. His temper had been that of the peevish hare.

But the interview in the Wire had kindled his wrath—a new experience for one who for so long had been sheltered from small annoyances. And with that kindling had come unrest, a feeling that he himself must act, else all that he had built might crumble away. He felt a sinking of the foundations under him which made passivity mere folly. Even his personality seemed threatened. Till that accursed interview was disowned, the carefully constructed figure which he had hitherto presented to the world was distorted and awry. . . . And at the very moment when he had it in his power to magnify it! Never, he told himself, had his mind been more fruitful than during the recent days. That article in yesterday's View was the best he had written for years.

Following upon this restlessness had come a sudden self-confidence. Last night he had attempted an incredibly difficult thing and brought it off. He marvelled at his own courage. Jaikie (whom at the moment he heartily detested) had admitted that he had been very brave. . . . Not the only occasion, either. He had endured discomfort uncomplainingly—he had assisted to eject a great hulking bully from a public house. He realised that if anyone had prophesied the least of these doings a week ago he would have laughed incredulously. . . . There were unexpected depths in him. He was a greater man than he had dreamt, and the time had come to show it. Fragments of Jaikie's talk at the Back House of the Garroch returned to his mind as if they had been his own inspiration. "You can carry things with a high hand." . . . "Sit down in your own house and be master there." . . . "If they turn nasty, tell them to go to the devil." That was precisely what he must do—send his various enemies with a stout heart to the devil.

He particularly wanted to send Allins there. Allins was the second thing that broke his temper. That a man whom he had petted and favoured and trusted should go back on him was more than he could endure. He now believed wholeheartedly in Jaikie's suspicions. Mr Craw had a strong sense of decency, and Allins's behaviour had outraged it to its core. He had an unregenerate longing to buffet his former secretary about the face.

His mind was made up. He would leave Portaway forthwith and hurl himself into the strife. . . . The day of panic was over and that of action had dawned. . . . But where exactly should he join the battle front? . . . Knockraw was out of the question. . . . Castle Gay? That was his ultimate destination, but should it be the first? Jaikie had said truly that Barbon and Dougal might have got things well in train, and, if so, it would be a pity to spoil their plans. Besides, Castle Gay would be the objective of his new enemies, that other brand of Evallonian at which Jaikie had hinted. Better to avoid Castle Gay till he had learned the exact lie of the land. . . . The place for him was the Mains. Mrs Brisbane—Brown, whom he had always respected, lived there; she knew all about his difficulties; so did her niece, who was one of Jaikie's allies. The high-nosed gentility of the Mains seemed in itself a protection. He felt that none of the troubles of a vulgar modern world could penetrate its antique defences.

So with some dregs of timidity still in his heart, but on the whole with a brisk resolution, he left the inn. The wet southwest wind, now grown to half a gale, was blowing up the street. Mr Craw turned up the collar of his thin raincoat, and, having discarded long ago his malacca cane, bought a hazel stick for a shilling in a tobacconist's shop. This purchase revealed the fact that the total wealth now borne in his purse was five shillings and threepence. He was not certain of his

road, but he knew that if he kept up the right bank of the Callowa he would reach in time the village of Starr. So he crossed the bridge, and by way of villas and gas-works came into open country.

Knockraw is seven miles from Portaway as the crow flies, and after the first two miles Jaikie took the route of the crow. It led him by the skirts of great woods on to a high moorish ridge, which had one supreme advantage in that it commanded at a distance large tracts of the highway. But that highway was deserted, except for a solitary Ford van. Jaikie had reached the edge of the Knockraw policies, and the hour was a quarter to eight, before he saw what he expected.

This was a car drawn up in the shelter of a fir wood—an aged car with a disreputable hood, which no doubt belonged to some humble Portaway garage. What was it doing there so early in the morning? It stood in a narrow side-road in which there could be little traffic, but it stood also at a view-point. . . . Jaikie skirted the little park till he reached the slope of Knockraw Hill, and came down on the back of the house much as the luckless Tibbets had done on the previous Saturday night. He observed another strange thing. There was a wood-cutter's road up the hill among the stumps of larches felled in the War, the kind of road where the ruts are deep and the middle green grass. It was not a place where a sane man would take a car except for urgent reasons. Yet Jaikie saw a car moving up that road, not a decayed shandrydan like the other, but a new and powerful car. It stopped at a point which commanded the front door and the main entrance to the house. It could watch unperceived, for it was not in view from below, it was far from any of the roads to the grouse moor, and there were no woodmen at work.

Jaikie made an inconspicuous entrance, dropping into the sunk area behind the kitchen, and entering by the back door. To an Evallonian footman, who in his morning garb looked like an Irish setter, he explained that he was there by appointment; and Jaspar, the butler, who came up at that moment apparently expected him. He was led up a stone stair, divested of a sopping waterproof, and ushered into the low-ceilinged, white-panelled dining-room.

In that raw morning hour it was a very cheerful place. Alison sat on the arm of a chair by the fire, with her wet riding-boots stretched out to the blaze. Opposite her stood a young man in knickerbockers, a tall young man, clean-shaven, with a small head, a large nose, and smooth fair hair. Prince Odalchini was making coffee at the table, and the Professor was studying a barograph. Casimir, who was attired remarkably in very loud tweeds and white gaiters, came forward to greet him.

Alison jumped to her feet. "This is Mr Galt, sir, that I told you about," she informed the young man. Jaikie was presented to him, and made the kind of bow which he thought might be suitable for royalty. He shook hands with the others, and then his eyes strayed involuntarily to Alison. The fire had flushed her cheeks, and he had the dismal feeling that it would be starkly impossible for anything under the age of ninety to avoid falling in love with her.

They sat down to breakfast, Alison on Prince John's right hand, while Jaikie sat between Casimir and the Professor. Jaikie was very hungry, and his anxieties did not prevent him making an excellent meal, which Casimir thoughtfully did not interrupt with questions. One only he asked: "I understand that Mr Craw is with you? You have just left him?"

Jaikie was a little startled. Alison must have given this fact away. A moment's reflection assured him that it did not matter. With the Knockraw party the time had come to put all their cards on the table.

"I left him in bed," he said. "He had a difficult time last night. We fell in with Allins, and he thought he recognised Mr Craw. We took refuge in a Communist meeting, and Allins followed us. I knew the chairman, and there was nothing for it but to get him to ask Mr Craw to speak. And speak he did. You never heard anything like it. He belted the Labour party for not being logical and taking the next step to Communism, and he did it in the accents of a Fife baillie. That was enough to make Allins realise that he was on the wrong scent."

"How splendid!" Alison cried. "I never thought . . ."

"No more did he. His nearest friends wouldn't recognise him now. He scarcely recognises himself."

Jaikie spoke only once again during the meal.

"Do you know that this place is watched, sir?" he asked Casimir.

"Watched?" three voices exclaimed as one.

"I came on foot across country," said Jaikie, "for I expected something of the kind. There's an old Portaway car in the by-road at the southwest corner of the park, and there's a brand-new car on the wood-road up on the hill. Good stands both, for you'd never notice them, and if you asked questions they'd be ready with a plausible answer. We're up against some cleverish people. Has Miss Westwater told you anything?"

"Only that Mr Sigismund Allins is a rascal," said Casimir. "And that is grave news, for he knows too much."

Jaikie looked at the four men, the kindly fanatical eyes of Prince Odalchini, the Professor's heavy honesty, Casimir's alert, clever face, Prince John's youthful elegance, and decided that these at any rate were honest people. Foolish, perhaps, but high-minded. He was a good judge of the other thing, having in his short life met much of it.

The table was pushed back, the company made a circle round the fire, and Jaikie was given a cigarette out of Prince John's case. The others preferred cigars.

"We are ready to listen, Mr Galt," said Casimir.

Jaikie began with a question. "It was Allins who arranged your visit here?"

Casimir nodded. "He has been in touch with us for some time. We regarded him as Mr Craw's plenipotentiary. He assured us that very little was needed to secure Mr Craw's active support."

"You paid him for his help?"

"We did not call it payment. There was a gift—no great amount— simply to cover expenses and atone for a relinquished holiday."

"Well, the first thing I have to tell you is that somebody else has paid him more—to put a spoke in your wheel."

"The present Government in Evallonia!"

"I suppose so. I will tell you all I know, and you can draw your own conclusions."

Jaikie related the facts of which we are already aware, beginning with his first sight of Allins in the car from Gledmouth on the Sunday evening. When he came to the party of foreigners at the Hydropathic he could only describe them according to the account of the head-porter, for he had not yet seen them. But, such as it was, his description roused the liveliest interest in his audience.

"A tall man with a red, pointed beard!" Casimir cried. "That can only be Dedekind."

"Or Jovian?" Prince Odalchini interjected.

"No. I know for certain that Jovian is sick and has gone to Marienbad. It must be Dedekind. They have used him before for their dirty work. . . . And the other—the squat one—that is beyond doubt the Jew Rosenbaum. I thought he was in America. The round-faced, spectacled man I do not know—he might be any one of a dozen. But the youngish man like a horse-breaker—he is assuredly Ricci. Your Royal Highness will remember him—he married the rich American wife. The fifth I take to be one of Calaman's sons. I heard that one was well thought of in the secret service."

"There's a sixth," said Jaikie, "whom I have seen myself. I saw him in Allins's company, and I saw him at a Labour meeting. He's a short, very powerful fellow with big glasses and an underhung jaw that sticks forward. I know his name, too. He's called Mastrovin."

It was a bombshell of the largest size. "Mastrovin!" each of them exclaimed. It was as if a flood of dark memories and fears had been unloosed, and every eye was troubled. "Gracious God!" Casimir murmured. "And Ricci and Dedekind in conjunction! Crime and fanaticism have indeed joined hands." He leaned over to Prince John. "I fear that we have brought your Royal Highness very near to your most deadly enemies."

Then he bowed to Jaikie. "You have given us news of extreme importance, and we are most deeply your debtors. If you are to help us—and I think you desire to—it is necessary that you should understand the situation. . . . The present Government in Evallonia is Republican. We believe that it is not loved by the people and but ill suited to the national genius. But it is loved by the Powers of Europe, especially by Britain. They see in it a sober, stable, bourgeois government such as those enjoyed by France and Germany, and in their own interest the present rulers of Evallonia play up to them. They are always ready with the shibboleths of democracy, and at Geneva they speak wonderful things about peace and loving-kindness. But we, Mr Galt, we who are in close touch with the poor people of Evallonia, know better. We know that the Government is a camarilla of selfish adventurers. Already in many secret ways they are oppressing the poor. They think, most of them, not of Evallonia, but of their own power and their own pockets. And some think of darker things. There are among them men who would lead Evallonia into the black ways of Russia. There is above all this Mastrovin. He holds no portfolio—he has refused many—but he is the power in the background. He is the most subtle and dangerous mind in Europe today, and he is a fanatic who cannot be intimidated or persuaded or purchased. Why is he here? Why are Dedekind and Ricci and Calaman and Rosenbaum here? They cannot harm us with the Evallonian people—that they know

well, for every day among the Evallonian masses disquiet with their régime is growing and enthusiasm for our Prince as their deliverer. . . . They are desperate men, and they must mean desperate things.”

“I daresay they’re all that,” said Jaikie. “But what kind of desperate act would profit them? That’s what puzzles me.”

“They could kidnap his Royal Highness,” Prince Odalchini put in. “Here—on a foreign shore—far from his friends.”

“I don’t think so,” said Jaikie. “Britain is a bad place for that kind of game—our police are too good. Besides, what would they do with him if they got him? Kidnapping would be far easier on the Continent, and if they wanted that they must have had plenty of chances. . . . Suppose they meant to do him bodily harm? Could they choose a worse place than this, where a foreigner is uncommon and conspicuous, and would half-a-dozen of their chief people turn up to do the job? It would be insanity, and they don’t strike me as insane.”

“What then is your explanation?” the Professor asked sombrely.

“They want to discredit his Royal Highness and his party. You say they can’t do that with the Evallonians. But they can do it with the Powers. They can do it with Britain. Suppose they publish to the world details of his Royal Highness and yourselves plotting a revolution on British soil with Mr Craw. We’re a queer people, and one thing we can’t stand is having our country used for foreign intrigues. The news of it would put up the back of Tory and Socialist alike. And the notion that Mr Craw was in it—well, it would be the end of Mr Craw and the Craw Press.”

“Of course it would,” said Alison, who had followed Jaikie’s exposition with appreciative nods.

“I’m certain I’m right. They want to compromise you. They and Allins believe that Mr Craw is at Castle Gay. They know that you are at Knockraw, and they know that what they hoped for has happened, and that his Royal Highness is here. They are waiting to find just the kind of compromising situation they want. And they’re desperate men, so they won’t stick at much to bring it about. I have no doubt at all that Mastrovin has ways and means of mobilising some pretty tough elements in Portaway. Remember, too, that the election is on Friday, and the Canonry will be all upside down that day.”

“By God, I believe the boy is right,” said Casimir, and the Professor acquiesced with a solemn nod.

“I’ve got it,” Jaikie cried. “I believe Friday—the day after tomorrow—is the day they’ve chosen to act. The countryside, as I say, will be upside down, the police will all be at the polling stations, and there will be a good chance for high-handed proceedings. I can’t just guess what these will be, but you may take it that they will be adequate.”

“But they won’t find Mr Craw,” put in Alison.

“I don’t think that that will matter. If they can get you somehow connected with Castle Gay, we’ll never be able to persuade people that Mr Craw was not there, or at any rate was not privy to the meeting. Not after that interview in the Wire,” and he looked across at Alison. “The world knows his opinions, and will assume Barbon to have his authority. No, Allins has been lucky, and things up to now have turned out rather well for him.”

“What do you advise?” It was Prince John who spoke. He looked at Jaikie as at another young man, who might be more useful than middle-age.

“Well, sir, if we know what they intend—and I think my guess is right—we start with one big advantage. Besides, I may find out a great deal in the next two days. But there’s one thing to be done at once. We must shorten our front of defence, and get rid of Knockraw.”

“Will you please explain?” said Casimir.

“You must give up your mission. You must see that it’s impossible. You can’t do anything with Mr Craw. Even if he were hot on your side, and not scared to death at the very mention of you, you can do nothing with him now. Your business is to prevent this mission of yours becoming a deadly blow to your cause and setting Britain violently against you. You see that?”

The silence proved that they did see it.

“May I ask, Mr Galt,” Casimir spoke, “what exactly is your position in this affair? Are you one of Mr Craw’s journalists, like Mr Crombie?”

“No, thank Heaven. I’ve nothing to do with journalism. My position is the same as Miss Westwater’s. We like Mr Craw and we don’t like Allins, and we’re going to do our best to protect the one and down the other. Our attitude to you is one of benevolent neutrality, but we’re for you against the other blighters.”

Prince John laughed. “That is candid and fair. Go on, sir. What is your plan?”

"You must leave Knockraw, and the sooner the better. It's a rotten place to defend. It's as open as a cricket-field. You and your household must clear out. You've no local people indoors, so you should be able to do that unostentatiously. But you mustn't take his Royal Highness with you. You must depart exactly the same party as you arrived. We must take no chances. Nobody knows that he is with you except Allins and his friends, and nobody else must ever know. He can join you in London, where nothing matters."

"And meantime what is to become of him?"

"You must entrust him to us. Miss Westwater and I will undertake to get him somehow quietly into England—and alone. What do you say, sir?"

"I will gladly entrust myself to Miss Westwater," said Prince John with a bow.

"Then you must be the first to leave, sir," said Jaikie. "Every hour you spend in this house and in this company increases the danger. I think Castle Gay is the right place for you, for it's not very easy for anybody to get near it. But we'll have to move cautiously. I think that the best place to go first will be the Mains."

Casimir brightened. "I have a high regard for Mrs Brisbane—Brown," he announced. "She might be of the utmost service."

"I'll back Aunt Harriet to put anything through," said the loyal Alison.

Jaikie was aware that four pairs of eyes were scrutinising him closely, and small wonder. He had wandered in out of the rain an hour ago, a complete stranger, and here he was asking four men of ripe experience and high position to put their fortunes in his hands. He faced the scrutiny with his serious, gentle eyes, very little perturbed, for he had a purpose now, and, as was his custom, was wholly absorbed in it. They saw his small wedge-shaped countenance, his extreme youthfulness, his untidy hair, his shabby clothes, but, being men of penetration, they saw something else— that sudden shadow which seemed to run over his face, tightening it into a mask of resolution. Every line of Jaikie spoke of a brisk purpose. He looked extraordinarily dependable.

Prince John spoke first.

"I was never much in love with this venture, my dear Casimir, and now I have only one wish—to be well out of it. We shall be well advised if we are guided by Mr Galt. You and I must clearly separate and not reunite till London. I am the compromising article, but I shall be much less conspicuous alone."

"We go—when?" said Casimir, looking at Jaikie.

"I should advise to-night—a moonlight flitting, as we say. You can send the keys to the lawyers—say you were called home suddenly—anything. It's a foul day, so you'd better stop indoors, or if you go out leave word with your servants to keep a good watch and let nobody in. You have two cars, I think, and they're both hired from Portaway. Leave them in a Gledmouth garage and catch the night train to London. I'll arrange with the Portaway people to send for them—they're friends of mine."

"And his Royal Highness?"

"I want him out of this house now. This dirty weather will help us. Miss Westwater can arrange for a groom from the Castle to fetch his kit—he'd better come in a dogcart, as if he were on an errand to the servants. Our first job is to get the Prince out of Knockraw and safe in the Mains without any mortal eye seeing him. . . . I'm ready, if you are, sir."

Jaikie stood up stiffly, for the armchair had been very deep and his legs were rather cramped, and the others rose with him. He asked one more question: "Was the Prince out of doors yesterday?" and was told that he had been on the moor for some rough shooting. He had worn a different suit from that which he was now wearing, and a white mackintosh. "Good," said Jaikie. "I want him now to put on the oldest and dingiest waterproof you can raise. But you must be sure to have that white mackintosh sent to Castle Gay." A plan was vaguely building itself up in his head.

Jaikie arranged the departure with an eye to the observation-points on the hill and in the by-road. The mere exit from Knockraw was not a difficult problem; the real trouble would come when they were beyond the policies and in the rough pastures which stretched to the eastern wall of Castle Gay park. Once at that wall they were safe for a time, for there was a gate of which Alison had the key, and inside the park there were Mackillop and his myrmidons to ward off strangers.

Alison had her pony brought round, and set off at a canter down the avenue. Her arrival had been observed, and her going must be not less conspicuous. She rode fast through the drizzle till she reached the steading of Kirmshaw, which is

one of the Castle farms. There she left her pony, and returned on foot to a clump of birches at the edge of a broomy common, where she was to meet the others. Her local knowledge could not be dispensed with.

The first part was easy. Jaikie and Prince John emerged from a scullery window and by way of a thicket of laurels reached a fir planting which led to the park boundary. The rain now descended in sheets, and soon they were both comprehensively wet, but it was the right weather for their task. There must be but poor visibility for the watcher on the hill, and the car in the by-road controlled only the direction of Portaway. . . . It was easy, too, to cross the road by which Tibbets had pursued the Knockraw car. It was full of twists and turns and at this hour as empty of humanity as the moor. After that came half an hour of slinking through patches of furze and down hedgerow ditches, till the clump of birches was reached, where Alison awaited them. So far the Prince had behaved well, and had obeyed Jaikie as a docile novice in a deer forest obeys a masterful stalker.

But with Alison in the party complications began. They had still three-quarters of a mile to cover before they reached the Castle park wall, and, since they were descending a slope, they were more or less in view of the road from Portaway which followed the left bank of the Callowa. Jaikie, who had a sense for landscape like a wild animal's, had this road always in his mind, and sometimes he made them crawl flat for yards, sometimes run hard in cover, sometimes lie on damp earth till some alarm had ceased. The trouble was Prince John, who became suddenly a squire of dames. He wanted to help Alison over every difficulty. He would rise to his full height in crossing a brook that he might give her a hand, he did the same thing in parting the bramble coverts, and he thought it his duty to make polite conversation in spite of Jaikie's warning growl.

The girl, as active as a squirrel, needed no assistance, and was much embarrassed by these attentions. Already Jaikie had forced the Prince's head down into the heather several times when he had raised it to address Alison, and he was just beginning to wonder how his companion was to be sternly reprimanded without *lèse-majesté*, when Alison anticipated him.

"Prince," she said in her clear high voice, "do you mind if I mention that for the present the Age of Chivalry has gone?" They crossed the high-road when, after a reconnaissance by Jaikie, the coast was pronounced clear, and with some difficulty induced the gate in the park wall to open. Now for a space they were safe, so they restored their circulation by running down a glade of bracken to where the Callowa lay in its hollow. The river was rising, but it could be forded at a shallow, and the three splashed through, Alison going first to escape Prince John's obvious intention of carrying her across. After that they went more warily, for there were points in the neighbourhood from which this section of the park could be commanded. Indeed their route was very much that taken by Jaikie and Dougal on their first visit, and they passed under the very tree in which Alison had been perched. Just before noon they reached the gate in the further wall.

Jaikie, with the help of the bough of an adjoining tree, shinned up, raised his head above the top, and cautiously prospected the highway. Opposite was a low fence, and then a slope of hazels and rhododendrons which was part of the Mains demesne. Once inside that pale they were safe. The road was empty. He gave the word, and Alison and the Prince darted across and in a moment were out of sight.

An instant later a man appeared round the bend of the road. He was a fisherman, for he carried a great salmon-rod and he wore brogues and waders. As he came nearer Jaikie recognised him and tumbled off the wall. It was Mr McCunn, who proposed to fish the Bridge pool of the river and was taking the quickest way to it.

Jaikie cut short his greeting, for a car was coming down the road. "Not a word," he whispered. "Let me speak . . ."

Then, raising his voice, "It's a grand day for a salmon. . . . What's your fancy for flies? . . . The water is three feet up already. . . . I saw a big one in the Bridge pool, thirty pounds if he was an ounce, but pretty black . . ."

So he chattered as the car passed. It was a two-seater, and in it was one man, Allins. He slowed down, and Jaikie's babble must have come clearly to his ear.

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Jaikie?" the mystified Dickson asked.

"Yes. I'm as daft as a yett in a high wind. D'you know what I've been doing all morning? Dragging a prince through burns and bogs by the hair of his head. . . . I'm going to watch you fishing for ten minutes and you've got to answer me some questions." When Alison and Prince John halted in a recess of the hazel thicket, whence ran a rustic path to the upper garden, they found another occupant of that hermitage. This was a small man, very wet and muddy, in a ruinous waterproof, rather weary, and apparently in some alarm. It was a full minute before Alison recognised in the scarecrow the celebrated Mr Craw.

CHAPTER 16

ENEMY'S COUNTRY

Jaikie, being very wet, trotted most of the way back to Portaway. The rudiments of a plan were growing in his mind, and he had a great deal to think about and a great deal to do. . . . The enemy was keeping a close watch, and must have got together a pretty considerable posse to help him. It was a bold thing for Allins himself to be in the neighbourhood of Castle Gay. But then, he reflected, Allins's visits there had not been frequent—he generally took his holiday abroad in the autumn—and, when there, he probably never stirred much outside the park gates. Besides, he would not be easy to identify with the collar of his ulster turned up and a cap pulled over his brows. Only one who, like Jaikie himself, was on the look-out for him, would be likely to recognise him. No, Allins was safe enough.

He reached the Green Tree to find no Mr Craw or any message from him, and learned from a maid that he had sallied forth about half-past nine. . . . Jaikie sat down and considered, while he ate a luncheon of bread and cheese. Mr Craw could not be wandering about Portaway—he knew the risk he ran in the town. He must have gone up the water. But where? Had he taken the bit between his teeth and returned to Castle Gay? It seemed the only explanation. Mr Craw, puffed up with last night's achievement, had discovered a new self-reliance, and proposed to steer his own course.

It was an unforeseen complication, but there was no help for it. He must trust to luck, and go on with his own preparations. After all, for the moment Mr Craw was not the chief piece on the chess-board.

Jaikie dried the legs of his trousers at Mrs Fairweather's kitchen fire. Then he took some pains with his toilet. His old flannel suit was shabby but well-cut, and, being a tidy mortal, he wore a neat, if slightly bedraggled, soft collar and tie. This would scarcely do, so, at a neighbouring draper's, he purchased a rather high, hard, white collar and a very vulgar striped tie. At a pawnshop he invested in an imitation-silver watch-chain with a football shield appended, and discarded his own leather guard. His hair was a little too long, and when he had reduced it to further disorder by brushing it straight up, he regarded himself in a mirror and was satisfied. He looked the very image of the third-rate reporter or press-photographer, and he could guarantee an accent to correspond. His get-up was important, since he proposed to make himself ground-bait to attract the enemy.

His business was to find Allins, and he believed that the best covert to draw was the lounge of the Station Hotel. So, accompanied by the neglected Woolworth, he made his way to that hostelry. The hour was half-past two, and he argued that a gentleman who had lunched droughtily in the Hydropathic might be inclined for a mild stimulant. He sought the retreat of his friend, the head-porter, which had the advantage of possessing a glass window which commanded about three-quarters of the lounge.

To his relief he saw Allins sitting by a small table, and beside him Tibbets. They appeared to be deep in talk, Tibbets especially expounding and gesticulating.

That eminent journalist, after his Sunday's triumph, had made a tour of the Canonry to get material for a general article on the prospects of the election. He had returned to Portaway with a longing for better food than that furnished by country inns, and had lunched heavily in the Station Hotel. While in the enjoyment of coffee and a liqueur, he had found himself next to Allins, and according to his wont had entered into conversation. Tibbets was a communicative soul, and in a little time had told his neighbour all about the Wire interview, and, since that neighbour showed a flattering interest, had faithfully recounted every detail of his visit to Castle Gay. He had not mentioned his adventure at Knockraw, for he was an honest man, and regarded complete secrecy on that point as part of the price of the Craw interview.

Jaikie observed the two, and rightly deduced what they were talking about. That was all to the good. It would convince Allins that Mr Craw was at Castle Gay, and lull any suspicion he might have entertained on the subject. He wished he knew himself where Mr Craw was. . . . He was reminded of a duty. There was no public telephone in Portaway, and nothing of the kind in the Green Tree, but the head-porter had one in his cubby hole, and gave him permission to use it. He rang up Castle Gay and asked to speak to Dougal.

When he heard the gruff hullo of his friend, he informed him of Mr Craw's disappearance. Had he arrived at the Castle?

“Good God!” came the answer. “He’s not here. What on earth are we to do? Isn’t he somewhere in Portaway?”

“I don’t think so. I believe he’s on his way to you. I wish . . .”

At that moment Jaikie was compelled to ring off, for Tibbets was leaving the lounge, and if he remained at the telephone Tibbets would see him. He particularly did not want to see Tibbets, so he subsided on to the floor. When he rose, Tibbets had left the hotel, but Allins was still in the lounge. He might leave at any moment, so there was no time to be lost.

Followed by Woolworth, whom the rain had made to look like a damp white sponge set on four spindly legs, he sauntered into the lounge and sat himself on a couch a yard or two from Allins, the dog squatting docilely beside him. He spoke to Woolworth in a way which was bound to attract the attention of his neighbour. While he looked round, as if for a waiter, he observed that Allins’s eye was fixed on him. He hoped that, in spite of his strange collar and tie, Allins would recognise him. He had been seen in company with Alison, he had been seen that very morning outside Castle Gay park: surely these were compromising circumstances which Allins must wish to investigate.

He was right. Allins smiled at him, came over, and sat down beside him on the couch.

“I saw you at the meeting the other night,” he said pleasantly. “What do you think of the local Communists?”

Jaikie was something of an actor. His manner was slightly defensive, and he looked at the speaker with narrowed eyes.

“Very middling.” His voice was the sing-song of the Glasgow slums. “My friend wasn’t bad. Ye heard him—I saw ye at the back of the hall. But yon Stubber!” He spat neatly into the adjacent fire. “He was just a flash in the pan. Fine words and no guts. I know the breed!”

“I didn’t hear Stubber—I had to leave early. Your friend, now. He seemed to know a good deal, but he wasn’t much of an orator.”

“Carroll’s his name. Jimmy’s red hot. But ye’re right. He’s no much of a speaker.”

Jaikie extracted from a waistcoat pocket a damaged Virginian cigarette, which he lit by striking a match on the seat of his trousers.

“Have a drink,” said Allins.

“I don’t mind if I do.”

“What will you have?”

“A dry Martini. If you had sampled as much bad whisky as me in these country pubs, you would never want to taste it again.”

Two cocktails were brought. “Here’s luck,” said Allins, and Jaikie swallowed his in two gulps as the best way to have done with it. One of his peculiarities was a dislike of alcohol in every form except beer, a dislike increased by various experiments at Cambridge. Another was that alcohol had curiously little effect on him. It made him sick or sleepy, but not drunk. “Are you a Communist?” Allins asked. Jaikie looked sly. “That’s asking. . . . No, by God, I’m no afraid to confess it. I’m as red as hell. . . . That’s my private opinion, but I’ve to earn my living and I keep it dark.”

“What’s your profession, if I may ask?”

“I’m a journalist. And with what d’ye think? The Craw Press. I’m on their Glasgow paper. I’m here to cover the election, but our folk don’t want much about it, so I’ve a lot of time on my hands.”

“That’s an odd place for a man of your opinions to be.”

“Ye may say so. But a chap must live. I’m just biding my time till I can change to something more congenial. But meanwhile I get plenty fun studying the man Craw.”

“Do you know him?”

“Never clapped eyes on him. None of us have. But he lives in this neighbourhood, and I’ve been picking up a lot of information about him these last few days.”

Jaikie had the art of watching faces without his scrutiny being observed, for his own eyes appeared to be gentle and abstracted. He respected Allins’s address. Allins’s manner was at once detached and ingratiating, and he spoke with a suspicion of a foreign accent. His eyes were small, sharp, and observant. He had the high gloss which good living and regular exercise give, but there were anxious lines about the corners of his eyes, and something brutal about the full compressed lips. The man was formidable, for he was desperately anxious; he was in a hole and would stick at little to get out of it.

Jaikie's last words seemed to rouse him to a livelier interest.

"Have another drink," he said.

"I don't mind if I do. Same as before."

Allins ordered a single cocktail. Jaikie sipped it, and then took the glass in his right hand. As he spoke he lowered it, and gradually bestowed its contents on the thick damp fleece of the couchant Woolworth, who was so wet already that he took no notice.

"Mr Craw lives here?" said Allins. "Of course. I remember now. His is the big house some miles up the river."

"You passed it this morning," said Jaikie, greatly daring. "Yon was you, wasn't it, that I saw in the two-seater? I was having a yarn with an old fisherman body who had got a day's fishing in the Callowa. I thought that, seeing he was allowed to fish the water, he could tell me something about Craw."

"And did he?"

"Not him. He was only a Glasgow grocer that had got leave from the factor."

"Then what have you found out about Mr Craw?"

"The queer thing is that I've found out so little. The man's fair immured, and they won't let people inside the place. I'm grand at getting on with plain folk, and I've made friends with a good few of the people on the estate. It's a daft-like business. They keep the lodge gates locked up like prisons, but there's a dozen places you can get into the park. I've been all round the gardens and not a soul to object. I could have got in at any one of twenty windows if I had wanted. Oh, I can tell ye, I've had some fun up there. Craw would fire me the morn if he knew what I had been up to."

It was Jaikie's cue to appear a little excited, as if the second cocktail had been too much for him.

"Have another drink?" said Allins.

"I don't mind if I do. The same . . . No, wait a jiffy. I'll have a lickure brandy."

As the waitress brought the drink, the head-porter also appeared.

"They're ringin' up frae Castle Gay, Mr Galt," he said. "Wantin' to know if ye're still in the hotel?"

"Tell them I've just gone," said Jaikie, and he winked at Allins.

He sipped the brandy and looked mysteriously at his neighbour.

"There's a girl living up thereaways. I don't know her name, but she wants this dog of mine. She saw him in Portaway the other day, and was mad to buy him. It seems that he's like a wee beast she had herself that died. She offered me four pounds for him, but I wasn't for selling. . . . That was her ringing up just now. She's a determined besom. . . . I wonder who she can be. Craw is believed to be a bachelor, but maybe he has had a wife all the time on the sly."

As Jaikie spoke he decanted the brandy on the back of the sleeping Woolworth. This time he was not so successful. Some of the liqueur got into the little dog's ear, who awoke and violently scratched the place with a paw.

"That beast's got fleas," said Jaikie with a tipsy solemnity.

"What you say about Castle Gay is very strange," said Allins. "Why should a great man, a publicist of European reputation, live in such retirement? He can have nothing to conceal."

Jaikie assumed an air of awful secrecy.

"I'm not so sure. I'm not—so sure—about that." He thrust his face closer to the other's. "The man is not doing it because he likes it. There must be a reason. . . . I'm going to find out what that reason is. . . . I've maybe found it."

He spoke thickly, but coherently enough. He did not want Allins to think that he was drunk—only excited and voluble.

"Have another drink?"

"Don't mind if I do. Another b-brand. It must be the last, all the same, or I'll never get out of this hotel. . . . What was I saying? Oh, ay! About Craw. Well, isn't it ridiculous that he should behave like an old ostrich? Ay, an ostrich. He locks his lodge gates and lets nobody inside his house, but half the pop'lotion of the Canonry might get in by the park. . . . What's Friday? I mean the day after the morn. It's the polling day. The folk up there will all be down at Portaway voting, and they'll make a day of it—ay, and a night of it. . . . Man, it would be a grand joke to explore Castle Gay that night. Ye could hold up Craw in his lair—no harm meant, if ye understand, but just to frighten him, and see how he likes publicity. It's what he's made his millions by, but he's queer and feared of a dose of it himself."

"Why don't you try?" said Allins.

"Because I must think of my job. There might be a regrettable incident, ye see, and I'm not wanting to be fired. Not yet. . . . Besides . . ."

"Yes?"

"Besides, that kind of ploy wouldn't get me much forward. I want to find out what Craw's feared of, for he's damned feared of something. And the key to it is not in Castle Gay."

Allins was listening intently, and did not notice the small moan which came from the sleeping Woolworth as something cold splashed in the vicinity of his tail.

"Where?" he asked.

Jaikie leaned towards him and spoke in a thick whisper.

"Did you ever hear of a place called Knockraw?"

"No," said Allins.

"Well, it's next door to Castle Gay. And there's some funny folk there. Foreigners. . . . I've nothing against foreigners. Ye're maybe one yourself. Ye speak a wee thing like it. . . . But the Knockraw foreigners are a special kind, and they've got some hold on Craw. I don't yet know what it is, but I'll find out. Never fear, I'll find out. I've been hanging about Knockraw these last days, and if I liked I could tell ye some queer tales."

Jaikie suddenly raised his eyes to the clock on the wall and gave a violent start.

"Govey Dick! It's close on four! Here! I must go. I can't sit hawering any longer, for I've some stuff to get off with the post. . . . I'm much obliged to ye. It's been very enjoyable. Ye'll keep your mouth shut about what I've told ye, for I'm not wanting to get into Craw's black books."

He rose slowly to his feet and steadied himself by the table. Allins rose also and held out his hand.

"This has been a very pleasant meeting, Mr Galt," he said. He had got the name from the head-porter's message. "I wonder if I could persuade you to repeat it quite soon. This very evening, in fact. I am staying with some friends at the Hydropathic. Could you drop in for a light supper about ten o'clock? We are strangers in Scotland, and should like to hear more from you about local politics—and journalism—and Mr Craw."

"I don't mind if I do. But the Hydropathic's black teetotal."

Allins smiled. "We have means of getting over that difficulty. Ten o'clock sharp. Will you ask for Mr Louvain? That will be splendid. Au revoir."

Jaikie made his way delicately through the lounge as if he were carrying egg-shell china, followed by Woolworth, who paused occasionally to shake himself and who smelt strongly of spirits.

Jaikie dined at the Green Tree, but first he wrote and despatched a letter to Dougal by the country post. He had still no word of the missing Craw. The letter said little, for he did not believe in committing himself on paper, but it asked that Dougal and Barbon and Dickson McCunn should be at the Mains on the following afternoon about three o'clock, and that the Mains party should also muster in full strength. "We must consult," Jaikie wrote, "for I'm anxious about Friday."

After dinner he put in an hour at a Unionist meeting, which was poorly attended, but which convinced him that the candidate of that party would win, since—so he argued—the non-political voters who did not go to meetings and made up the bulk of the electorate were probably on his side. Then he went for a walk along the Callowa banks. For the first time in this enterprise he was feeling a little nervous. He was about to meet a type of man of whom he knew nothing, and so much hung on the meeting. At five minutes to ten he turned up the hill towards the Hydropathic. He asked Grierson, the head-porter, for Mr Louvain. "I'll send up and see if they're expecting ye," was the answer. "They're queer folk, foreigners, and I daurna take ony liberties." The message came down that Mr Louvain was awaiting Mr Galt, and Jaikie ascended to the second floor and was shown into a large sitting-room.

A table was laid with a cold supper, and on another stood a little grove of champagne bottles. There were seven men in the room, and they were talking volubly in a foreign tongue when Jaikie entered. All wore dinner jackets, so that Jaikie's shabbiness was accentuated. Allins came forward with outstretched hand. "This is very good of you, Mr Galt. Let me present you to my friends."

Names were named, at each of which Jaikie bobbed his head and said, "Pleased to meet ye," but they were not the

names which Casimir had spoken at Knockraw. Still he could identify them, for the description of the head-porter had been accurate. There was Dedekind, and Ricci, who looked like a groom, and Calaman, and the Jew Rosenbaum, and the nameless nondescript; at the back there was the smiling and formidable face of Mastrovin.

This last spoke. "I have seen Mr Galt before—at a Socialist meeting in this town. He is, I think, a friend of my friend Antrobus."

"Red Davie," said Jaikie. "Ay, I know him a little. Is he still in Portaway?"

"Unfortunately he had to leave this morning. He had a conference to attend in Holland."

Jaikie was relieved to hear it. Red Davie knew things about him— Cambridge and such like—which were inconsistent with his present character.

They sat down to supper, and Jaikie toyed with a plate of cold chicken and ham. The others drank champagne, but Jaikie chose beer. He wanted a long drink, for his nervousness had made him thirsty.

The interrogation began at once. There was no pretence of a general interest in British journalism or the politics of the Canonry. These men had urgent business on hand, and had little time to waste. But Mastrovin thought it right to offer a short explanation.

"We do not know Mr Craw," he said, "except by repute. But we are a little anxious about him, for we know something about the present tenants of the place you call Knocknaw—Knockraw—or whatever it is. It is fortunate, perhaps, that we should be travelling in Scotland at this time. I understand that you take an interest in Knockraw and have been making certain inquiries. Will you describe the present occupants of the house?"

"Here! Play fair!" said Jaikie. "I'm a journalist and I'm following my own stunt. I don't see why I should give away my results to anybody."

His manner was that of a man who realises that in the past he has been a little drunk and a little too communicative, and who is now resolved to be discreet.

Mastrovin's heavy brows descended. He said something to Allins and Allins whispered a reply, which Jaikie caught. Now Jaikie was no great linguist, but between school and college he had been sent by Dickson McCunn to Montpellier for six months, and had picked up a fair working knowledge of French. Allins's whisper was in French, and his words were, "We'll persuade the little rat to talk. If not, we'll force him."

Those words made all the difference to Jaikie's comfort. He was called a "little rat"—he was being threatened; and threats had always one effect on him. They roused his slow temper, and they caused him to turn very pale, just as six years earlier they would have made him weep. Allins saw his whitening face, and thought it was the consequence of Mastrovin's glower and the formidable silence of the company. He saw only a rag of a journalist, who had been drunk in the afternoon, and was now feeling the effects. He did not see the little shiver which ran across Jaikie's face, leaving it grey and pinched, and, even if he had, he would not have known how to interpret it.

"I think you will tell me," said Mastrovin with a menacing smoothness. "We will make it worth your while. If you don't, we can make it unpleasant for you."

Jaikie's acting was admirable. He let a wild eye rove among the faces and apparently find no comfort. Then he seemed to surrender.

"All right. Keep your hair on. . . . Well, first there's a man they call the Count—that's all I could get from the Knockraw beaters."

He described in accurate detail the appearance and garb of Casimir, of the Professor, of Prince Odalchini. He in no way drew upon his imagination, for he was speaking to men to whom the three had for years been familiar.

"Is there not a fourth?" Mastrovin asked.

Jaikie appeared to consider. "Oh, yes. There's a young one. He came the night before last, and was out shooting yesterday." He described elaborately the appearance of Prince John. "He wears a white mackintosh," he added.

Mastrovin nodded.

"Now, will you tell us why you think these people have some hold on Mr Craw?"

Jaikie appeared to hesitate. "Well—ye see—I don't just quite like. Ye see, Craw's my employer. . . . If he heard I had been mooching round his house and spying—well, I'd be in the soup, wouldn't I?"

The alcoholic bravado of the afternoon had evaporated. Jaikie was now the treacherous journalist, nervous about his job.

"You are afraid of offending Mr Craw," said Mastrovin. "Mr Galt, I assure you that you have much more reason to be afraid of offending us. . . . Also we will make it worth your while."

Threats again. Jaikie's face grew a shade paler, and his heart began to thump. He appeared to consider anew.

"Well, I'll tell ye. . . . Craw never entertains anybody. His servants tell me that he never has any guests from the neighbourhood inside the door. But the people at Knockraw dined at Castle Gay last Saturday night, and the Castle Gay party dined at Knockraw on Monday night. That looks queer to begin with."

The others exchanged glances. They apparently had had news of these incidents, and Jaikie confirmed it. Their previous knowledge also established Jaikie's accuracy.

"Anything more?"

"Plenty. The people at Knockraw have brought their own servants with them. Everybody inside the house is a foreigner. That looks as if they had something they wanted to keep quiet. . . . It would have been far cheaper to get servants in the Canonry, like other tenants."

Again Mastrovin nodded.

"Anything more?"

"This," said Jaikie, allowing a smile to wrinkle his pallor. "These Knockraw foreign servants are never away from Castle Gay. They spend half their time crawling about the place. I've seen one of them right up at the edge of the terrace. I daresay they're all poachers at home, for they're grand hands at keeping cover. Now, what does that mean?" Jaikie seemed to be gaining confidence and warming to his task. "It means that they're not friends of Craw. They've got something coming for him. They're spying on him. . . . I believe they're up to no good."

Mastrovin bent his brows again.

"That is very interesting and very odd. Can you tell us more, Mr Galt?"

"I can't give ye more facts," said Jaikie briskly, "but I can give ye my guesses. . . . These Knockraw folk want something out of Craw. And they're going to get it. And they're going to get it soon. I'll tell ye why I think that. The polling's on Friday, and on that day there's a holiday at Castle Gay. Craw's very keen—so they tell me—on his people exercising what he calls their rights as citizens. All the outdoor servants and most of the indoor will be in Portaway, and, if I'm any judge, they'll no be back till morning. Maybe you don't know what a Scotch election is like, especially in the Canonry. There'll be as many drunks in Portaway as on a Saturday night in the Cowcaddens. The Knockraw foreigners will have Craw to themselves, for yon man Barbon, the secretary, is no mortal use."

Jaikie observed with delight that his views roused every member of the company to the keenest interest, and he could not but believe that he had somehow given his support to a plan which they had already matured. It was with an air of covering his satisfaction that Mastrovin asked, in a voice which he tried to make uninterested:

"Then you think that the Knockraw people will visit Castle Gay on Friday night?"

"They won't need to visit it, for they'll be there already," said Jaikie.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that by this time they've all shifted their quarters, bag and baggage, to the Castle."

"How the devil do you know that?" It was Allins who spoke, and his voice was as sharp as a dog's bark.

"I found it out from one of the Castle maids. I can tell ye it's all arranged. The servants have left, but the gentry are shifting over to the Castle. . . . I was at Knockraw this morning, and I saw them packing the guns in their cases. They're done with shooting for the year, unless," he added with a grin, "there's some shooting of a different kind at Castle Gay."

This news produced an impression as great as the most sensitive narrator could have desired. The seven men talked excitedly among themselves—not, to Jaikie's regret, in French.

"It looks as if ye didn't believe me," he said, with irritation in his tone. "Well, all I can say is, send out somebody to Knockraw the morn's morning, and if the place is not all shuttered up and not a chimney smoking, ye can call me the worst kind of liar."

"We accept what you say, Mr Galt," said Mastrovin, "and we will test it. . . . Now, on another matter. You say that you

have explored the park of the Castle very thoroughly, and have seen the Knockraw servants engaged in the same work. . . . We have here a map. As a proof of your good faith, perhaps you will show us the route by which these servants approached the gardens unobserved.”

He produced a sheet of the largest-scale Ordnance Survey.

“Fine I can do that,” said Jaikie. “In my young days I was a Boy Scout. But I’m awful dry with so much talking. I’ll thank you for some more beer.”

His glass was filled, and he drained it at a draught, for he was indeed very thirsty. A space was cleared on the table, and with a pencil he showed how the park could be entered at the Callowa bridge and elsewhere, and what sheltered hollows led right up to the edge of the terrace. He even expounded the plan of the house itself. “There’s the front door. . . . A man could get in at any one of these lower windows. They’re never shuttered. . . . No, the gardeners’ houses are all down by the kitchen garden on the east bank of the Callowa. The chauffeurs and mechanics live on the other side just under the Castle Hill. . . . The keepers? Mackillop is miles away at the Blae Moss; one of the under-keepers lodges in Starr, and one lives at the South Lodge. Craw has a very poor notion of guarding his privacy, for all he’s so keen on it.”

Jaikie yawned heavily—partly in earnest, for he was very weary. He consulted the cheap watch at the end of his recently purchased chain. He was searching for the right note on which to leave, and presently he found it. It was no occasion for ceremony.

“I wasn’t much in my bed last night, and it’s time I was there now— or I’ll be dropping under this table.” He got to his feet and made an embarrassed survey of the company.

“I’m much obliged to you gentlemen for your hospitality. We’ve had a great crack, but for God’s sake keep it to yourselves. . . . I’ve maybe said more than I should have, but it’s your blame for leading me on. . . . I want ye to promise that ye’ll never mention my name. If it came out that I had been spending my time nosing into his private affairs, Craw would fire me like a shot. . . . And he doesn’t pay badly.”

“You need not worry, Mr Galt,” said Mastrovin. “We are not loquacious people. Let me recommend you to be equally silent— especially in your cups.”

“Never fear. I’ll take care of that.” Jaikie gave an imbecile giggle, bobbed his head to the company, and took his leave. Allins did not offer his hand or trouble to open the door. They had had all that they wanted from this bibulous, babbling, little reporter.

At the door of the Hydropathic Jaikie remembered suddenly that they had promised to remunerate him for his confidences. He wished he had collected his fee, for he believed in taking every opportunity of spoiling the Egyptians. But he could do nothing now. He was as one who had escaped from the cave of Polyphemus, and it would be folly to go back for his hat.

At the Green Tree he found a note which had been brought by a boy on a bicycle. “Dear Jaikie,” he read, “set your mind at ease. Mr Craw is here at the Mains, being lectured by Aunt Harriet. You have made him twice the man he was. Love from Alison.”

He read this missive at least eight times. Then he put it carefully into his pocket-book and laid the pocket-book under his pillow. Last night, though that pocket-book contained fifty pounds in Treasury notes, it had lain casually on his dressing-table.



CHAPTER 17

JAIKIE OPENS HIS COMMUNICATIONS

Jaikie slept like a log and awoke next morning in high spirits. These were mainly attributable to Alison's letter, which he reread many times while he dressed. She had called him "Jaikie" on paper; she had sent him her love: the whole enterprise was a venture of his and Alison's—the others were only lay figures. At breakfast he had some slight uneasiness as to whether he had not been a little too clever. Had he not given too much rein to his ingenuity? . . . He had prevented Prince John joining the others in their midnight flitting. No doubt it was in a general way desirable to scatter in a flight, but he could not conceal from himself that the Prince might now be safe in the English midlands, whereas he was still in the very heart of danger. Well, he had had a reason for that, which he thought Alison would appreciate. . . . And he had gone out of his way to invite an assault on Castle Gay. He had his reason for that, too, many reasons, but the chief, as he confessed to himself, was the desire for revenge. He had been threatened, and to Jaikie a threat was a challenge.

He spent half an hour in cleansing Woolworth, whose alcoholic flavour the passage of hours had not diminished. His bedroom had smelt like a public house. First he borrowed big scissors from Mrs Fairweather, and clipped the little dog's shaggy fleece and his superabundant beard and whiskers. Then he washed him, protesting bitterly, with soap and hot water, and dried him before the kitchen fire. He made a few alterations in his own get-up. The stiff collar and flamboyant tie of yesterday were discarded, and for neckwear he used a very faded blue scarf, which he tied in the kind of knot affected by loafers who have no pride in their appearance. He might meet Allins or one of the Evallonians in the street, and he had no desire to be recognised. He looked now, he flattered himself, like a young artisan in his working clothes, and to complete the part he invested in an unfashionably shaped cap.

Attended by the shorn and purified Woolworth, he made for the railway station. Portaway, as has been explained, is an important main-line station, but it is also the junction for a tiny single-line railway which runs down the side of the Callowa estuary to the decayed burgh of Fallatown. Once Fallatown was a flourishing port, with a large trade to the Cumberland shore and the Isle of Man, a noted smuggling centre, and the spot from which great men had taken ship in great crises. Now the ancient royal burgh is little more than a hamlet, with a slender fishing industry, a little boat-building, and one small distillery. Jaikie did not propose to go as far as Fallatown, but to stop at the intermediate station of Rinks, where he had some business with a friend.

He crossed the bridge and reached the station without mischance. The rain of the preceding day had gone, and had left one of those tonic October mornings which are among the delicacies of Scottish weather. There was no frost, the air was bracing and yet mild, the sky was an even blue, the distances as sharp as April. From the bridge Jaikie saw the top of the great Muneraw twenty-five miles distant, with every wrinkle clear on its bald face. The weather gave an edge to his good spirits. He bought a third-class return ticket for Rinks, and walked to the far end of the station, to the small siding where the Fallatown train lay, as if he had not a care in the world.

There he got a bad fright. For among the few people on the little platform was Allins, smoking a cigar outside a first-class carriage.

Jaikie hastily retreated. Why on earth was Allins travelling to Fallatown? More important, how on earth was he to escape his notice at such close quarters? At all costs Allins must not know of his visit to Rinks.

He retreated to the booking-office, and at an adjoining bookstall bought a paper with the notion that he might open it to cover his face. In the booking-office was a large comely woman of about thirty, much encumbered with a family. She carried an infant in one arm, and a gigantic basket in the other, and four children of ages from four to ten clung to her skirts. Apparently she desired to buy a ticket and found it difficult to get at her purse because of the encumbrance in her arms. "I want three return tickets to Fallatown," she was telling the clerk, while she summoned the oldest child to her aid. "Hector Alexander, see if you can get Mither's purse oot o' Mither's pooch. Na, na, ye gomeril, that's no whaur it bides. Peety me that I suld hae sic feckless weans . . . Mind the basket, then . . . Canny, it's eggs . . . Gudesakes, ye'll hae them a' broke."

Hector Alexander showed signs of tears, and one of the toddlers set up a wail. The mother cast an agonised look round

and caught sight of Jaikie.

"Can I help ye, mistress?" he said in his friendly voice. "I'm for Rinks mysel'. It's a sore job traivellin' wi' a family. Gie me the wean and the basket. Ye havena muckle time, for the train starts in three minutes."

The flustered woman took one look at his face, and handed over the baby. "Thank ye kindly. Will ye tak the bairns to the train and I'll get the tickets? Hector Alexander and Jean and Bessie and Tommy, you follow the gentleman. I'm sure I'm awfu' obliged."

So it fell out that Jaikie, with an infant beginning to squall held resolutely before his face, a basket in his right hand, and four children attached to different parts of his jacket, made his way to the Fallatown train, passing within ten feet of his enemy. The third-class coach was just behind the engine. Allins did not spare even a glance for the much-encumbered youth. Jaikie found a compartment with only one old woman in it, and carefully deposited the basket on the floor and the four children on the seats, the while he made strange noises to soothe the infant. The guard was banging the doors when the hustled mother arrived and sat down heavily in a corner. She cuffed Hector Alexander for blowing his nose in a primitive way, and then snatched the now obstreperous babe from Jaikie's arms. "Wheesht, daurlin! Mither's got ye noo . . . Feel in my pooch, Bessie. There's some jujubes for you and Jean and wee Tommy."

The old woman surveyed the scene over the top of her spectacles. Then she looked at Jaikie.

"Ye're a young chiel to be the faither o' sae mony weans."

The mother laughed hilariously. "He's no their faither. He's just a kind freend. . . . Their faither is in the Gledmouth hospital wi' a broken leg. He works in the Quarries, ye ken, and a month yestreen he got a muckle stane on his leg that brak it like a pipe stapple. . . . Thank ye, he's gettin' on fine. He'll be out next week. I'm takin' the weans to see their grannie at the Port."

The infant was quieted, and the two women embarked on a technical discussion of human ailments, while the four children found an absorbing interest in Woolworth. The little dog was deeply offended with his master and showed it by frequent artificial sneezes, but he was not proof against the respectful blandishments of the children. Consequently when he left the carriage at Rinks, he had two of their jujubes sticking in his damp fleece.

Jaikie, with the dog in his arms, sheltered behind a shed till the train had left the platform. He had a glimpse of Allins's unconscious profile as he was borne past. Then he went out to the roadside clachan which was Rinks, and turned his steps over the salty pastures to the riverside.

The machars, yellowing with autumn, stretched for miles before him till in the south they ended in a blue line of sea. The Callowa, forgetting its high mountain cradle, had become a sinuous trench with steep mud banks, at the bottom of which—for the tide was out—lay an almost stagnant stream. Above the grasses could be seen here and there the mast of a small vessel, waiting in the trough for the tide. The place was alive with birds—curlew and plover and redshank and sandpiper—and as he jumped the little brackish ditches Jaikie put up skeins of wild duck. It was a world in which it was good to be alive, for in the air there was both the freedom of the hills and the sting of the sea.

Presently he reached a little colony of huts beside the water. Down in the ditch which was the Callowa lay three small luggers; there was an antiquated slip and a yard full of timber. One of the huts was a dwelling-house, and before its door, sitting on a log, was a man in sea-boots and jersey, busy mending a sail. He looked up as Jaikie appeared, dropped his task, took the pipe from his mouth, and grinned broadly. "Whae would hae thocht to see YOU here?" was his greeting. "Is Mr McCunn wi' ye?"

"Not this time," said Jaikie, finding a place on the log. "But he's in this countryside. How's the world treating you, Mr Maclellan?"

Jaikie had come here several times with Dickson, when the latter, growing weary of hill waters, desired to fill his lungs with sea air, and appease his appetite for slaughter by catching the easy salt-water fish. In Mr Maclellan's boat they had fished the length of the Solway, and beyond it far down the English coast and round the Mull. Once even in a fine April they had crossed to the Isle of Man and made the return journey by night.

"No sae bad," Maclellan answered Jaikie's question. "Ye'll see the Rosabelle's new pentit. It's been a fair season for us folk, and the weather has been mercifu'! . . . It's ower lown the noo, but it'll no be long or it changes. The auld folk was sayin' that this month will gang oot in snaw. When are you and Mr McCunn comin' to hae a shot at the jukes? The first nip o' frost and there'll be a walth o' birds on the tideway."

"Mr McCunn's not much of a shot," said Jaikie, "and just now he has other things to think about. . . . What's that?" he asked suddenly, pointing towards the sea. On the right of what seemed to be the Callowa mouth rose the top-gear of a small ship, a schooner with auxiliary steam.

"That?" said Maclellan, turning his deep-set, long-sighted eyes in the direction of Jaikie's finger. "That's a yatt—a bonny wee yatt. She's lyin' off Fallatown. What she's doin' there I canna tell, unless she belongs to some shooting-tenant"

"Has she been there long?"

"Since the day afore yesterday. I was thinkin' o' takin' the dinghy and gaun down to hae a look at her."

Jaikie pondered. A yacht at Fallatown at this season of the year was a portent. Now he understood the reason of Allins's journey. . . . He understood something more. The people at the Hydropathic would not stick at trifles. Kidnapping? No, there could be no reason for that. They did not want to put themselves in the wrong. But it might be that they would desire to leave quietly and speedily, when their business was done, and the little ship at Fallatown gave them the means. . . . Jaikie smiled. It was a pleasure to deal with people who really meant business. He no longer felt that he had been too ingenious.

"Is the Rosabelle in good trim?" he said.

"Never better. As ye see, she's new pentit."

"Well, Mr McCunn wants you to do a job for him. He's staying up the water at Starr, and he has a friend with him who wants to get over to Cumberland tomorrow night. It's a quicker way than going round by Gledmouth and Carlisle. Could you put him over to Markhaven—that's where he wants to go—some time before midnight tomorrow?"

Maclellan considered. "High tide's about 9.15. I could slip down wi' the ebb. . . . There's no muckle wind, but what there is is frae the north. . . . Ay, I could set your freend over if he cam here round about eleven—maybe, a wee thing later."

"That's splendid. Mr McCunn will bring him down. He wants to see you again. . . . There's just one small thing. Keep the business entirely to yourself. You see, Mr McCunn's friend has a reason for wanting to get away quietly. . . . I'm not quite sure what it is, but there's some tiresome engagement he wants to cut, and it wouldn't do if the story got about that he had made a moonlight flitting to avoid it. He's rather a big man in his way, I believe. A politician, I think."

Maclellan nodded with profound comprehension. "There's walth o' poalitics in the Canonry the noo," he observed. "It's a dowg's trade. I don't blame ane o' the puir deevils for takin' the jee. Tell Mr McCunn I'll never breathe a word o't. . . . Peety there's nae smugglin' nowadays. I wad be a fine hand at it, bidin' here wi' nae wife and nae neebors."

Jaikie spent a pleasant morning. He boarded the Rosabelle and renewed his memory of her tiny cabin; he enjoyed a rat hunt in Woolworth's company; he helped Maclellan to paint the dinghy; he dined with him at noon on Irish stew. Then he borrowed his bicycle. There was a train to Portaway at 1.30, but it was possible that Allins might travel by it, and Jaikie was taking no needless risks. "Send back the thing when ye're through wi't," Maclellan told him. "I've nae need o't the noo. I thought o' bicycling in to vote the morn, but I'm inclined to bide at hame. I'm seeck o' poalitics."

Going very slow, so that Woolworth might keep up with him, Jaikie managed to avoid Portaway altogether, and joined the Callowa valley three miles above the town. After that he went warily, reconnoitring every turn of the road, till he was inside the Mains avenue. He arrived a few minutes after the hour he had named to Dougal.

At the edge of the lawn Alison was waiting for him.

"Oh, Jaikie," she cried, "isn't this a stupendous lark! Such a party in the drawing-room! A real live Pretender to a Throne—and very nice-looking! Freddy as anxious as a hen, and Dougal as cross as thunder—I've discovered that that's Dougal's way of showing nervousness! And Mr Craw! What have you done with Mr Craw? He's as bold as brass, and nobody can manage him except Aunt Hatty. . . . Jaikie, you're very disreputable. I don't like your clothes a bit. Where did you get that horrible scarf?"

"I was worse yesterday," was all that Jaikie would say. "What I want to know is—have you kept Prince John indoors? And what about the servants? They mustn't talk."

"He has never put his head outside since he arrived yesterday— except for an hour after dark last night when I took him for a walk on the hill. The servants have nothing to talk about. We call him John, and pretend he is another Australian cousin like Robin. Freddy sent a groom to Knockraw to pick up his kit."

"How did that go off?"

"All right. The groom went to the back door. There was a good deal of luggage—enough to fill the dogcart. He said he met a lot of people—a man in the avenue and several on the road. I suppose these were the spies?"

"The groom went straight to Castle Gay?"

"Yes. Middlemas arranged for getting the things over here after dark."

"That was lucky. The sight of the luggage going to the Castle will have helped my reputation for speaking the truth, when the story gets to the Hydropathic this morning. You realise that all this neighbourhood is being watched?"

"Of course I do. It's a delicious feeling. There's been some very odd people in cars and on bicycles up the road, and Mackillop has hunted several out of the park."

"Mackillop had better stop that," said Jaikie. "For the next twenty-four hours it would be as well if the park were open to the public."

"Are you serious?" Alison looked puzzled. "Come in at once and explain things. I've had a lot of trouble keeping our own lot quiet. Mr Craw has been rather above himself. That beloved Mr McCunn is my great ally. He said, 'I'll take no responsibility about anything till Jaikie comes. It's Jaikie that's got the sow by the lug.'"

Mrs Brisbane-Brown's drawing-room was as bright and gracious in the October sun as when Jaikie had visited it a week ago. But then he had entered it with curiosity and trepidation; now it seemed too familiar to give a thought to; it was merely a background for various human beings with whom he had urgent business. The coffee cups were still in the room, and the men were smoking. Prince John wore the clothes he had worn the day before, and in the clear afternoon light looked more elegant than ever. He was talking to Charvill, who was much about his height, and looking up at them was Dickson McCunn in an ancient suit of knickerbockers, listening reverently. The hostess sat in her accustomed chair, busy at her usual needlework, and beside her was the anxious face of Mr Barbon. Dougal was deep in that day's issue of the View. But the centre of the company was Mr Craw. He stood with his back to the fire, his legs a little apart, and his eyes on Mrs Brisbane-Brown. He seemed to have recovered his balance, for there was no apology or diffidence in his air. Rather it spoke of renewed authority. He had also recovered his familiar nattiness of attire. Gone were the deplorable garments provided by the Watermeeting innkeeper and the Portaway draper. He wore a neat grey suit with a white line in it, a grey tie with a pearl pin, and the smartest of tan shoes. His garb was almost festive.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr Galt," said Mrs Brisbane-Brown. "You look a little the worse for wear. Have you had luncheon? . . . Well, you have been giving us all a good deal to think about. It looks as if the situation had rather got out of hand. Perhaps you can clear things up."

Jaikie's mild eyes scanned the party. He saw Dougal hungry for enlightenment, Mr Barbon fearful lest some new horror should be sprung upon him, Charvill prepared to be amused, Prince John smilingly careless as being used to odd adventures, Dickson puzzled but trustful, Mr Craw profoundly suspicious. He met their eyes in turn, and then he met Alison's, and the lashes of one of hers drooped over her cheek in a conspirator's wink.

"A week ago," he said slowly, "I was given my instructions. I was told to find Mr Craw at the Back House of the Garroch and keep him hidden till the Evallonians left Knockraw. I have fulfilled them to the letter. There's not a soul except ourselves knows where Mr Craw has been. Nobody has recognised him. The world believes that he's living quietly at Castle Gay. . . . And the Knockraw people by this time must be in London . . ."

Mrs Brisbane-Brown laughed. "A very good account of your stewardship. . . . On the other side the situation can scarcely be said to have cleared. We have his Royal Highness here in close hiding, and a number of men in Portaway who mean every kind of mischief to him and to Mr Craw. The question is, what we are to do about it. This state of affairs cannot go on indefinitely."

"It can't," said Jaikie. "It must be cleared up tomorrow night."

"Will you please explain?"

"It all begins," said Jaikie, "with the man Allins."

"He is shockingly underbred," said Mrs Brisbane-Brown. "I never understood why Mr Craw employed him. Poor Freddy can't have been happy with him. . . . You think he is something worse?"

"I can prove that he is a rogue," said Jaikie calmly, and embarked on his tale.

He dealt first with Allins, recounting his meetings with him, from the Cambridge club to the episode of the previous

day. He told the story well, and he purposely made Mr Craw the hero of it—Mr Craw's encounter with Allins in the street, Mr Craw at the Socialist meeting, Mr Craw as a Communist orator. The hero was made a little self-conscious by the narrative, but he was also flattered. He became slightly pink and shifted his feet.

"What astonishing presence of mind!" said Mrs Brisbane—Brown. "I warmly congratulate you."

"I must not be understood to have made a speech in favour of Communism," said Mr Craw. "It was a speech condemnatory of official Socialism, showing its logical culmination."

"Anyway, it did the trick," said Jaikie. "Allins dropped his suspicions. Mr Craw's disguise was pretty good in any case. You saw him yourself yesterday."

"I did," said Mrs Brisbane—Brown. "I thought he was the piano-tuner from Gledmouth, who is a little given to drink."

Mr Craw frowned. "Will you continue, Mr Galt? Detail the suspicions you entertain about Mr Allins."

"He brought the Evallonians to Knockraw, and was paid for it. We have it on their own testimony. He brought the other Evallonians to Portaway and is being paid for it. And the man is in a sweat of fear in case the plot fails. The price must be pretty big."

"The plot! What is it? What evidence have you?"

"The evidence of my own eyes and ears. I spent part of yesterday afternoon with Allins, and two hours last night with him and his friends."

Jaikie had an audience which hung on his lips while he told of how he had made himself ground-bait for the predatory fish. There was a good deal of the actor in him, and he did full justice to his alcoholic babblings of the afternoon, and the grim inquisition of the evening. He even allowed part of his motive to appear. "They called me a little rat," he said meditatively.

"You led them to believe that Count Casimir and his friends were now at Castle Gay. May I ask why?" Mr Craw's voice was harsh with offence.

"Because I wanted the Knockraw people to have plenty of time to get clear."

"For which purpose I am to be sacrificed?"

"Your interests and theirs are the same. You must see that. What they want is to find the Evallonian monarchists and Prince John and you yourself in some close relation, and to publish the fact to the world. That would give them a big advantage. It would kill your power to help Casimir, and it would put Britain definitely against him. Our people would never stand the notion that you and the Evallonians were conspiring on British soil, and the presence of Prince John would put the lid on it. You see that, don't you?"

"I see that it was desirable to get rid of the Knockraw tenants. . . . But I do not see why I should be exposed to a visit from those Republican miscreants."

"It was the only way to make Casimir's escape certain. . . . What will happen, Mr Craw? The Republicans think that Casimir and the Prince are safe at Castle Gay. They won't trouble very much about them till tomorrow night, when they are coming to see you, hoping to catch the lot of you in the very act of conspiracy. They chose Friday because it is the day of the poll, and the countryside will be in a stir, and they think that your outdoor and indoor servants will be mostly in Portaway. Well, all you've got to do is to be there to meet them, and tell them you never heard of any such nonsense, and send them all to blazes. Then it will be they who will look the fools, and you won't be troubled any more from that quarter. We must settle this business once and for all, and give you some security for a quiet life."

"It will be a very unpleasant experience for me," said Mr Craw. But there was no panic in his voice, only irritation. The listeners received the impression that there would be a certain asperity in Mr Craw's reception of the Evallonian delegates.

"Of course," Jaikie added, "it will all have to be stage-managed a little. You can trust me for that."

"What I don't understand," said Mrs Brisbane—Brown, "is why his Royal Highness did not accompany the Knockraw party. . . . It sounds shockingly inhospitable, sir, and I need not tell you how deeply honoured I am to have you in my house. But I am thinking of your own interests. You are the most important personage in this business, and it is imperative to get you out of danger at once. Yet you are still here, in hiding, only five miles from your bitterest enemies."

Jaikie looked a little embarrassed. "Perhaps I was wrong, but it seemed to me that the best chance of the Prince's safety was to keep him apart from the others. You see, those people at Portaway are not to be trifled with. They have got

lines down everywhere, and for all I know they may have discovered the flight of Casimir and his friends and followed them. But Casimir doesn't greatly matter as long as the Prince is not with him. There's nothing wrong in three Evallonian gentlemen visiting Scotland; the trouble begins when they get into Mr Craw's neighbourhood, and when they have the Prince in their company. I thought it safer to break up the covey."

"But how is the Prince to get away?"

"I have arranged all that. There's a man, Maclellan, down at Rinks—he's a friend of Mr McCunn. He has a boat, and he'll put the Prince across to Markhaven and never breathe a word about it. My suggestion is that Mr McCunn and the Prince drive to Rinks tomorrow night, getting there about eleven. There's a train leaves Markhaven at 8.15 next morning which gets to London at 4.30. Once in London he is for all practical purposes safe. . . . The difficulty will lie in getting him away from here. There's a man in Portaway will bring a car—a friend of mine; but I may as well tell you that every corner of this place will be pretty well watched. I told the Evallonians that the Prince was now at Castle Gay. We must do something to keep up that pretence."

"To-morrow night is the Callowa Club Ball," said Mrs Brisbane—Brown, but no one was listening.

"I think Mr Charvill should transfer himself to the Castle as soon as possible," said Jaikie. "He's about the Prince's height."

"I have three tickets for the Ball," went on the hostess. "I usually take tickets, but I have not been for years. This year I proposed to take Alison and Robin."

"Mr Charvill must wear the Prince's white waterproof—whatever the weather—and show himself on the terrace. There will be people to see him, and it will divert attention from the Mains."

Mrs Brisbane—Brown obtained an audience at last, for she raised her voice to a high pitch of authority.

"I have a plan," she said. "His Royal Highness will come with me to the Ball. It is fancy dress, and he can go as Prince Charles Edward—I have the clothes, wig and all. They belonged to my husband, who was something of the Prince's height and figure. . . . There will be no need for special precautions. A car from Portaway will take my niece, my cousin, and myself to the Station Hotel. At a certain hour in the evening the Prince will leave us and motor to Rinks, where Mr McCunn will see him safely on board. It is all perfectly simple."

"That's a good idea," said Jaikie fervently. He saw the one snag in his plan neatly removed. "I'll arrange about the car. His Royal Highness must lie very close here till tomorrow evening. It might be a good thing if he went to bed. And Mr Charvill had better get to the Castle and inside that waterproof."

Mr Craw made one last protest.

"You have cast me for a very unpleasant part." He looked with disfavour at Jaikie, whom he had come to fear, and with an air of appeal at Dougal, whom he regarded more particularly as his henchman. It was the henchman who replied:

"You'll have nothing to do, Mr Craw. Simply to sit in your own chair in your own library and watch those foreigners making idiots of themselves. Then you can say what is in your mind, and I hope the Almighty will put some winged words into your mouth."

An hour later Jaikie stood with Dougal on the terrace of the Mains in the fast-gathering twilight. To them appeared Alison, bearing in her arms a reluctant Woolworth.

"Such a thing has never happened before," she declared. "This evil dog of yours has seduced Tactful and Pensive into raiding the chicken run. They have killed three cockerels. . . . Jaikie, you've introduced a touch of crime into this quiet countryside."

"And that's true, Miss Westwater," said Dougal. "I don't know if you realise it, but we're up against something rather bigger than we pretended indoors."

"I want Jaikie to tell me one thing," said the girl. "Why didn't he let Prince John go with the others? I wondered at the time. Oh, I know the reason he gave, but it wasn't very convincing."

Jaikie grinned. "Haven't you guessed? I wanted to please Dickson McCunn. Dougal and I owe everything to him, and it's not much we can do in return. He's a great romantic character, and you can see how he's taken up with Prince John. He was telling me that he has been looking up books at the Castle and finds that the Prince is partly descended from Elizabeth of Bohemia and from the Sobieskis. Prince Charlie's mother was a Sobieski. It will be meat and drink to him to be helping

the Prince to escape in the middle of the night in a boat on the Solway shore.”

The girl laughed softly. “There couldn’t be a better reason,” she said. . . . “Then about tomorrow night? Why have you taken such pains to arrange a visit to Castle Gay—telling the enemy that everybody would be there—encouraging them, you might say?”

“It was the common-sense plan. I had other reasons, too, and I’ll tell you them. I want to see those blighters made to look foolish. I want to see it with my own eyes. You know, they called me a rat, and tried to threaten me. . . . Also, I was thinking of Mr Craw. This last week has made him a new man.”

“That is certainly true. He is losing all his shyness. And Aunt Hatty is so good for him. I believe that, if this crisis goes on much longer, he’ll propose to her.”

“To-morrow night,” said Jaikie, “will put the finishing touch to Mr Craw. If he confronts the Evallonians in his own house and packs them off with a cursing, he’ll have henceforth the heart of an African lion.”

“He’ll need it,” said Dougal solemnly. “I tell you we’re up against something pretty big. . . . I have the advantage of knowing a little about the gentry down at Portaway. My politics have taken me into some queer places, and I’ve picked up news that never gets into the Press. . . . First of all, Craw is right to some extent about the Evallonian Republic. It’s not what the newspapers make out. There’s a queer gang behind the scenes—a good deal of graft, a fair amount of crime, and a lump of Communism of rather a dirty colour. . . . And these people at the Hydropathic are some of the worst of them. They gave you false names last night, but Casimir, so Miss Westwater tells me, recognised them from your description, and he gave them their right names. I know something about Rosenbaum and Dedekind and Ricci, and I know a whole lot about Mastrovin. They’re desperate folk, and they know that their power is on a razor edge, so they won’t stick at trifles. . . . You may be right. They may only want to find the Monarchists in a thoroughly compromising position and publish it to the world. . . . On the other hand, they may have a darker purpose. Or perhaps they have two purposes, and if one fails they will try the other. It would suit their book to make Casimir and Craw the laughing-stock of Europe, but it would suit their book even better to have done with Casimir and Co. altogether—and especially with Prince John. . . . To remove them quietly somewhere where they would be out of action. . . . For I haven’t a doubt that Casimir is right, and that any moment Evallonia may kick the Republicans over the border.”

“I thought of that,” said Jaikie. “They have a yacht waiting at Fallatown.”

Dougal listened with wide eyes to this fresh piece of news.

“To-morrow night,” he said solemnly, “there’s going to be some sort of a battle. And we must prepare every detail as carefully as if it were a real battle. Man, Jaikie!” and he beat his companion’s back, “isn’t this like old times?”

“How marvellous!” Alison cried, and the dusk did not conceal the glow in her eyes. “I’m going to be in it. Do you think I am going to that silly ball? Not I!”

“You will certainly be in it,” Jaikie told her. “You and I are going to have the busiest evening of our lives.”



CHAPTER 18

SOLWAY SANDS

This simple tale, which has been compelled to linger in too many sordid by-paths, is to have at last one hour of the idyllic. But an idyll demands a discerning mind, a mind which can savour that quality which we call idyllic, which can realise that Heaven has for a moment brought spirit and matter into exquisite unison. "We receive but what we give," says the poet, "and in our life alone doth Nature live." Such a mind was Mr McCunn's, such a maker of idylls was the laird of Blawearry. He alone of men perceived the romance into which he had stumbled, and by perceiving created it. Cogitavit, ergo fuit.

Prince John did not go to bed on Thursday afternoon as Jaikie had advised. On the contrary he played bridge after dinner till close on midnight, and was with difficulty restrained from convoying Robin Charvill on his road to Castle Gay. But next morning he stayed in bed. It was a mild bright day of late autumn; the pheasants were shouting in the woods; the roads were alive with voters hastening to Portaway; Charvill was to be observed, by those who were meant to observe him, sitting on a seat on the Castle terrace in the royal white waterproof: and in the midst of that pleasant bustle of life Prince John was kept firmly between the sheets at the Mains, smoking many cigarettes and reading a detective novel provided by Alison. The cause of this docility was Dickson, who came over after breakfast and took up position in the sitting-room adjoining the royal bed-chamber. It was his duty to see the Prince out of the country, and he was undertaking it in a business spirit.

Jaikie, his headquarters the Green Tree, spent a busy morning over transport. Wilkie, the mechanic at the Hydropathic, was his chief instrument, and he was also his intelligence officer. He brought news of the Evallonians. Allins had been having a good many conferences in the town, he reported, chiefly in a low class of public house. He had also hired two cars for the evening—the cars only, for his party preferred to find the drivers. "He's got the Station Hotel Daimler," said Wilkie, "and young Macvittie's Bentley. They'll be for a long run, nae doot. Maybe they're leaving the place, for Tam Grierson tells me they've got a' their bags packed and have settled their bills. . . . I've got our Rolls for you. Ay, and I've got my orders clear in my mind. I bring the Mains folk down to the Ball, and syne I'm at the hotel at ten-thirty to take the young gentleman down to Rinks, and back again to take the leddies home. . . . 'Deed, yes. I'll haud my tongue, and ye can see for yersel' I'm speirin' nae questions. For this day and this nicht I'm J. Galt's man and naeboddy else's." He laid a confidential and reassuring finger against his nose.

The one incident of note on that day was Jaikie's meeting with Tibbets. He ran against him in the Eastgate, and, on a sudden inspiration, invited him to the Green Tree and stood him luncheon— Mrs Fairweather's plain cooking, far better than the pretentious fare of the Station Hotel.

"Mr Tibbets," he said solemnly, when his guest had stayed his hunger, "you're proud of your profession, aren't you?"

"You may say so," was the answer.

"And you're jealous of its honour? I mean that, while you are always trying to get the better of other papers, yet if any attack is made on the Press as a whole, you all stand together like a stone wall."

"That's so. We're very proud of our solidarity. You get a Government proposing a dirty deal, and we'd smash them in twenty-four hours."

"I thought so. You're the most powerful trade-union on earth."

"Just about it."

"Then, listen to me. I'm going to confess something. That walking-tour we told you about was all moonshine. Dougal—he's my friend—is a journalist on one of the Craw papers, and he's been at Castle Gay for the last week. I'm not a journalist, but there was rather a mix-up and I had to lend a hand. . . . You scored heavily over your interview with Craw."

"My biggest scoop so far," said Tibbets modestly.

"Well, it was all bogus, you know. You never saw Craw. You saw another man, a friend of mine, who happened to be staying at the Castle. He didn't know he was being interviewed, so he talked freely. . . . You had a big success, because your readers thought Mr Craw was recanting his opinions, and you emphasised it very respectfully in no less than three leaders.

... Naturally, Craw's pretty sore."

Tibbets's jaw had fallen and consternation looked out of his eyes.

"He can't repudiate it," he stammered.

"Oh yes, he can. He wasn't in the house at the moment. He's there now, but he wasn't last Sunday."

"Where was he?"

"He was with me," said Jaikie. "Don't make any mistake. He has a perfectly watertight alibi. He's only got to publish the facts in his own papers to make the Wire look particularly foolish."

"And me," said Tibbets in a hollow voice. "They've just raised my screw. Now they'll fire me."

"Probably," said Jaikie coolly. "It will be the hoax of the year, and the Wire is sensitive about hoaxes. It has been had lots of times. . . . But you may ask why the thing hasn't been disavowed already? This is Friday, and your interview appeared last Monday. A telegram to the View signed with Craw's private code-word would have done the trick. That telegram was written out, but it wasn't sent. Can you guess why?"

Tibbets, sunk in gloom, looked far from guessing.

"I stopped it. And the reason was because we want your help. What's more, that telegram need never be sent. The interview can remain unrepudiated and your own reputation untarnished. It has done a good deal of harm to Craw, but he'll say no more about it if—"

"If?" came Tibbets's sharp question.

"If you give us a hand in an altogether different matter. Craw is being bullied by a gang of foreigners—Evallonians—Evallonian Republicans. That would be grand stuff for the Wire, wouldn't it? Yes, but not a word must appear about it unless it is absolutely necessary, for, you see, this is a case for your famous solidarity. A portion of the British Press is being threatened, and in defence the rest of it must stand shoulder to shoulder. You're the only representative of the rest on the spot; and I want you to come with me to-night to Castle Gay to see what happens. There may be no need for your help—in which case you must swear that you'll never breathe a word about the business. On the other hand, you may be badly wanted. In Craw's interest it may be necessary to show up a foreign plot to intimidate a British newspaper proprietor, and between the Wire and the View we ought to make a pretty good effort. What do you say?"

Tibbets looked at Jaikie with eyes in which relief was mingled with disappointment.

"Of course I agree," he said. "I promise that, unless you give me the word, I will wipe anything I may see or hear clean out of my memory. I promise that, if you give me the word, I will put my back into making the highest and holiest row in the history of the British Press. . . . But, Mr Galt, I wish you hadn't brought in that interview as the price of my help. I needn't tell you I'll be thankful if it is allowed to stand. It means a lot to me. But, supposing Craw disowned it straight away, I'd still be glad to come in on to-night's show. I've got my professional standards like other people, and I'm honest about them. If Craw's independence is threatened by somebody outside our trade, then I'm out to defend him, though he were doing his damndest to break me. Have you got that?"

"I've got it," said Jaikie, "and I apologise. You see I'm not a journalist myself."

Dickson McCunn spent the day, as he would have phrased it, "in waiting." He was both courtier and business man. Middlemas was left to see to the packing of the Prince's kit. Dickson's was no menial task; it was for him to act for one day as Chief of Staff to a great man in extremity. He occupied his leisure in investigating Mrs Brisbane-Brown's reference library, where he conned the history of the royal house of Evallonia. There could be no doubt of it; the blood of Stuart and Sobieski ran in the veins of the young gentleman now engaged in bed with a detective novel and a box of cigarettes.

He lunched alone with Mrs Brisbane-Brown. Alison, it appeared, was at the Castle, to which late the night before Mr Craw had also been secretly conveyed. In the afternoon Dickson fell asleep, and later was given a solitary tea by Middlemas. At the darkening Alison returned, the Prince was got out of bed, and there was a great mustering of the late General's Highland accoutrements. Presently Dickson had the felicity of watching a young man in the costume of Prince Charles Edward (and, if the miniature in the drawing-room was to be trusted, favouring the original in most respects) being instructed by Alison, with the assistance of her gramophone, in the movements of the foursome and the eightsome reels. Dickson sat through the performance in a happy trance. The faded Stuart tartan of the kilt and plaid, the old worn velvet of the doublet, the bright silver of dirk and sword-hilt, the dim blue of the Garter riband, were part of something

which he had always dreamed. The wig was impossible, for the head of the late General had been larger than the Prince's, but Dickson applauded its absence. He had always thought of Prince Charlie as wearing his own hair, and that hair not too long.

Mrs Brisbane-Brown appeared at dinner "en grande tenue," as she expressed it, with a magnificent comb of diamonds surmounting her head. But Alison was in her ordinary outdoor clothes. The ball was not for her, she said, for she had far too much to do. Jaikie was due at the Castle at half-past eight, and she must be there when he arrived. "That woman Cazenove," she observed, "is no manner of use. She has been fluttering round Mr Craw like a scared hen, and undermining his self-confidence. She is undoing all the good you did him, Aunt Hatty. I have told Bannister to carry her to her bedroom and lock her in if she gets hysterical."

She left before the meal was over, and her adieu to the Prince scandalised Dickson by its informality. "See that you turn up the collar of your ulster, sir, and tie a muffler round your chin. There are several people near the gate who have no business to be there. I shall have some fun dodging them myself."

The car, driven by Wilkie, duly arrived at the stroke of nine, and Mrs Brisbane-Brown, attended by her nephew, who was muffled, as one would expect in an Australian, against the chills of a Scots October, was packed into it by Middlemas and her maid. Dickson did not show himself. His time was not yet, and he was fortifying himself against it by a pipe and a little hot toddy.

The story of the Ball may be read in the Canonry Standard and Portaway Advertiser, where the party from the Mains was incorrectly given as the Honourable Mrs Brisbane-Brown, the Honourable Alison Westwater, and Mr John Charvill. The Australian cousin was a huge success, and to this day many a Canonry maiden retains a tender memory of the tall young Chevalier, who danced beautifully—except in the reels, where he needed much guidance—and whose charm of manner and wide knowledge of the world upset all their preconceived notions of the inhabitants of the Antipodes. His aunt introduced him also to several of the neighbouring lairds, who found him not less agreeable than their womenkind. It was a misfortune that he left so early and so mysteriously. His name was on many virginal programmes for dances after midnight. Lord Fosterton wanted to continue his conversation with him about a new method of rearing partridges, which Mr Charvill had found in Czecho-Slovakia, and young Mr Kennedy of Kenmair, who was in the Diplomatic Service, and whose memory was haunted by a resemblance which he could not define, was anxious to exchange gossip with him about certain circles in Vienna with which he appeared to be familiar. As it was, Mr Charvill departed like Cinderella, but long before Cinderella's hour.

At half-past ten Wilkie returned to the Mains and Dickson's hour had come. He wore a heavy motoring ulster and a soft black hat which belonged to Barbon. It seemed to him the nearest approach he could find to the proper headwear. From Bannister he had borrowed a small revolver, for which he had only four cartridges. He felt it incongruous—it should have been a long sword.

At a quarter to eleven he stood on the pavement outside the Station Hotel, which was empty now, for the crowd which had watched the guests' arrival had departed. A tall figure in a greatcoat came swiftly out. Dickson held the door open while he entered the car, and then got in beside him. His great hour had begun.

I wish that for Dickson's sake I could tell of a hazardous journey, of hostile eyes and sinister faces, of a harsh challenge, a brush with the enemy, an escape achieved in the teeth of odds by the subtlety and valour of the Prince's companion. For such things Dickson longed, and for such he was prepared. But truth compels me to admit that nothing of the sort happened. The idyllic is not the epic. The idyll indeed is an Alexandrian invention, born in the days when the epic spirit had passed out of life. But Dickson, whose soul thirsted for epic, achieved beyond doubt the idyllic.

Prince John was in a cheerful, conversational mood. He was thankful to be out of what promised to be a very tiresome entanglement. He wanted to be back in France, where he was due at a partridge shoot. He had enjoyed the ball, and purposed to take lessons in reel-dancing. "You have pretty girls in Scotland," he said, "but none to touch Miss Westwater. In another year I back her to lead the field. There's a good hotel, you say, at Markhaven, where I can get a few hours' sleep. . . . My friends by this time are in London, but we do not propose to meet till Paris. . . . Happily the wind is slight. I am not the best of sailors."

He conversed pleasantly, but Dickson's answers, if respectful, were short. He was too busy savouring the situation to talk. He addressed his companion, not as "Sir," but as "Sire."

The car stopped a little beyond the hamlet of Rinks, and "Wait here," Dickson told Wilkie; "I'll be back in less than half an hour." He humped the heavier of the Prince's two cases (which was all the baggage the Prince proposed to take with him) and led him, by a road he knew well, over the benty links and by way of many plank bridges across the brackish runnels which drained the marshlands. The moon was high in the heavens, and the whole cup of the estuary brimmed with light. The trench of the Callowa was full, a silver snake in a setting of palest gold, and above it, like a magical bird, brooded the Rosabelle. Only the rare calls of sea-fowl broke into the low chuckle and whisper of the ebbing tide.

Maclellan was waiting for them, Maclellan in sea-boots and an ancient greatcoat of frieze.

"Man, I'm glad to see ye, Mr McCunn," was his greeting. "I'm vexed we're to hae sae little o' ye, but I'm proud to be able to oblige your freend . . . What did you say his name was? Mr Charles? It's a grand nicht for our job, Mr Charles. The wind's at our back—what there is o't. It's no muckle the noo, but there'll be mair oot on the Solway. We'll be in Markhaven by ane o' the mornin'."

Dickson's ear caught Maclellan's misapprehension of Charvill. He did not correct it, for the name Maclellan gave the Prince was the name he had long given him in his heart.

Far down the estuary he saw the lights of a ship, and from its funnel a thin fluff of smoke showed against the pale sky.

"That's the yatt that's lyin' off Fallatown," Maclellan said. "She's gettin' up steam. She'll be for off early in the mornin'."

It was the last touch that was needed to complete the picture. There lay the enemy ship, the English frigate, to prevent escape. Under its jaws the Prince must slip through to the sanctuary of France. The place was no longer an inlet on a lowland firth. It was Loch Nanuamh under the dark hills of Moidart—it was some Hebridean bay, with outside the vast shadowy plain of the Atlantic . . .

They were on the deck of the Rosabelle now, and, as the Prince unbuttoned his ulster to get at his cigarettes, Dickson saw the flutter of tartan, the gleam of silver, the corner of a blue riband. In that moment his spirit was enlarged. At last—at long last—his dream had come true. He was not pondering romance, he was living it. . . . He was no more the prosperous trader, the cautious business man, the laird of a few humdrum acres, the plump elder whose seat was the chimney-corner. He was young again, and his place was the open road and the seashore and the uncharted world. He was Lochiel, with a price on his head and no home but the heather. . . . He was Montrose in his lonely loyalty. . . . He was Roland in the red twilight of Roncesvalles . . .

The Prince was saying good-bye.

"I'm very much obliged to you, Mr McCunn. Some day I hope we may meet again and renew our friendship. Meanwhile, will you wear this as a memento of our pleasant adventure?"

He took a ring from his finger, a plain gold ring set with an engraved cornelian. Dickson received it blindly. He was to remember later the words which accompanied it, but at the moment he scarcely heard them. He took the Prince's hand, bent low, and kissed it. Happily Maclellan was not looking.

"God bless your Royal Highness," he stammered, "and bring you safe to port. And if you ever have need of me, a word will bring me across the world."

He was on the bank now, the mooring rope had been loosed, and the Rosabelle was slipping gently down the current. Maclellan had begun to hoist the sail. The Prince stood in the stern and waved his hand, but Dickson did not respond. His thoughts were too insurgent for action. His whole soul was drawn to that patch of dark which was the boat, momentarily growing smaller, speeding down a pathway of silver into a golden haze.

"I meant it," he said firmly to himself. "By God, I meant it. . . . I'm sixty-one years of age on the 15th of next month, but a man's just as old as his heart, and mine's young. I've got the ring. . . . And maybe some day I'll get the word!"

He took his seat beside Wilkie and amazed him by his high spirits. All the road to Portaway he sang what seemed to be Jacobite songs. "I'll to Lochiel and Appin and kneel to them," he crooned. When they picked up Mrs Brisbane—Brown at the hotel, she travelled alone inside the car, for Dickson resumed the outside seat and his melodies. "Follow thee, follow thee, wha wadna follow thee!" he shouted.

"Ye havena got the tune richt," said the distracted Wilkie.

"Who cares about the tune?" Dickson cried. "It's the words that matter. And the words are great."

The car halted in the street of Starr village. Presently Dickson joined Mrs Brisbane—Brown inside, and the place beside the driver was taken by a bulky stranger. "A friend of mine," he told the lady. "He'll maybe come in useful at the Castle."

CHAPTER 19

MR CRAW IS MASTER IN HIS OWN HOUSE

A little after ten o'clock the front-door bell of Castle Gay was violently rung. The summons was answered by Bannister, unattended by the customary footmen. He opened upon a strange spectacle. A conventicle stood upon the doorstep, no less than six men, and behind them on the gravel were two large cars, in which other figures could be discerned. It was a fine night with a moon, and the astonished butler was left in no doubt about the strength of the visitors.

An authoritative voice demanded Mr Craw. Bannister, jostled out of all his traditions, admitted that his master was at home.

"We will speak with him," said the voice.

The butler stammered something about an appointment.

"He will see us," said the voice firmly. "You need announce no names. Take us to him at once." By this time the six were well inside the doorway, and Bannister had retreated nervously into the hall. It was one of the six, not the butler, that shut the door behind them.

Then Bannister seemed to recover himself. He offered to help the leader in removing his coat, for all six wore travelling ulsters. But he was roughly waved aside. "You will stay here, Hannus," the leader said to one of the party, "and if anyone attempts to leave blow your whistle. Our friends outside will watch the other doors. Now, you," he turned to Bannister, "take us instantly to Mr Craw."

The butler was certainly recovering. "Mr Craw is in the library," he said, in a tone which was wonderfully composed considering the circumstances. "One moment, sir, and I will light the staircase."

He slipped into the cloakroom on the left side of the hall, and in a moment the great staircase was flooded with light. But in his three seconds of absence Bannister had done something more. He had switched on the light in a minute chamber at the base of the tower, which was one of the remnants of the old shell of the castle. This chamber had the advantage of looking directly upon the park, and a light in it shone like a signal beacon down the Callowa vale.

"Will you follow me, sir?" he said, and five of the visitors, with eyes as wary as colts, ascended the broad carpeted stairs, while the sixth remained on duty below, standing rigid in the centre of the hall as if to avoid an ambush. It was odd behaviour, but not more odd than that shown by the ascending five. Bannister found himself poked in the back by the barrel of a pistol, and, when he looked round, the pistol's owner grinned and nodded, to point his warning that he was not to be trifled with.

Bannister took no notice. He had recovered the impassiveness of a well-trained servant. He behaved as if such visitors and such manners were in no way abnormal, and led them along the upper gallery and flung open the door of the library.

"Gentlemen to see you, sir," he announced, and when the five had crowded in he shut the door behind them. He seemed to be amused and to have urgent business on hand, for he darted down a side staircase towards the lower regions of the house, and as he went he chuckled.

The library was half in dusk. There was a glow from the big fire on the hearth, and one lamp was lit in the central chandelier. The long lines of vellum and morocco on the walls made a dim pattern in the shadows, and the great Flemish tapestry was only a blur. But there was a reading-lamp on the big table, which partly illumined the blue velvet curtains of the six tall narrow windows.

At the table in his accustomed chair sat Mr Craw, spectacles on nose, and a paper in his hand, and opposite him was the discreet figure of Miss Elena Cazenove, her pencil poised above her note-book. At the end of the table stood Mr Barbon, with the air of a secretary waiting to supplement or endorse some ukase of his chief. Both men wore dinner jackets. It was a pleasant picture of busy domesticity.

Mr Craw raised his eyes from the paper at the interruption. He had nerved himself to a great effort and his heart was beating uncomfortably. But he managed to preserve an air of self-possession. The features of the marble Augustus on the pedestal behind him were not more composed.

"What does this mean?" he said sharply, in a voice to which nervousness gave the proper irritability. "Bannister!" He raised his voice. But the butler had gone, and the five men in ulsters had approached the table.

He took off his spectacles, but he did not rise. "Who on earth are you?" he demanded. The words came out like pistol shots. The voice was a little startled, which in the circumstances was right.

"Our names do not matter." Mastrovin bent his heavy brows upon the comfortable figure in the chair. This was not quite what he had expected. He had hoped to come upon a full conclave, Royalty and Royalists and Craw in the act of conspiring. He had hoped for a dramatic entry, an embarrassed recognition, a profound discomfiture, and he found only an elderly gentleman dictating letters. Instead of a den of foxes he had stumbled upon a kennel of spaniels. He was conscious that he and his companions struck a discordant note in this firelit room. He must make the most of the discord.

"I offer the conventional apologies for our intrusion, Mr Craw," he said. "But, as you know well, those who play a certain game cannot always preserve the politenesses. We have come to have a few words with you and your guests."

"I shall not require you for the present, Miss Cazenove," said Mr Craw, and the lady clutched her note-book and with a wavering snipelike motion left the room.

"Well?" said Mr Craw, when the door had closed behind her. He had sat back in his chair and Barbon had moved to his side.

"The guests to whom I refer," Mastrovin continued, "are four Evallonian gentlemen in whom we are interested."

"Evallonian gentlemen!" exclaimed Mr Craw. "Barbon, this man must be mad."

"Let me give you their names," said Mastrovin gently. "They are Count Casimir Muresco, of whom all the world has heard; Prince Odalchini, and Professor Jagon. Last, but by no means least, there is Prince John, the claimant to the Evallonian throne."

Mr Craw had pulled himself together and had entered on the line of conduct which had already been anxiously rehearsed.

"I have heard of all four," he said. "But what makes you think they are here? I do not keep foreign notables on the ice in my cellar."

"We have evidence that at this moment they are under your roof. Be well advised, Mr Craw. You cannot deceive us. We are perfectly informed of all that has been happening here. At this moment every exit from your house is watched. You had better surrender at discretion."

"Barbon," said Mr Craw in a pained voice, "what in Heaven's name is he talking about?"

Mr Barbon was fussy and anxious in the ordinary relations of life, but not for nothing did the blood of a Cromwellian Barebones run in his veins. His war record had proved that he could be cool enough in certain emergencies. Now he was rather enjoying himself.

"I'm sure I don't know, sir," he said. "The first three men are, or were, the shooting tenants in Knockraw. I knew Count Casimir slightly, and they came to dinner last Saturday night, and we dined with them on Monday. I heard that they had now gone home. I know nothing about Prince John. There was nobody of that name with the Knockraw people when they dined here."

"I see," said Mr Craw. He turned to Mastrovin. "Is that information any use to you? Apparently you must look for your friends at Knockraw. I myself have been away from home and only returned last night. I know nothing whatever about your Evallonians. I never saw them in my life."

"I am sorry to be obliged to give you the lie," said Mastrovin. "We have evidence that three of them came here two days ago. We know that Prince John is here—he was seen here this very day. I warn you, Mr Craw, that we are difficult people to trifle with."

"I have no desire to trifle with you." Mr Craw's manner was stately. "You come here uninvited, and cross-examine me in my own library. I have told you the literal truth. You, sir, have the air and speech of a gentleman. I shall be obliged if you will now withdraw."

For answer the five men came a little nearer, and Barbon sat himself on the arm of his chief's chair. He was beginning to measure the physical prowess of the visitors. The difficulty lay in what they might have in their ulster pockets.

Over the fireplace there was a huge coat of arms in stone, the complete achievement of the house of Westwater, and

above this was a tiny balcony. It was flush with the wall and scarcely discernible from below—it was reached by a turret stair from the old keep, and may once have been a hiding-place, the Canonry equivalent of a “priest’s hole.” At this moment it held Alison and Jaikie. They had a full view of Mr Craw’s face and of the Evallonian profiles.

“Will you inform us who are the present inmates of this house?” Mastrovin asked.

“Let me see,” said Mr Craw. “Apart from Mr Barbon, whom you see here, there is Miss Cazenove, who has just gone, and Mr Crombie, who is one of my Press assistants. Then there is a young Australian friend called Charvill. There is also a country neighbour, Mr McCunn, but he is out this evening and will not be home till late. That is all, I think, Barbon, besides the domestic staff?”

“Will you kindly have them assembled here?”

The tone nettled Mr Craw, in spite of the restraint he had put upon himself.

“You are insolent, sir,” he rapped out. “You would be justly served if I summoned my servants and had you kicked out-of-doors. Who are you to issue commands?”

“We happen to be in command,” said Mastrovin with a thrust forward of his heavy chin. “Your household staff is depleted. Your outdoor staff is in Portaway and will not return till evening. They were seen to leave your park gates. We have our own people inside and outside this house. You will be wise to obey us.”

Mr Craw, having remembered his part, shrugged his shoulders. He touched a button on the table, and Bannister appeared with a suddenness that suggested that he had been lurking outside the door.

“Have the goodness to ask Mr Charvill and Mr Crombie to come here,” he said. “You will find them, I believe, in the billiard-room.”

The billiard-room was at the other end of the house, but the rapidity with which the two presented themselves argued a less distant lair. Dougal had his pipe, and Robin Charvill had his finger in a novel to mark his place. Mastrovin cast an eye over their physical proportions, which were not contemptible. Craw was, of course, useless, but there were three able-bodied opponents if trouble came. But he was accustomed to similar situations, and had no doubt about his power to control them.

“You say this is all your household. Very well. We will soon test your truthfulness. We are going to search your house. You four will remain here till I return, and two of my friends will keep you company. You”—he turned to Bannister, who stood discreetly in the background—“will accompany me.”

Up in the gallery Jaikie chuckled. “Just what I hoped,” he whispered to Alison. “Bannister knows what to do. You and I must show them a little sport.” The two slipped out to the turret staircase.

Rosenbaum and Dedekind were the two left behind to guard the prisoners in the library. They had done the same sort of thing before and knew their job, for they took up positions to cover the two doors. Each had his right hand in the pocket of his ulster. The face of the Jew Rosenbaum was heavy and solemn, expressionless as a ship’s figurehead, but Dedekind was more human. He shifted his feet, undid the top button of his ulster, for the night was not cold and the fire was good, and looked as if he would like to talk. But the party of four seemed to be oblivious of their gaolers. Mr Craw resumed his papers, Barbon was busy making entries in a note-book, Dougal had picked up a weekly journal, and Charvill had returned to his novel. They gave a fine example of British phlegm, and disregarded the intruders as completely as if they had been men come to wind up the clocks.

Meantime Bannister, with the injured air of an abbot who is compelled to reveal to some raiding Goths the treasures of his abbey, conducted Mastrovin, Ricci, and Calaman over the castle. They descended into the hall, where they found the sixth Evallonian at his lonely post: he reported that he had seen and heard no one. They investigated the big apartments on the ground-floor, including the nest of small rooms beyond the dining-hall. Then they made an elaborate survey of the main bedroom floors, both in the ancient central keep and the more modern wings. They found everything in order. They penetrated to Mr Craw’s luxurious chamber, to which he proposed, as we know, to add a private bathroom. They raided the rooms which housed Barbon and Dougal, Charvill and Dickson McCunn, and they satisfied themselves by an inspection of the belongings that the inmates were those whom Bannister named. They entered various bedrooms which were clearly unoccupied. And then they extended their researches to the upper floors.

It was here that their tour became less satisfying. The upper floors of Castle Gay are like a rabbit-warren—clusters of small rooms, tortuous passages on different levels, unexpected staircases, unlooked-for cul-desacs. It was hard for any

stranger to preserve his sense of direction, and to keep tally of all that he saw. The business was complicated by the hidden presence of Alison and Jaikie, and of Tibbets, who had been summoned from his own lair. Also of the beagle pups, Tactful and Pensive.

Alison, who knew every cranny of the house, took command, and Jaikie and Tibbets in their stocking-soles followed. . . . The Evallonians would hear suddenly loud voices at a corridor's end, and on arriving there find no one. Lights would be turned on and as suddenly turned off. There would be a skirl of idiot laughter as they came into a passage, cold and blue in the light of the moon. . . . Also there were dogs, dogs innumerable. A hound would suddenly burst into their midst and disappear. Ricci fell heavily on one of the stairways, because of a dog which swept him off his legs.

The searchers, puffing and bewildered, lost their tempers. Bannister found a pistol clapped to his chest, and turned on Mastrovin a pallid, terror-stricken face.

"What infernal maze is this you have brought us to?" the voice behind the pistol demanded. "Answer, you fool. There are people here, many people. Who are they?"

The butler was a figure of panic. "I don't know," he stammered. "You have seen the rooms of the staff. Up here no one sleeps. It is the old part of the house. They say it is haunted."

"Haunted be damned!" Mastrovin turned suddenly and peered into a long, low attic, empty except for some ancient bedsteads. There was a sound without, and as he moved his head he saw the butt-end of a human form disappearing apparently into the ground. It was Tibbets, who was a little behind the others. The sight quickened Mastrovin's paces. For a little he preceded Bannister, darting with surprising rapidity in the direction of any noise. But all that happened was that he hit his head hard on a beam, and, opening a door hastily, all but cascaded down a steep flight of steps. And his movements were enlivened by echoes of ghostly merriment above, below, before, behind him . . .

In a secluded corner Alison, Jaikie, and Tibbets were recovering their breath. The girl shook with laughter. "Was there ever such a game of hide-and-seek?" she panted.

But Jaikie looked grave.

"We mustn't rattle them too much," he said. "They're a queer lot, and if we wake the savage in them they may forget their manners. We don't want anything ugly to happen. They'll give up in a little if we let them alone, and go back to the library."

But it was a full half-hour before Mastrovin left those upper floors, and, with each minute of failure to find what he sought, his fury and his suspicions increased. Alison and her two squires followed the party at a discreet distance, till they saw them enter the library corridor. Jaikie took a glance into the hall below, and observed that the Evallonian sentry was no longer there. He knew that he was now lying gagged and trussed in a corner of the cloak-room. The time had come for Mackillop and his friends to act.

The three squeezed into their little gallery above the fireplace, just as the Evallonians entered the library. Mr Craw was still writing in apparent unconcern. As a matter of fact he had written his name six hundred and seventy times on sheets of foolscap by way of steadying his nerves. Dougal was smoking and reading the New Statesman, Barbon was apparently asleep, and Charvill still deep in his novel. As they entered, Rosenbaum and Dedekind moved towards them, and there were some rapid questions and answers.

Something which the leader said woke all five into a sudden vigilance. The slouch and embarrassment disappeared, and their bodies seemed to quicken with a new purpose. The five took a step towards the table, and their movements were soft and lithe as panthers. They were no longer clumsy great-coated foreigners, but beasts of prey.

The sweat stood on Mastrovin's brow, for he was of a heavy habit of body and had had a wearing time upstairs. But his voice had an edge like ice.

"I have seen your house," he said. "I am not satisfied. There are people hiding in it. You will bring them to me here at once or . . ."

He paused. There was no need to put his threat into words; it was in every line of his grim face: it was in the sinister bulge of his hand in his ulster pocket.

Mr Craw showed his manhood by acting according to plan. He was desperately afraid, for he had never in his life looked into such furious eyes. But the challenge had come, and he repeated the speech with which he had intended to meet that challenge.

"This is pure brigandage," he said. "You have not given me your names, but I know very well who you are. You must be aware, Mr Mastrovin, that you will not further your cause by threatening a British subject in his own house."

The risk in preparing speeches beforehand is that the conditions of their delivery may be far other than the conditions forecast in their preparation. Mr Craw had assumed that the Evallonians were politicians out to secure a political triumph, and that, when this triumph tarried, they would realise that their audacity had defeated its purpose and left them at his mercy. He had forgotten that he might have to deal with men of primeval impulses, whose fury would deaden their ears to common sense.

At the sound of his name Mastrovin seemed to stiffen, as a runner stiffens before the start. Then he laughed, and it was not a pleasant sound. He turned to his followers. "He knows me," he cried. "He is not as innocent as he pretends. He knows of us from our enemies. They are here. We are close to them. Now there will be no mercy."

In a voice that made Mr Craw jump in his chair he thundered: "One minute! I will give you one minute!"

He had his pistol out, and little blue barrels gleamed in the hands of the other four, covering Barbon, Dougal, and Charvill. Mr Craw sat stupefied, and his spectacles in the tense hush made a clatter as they dropped on the table. The gilt baroque clock on the mantelpiece struck the quarter to midnight.

In the little gallery the estate mechanic had that morning arranged a contrivance of bells. There was a button at Jaikie's elbow, and if he pressed it bells would ring in the corridor outside and in the ante-room. There by this time Mackillop and his men were waiting, in two parties of five, all of them old soldiers, armed with rifles and shot-guns. At the sound of the bells they would file in and overawe the enemy—ten weapons in ten pairs of resolute hands.

Jaikie's finger was on the button, but he did not press it.

For the first time in his life he had to make a momentous decision. Dougal and he had planned out every detail of that evening's visit, and believed that they had foreseen every contingency. But they had forgotten one. . . . They had forgotten how different these five foreigners below were from themselves. These were men who all their lives had played darkly for dark stakes—who had hunted and been hunted like beasts—to whom murder was an incident in policy— whose natural habitat was the cave and the jungle. He was aware that the atmosphere in the library had changed to something savage and primordial—that human lives hung on a slender hair. A devil had been awakened, a devil who was not politic. . . . If Mackillop and his men appeared in the doorway, if the glint of weapons answered those now in the hands of the five, it would be the spark to fire the mine. These men would fight like cornered weasels, oblivious of consequences—as they had often in other lands fought before. No doubt they would be overpowered, but in the meantime— In that warm and gracious room the Den had been recreated, and in that Den there were only blind passions and blind fears.

He did not press the button, for he knew that it would be to waken Hell.

As it was, Hell was evident enough. His companions felt it. Alison's hand tightened convulsively on his arm, and as for Tibbets behind him—he heard Tibbets's teeth chatter. Down below the four men, covered by the five pistols, knew it. Mr Craw's face was the colour of clay, and his eyes stared at Mastrovin as if he were mesmerised. Barbon and Charvill had also whitened, and sat like images, and Dougal seemed to be seeking self-command by sucking in his lips against his clenched teeth. In a second anything might happen. The jungle had burst into the flower-garden, and with it the brutes of the jungle. . . . A small hopeless sound came from Jaikie's lips which may have been meant for a prayer.

Suddenly he was aware that Mastrovin's eyes had turned to the door which led to the ante-room. Had Mackillop shown himself?

"Stand!" Mastrovin cried. "Not another step on your life!"

A voice answered the Evallonian's bark, a rich, bland, assured voice.

"Tut, tut, what's all this fuss about?" the voice said. "Put away that pistol, man, or it'll maybe go off. SICH behaviour in a decent man's house!"

Jaikie was looking down upon the bald head of Dickson McCunn— Dickson in his best suit of knickerbockers, his eyes still bright with the memory of his great adventure on the Solway sands, his face ruddy with the night air and as unperturbed as if he were selling tea over the counter. There was even a smile at the corner of his mouth. To Jaikie, sick with fear, it seemed as if the wholesome human world had suddenly broken into the Den.

But it was the voice that cracked the spell—that pleasant, homely, wheedling voice which brought with it daylight and common sense. Each of the five felt its influence. Mastrovin's rigour seemed to relax. He lowered his pistol.

"Who the devil are you?" he grunted.

"My name's McCunn," came the brisk answer. "Dickson McCunn. I'm stopping in this house, and I come back to find a scene like a demented movie. It looks as if I'm just in time to prevent you gentlemen making fools of yourselves. I heard that there was a lot of queer folk here, so I took the precaution of bringing Johnnie Doig the policeman with me. It was just as well, for Johnnie and me overheard some awful language. Come in, Johnnie. . . . You're wanted."

A remarkable figure entered from the ante-room. It was the Starr policeman, a large man with his tunic imperfectly buttoned, and his boots half-laced, for he had been roused out of his early slumbers and had dressed in a hurry. He carried his helmet in his hand, and his face wore an air of judicial solemnity.

"Johnny and me," said Mr McCunn, "heard you using language which constitutes an assault in law. Worse than that, you've been guilty of the crime of hamesucken. You're foreigners, and maybe no very well acquaint with the law of Scotland, but I can tell you that hamesucken is just about the worst offence you can commit, short of taking life. It has been defined as the crime of assaulting a person within his own house. That's what you're busy at now, and many a man has got two years hard for less. Amn't I right, Johnny?"

"Ye're right, sir," said the policeman. "I've made notes o' the langwidge I heard, and I hae got you gentlemen as witnesses. It's hamesucken beyond a doubt." The strange syllables boomed ominously, and their echoes hung in the air like a thunderstorm. "Gie me the word, sir"—this to Mr Craw—"and I'll chairge them." Then to the five. "Ye'd better hand ower thae pistols, or it'll be the waur for ye."

For the fraction of a second there was that in Mastrovin's face which augured resistance. Dickson saw it, and grinned.

"Listen to reason, man," he cried genially, and there was a humorous contempt in his voice which was perhaps its strongest argument. "I know fine who you are. You're politicians, and you've made a bad mistake. You're looking for folk that never were here. You needn't make things worse. If you try violence, what will happen? You'll be defying the law of Scotland and deforcing the police, and even if you got away from this countryside—which is not likely—there's not a corner of the globe that could hide you. You'd be brought to justice, and where would your politics be then? I'm speaking as a business man to folk that I assume to be in possession of their wits. You're in Mr Craw's hands, and there's just the one thing you can do—to throw yourselves on his mercy. If he takes my advice he'll let you go, provided you leave your pistols behind you. They're no the things for folk like you to be trusted with in this quiet countryside."

Jaikie in the gallery gave a happy sigh. The danger was past. Over the Den had descended the thick, comfortable blanket of convention and law. Melodrama had gone out of the air. Mastrovin and his friends were no longer dangerous, for they had become comic. He prodded Tibbets. "Down you get. It's time for you to be on the floor of the house." Things could now proceed according to plan.

Then Mr Craw rose to the height of a great argument. He rescued his spectacles, rested his elbows on the table, and joined his still tremulous fingertips. Wisdom and authority radiated from him.

"I am inclined," he said, "to follow Mr McCunn's advice and let you go. I do not propose to charge you. But, as Mr McCunn has said, in common decency you must be disarmed. Mr Barbon, will you kindly collect these gentlemen's weapons."

The five were no longer wolves from the wilds: they were embarrassed political intriguers. Sullenly they dropped their pistols into the waste-paper basket which Barbon presented to them.

Mr Craw continued:

"I would repeat that what I have told you is the literal truth. Your countrymen were at Knockraw and dined here with Mr Barbon, but I did not meet them, for I only returned yesterday. As for Prince John, I do not know what you are talking about. Nobody like him has ever been in Castle Gay. You say that he was seen here this very morning. I suggest that your spies may have seen my friend Mr Charvill, who is spending a few days with me. . . . But I am really not concerned to explain the cause of your blunders. The principal is that you have allowed yourself to be misled by an exservant of mine. I hope you have made his rascality worth his while, for it looks as if he might be out of employment for some little time."

Mr Craw was enjoying himself. His voice grew round and soothing. He almost purred his sentences, for every word he spoke made him feel that he had captured at last an authority of which hitherto he had never been quite certain.

"I am perfectly well informed as to who you are," he went on. "You, sir," addressing Mastrovin, "I have already named, and I congratulate you on your colleagues, Messieurs Dedekind, Rosenbaum, Calaman, and Ricci. They are names not

unknown in the political— and criminal—annals of contemporary Europe. . . . You have put yourself in a most compromising position. You come here, at a time when you believe that my staff is depleted, with a following of your own, selected from the riffraff of Portaway. You were mistaken, of course. My staff was not depleted, but increased. At this moment there are ten of my servants, all of whom served in the War, waiting outside this door, and they are armed. Any attempt at violence by you would have been summarily avenged. As for your ragamuffin following, you may be interested to learn that during the last hour or two they have been collected by my keepers and ducked in the Callowa. By now they will have returned to Portaway wiser and wetter men

“As for yourselves, you have committed a grave technical offence. I could charge you, and you would be put at once under arrest. Would it be convenient for the Republican Party of Evallonia to have some of its most active members in a British dock and presently in a British gaol? . . . You are even more completely in my power than you imagine. You have attempted to coerce an important section of the British Press. That, if published, would seal the doom of your party with British public opinion. I have not only my own people here to report the incident in the various newspapers I control, but Mr Tibbets of the Wire is present on behalf of my chief competitors, and at my request has put himself in a position also to furnish a full account.”

“But,” said Mr Craw, moving his chair back from the table and folding his arms, “I do not propose to exact any such revenge. You are free to go as you came. I will neither charge you, nor publish one word of this incident. But a complete record will be prepared of this evening’s doings, and I warn you that, if I am ever troubled again in any way by you or your emissaries, that record will be published throughout the world’s Press, and you will be made the laughing stock of Europe.”

Mr Craw ceased, pressed his lips, and looked for approbation to Dougal, who nodded friendly. Mastrovin seemed about to reply, but the nature of his reply will never be known. For Dickson broke in with: “You’d better hurry, gentlemen. You should be at Fallatown within the next three-quarters of an hour, if your yatt is to catch the tide.”

This final revelation of knowledge shut Mastrovin’s lips. He bowed, and without a word led his friends from the room, after which, through the lines of Mackillop’s deeply disappointed minions, they descended to the front door and their cars. Dickson chose to accompany and speed the parting guests.

With their departure Mrs Brisbane—Brown entered the library from the ante-room, where she had waited under Mr McCunn’s strict orders. Jaikie and Alison, whose heads were very close together in the little balcony, observed her arrival with interest.

“Aunt Hatty has been really anxious,” said the girl. “I know that look on her face. I wonder if she’s in love with Mr Craw. I rather think so. . . . Jaikie, that was a horrid strain. I feel all slack and run down. Any moment I expected to see those devils shoot. I wouldn’t go through that again for a million pounds.”

“No more would Mr Craw. But it will have made a man of him. He has been under fire, so to speak, and now he’ll be as bold as brass.”

“He owes it all to you.”

“Not to me,” Jaikie smiled. “To me he very nearly owed a bullet in his head. To Dickson McCunn. Wasn’t he great?”

The girl nodded. “Mr McCunn goes off in a fury of romance to see a rather dull princeling depart in a boat, because he reminds him of Prince Charlie. And he comes back to step from romance into the most effective kind of realism. He’ll never give another thought to what he has just done, though he has saved several lives, but he’ll cherish all his days the memory of the parting with Prince John. Was there ever such an extraordinary mixture?”

“We’re all like that,” was the answer.

“Not you. You’ve the realism, but not the sentiment.”

“I wonder,” said Jaikie.

Ten minutes later Mr McCunn was refreshing himself in the library with a whisky-and-soda and sandwiches, for the excitements of the night had quickened his appetite.

“I got the idea,” he explained to Dougal, “by remembering what Bismarck said during the Schleswig—Holstein affair—when he was asked in Parliament what he would do if the British Army landed on German soil. He said he would send for the police. . . . I’ve always thought that a very good remark. . . . If you’re faced with folk that are accustomed to shoot it’s no good playing the same game, unless you’re anxious to get hurt. You want to paralyse them by lapping them in the atmosphere of law and order. Talk business to them. It’s whiles a very useful thing to live in a civilised country, and you

should take advantage of it.”

“Ay,” he continued, “I accompanied yon gentry to the door. I thought it my duty to offer them a drink. They refused, though their tongues were hanging out of their mouths. That refusal makes me inclined to think that it will not be very long before Prince John sits on the throne of Evallonia. For it shows that they have no sense of humour, and without humour you cannot run a sweetie-shop, let alone a nation.”



CHAPTER 20

VALEDICTORY

Next evening the sun, as it declined over the Carrick hills, illumined a small figure plodding up the road which led to Loch Garroch. Very small the figure appeared in that spacious twilight solitude, and behind it, around it, in front of it scampered and sniffed something still smaller. Jaikie and Woolworth were setting out again on their travels, for there was still a week before the University of Cambridge claimed them. Jaikie had left Castle Gay in a sober and meditative mood. "So that's that," had been his not very profound reflection. Things did happen sometimes, he reminded himself, unexpected things, decisive things, momentous incidents clotted together in a little space of time. Who dare say that the world was dull? He and Dougal, setting out on an errand as prosaic as Saul's quest of his father's asses, had been suddenly caught up into a breathless crisis, which had stopped only on the near side of tragedy. He had been privileged to witness the discovery by an elderly gentleman of something that might almost be called his soul.

There could be no doubt about Mr Craw. Surprising developments might be looked for in that hitherto shy prophet. He had always been assured enough in his mind, but he had been only a voice booming from the sanctuary. He had been afraid of the actual world. Now that fear had gone, for there is no stiffer confidence than that which is won by a man, otherwise secure, who discovers that the one thing which he has dreaded need only be faced to be overcome. . . . Much depended upon Mrs Brisbane-Brown. Jaikie was fairly certain that there would be a marriage between the two, and he approved. They were complementary spirits. The lady's clear, hard, good sense would keep the prophet's feet in safe paths. He would never be timid any more. She would be an antiseptic to his sentimentality. She might make a formidable being out of the phrasing journalist.

Much depended, too, upon Dougal. It was plain that Dougal was now high in the great man's favour. A queer business, thought Jaikie, and yet natural enough. . . . Jaikie had no illusions about how he himself was regarded by Mr Craw. Hatred was too strong a word, but beyond doubt there was dislike. He had seen the great man's weakness, whereas Dougal had only been the witness of his strength. . . . And Craw and Dougal were alike, too. Both were dogmatists. They might profess different creeds, but they looked on life with the same eyes. Heaven alone knew what the results of the combination would be, but a combination was clearly decreed. Dougal was no more the provincial journalist; he would soon have the chief say in the direction of the Craw Press.

At the thought Jaikie had a momentary pang. He felt very remote not only from the companion of his week's wanderings but from his ancient friend.

Mr Craw had behaved handsomely by him. He had summoned him that morning into his presence and thanked him with a very fair appearance of cordiality. He had had the decency, too, not to attempt to impose on him an obligation of silence as to their joint adventures, thereby showing that he understood at least part of Jaikie's character.

"Mr Galt," he had said, "I have been much impressed by your remarkable abilities. I am not clear what is the best avenue for their exercise. But I am deeply in your debt, and I shall be glad to give you any assistance in my power."

Jaikie had thanked him, and replied that he had not made up his mind.

"You have no bias, no strong impulse?"

Jaikie had shaken his head.

"You are still very young," Mr Craw had said, "but you must not postpone your choice too late. You must find a philosophy of life. I had found mine before I was out of my teens. There is no hope for the drifter."

They had parted amicably, and, as he breasted the hill which led from the Callowa to the Garroch, Jaikie had found himself reflecting on this interview. He realised how oddly detached he was. He was hungry for life, as hungry as Dickson McCunn. He enjoyed every moment, but he knew that his enjoyment came largely from standing a little apart. He was not a cynic, for there was no sourness in him. He had a kindness towards most things, and a large charity. But he did not take sides. He had not accepted any mood, or creed, or groove as his own. *Vix ea nostra voco* was his motto. He was only a seeker. Dougal wanted to make converts; he himself was still occupied in finding out what was in his soul.

For the first time in his life he had a sense of loneliness. . . . There was no help for it. He must be honest with himself.

He must go on seeking.

At the top of the hill he halted to look down upon the Garroch glen, with the end of Lower Loch Garroch a pool of gold in the late October sun. There was a sound behind him, and he turned to see a girl coming over the crest of the hill. It was Alison, and she was in a hurry, for she was hatless, and her cob was in a lather.

She swung herself to the ground with the reins looped round an arm.

"Oh, Jaikie!" she cried. "Why did you leave without saying good-bye? I only heard by accident that you had gone, and I've had such a hustle to catch you up. Why did you do it?"

"I don't know," said Jaikie. "It seemed difficult to say good-bye to you, so I shirked it." He spoke penitently, but there was no penitence in his face. That plain little wedge of countenance was so lit up that it was almost beautiful.

They sat down on a bank of withered heather and looked over the Garroch to the western hills.

"What fun we have had!" Alison sighed. "I hate to think that it is over. I hate your going away."

Jaikie did not answer. It was difficult for one so sparing of speech to find words equal to that sudden glow in his eyes.

"When are we going to meet again?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said at last. "But we are going to meet again . . . often . . . always."

He turned, and he saw in her face that comprehension which needs no words.

They sat for a little, and then she rose. "I must go back," she said, "or Aunt Hatty will be dragging the ponds for me."

They shook hands, quite prosaically. He watched her mount and turn her horse's head to the Callowa, while he turned his own resolutely to the Garroch. He took a few steps and then looked back. The girl had not moved.

"Dear Jaikie," she said, and the intervening space did not weaken the tenderness of the words. Then she put her horse into a canter, and the last he saw was a golden head disappearing over the brow of the hill.

He quickened his pace, and strode down into the Garroch valley with his mind in a happy confusion. Years later, when the two monosyllables of his name were famous in other circles than those of Rugby football, he was to remember that evening hour as a crisis in his life. For, as he walked, his thoughts moved towards a new clarity and a profound concentration. . . . He was no longer alone. The seeker had found something infinitely precious. He had a spur now to endeavour, such endeavour as would make the common bustle of life seem stagnant. A force of high velocity had been unloosed on the world.

These were not Jaikie's explicit thoughts; he only knew that he was happy, and that he was glad to have no companion but Woolworth. He passed the shores of Lower Loch Garroch, and his singing scared the mallards out of the reeds. He came into the wide cup of the Garroch moss, shadowed by its sentinel hills, with the light of the Back House to guide him through the thickening darkness. But he was not conscious of the scene, for he was listening to the songs which youth was crooning in his heart.

Mrs Catterick knew his step on the gravel, and met him at the door.

"Bide the nicht?" she cried. "'Deed ye may, and blithe to see ye! Ye've gotten rid o' the auld man? Whae was he?"

"A gentleman from London. He's safely home now."

"Keep us a'. Just what I jaloused. That's a stick for me to haud ower Erchie's heid. Erchie was here twae days syne, speirin' what had become o' the man he had sae sair mishandled. D'ye ken what I said? I said he was deid and buried among the tatties in the yaird. No anither word could Erchie get oot o' me, and he gae'd off wi' an anxious hert. I'll keep him anxious. He'll be expectin' the pollis ony day."

Five minutes later Jaikie sat in the best room, while his hostess lit the peat fire.

"Ye've been down by Castle Gay?" she gossiped. "It's a braw bit, and it's a peety the family canna afford to bide in it. It's let to somebody—I canna mind his name. We're on his lordship's land here, ye ken. There's a picture o' Miss Alison. She used to come often here, and a hellicat lassie she was, but rale frank and innerly. I aye said they wad hae a sair job makin' a young leddy o' her."

Mrs Catterick pointed to where above the mantelpiece hung a framed photograph of a girl, whose face was bordered by two solemn plaits of hair.

"It's a bonny bit face," she said reflectively. "There's daftness in it, but there's something wise and kind in her een. 'Deed, Jaikie, when I come to look at them, they're no unlike your ain."

THE GAP IN THE CURTAIN

I. — WHITSUNTIDE AT FLAMBARD

*“Si la conscience qui sommeille dans l’instinct se réveille, s’il s’intériorisait en connaissance au lieu de s’extérioriser en action, si nous savions l’interroger et s’il pouvait répondre, il nous livrerait les secrets de la vie.”—Bergson, *L’Evolution Créatrice*.*

“But no!” cried Mr Mantalini. “It is a demn’d horrid dream. It is not reality. No!”—*Nicholas Nickleby*.

I

As I took my place at the dinner-table I realised that I was not the only tired mortal in Lady Flambard’s Whitsuntide party. Mayot, who sat opposite me, had dark pouches under his eyes and that unwholesome high complexion which in a certain type of physique means that the arteries are working badly. I knew that he had been having a heavy time in the House of Commons over the Committee stage of his Factory Bill. Charles Ottery, who generally keeps himself fit with fives and tennis, and has still the figure of an athletic schoolboy, seemed nervous and out of sorts, and scarcely listened to his companion’s chatter. Our hostess had her midseason look; her small delicate features were as sharp as a pin, and her blue eyes were drained of colour. But it was Arnold Tavanger farther down the table who held my attention. His heavy, sagacious face was a dead mask of exhaustion. He looked done to the world, and likely to fall asleep over his soup.

It was a comfort to me to see others in the same case, for I was feeling pretty near the end of my tether. Ever since Easter I had been overworked out of all reason. There was a batch of important Dominion appeals before the Judicial Committee, in every one of which I was engaged, and I had some heavy cases in the Commercial Court. Of the two juniors who did most of my “devilling” one had a big patent-law action of his own, and the other was in a nursing-home with appendicitis. To make matters worse, I was chairman of a Royal Commission which was about to issue its findings, and had had to rewrite most of the report with my own hand, and I had been sitting as a one-man Commission in a troublesome dispute in the shipbuilding trade. Also I was expected to be pretty regularly in the House of Commons to deal with the legal side of Mayot’s precious Bill, and the sittings had often stretched far into the next morning.

There is something about a barrister’s spells of overwork which makes them different in kind from those of other callings. His duties are specific as to time and place. He must be in court at a certain hour. He must be ready to put, or to reply to, an argument when he is called upon; he can postpone or rearrange his work only within the narrowest limits. He is a cog in an inexorable machine, and must revolve with the rest of it. For myself I usually enter upon a period of extreme busyness with a certain lift of spirit, for there is a sporting interest in not being able to see your way through your work. But presently this goes, and I get into a mood of nervous irritation. It is easy enough to be a carthorse, and it is easy enough to be a racehorse, but it is difficult to be a carthorse which is constantly being asked to take Grand National fences. One has to rise to hazards, but with each the take-off gets worse and the energy feebler. So at the close of such a spell I am in a wretched condition of soul and body—weary, but without power to rest, and with a mind so stale that it sees no light or colour in anything. Even the end of the drudgery brings no stimulus. I feel that my form has been getting steadily poorer, and that virtue has gone out of me which I may never recapture.

I had been in two minds about accepting Sally Flambard’s invitation. She is my very good friend, but her parties are rather like a table d’hôte. Her interests are multitudinous, and all are reflected in her hospitality, so that a procession goes through her house which looks like a rehearsal for the Judgement Day. Politics, religion, philanthropy, letters, science, art and the most brainless fashion—she takes them all to her capacious heart. She is an innocent lion-hunter, too, and any man or woman who figures for the moment in the Press will be a guest at Flambard. And she drives her team, for all are put through their paces. Sally makes her guests work for their entertainment. In her own way she is a kind of genius, and what Americans call a wonderful “mixer.” Everyone has got to testify, and I have seen her make a bishop discourse on Church union, and a mathematician on hyper-space to an audience which heard of the topics for the first time. The talk is apt to be a little like a magazine page in a popular newspaper—very good fun, if you are feeling up to it, but not quite the thing for a rest-cure.

It was my memory of Flambard itself that decided me. The place is set amid the greenest and quietest country on earth. The park is immense, and in early June is filled with a glory of flowers and blossoming trees. I could borrow one of Evelyn’s horses and ride all day through the relics of ancient forests, or up on to the cool, windy spaces of the Downs. There was good dry-fly fishing in the little Arm, which runs through a shallow vale to the young Thames. At Whitsuntide you can recover an earlier England. The flood of greenery hides modern blemishes which are revealed by the bareness of winter, and an upland water-meadow is today just as it met the eye of the monks when they caught their Friday’s trout, or of the corseleted knights as they rode out to the King’s wars. It is the kind of scene that comforts me most, for there, as some poet says, “old Leisure sits knee-deep in grass.” Also the house is large enough for peace. It is mostly Restoration period, with some doubtful Georgian additions, but there is a Tudor wing, the remnant of the old house, which the great Earl of Essex once used as a hunting lodge. Sally used to give me a room at the top of the Essex wing, with a wide prospect north into the Cotswold dales. The hall and the drawing-rooms and the great terrace might be as full of “turns” as a music-hall stage, but somewhere in the house fatigue could find sanctuary.

I had arrived just in time to dress for dinner, and had spoken to none of my fellow-guests, so my inspection of the table had a speculative interest. It was a large party, and I saw a good many faces that I knew. There were the Nantleys, my best of friends, and their daughter Pamela, who was in her first season... There was old Folliot, the bore of creation, with his little grey imperial, and his smirk, and his tired eyes. He was retailing some ancient scandal to Mrs Lamington, who was listening with one ear and devoting the other to what Lady Altrincham was saying across the table. George Lamington a

little farther down was arguing with his host about the Ascot entries—his puffy red face had that sudden shrewdness which it acquires when George's mind is on horses... There was a man opposite him of whom I could only catch the profile—a dark head with fine-drawn features. I heard his voice, a pleasant voice, with full deep tones like a tragic actor's, and, as he turned, I had an impression of a face full of swift, nervous strength... There was a good deal of youth in the party, four girls besides Pamela Brune, and several boys with sleek hair and fresh voices. One of them I knew, Reggie Daker, who was a friend of my nephew's.

I was on Sally's left hand, and as she was busy with Mayot, and the lady on my left was deep in a controversy with her neighbour over some book, I was free to look about me. Suddenly I got a queer impression. A dividing line seemed to zigzag in and out among us, separating the vital from the devitalised. There was a steady cackle of talk, but I felt that there were silent spaces in it. Most of the people were cheerful, eupeptic souls who were enjoying life. The Nantleys, for example, sedate country gentlefolk, whose days were an ordered routine of pleasant cares... Pamela Brune? I was not so sure of her, for a young girl's first season is a trying business, like a boy's first half at school... Old Folliot, beyond doubt—he was perfectly happy as long as he was in a great house with somebody to listen to his archaic gossip... Evelyn Flambard and George Lamington and the boys who were talking Ascot and next winter's hunting plans... Lady Altrincham, sixty but with the air of thirty, who lives for her complexion and her famous pearls... But I realised that there were people here who were as much at odds with life as myself—Mayot and Tavanger and Charles Ottery, and perhaps the dark fellow who sat opposite George Lamington.

Sally turned to me, hiding a yawn with her small hand. Her head on its slim neck was as erect as a bird's, and her body had a darting, bird-like poise, but I could see that the poise required some effort to maintain it. She patted my sleeve in her friendly way.

"I am so glad you came," she said. "I know you want a rest." She screwed up her eyes and peered at me. "You look as if you hadn't been in bed for a month!"

"I'm nearly all out," I said. "You must let me moon about by myself, please, for I'm no sort of company for anybody."

"You shall do exactly as you like. I'm pretty tired also, and I'm giving a ball next week, and there's Ascot looming ahead. Happily we're having quite a small party—and a very quiet one."

"Is this the lot?" I asked, looking down the table. I knew her habit of letting guests appear in relays during a weekend till the result was a mob.

"Practically. You know all the people?"

"Most of them. Who's the dark fellow opposite George Lamington?"

Her face brightened into interest. "That's my new discovery. A country neighbour, no less—but a new breed altogether. His name is Goodeve—Sir Robert Goodeve. He has just succeeded to the place and title."

Of course I knew Goodeve, that wonderful moated house in the lap of the Downs, but I had never met one of the race. I had had a notion that it had died out. The Goodeves are one of those families about which genealogists write monographs, a specimen of that unennobled gentry which is the oldest stock in England. They had been going on in their undistinguished way since Edward the Confessor.

"Tell me about him," I said.

"I can't tell you much. You can see what he looks like. Did you ever know a face so lit up from behind?... He was the son of a parson in Northumberland, poor as a church mouse, so he had to educate himself. Local grammar school, some provincial university, and then with scholarships and tutoring he fought his way to Oxford. There he was rather a swell, and made friends with young Marburg, old Isaac's son, who got him a place in his father's business. The War broke out, and he served for four years, while Marburgs kept his job open. After that they moved him a good deal about the world, and he was several years in their New York house. It is really a romance, for at thirty-five he had made money, and now at thirty-eight he has inherited Goodeve and a good deal more... Yes, he's a bachelor. Not rich as the big fortunes go, but rich enough. The thing about him is that he has got his jumping-off ground reasonably young, and is now about to leap. Quite modest, but perfectly confident, and terribly ambitious. He is taking up politics, and I back him to make you all sit up. I think he's the most impressive mortal I have ever met. Bored stiff with women—as stony-hearted as you, Ned. He's a sort of ascetic, vowed to a cause."

"His own career?" I asked.

"No. No. He's not a bit of an egotist. There's a pent-up force that's got to come out. He's a fanatic about some new kind of Empire development, and I know people who think him a second Rhodes. I want you to make friends with him and tell me what you think, for in your fish-like way you have good judgement."

Sally yawned again, and I respected more than ever the courage of women who can go on till they drop and keep smiling. She turned away in response to a question of Mayot's, and I exchanged banalities with the lady on my other side. Presently I found myself free again to look round the table. I was right: we were the oddest mixture of the fresh and the blasé, the care-free and the care-worn. To look at Tavanger's hollow eyes and hear in one's ear the babble of high young voices made a contrast which was almost indecent... I had a feeling as if we were all on a vast, comfortable raft in some unknown sea, and that, while some were dancing to jazz music, others were crowding silently at the edge, staring into the brume ahead. Staring anxiously, too, for in that mist there might be fearful as well as wonderful things... I found myself studying George

Lamington's face, and felt a childish dislike of him. His life was so padded and cosseted and bovine. He had just inherited another quarter of a million from an uncle, and he had not the imagination of a rabbit in the use of money. Why does wealth make dull people so much duller? I had always rather liked George, but now I felt him intolerable. I must have been very tired, for I was getting as full of silly prejudices as a minor poet.

Sally was speaking again, as she collected eyes.

"Don't be afraid. This is going to be a very peaceful party."

"Will you promise me," I said, "that I won't come down tomorrow and find half a dozen new faces at breakfast?"

"Honest Injun," she replied. "They are all here except one, and he arrives tonight."

When the women had gone Evelyn Flambard brought his port to my side. Having exhausted horses during dinner, he regaled me with the Englishman's other main topic, politics. Evelyn despaired of the republic. He had grievances against the Budget, the new rating law, and the Government's agricultural policy. He was alarmed about the condition of India, where he had served in his old Hussar days, and about Egypt, where he had large investments. His views on America were calculated to make a serious breach between the two sections of the Anglo-Saxon race. But if he feared the Government he despised the Opposition, though for politeness' sake he added that his strictures did not apply to me. There was no honest Toryism left, so his plaint ran; there was not a pin to choose between the parties; they were all out to rob struggling virtue—meaning himself and other comfortable squires. He nodded down the table towards Goodeve. "Look at that chap," he whispered darkly. "I mean to say, he don't care a straw what he says or does, and he'll have Tommy Twiston's seat, which is reckoned the safest in England. He as good as told George Lamington this afternoon that he'd like to see a Soviet Government in power for a week in England under strict control, for it was the only way to deal with men like him. Hang it all, there's nothing wrong with old George except that he's a bit fussy, if you see what I mean."

I said that I rather agreed with Goodeve, and that set Evelyn pouring out his woes to the man on the other side. Reggie Daker had come up next me, his eye heavy with confidences. I had acted as a sort of father-confessor to Reggie ever since he came down from the University, but I hadn't much credit by my disciple. He was infinitely friendly, modest, and good-humoured, but as hard to hold as a knotless thread. Usually he talked to me about his career, and I had grown very tired of finding him jobs, which he either shied off or couldn't hold for a week. Now it seemed that this was not his trouble. He had found his niche at last, and it was dealing in rare books. Reggie considered that a lad like himself, with a fine taste and a large acquaintance, could make a lot of money by digging out rarities from obscure manor-houses and selling them to American collectors. He had taken up the study very seriously, he told me, and he actually managed to get a few phrases of bibliophile's jargon into his simple tale. He felt that he had found his life's work, and was quite happy about it.

The trouble was Pamela Brune. It appeared that he was deeply in love, and that she was toying with his young heart. "There's a strong lot of entries," he explained, "and Charles Ottery has been the favourite up till now. But she seems a bit off Charles, and... and... anyhow, I'm going to try my luck. I wangled an invitation here for that very purpose. I say, you know—you're her godfather, aren't you? If you could put in a kind word..."

But my unreceptive eye must have warned Reggie that I was stony soil. He had another glass of port, and sighed.

I intended to go to bed as soon as I decently could. I was not sleepy, but I was seeing things with the confusion of a drowsy man. As I followed my host across the hall, where someone had started a gramophone, I seemed more than ever to be in a phantasmal world. The drawing-room, with the delicate fluted pilasters in its panelling and the Sir Joshuas and Romneys between them, swam in a green dusk, which was partly the afterglow through the uncurtained windows and partly the shading of the electric lamps. A four at bridge had been made up, and the young people were drifting back towards the music. Lady Nantley beckoned me from a sofa. I could see her eyes appraising my face and disapproving of it, but she was too tactful to tell me that I looked ill.

"I heard that you were to be here, Ned," she said, "and I was very glad. Your god-daughter is rather a handful just now, and I wanted your advice."

"What's wrong?" I asked. "She's looking uncommonly pretty." I caught a glimpse of Pamela patting her hair as she passed a mirror, slim and swift as a dryad.

"She's uncommonly perverse. You know that she has been having an affair with Charles Ottery ever since Christmas at Wirlesdon. I love Charles, and Tom and I were delighted. Everything most suitable—the right age, enough money, chance of a career, the same friends. There's no doubt that Charles adores her, and till the other day I thought that she was coming to adore Charles. But now she has suddenly gone off at a tangent, and has taken to snubbing and neglecting him. She says that he's too good for her, and that his perfections choke her—doesn't want to play second fiddle to an Admirable Crichton—wants to shape her own life—all the rubbish that young people talk nowadays."

Mollie's charming eyes were full of real distress, and she put an appealing hand on my arm.

"She likes you, Ned, and believes in you. Couldn't you put a little sense into her head?"

I wanted to say that I was feeling like a ghost from another sphere, and that it was no good asking a tenuous spectre to meddle with the affairs of warm flesh and blood. But I was spared the trouble of answering by the appearance of Lady Flambard.

"Forgive me, Mollie dear," she said, "but I must carry him off. I'll bring him back to you presently."

She led me to a young man who was standing near the door. “Bob,” she said, “this is Sir Edward Leithen. I’ve been longing for you two to meet.”

“So have I,” said the other, and we shook hands. Now that I saw Goodeve fairly, I was even more impressed than by his profile as seen at dinner. He was a finely made man, and looked younger than his thirty-eight years. He was very dark, but not in the least swarthy; there were lights in his hair which suggested that he might have been a blond child, and his skin was a clear brown, as if the blood ran strongly and cleanly under it. What I liked about him was his smile, which was at once engaging and natural, and a little shy. It took away any arrogance that might have lurked in the tight mouth and straight brows.

“I came here to meet you, sir,” he said. “I’m a candidate for public life, and I wanted to see a man who interests me more than anybody else in the game. I hope you don’t mind my saying that... What about going into the garden? There’s a moon of sorts, and the nightingales will soon begin. If they’re like the ones at Goodeve, eleven’s their hour.”

We went through the hall to the terrace, which lay empty and quiet in a great dazzle of moonlight. It was only about a fortnight till midsummer, a season when in fine weather in southern England it is never quite dark. Now, with a moon nearing the full, the place was bright enough to read print. The stone balustrade and urns were white as snow, and the two stairways that led to the sunk garden were a frosty green like tiny glaciers.

We threaded the maze of plots and lily-ponds and came out on a farther lawn, which ran down to the little river. That bit of the Arm is no good for fishing, for it has been trimmed into a shallow babbling stretch of ornamental water, but it is a delicious thing in the landscape. There was no sound except the lapse of the stream, and the occasional squattering flight of a moorhen. But as we reached the brink a nightingale began in the next thicket.

Goodeve had scarcely spoken a word. He was sniffing the night scents, which were a wonderful blend of early roses, new-mown hay, and dewy turf. When we reached the Arm, we turned and looked back at the house. It seemed suddenly to have gone small, set in a great alley-way of green between olive woods, an alley-way which swept from the high downs to the river meadows. Far beyond it we could see the bare top of Stobarrow. But it looked as perfect as a piece of carved ivory—and ancient, ancient as a boulder left millenniums ago by a melting ice-cap.

“Pretty good,” said my companion at last. “At Flambard you can walk steadily back into the past. Every chapter is written plain to be read.”

“At Goodeve, too,” I said.

“At Goodeve, too. You know the place? It is the first home I have had since I was a child, for I have been knocking about for years in lodgings and tents. I’m still a little afraid of it. It’s a place that wants to master you. I’m sometimes tempted to give myself up to it and spend my days listening to its stories and feeling my way back through the corridors of time. But I know that that would be ruin.”

“Why?”

“Because you cannot walk backward. It is too easy, and the road leads nowhere. A man must keep his eyes to the front and resist the pull of his ancestors. They’re the devil, those ancestors, always trying to get you back into their own rut.”

“I wish mine would pull harder,” I said. “I’ve been badly overworked lately, and I feel at this moment like a waif, with nothing behind me and nothing before.”

He regarded me curiously. “I thought you looked a little done up. Well, that’s the penalty of being a swell. You’ll lie fallow for a day or two and the power will return. There can’t be much looking backward in your life.”

“Nor looking forward. I seem to live between high blank walls. I never get a prospect.”

“Oh, but you are wrong,” he said seriously. “All your time is spent in trying to guess what is going to happen—what view the Courts will take of a case, what kind of argument will hit the prospective mood of the House. It is the same in law and politics and business and everything practical. Success depends on seeing just a little more into the future than other people.”

I remembered my odd feeling at dinner of the raft on the misty sea, and the anxious peering faces at the edge.

“Maybe,” I said. “But just at the moment I’m inclined to envy the people who live happily in the present. Our host, for example, and the boys and girls who are now dancing.” In the stillness the faint echo of music drifted to us from the house.

“I don’t envy them a bit,” he said. “They have no real sporting interest. Trying to see something solid in the mist is the whole fun of life, and most of its poetry.”

“Anyhow, thank Heaven, we can’t see very far. It would be awful to look down an avenue of time as clear as this strip of lawn, and see the future as unmistakable as Flambard.”

“Perhaps. But sometimes I would give a good deal for one moment of prevision.”

After that, as we strolled back, we talked about commonplace things—the prospects of a not very secure Government, common friends, the ways of our hostess, whom he loved, and the abilities of Mayot, which—along with me—he doubted. As we entered the house again we found the far end of the hall brightly lit, since the lamps had been turned on in the porch. The butler was ushering in a guest who had just arrived, and Sally had hastened from the drawing-room to greet

him.

The newcomer was one of the biggest men I have ever seen, and one of the leanest. A suit of grey flannel hung loose upon his gigantic bones. He reminded me of Nansen, except that he was dark instead of fair. His forehead rose to a peak, on which sat one solitary lock, for the rest of his head was bald. His eyes were large and almost colourless, mere pits of light beneath shaggy brows. He was bowing over Sally's hand in a foreign way, and the movement made him cough.

"May I present Sir Edward Leithen?" said Sally. "Sir Robert Goodeve... Professor Moe."

The big man gave me a big hand, which felt hot and damp. His eyes regarded me with a hungry interest. I had an impression of power—immense power, and also an immense fragility.

II

I did not have a good night; I rarely do when I have been overworking. I started a chapter of Barchester Towers, dropped off in the middle, and woke in two hours, restless and unrefreshed. Then I must have lain awake till the little chill before dawn which generally sends me to sleep. The window was wide open, and all the minute sounds of a summer night floated through it, but they did not soothe me. I had one of those fits of dissatisfaction which often assail the sleepless. I felt that I was making very little of my life. I earned a large income, and had a considerable position in the public eye, but I was living, so to speak, from hand to mouth. I had long lost any ordinary ambitions, and had ceased to plan out my career ahead, as I used to do when I was a young man. There were many things in public life on which I was keen, but it was only an intellectual keenness; I had no ardour in their pursuit. I felt as if my existence were utterly shapeless.

It was borne in on me that Goodeve was right. What were his words?—"Trying to see something solid in the mist is the whole fun of life, and most of its poetry." Success, he had argued, depended upon looking a little farther into the future than other people. No doubt; but then I didn't want success—not in the ordinary way. He had still his spurs to win, whereas I had won mine, and I didn't like the fit of them. Yet all the same I wanted some plan and policy in my life, for I couldn't go on living in the mud of the present. My mind needed prospect and horizon. I had often made this reflection before in moments of disillusionment, but now it came upon me with the force of a revelation. I told myself that I was beginning to be cured of my weariness, for I was growing discontented, and discontent is a proof of vitality... As I fell asleep I was thinking of Goodeve and realising how much I liked him. His company might prove the tonic I required.

I rose early and went for a walk along the Arm to look for a possible trout. The May-fly season was over, but there were one or two good fish rising beyond a clump of reeds where the stream entered the wood. Then I breakfasted alone with Evelyn, for Flambard is not an early house. His horses were mostly at grass, but he lent me a cob of Sally's. I changed into breeches, cut a few sandwiches, and set out for the high Downs. I fancied that a long lonely day on the hills would do me as much good as anything.

It was a quiet dim morning which promised a day of heat. I rode through a mile of woods full of nesting pheasants, then over a broomy common, and then by way of a steep lane on to the turf of the Downs. I found myself on the track where Evelyn exercised his race-horses, for he trained at home, so I gave my beast its head, and had that most delectable of experiences, a gallop over perfect turf. This brought me well up on the side of Stobarrow, and by the time I reached its summit the haze was clearing, and I was looking over the Arm and the young Thames to the blue lift of Cotswold.

I spent the whole day on the uplands. I ate my sandwiches in a clump of thorns, and had a mug of rough cider at an alehouse. I rode down long waterless combs, and ascended other tops besides Stobarrow. For an hour I lay on a patch of thyme, drowsy with the heat and the aromatic scents. I smoked a pipe with an old shepherd, and heard slow tales of sheep and dogs and storms and forgotten fox-hunts. In the end I drugged myself into a sort of animal peace. Thank God, I could still get back when I pleased to the ancient world of pastoral.

But when on my return I came over the brink of Stobarrow I realised that I had gained little. The pastoral world was not mine; my world was down below in the valley where men and women were fretting and puzzling... I no longer thought of them as on a raft looking at misty seas, but rather as spectators on a ridge, trying to guess what lay beyond the next hill. Tavanger and Mayot and Goodeve—they were all at it. A futile game, maybe, but inevitable, since what lay beyond the hill was life and death to them. I must recapture the mood for this guessing game, for it was the mainspring of effort, and therefore of happiness.

I got back about six, had a bath, and changed into flannels. Sally gave me a cup of tea at a table in the hall which carried food for a multitude, but did not look as if it had been much patronised. Evelyn and the Lamingtons had gone to see the Wallingdon training stables; the young people had had tea in the tennis-court pavilion; Mayot had motored to Cirencester to meet a friend, and Tavanger had gone to Goodeve to look at the pictures, in which subject he was a noted connoisseur; Charles Ottery had disappeared after luncheon, and she had sent the Professor to bed till dinner.

Sally's face wore something between a smile and a frown.

"Reggie Daker is in bed, too. He was determined to try Sir Vidas over the jumps in the park, though Evelyn warned him that the horse was short of exercise and was sure to give trouble. The jumps haven't been mended for months, and the take-off at some of them is shocking. Well, Sir Vidas came down all right, and Reggie fell on his head and nearly cracked his skull. He was concussed, and unconscious for a quarter of an hour. Dr Micklem sewed him up, and he is now in bed, covered with bandages, and not allowed to speak or be spoken to till tomorrow. It's hard luck on poor Reggie, but it will

keep him for a little from making a fool of himself about Pamela Brune. He hasn't a chance there, you know, and he is such a tactless old donkey that he is spoiling the field for Charles Ottery."

But it was not Reggie's misfortunes that made my hostess frown. Presently I learned the reason.

"I'm very glad of the chance of a quiet talk with you," she said. "I want to speak to you about Professor Moe. You saw him when he arrived last night. What did you think of him?"

"He seemed a formidable personage," I replied. "He looked very ill."

"He IS very ill. I had no notion how ill he was. He makes light of it, but there must be something mortally wrong with his lungs or his heart. He seems to be always in a fever, and now and then he simply gasps for breath. He says he has been like that for years, but I can't believe it. It's a tragedy, for he is one of the greatest minds in the world."

"I never heard of him before."

"You wouldn't. You're not a scientist. He's a most wonderful mathematician and physicist—rather in the Einstein way. He has upset every scientific law, but you can't understand just how unless you're a great scientist yourself. Our own people hush their voices when they mention him."

"How did you come across him?"

"I met him last year in Berlin. You know I've a flair for clever people, and they seem to like me, though I don't follow a word they say. I saw that he was to be in London to read a paper to some society, so I thought I'd ask him to Flambard to show him what English country life was like. Rather to my surprise he accepted—I think London tired him and he wanted a rest."

"You're worried about him? Are you afraid that he'll die on your hands?"

"No-o," she answered. "He's very ill, but I don't think he'll die just yet. What worries me is to know how to help him. You see, he took me into his confidence this morning. He accepted my invitation because he wanted the quiet of the country to finish a piece of work. A tremendous piece of work—the work of his life... He wants something more. He wants our help. It seems that some experiment is necessary before he can be quite sure of his ground."

"What sort of experiment?"

"With human beings—the right kind of human beings. You mustn't laugh at me, Ned, for I can't explain what he told me, though I thought I understood when he was speaking... It has something to do with a new theory of Time. He thinks that Time is not a straight line, but full of coils and kinks. He says that the Future is here with us now, if we only knew how to look for it. And he believes he has found a way of enabling one to know what is going to happen a long time ahead."

I laughed. "Useful for Evelyn and George. They'll be able to back all the Ascot winners."

But Sally did not laugh.

"You must be serious. The Professor is a genius, and I believe every word he says. He wants help, he told me. Not people like Evelyn and George. He has very clear ideas about the kind of man he needs. He wants Mr Mayot and Mr Tavanger and perhaps Charles Ottery, though he's not quite sure about Charles. Above all, he wants you and Bob Goodeve. He saw you last night, and took a tremendous fancy to you both."

I forbore to laugh only out of deference to Sally's gravity. It seemed a reduction to the absurd of Goodeve's talk the night before and my reflections on the Downs. I had decided that I must be more forward-looking, and here was a wild foreigner who believed that he had found the exact technique of the business.

"I don't like it," I said. "The man is probably mad."

"Oh, no, he isn't. He is brilliantly sane. You have only to talk to him to realise that. Even when I couldn't follow him I could see that he was not talking nonsense. But the point is that he wants to put it all before you. He is certain that he can make a convert of you."

"But I don't know the first thing about science. I have often got up a technical subject for a case, and then washed it out of my mind. I've never been instructed in the first principles. I don't understand the language."

"That is just why Professor Moe wants you. He says he wants a fresh mind, and a mind trained like yours to weigh evidence. It wasn't your beaux yeux, Ned, that he fell for, but your reputation as a lawyer."

"I don't mind listening to what he has got to say. But look here, Sally, I don't like this experiment business. What does he propose?"

"Nothing in the least unpleasant. It only means one or two people preparing themselves for an experience, which he says he can give them, by getting into a particular frame of mind. He's not sure if he can bring it off, you know. The experiment is to be the final proof of his discovery. He was emphatic that there was no danger and no unpleasantness, whether it was successful or not... But he was very particular about the people he wanted. He was looking at us all this morning with the queerest appraising eyes. He wants you and Bob especially, and Mr Mayot and Mr Tavanger, and possibly Charles. Oh, yes, and he thinks he may want me. But nobody else. He was perfectly clear about that."

I must say that this rather impressed me. He had chosen exactly those whom I had selected at dinner the previous night

as the care-full as opposed to the care-free. He wanted people whose physical vitality was low, and who were living on the edge of their nerves, and he had picked them unerringly out of Sally's house-party.

"All right," I said. "I'll have a talk to him after dinner. But I want you to be guided by me, and if I think the thing fishy to call it off. If the man is as clever as you say, he may scare somebody into imbecility."

Before I dressed I rang up Landor, and was lucky enough to find him still in London. Landor, besides being a patent-law barrister pretty near the top of his branch, is a Fellow of the Royal Society, and a devotee of those dim regions where physics, metaphysics, and mathematics jostle each other. He has published and presented me with several works which I found totally incomprehensible.

When I asked him about Professor Moe he replied with a respectful gurgle. "You don't mean to say you've got him at Flambard? What astounding luck! I thought he had gone back to Stockholm. There are scores of people who would walk twenty miles barefoot to get a word with him."

Landor confirmed all that Sally had said about the Professor's standing. He had been given the Nobel Prize years ago, and was undoubtedly the greatest mathematician alive. But recently he had soared into a world where it was not easy to keep abreast of him. Landor confessed that he had only got glimmerings of meaning from the paper he had read two days before to the Newton Club. "I can see the road he is travelling," he said, "but I can't quite grasp the stages." And he quoted Wordsworth's line about "Voyaging through strange seas of thought alone."

"He's the real thing," I asked, "and not a charlatan?"

I could hear Landor's cackle at the other end of the line.

"You might as well ask a conscript to vouch for Napoleon's abilities as ask me to give a certificate of respectability to August Moe."

"You're sure he's quite sane?"

"Absolutely. He's only mad in so far as all genius is mad. He is reputed to be a very good fellow and very simple. Did you know that he once wrote a book on Hans Andersen? But he looked to me a pretty sick man. There's a lot of hereditary phthisis in his race."

Dinner that evening was a pleasanter meal for me. I had more of an appetite, there was a less leaden air about my companions in fatigue, the sunburnt boys and girls were in good form, and Reggie Daker's woebegone countenance was safe on its pillow. Charles Ottery, who sat next to Pamela Brune, seemed to be in a better humour, and Mrs Lamington was really amusing about the Wallingdon stables and old Wallingdon's stable-talk. I had been moved farther down the table, and had a good view of Professor Moe, who sat next to our hostess. His was an extraordinary face—the hollow cheeks and the high cheekbones, the pale eyes, the broad high brow, and the bald head rising to a peak like Sir Walter Scott's. The expression was very gentle, like a musing child, but now and then he seemed to kindle, and an odd gleam appeared in his colourless pits of eyes. For all his size he looked terribly flimsy. Something had fretted his body to a decay.

He came up to me as soon as we left the dining-room. He spoke excellent English, but his voice made me uneasy—it seemed to come with difficulty from a long way down in his big frame. There was a vague, sad kindness about his manner, but there was a sense of purpose too. He went straight to the point.

"Some time you are going to give me your attention, Sir Edward, and I in return will give you my confidence. Her ladyship has so informed me. She insists, that gracious one, that I must go to bed, for I am still weary. Shall our talk be tomorrow after breakfast? In the garden, please, if the sun still shines."

III

I find it almost impossible to give the gist of the conversation which filled the next forenoon. We sat in wicker chairs on the flags of the Dutch garden in a grilling sun, for heat seemed to be the one physical comfort for which the Professor craved. I shall always associate the glare of a June sky with a frantic effort on my part to grasp the ultimate imponderables of human thought.

The Professor was merciful to my weakness. He had a great writing-pad on his knee, and would fain have illustrated his argument with diagrams, but he desisted when he found that they meant little to me and really impeded his exposition. Most scientists use a kind of shorthand—formulas and equations which have as exact a meaning for them as an ordinary noun has for the ordinary man. But there was no chance for this shorthand with me. He had to begin from the very beginning, taking nothing for granted. I realised his difficulty. It was as if I had had to argue an intricate case, not before a learned judge, but before an intelligent ignoramus, to whom each technical legal term had to be laboriously explained.

There was another difficulty, which applied not to me only, but to the most intelligent auditor in the world. Suppose you are trying to expound to a man who has been stone-deaf from birth the meaning of sound. You can show him the physical effects of it, the brain and sense reactions, but the FACT of sound you cannot bring home to him by any diagram or calculation. It is something for him without sensory vividness, altogether outside his realised universe. It was the same with the Professor's exposition of strange new dimensions, the discovery of which depended on logical processes. I could not grasp them imaginatively, and, not having lived as he had done with the arguments, I could not comprehend them intellectually.

But here—very crudely and roughly—is the kind of thing he tried to tell me.

He began by observing that in the blind instinct of man there was something which the normal intellect lacked—a prevision of future happenings, for which reason gave no warrant. We all of us had occasionally dim anticipations of coming events, lurking somewhere in our nerves. A man walking in the dark was aware subconsciously of a peril and subconsciously braced himself to meet it. He quoted the sentences from Bergson which I have put at the head of the chapter. His aim was to rationalise and systematise this anticipatory instinct.

Then he presented me with a theory of Time, for he had an orderly mind, and desired to put first things first. Here he pretty well bogged me at the start. He did not call Time a fourth dimension, but I gathered that it amounted to that, or rather that it involved many new dimensions. There seemed to be a number of worlds of presentation travelling in Time, and each was contained within a world one dimension larger. The self was composed of various observers, the normal one being confined to a small field of sensory phenomena, observed or remembered. But this field was included in a larger field and, to the observer in the latter, future events were visible as well as past and present.

In sleep, he went on, where the attention was not absorbed, as it was in waking life, with the smaller field of phenomena, the larger field might come inside the pale of consciousness. People had often been correctly forewarned in dreams. We all now and then were amazed at the familiarity with which we regarded a novel experience, as if we recognised it as something which had happened before. The universe was extended in Time, and the dreamer, with nothing to rivet his attention to the narrow waking field, ranged about, and might light on images which belonged to the future as well as to the past. The sleeper was constantly crossing the arbitrary frontier which our mortal limitations had erected.

At this point I began to see light. I was prepared to assent to the conclusion that in dreams we occasionally dip into the future, though I was unable to follow most of the Professor's proofs. But now came the real question. Was it possible to attain to this form of prevision otherwise than in sleep? Could the observer in the narrow world turn himself by any effort of will into the profounder observer in the world of ampler dimensions? Could the anticipating power of the dreamer be systematised and controlled, and be made available to man in his waking life?

It could, said the Professor. Such was the result of the researches to which he had dedicated the last ten years of his life. It was as a crowning proof that he wished an experiment at Flambard.

I think that he realised how little I had grasped of his exposition of the fundamentals of his theory. He undertook it, I fancy, out of his scrupulous honesty; he felt bound to put me in possession of the whole argument, whether I understood it or not. But, now that he had got down to something concrete which I could follow, his manner became feverishly earnest. He patted my knee with a large lean hand, and kept thrusting his gaunt face close to mine. His writing-pad fell into the lily-pond, but he did not notice it.

He needed several people for his experiment—the more the better, for he wanted a variety of temperaments, and he said something, too, about the advantage of a communal psychological effort... But they must be the right kind of people—people with highly developed nervous systems—not men too deeply sunk in matter. (I thought of Evelyn and the Lamingtons and old Folliot.) He deprecated exuberant physical health or abounding vitality, since such endowments meant that their possessors would be padlocked to the narrower sensory world. He ran over his selection again, dwelling on each, summing each up with what seemed to me astounding shrewdness, considering that he had met them for the first time two days before. He wanted the hungry and the forward-looking. Tavanger and Mayot. “They will never be content,” he said, “and their hunger is of the spirit, though maybe an earthy spirit...” Myself. He turned his hollow eyes on me, but was too polite to particularise what my kind of hunger might be... Charles Ottery. “He is unhappy, and that means that his hold on the present is loose...” Sally Flambard. “That gracious lady lives always *sur la branche*—is it not so? She is like a bird, and has no heavy flesh to clog her. Assuredly she must be one.” Rather to my surprise he added Reggie Daker. Reggie's recent concussion, for some reason which I did not follow, made him a suitable object... Above all, there was Goodeve. He repeated his name with satisfaction, but offered no comment.

I asked him what form his experiment would take.

“A little training. No more. A little asceticism, partly of the body, but mainly of the mind. It must be disciplined to see what it shall see.”

Then, speaking very slowly, and drawing words apparently from as deep a cavern as that from which he drew his breath, he explained his plan.

There must be a certain physical preparation. I am as unlearned in medical science as in philosophy, but I gathered that recently there had been some remarkable advances made in the study of the brain and its subsidiary organs. Very likely I am writing nonsense, for the Professor at this point forgot about tempering the wind to the shorn lamb, and poured forth a flood of technicalities. But I understood him to say that, just as the cortex of the brain was the seat of the intellectual activities, so the subcortical region above the spinal cord was the home of the instinctive faculties. He used a lot of jargon, which, not being an anatomist, I could not follow, but he was obliging enough to draw me a diagram in his pocket-book, the writing-pad being in the lily-pond.

In particular there was a thing which he called an “intercalated cell,” and which had a very special importance in his scheme. Just as the faculty of sight, he said, had for its supreme function the creation of an extended world, a world of space perception, so the instinct which had its seat in this cell specialised in time-perception... I had been reading lately about telegnosis, and mentioned that word, but he shook his head impatiently. The faculty he spoke of had nothing to do

with telegnosis. "You have not understood my exposition," he said. "But no matter. It is enough if you understand my purpose."

It was desirable to stimulate the functioning of this cell. That could only be done in a small degree. A certain diet was necessary, for he had discovered that the cell was temporarily atrophied by the wrong foods. Also there was a drug, which acted upon it directly.

At this I protested, but he was quick to reassure me. "On my honour," he cried, "it is the mildest drug. Its bodily effect is as innocuous as a glass of tonic water. But I have proved experimentally that it lulls the other faculties, and very slightly stimulates this one of which I speak."

Then he revealed his main purpose.

"I am still groping at the edge of mysteries," he said. "My theory I am assured is true, but in practice I can only go a very little way. Some day, when I am ashes, men will look at the future as easily as today they look out of a window at a garden. At present I must be content to exemplify my doctrine by small trivial things. I cannot enable you to gaze at a segment of life at some future date, and watch human beings going about their business. The most I hope for is to show you some simple matter of sense-perception as it will be at that date. Therefore I need some object which I am assured will be still in existence, and which I am also assured will have changed from what it now is. Name to me such an object."

I suggested, rather foolishly, the position of the planets in the sky.

"That will not do, for now we can predict that position with perfect certainty."

"A young tree?"

"The visible evidence of change would be too minute. I cannot promise to open up the future very far ahead. A year—two years maybe—no more."

"A building which we all know, and which is now going up?"

Again he shook his head. "You may be familiar with the type of the completed structure, and carry the picture of it in your memory... There is only one familiar object, which continues and likewise changes. You cannot guess? Why, a journal. A daily or weekly paper."

He leaned towards me and laid a hand on each of my knees.

"Today is the sixth of June. Four days from now, if you and the others consent, I will enable you to see for one instant of time—no longer—a newspaper of the tenth day of June next year."

He lay back in his chair and had a violent fit of coughing, while I digested this startling announcement... He was right on one point—a newspaper was the only thing for his experiment; that at any rate I saw clearly. I own to having been tremendously impressed by his talk, but I was not quite convinced; the thing appeared to be clean out of nature and reason. You see, I had no such stimulus to belief as a scientist would have had who had followed his proofs... Still, it seemed harmless. Probably it would end in nothing—the ritual prepared, and the mystics left gaping at each other... No. That could scarcely happen, I decided; the mystagogue was too impressive.

The Professor had recovered himself, and was watching me under drooped eyelids. All the eagerness had gone out of his face, but that face had the brooding power and the ageless wisdom of the Sphinx. If he were allowed to make the experiment something must happen.

Lady Flambard had promised to abide by my decision... There could be no risk, I told myself. A little carefulness in diet, which would do everybody good. The drug? I would have to watch that. The Professor seemed to read my thoughts, for he broke in:

"You are worrying about the drug? It is of small consequence. If you insist, it can be omitted."

I asked how he proposed to prepare the subjects of his experiment. Quite simply, he replied. A newspaper—The Times, for example—would be made to play a large part in our thoughts... I observed that it already played a large part in the thoughts of educated Englishmen, and he smiled—the first time I had seen him smile. There was an air of satisfaction about him, as if he knew what my answer would be.

"I see no objection to what you propose," I said at last. "I warn you that I am still a bit of a sceptic. But I am willing, if you can persuade the others."

He smiled again. "With the others there will be no difficulty. Our gracious hostess is already an enthusiast. Before luncheon I will speak to Mr Tavanger and Mr Mayot—and to Mr Ottery when he returns. I shall not speak to them as I have spoken to you."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because they are longing for such a revelation as I propose, whereas you care not at all. But I would beg of you to say a word on my behalf to Sir Robert Goodeve. His co-operation I especially seek."

He raised with difficulty his huge frame from the wicker chair, blinking his eyes in the hot sun, and leaning on a sundial as if he were giddy. I offered my arm, which he took, and together we went under the striped awning, which shaded one part of the terrace, into the coolness of the great hall.

You know the kind of banality with which, out of shyness, one often winds up a difficult conversation. I was moved to observe, as I left him, that in four days I hoped to be introduced to a new world. He made no answer. "To enter, waking, into the world of sleep," I added fatuously.

Then he said a thing which rather solemnised me.

"Not only the world of sleep," he said. "It is the world to which we penetrate after death."

As I watched his great back slowly mounting the staircase, I had a sudden feeling that into the peace of Flambard something fateful and tremendous had broken.

IV

I do not know what Professor Moe said to Tavanger and Mayot. I knew both men, but not intimately, for they were a little too much of the unabashed careerist for my taste, and I wondered how, in spite of his confidence, he was going to interest their most practical minds.

After luncheon I wanted to be alone, so I took my rod and went down to the Arm, beyond the stretch where it ran among water-meadows.

It was a still, bright afternoon, with a slight haze to temper the glare of the sun. The place was delicious, full of the scents of mint and meadowsweet, yellow flag-irises glowing by the water's edge, and the first dog-roses beginning to star the hedges. There was not much of a rise, but I caught a few trout under the size limit, and stalked and lost a big fellow in the mill pool. But I got no good of the summer peace, and my mind was very little on fishing, for the talk of the morning made a merry-go-round in my head.

I had moments of considering the whole business a farce, and wondering if I had not made a fool of myself in consenting to it. But I could not continue long in that mood. The Professor's ardent face would come before me like a reproachful schoolmaster's, and under those compelling eyes of his I was forced back into something which was acquiescence, if not conviction. There was a shadow of anxiety at the back of my mind. The man was an extraordinary force, with elemental powers of brain and will; was it wise to let such an influence loose on commonplace people who happened to be at the moment a little loose from their moorings? I was not afraid of myself, but what about the high-strung Sally, and the concussed Reggie, and Charles Ottery in the throes of an emotional crisis? I kept telling myself that there was no danger, that nothing could happen... And then I discovered, to my amazement, that, if that forecast proved true, I should be disappointed. I wanted something to happen. Nay, I believed at the bottom of my heart that something would happen.

In the smoking-room, before dinner, I found Charles Ottery and Reggie Daker—a rather pale and subdued Reggie, with a bandage round his head and a black eye. They were talking on the window seat, and when I entered they suddenly stopped. When they saw who it was, Charles called to me to join them.

"I hear you're in this business, Ned," he said. "I got the surprise of my life when the Professor told me that you had consented. It's a new line of country for a staid old bird like you."

"The man's a genius," I replied. "I see no harm in helping him in his experiment. Did you understand his argument?"

"I didn't try. He didn't argue much, but one could see that he had any quantity of scientific stuff behind him. He hopes to make us dream while we're awake, and I thought it such a sporting proposition that I couldn't refuse. It must all be kept deadly secret, of course. We have to get into the right atmosphere, and tune our minds to the proper pitch, and it would never do to rope in a born idiot like George Lamington. He'd guy it from the start."

"You were convinced by the Professor?" I asked.

"I won't say convinced. I was interested. It's an amusing game anyhow, and I want to be amused."

Charles spoke with a lightness which seemed to me to be assumed. He had obviously been far more impressed than he cared to admit. I could see that, since Pamela was giving him a difficult time, he longed for something to distract him, something which was associated with that world of new emotions in which he was living.

The lady's other suitor made no concealment. Reggie was honestly excited. He was flattered, perhaps, by being made one of the circle, and may have attributed his choice to his new role as an authority on books. At last he was being taken seriously. Also his recent concussion may have predisposed him to some research into the mysteries of mind, for as he explained, he could not remember one blessed thing that happened between putting Sir Vidas at a fence which he cleared with a yard to spare, and finding himself in bed with clouts on his head. He was insistent on the need of confidence in the experiment. "What I mean to say is, we've got to help the old boy out. If we don't believe the thing will come off, then it won't—if you see what I mean."

He dropped his voice as Evelyn Flambard and his terriers came noisily into the room.

As I was going upstairs to dress, I found Goodeve's hand on my shoulder.

"I hear you're on in this piece," he whispered jovially, as if the whole thing was a good joke.

"And you?" I whispered back.

"Oh, I'm on. I rather like these psychical adventures. I'm a hopeless subject, you know, and calculated to break up any

séance. I haven't got enough soul—too solidly tied to earth. But I never mind offering myself as a victim.”

He laughed and passed into his bedroom, leaving me wondering how the Professor had so signally failed with the man who was his special choice. He had obtained Goodeve's consent, so there was no need of pressure from me, but clearly he had not made any sort of convert of him.

At dinner we all tried to behave as if nothing special was afoot, and I think we succeeded. George Lamington had never had so good an audience for his dreary tales. He was full of racing reminiscences, the point of which was the preternatural cunning with which he had outwitted sundry rivals who had tried to beguile him. I never knew anyone whose talk was so choked with adipose tissue, but he generally managed to wallow towards some kind of point, which he and Evelyn found dramatic... During most of the meal I talked to his wife. She could be intelligent enough when she chose, and had a vigorous interest in foreign affairs, for she was an Ambassador's daughter. When I first knew her she had affected a foreign accent, and professed to be more at home in Paris and Vienna than in London. Now she was English of the English, and her former tastes appeared only in intermittent attempts to get George appointed to a Dominion Governorship, where he would most certainly have been a failure. For the present, however, the drums and trumpets did not sound for her. The recent addition to the Lamington fortunes had plunged her deep in the upholstery of life. She was full of plans for doing up their place in Suffolk, and, as I am as ignorant as a coal-heaver about bric-à-brac, I could only listen respectfully. She had the mannerism of the very rich, whose grievance is not against the price of things, but the inadequacy of the supply.

The Professor's health appeared to have improved, or it may have been satisfaction with his initial success, for he was almost loquacious. He seemed to have acute hearing, for he would catch fragments of conversation far down the table, and send his great voice booming towards the speaker in some innocent interrogation. As I have said, his English was excellent, but his knowledge of English life seemed to be on the level of a South Sea islander. He was very inquisitive, and asked questions about racing and horses which gave Evelyn a chance to display his humour. Among the younger people he was a great success. Pamela Brune, who sat next to him, lost in his company her slight air of petulance and discontent, and became once again the delightful child I had known. I was obliged to admit that the Flambard party had improved since yesterday, for certain of its members seemed to have shaken off their listlessness.

While youth was dancing or skylarking on the terrace, and the rest were set solidly to bridge, we met in the upper chamber in the Essex wing, which had been given me as a sitting-room. At first, while we waited for the Professor, we were a little self-conscious. Tavanger and Mayot, especially, looked rather like embarrassed elders at a children's party. But I noticed that no one—not even Reggie Daker—tried to be funny about the business.

The Professor's coming turned us into a most practical assembly. Without a word of further explanation he gave us our marching orders. He appeared to assume that we were all ready to surrender ourselves to his directions.

The paper chosen was *The Times*. For the next three days we were to keep our minds glued to that news-sheet, and he was very explicit about the way in which we were to do it.

First of all, we were to have it as much as possible before our eyes, so that its physical form became as familiar to each of us as our razors and cigarette cases. We started, of course, with a considerable degree of knowledge, for we were all accustomed to look at it every morning. I remember wondering why the Professor had fixed so short a time as three days for this intensive contemplation, till he went on to give his further orders.

This ocular familiarity was only the beginning. Each of us must concentrate on one particular part to which his special interest was pledged—Tavanger on the first City page, for example, Mayot on the leader page, myself on the Law Reports—any part we pleased. Of such pages we had to acquire the most intimate knowledge, so that by shutting our eyes we could reconstruct the make-up in every detail. The physical make-up, that is to say; there was no necessity for any memorising of contents.

Then came something more difficult. Each of us had to perform a number of exercises in concentration and anticipation. We knew the kind of things which were happening, and within limits the kind of topic which would be the staple of the next day's issue. Well, we had to try to forecast some of the contents of the next day's issue, which we had not seen. And not merely in a general sense. We had to empty our minds of everything but the one topic, and endeavour to make as full as possible a picture of part of the exact contents of *The Times* next morning—to see it not as a concept but as a percept—the very words and lines and headings.

For example. Suppose that I took the Law Reports pages. There were some cases the decisions on which were being given by the House of Lords today, and would be published tomorrow. I could guess the members of the tribunal who would deliver judgement, and could make a fair shot at what that judgement would be. Well, I was to try so to forecast these coming pages that I could picture the column of type, and, knowing the judges' idiosyncrasies, see before my eyes the very sentences in which their wisdom would be enshrined... Tavanger, let us say, took the first City page. Tomorrow he knew there would be a report of a company meeting in which he was interested. He must try to get a picture of the paragraph in which the City Editor commented on the meeting... If Mayot chose the leader page, he must try to guess correctly what would be the subject of the first or second leader, and, from his knowledge of *The Times* policy and the style of its leader-writers, envisage some of the very sentences, and possibly the headings.

It seemed to me an incredibly difficult game, and I did not believe that, for myself, I would get any results at all. I have never been much good at guessing. But I could see the general lay-out. Everything would depend upon the adequacy of the knowledge we started with. To make an ocular picture which would have any exactitude, I must be familiar with the Lord

Chancellor's mannerisms, Tavanger with the mentality and the style of the City Editor, and Mayot with the policy of the paper and the verbal felicities of its leader-writers... Some of us found the prescription difficult, and Reggie Daker groaned audibly.

But there was more to follow. We were also to try to fling our minds farther forward—not for a day, but for a year. Each morning at seven—I do not know why he fixed that hour—we were to engage in a more difficult kind of concentration—by using such special knowledge as we possessed to help us to forecast the kind of development in the world which June of next year would show. And always we had to aim at seeing our forecasts not in vague concepts, but in concrete black and white in the appropriate corner of *The Times*.

I am bound to say that, when I heard this, I felt that we had been let in for a most futile quest. We had our days mapped out in a minute programme—certain hours for each kind of concentration. We would meet the Professor in my sitting-room at stated times... I think that he felt the atmosphere sceptical, for on this last point his manner lost its briskness and he became very solemn.

"It is difficult," he said, "but you must have faith. And I myself will help you. Time—all time—is with us NOW, but we are confined to narrow fields of presentation. With my help you will enlarge these fields. If you will give me honestly all your powers, I can supplement them."

Lastly he spoke of the necessary régime. Too much exercise was forbidden, for it was desirable that our health should be rather an absence of ailments than a positive, aggressive well-being. There were to be no cold baths. We might smoke, but alcohol was strictly forbidden—not much of a hardship, for we were an abstemious lot. As to diet, we had to behave like convalescents—no meat, not even fish—nothing which, in the Professor's words, "possessed automobility." We were allowed weak tea, but not coffee. Milk, cheese, fruit, eggs and cereals were to be our staples.

It all reminded me rather eerily of the ritual food which used to be given to human beings set apart for sacrifice to the gods.

"Our gracious hostess has so arranged it that the others will not be curious," said the Professor, and Sally nodded a mystified head.

I went to bed feeling that I should probably get a liver attack from lack of exercise, if I did not starve from lack of food. Next morning I found a *Times* on the tray which brought my morning tea. Sally must have sent ten miles to a main-line station to get it.

v

It is difficult to write the consecutive story of the next three days. I kept a diary, but on consulting it, I find only a bare record of my hours of meditation on that confounded newspaper, and of our conferences with the Professor. I began in a mood which was less one of scepticism than of despair. I simply did not believe that I could get one step forward in this preposterous business. But I was determined to play the game to the best of my capacity, for Moe's talk last night had brought me fairly under his spell.

I did as I had been told. I emptied my mind of every purpose except the one. I read the arguments in the case—it was an appeal by an insurance company—and then sat down to forecast what the report of the judgement would be, as given by *The Times* next day. Of the substance of the judgement I had not much doubt, and I was pretty certain that it would be delivered by the Lord Chancellor, with the rest of the Court concurring. I knew Boland's style, having listened often enough to his pronouncements, and it would have been easy enough to forecast the kind of thing he would say, using some of his pet phrases. But my job was to forecast what *The Times* reporters would make him say—a very different matter. I collected a set of old copies of the paper and tried to get into their spirit. Then I made a number of jottings, but I found myself slipping into the manner of the official Law Reports, which was not what I wanted. I remember looking at my notes with disfavour, and reflecting that this guessing game was nothing but a deduction from existing knowledge. If I had made a close study of *The Times* reports, I should probably get a good deal right, but since I had only a superficial knowledge I would get little. Moe's grandiose theories about Time had nothing to do with it. It was not a question of casting the mind forward into a new field of presentation, but simply of a good memory from which one made the right deductions.

After my first attempt I went for a walk, and tried to fix my mind on something different. I had been making a new rock-garden at Borrowby, and I examined minutely Sally's collection of Tibetan alpine. On my return the butler handed me a note. The Professor had decided to have conferences with each of us separately, and my hour was three in the afternoon.

Before that hour I had two other bouts of contemplation. I wrestled honourably with the incurably evasive, and filled several sheets of foolscap with notes. Then I revised them, striking out phrases which were natural enough to Boland, but unsuitable for a newspaper summary. The business seemed more ridiculous than ever. I was simply chewing the cud of memories—very vague, inexact memories.

The Professor received me in Sally's boudoir. Now, the odd thing was that in his presence I had no self-consciousness. If anyone had told me that I should have been unburdening my mind in a ridiculous game to a queer foreigner, with the freedom of a novice in the confessional, I should have declared it impossible. But there it was. He sat before me with his gaunt face and bottomless pits of eyes, very grave and gentle, and without being asked I told him what I had been doing.

"That is a beginning," he said, "only a beginning. But your mind is too active as yet to *perceive*. You are still in the bonds

of ratiocination. Your past knowledge is only the jumping-off stage from which your mind must leap. Suffer yourself to be more quiescent, my friend. Do not torture your memory. It is a deep well from which the reason can only draw little buckets of water."

I told him that I had been making notes, and he approved. "But do not shape them as you would shape a logical argument. Let them be raw material out of which a picture builds itself. Your business is perception, not conception, and perception comes in flashes." And then he quoted what Napoleon had once said, how after long pondering he had his vision of a battle plan in a blinding flash of white light.

He said a great deal more which I do not remember very clearly. But one thing I have firm in my recollection—the compelling personality of the man. There must have been some strange hypnotic force about him, for as he spoke I experienced suddenly a new confidence and an odd excitement. He seemed to wake unexpected powers in me, and I felt my mind to be less a machine clamped to a solid concrete base, than an aeroplane which might rise and soar into space. Another queer thing—I felt slightly giddy as I left him. Unquestionably he was going to make good his promise and supplement our efforts, for an influence radiated from him, more masterful than any I have ever known in a fellow mortal. It was only after we had parted that the reaction came, and I felt a faint sense of antagonism, almost of fear.

In my last effort before dinner I struggled to follow his advice. I tried to picture next day's Times. The judgement, from its importance, would occupy a column at least; I saw that column and its heading, and it seemed to me to be split up into three paragraphs. I saw some of the phrases out of my notes, and one or two new ones. There was one especially, quite in Boland's manner, which seemed to be repeated more than once—something like this: "It is a legal commonplace that a contract of insurance is one uberrimae fidei, which is vitiated by any nondisclosure, however innocent, of material facts." I scribbled this down, and found, when I re-read it, that I had written uberrimi, and deplored my declining scholarship.

At dinner our group were as glum as owls. I did not know how the Professor had handled the others, but I assumed that his methods had been the same as with me, and certainly he had produced an effect. We all seemed to have something on our minds, and came in for a good deal of chaff, the more as we refrained from so many dishes. Reggie Daker escaped, for he was a convalescent, but Evelyn had a good deal to say about Goodeve's abstinence. Goodeve was supposed to be entering for a tennis contest which the young people had got up, while George Lamington started the legend that I was reducing my weight for the next Bar point-to-point. Happily this interest in our diet diverted their attention from our manners, which must have been strange. All seven of us were stricken with aphasia, and for myself I felt that I was looking on at a movie-show.

The Professor gathered us together in my sitting-room a little before midnight. As I looked at the others I had an impression of a kindergarten. Compared with him we all seemed ridiculously young, crude, and ignorant. Mayot's alert intelligence was only the callow vivacity of a child; Tavanger's heavy face was merely lumpish; even Goodeve looked the bright schoolboy. As for Sally and Reggie and Charles Ottery, something had happened to them which drained the personality from their faces, and made them seem slight and wispy. Moe himself brooded over us like a vital Buddha. I had an uneasy sense of looking at a man who lived most of his time in another world than ours.

He did not instruct us; he talked, and his talk was like a fierce cordial. Looking back at what I can remember of it, it does not seem to make any kind of sense, but it had an overwhelming effect on his hearers. It was as if he were drawing aside curtain after curtain, and, though we could not see into the land beyond the curtains, we were convinced of its existence. As I have said, I cannot make sense of my recollection of it, but while I was listening it seemed to be quite simple and intelligible...

He spoke of the instinct which gave perceptions, and of its immense power as compared to our petty reason which turned percepts into concepts. He spoke of what he called the "eye of the mind," and said the very phrase pointed to some intuition in the ordinary being of a gift which civilisation had atrophied... Then Reggie Daker became important. The Professor elicited from the coy Reggie that in his childhood he had been in the habit of seeing abstract things in a concrete form. For Reggie the different days of the week had each a special shape, and each of the Ten Commandments a special colour. Monday was a square and Saturday an oval, and Sunday a circle with a segment bitten out; the Third Commandment was dark blue, and the Tenth a pale green with spots. Reggie had thought of Sin as a substance like black salt, and the Soul as something in the shape of a kidney bean...

It all sounds the wildest nonsense, but the Professor made out of Reggie's confidences a wonderful thing. His images might seem ridiculous, but they showed perception struggling to regain its rightful place. He had some theory of the relation between the concrete vision and the abstract thought, which he linked somehow or other to his doctrine of Time. In the retrospect I cannot remember his argument, but he convinced me absolutely... He had a lot to say about the old astrologers and magic-makers who worked with physical charms and geometrical figures, and he was clear that they had had a knowledge of mysteries on which the door had long been locked. Also he talked about certain savage beliefs in ancient Greece and in modern Africa—which he said were profundity and not foolishness... He spoke, too, about the world of dreams, and how its fantasy had often a deeper reality than waking life. "We are children on the seashore," he said, "watching the jetsam of the waves, and every fragment of jetsam is a clue to a land beyond the waters which is our true home."

Not for a moment did any of us think him mad. We sat like beggars, hungrily picking up crumbs from a feast. Of one thing I was presently convinced. Moe had cast a stronger spell over the others than over myself. I found my mind trying feebly to question some of his sayings, to link them with the ordinary world of thought; but it was plain that the rest

accepted everything as inspired and infallible gospel.

I dare say I was tired, for I slept more soundly than I had done for weeks. I was called at seven, and set myself, according to instructions, to a long-range forecast—what would be likely to happen on June tenth a year ahead. It sounds a futile job, and so I found it. My head soon grew dizzy with speculations, some of them quite outside the legal sphere which I had marked out as my own. But I found one curious thing. I had lost the hopelessness which had accompanied my contemplations of the previous day. I BELIEVED now that I could make something of the task. Also I found my imagination far more lively. I convinced myself that in a year's time there would be a new Lord Chancellor and a new Lord of Appeal. I beheld them sitting in the Lords, but the figure on the Woolsack was so blurred that I could not recognise it. But I saw the new Lord clearly, and his face was the face of young Molsom, who had only taken silk two years ago. Molsom's appointment was incredible, but, as often as the picture of the scarlet benches of the Upper House came before me, there was Molsom, with his dapper little figure and his big nose and his arms folded after his habit. I realised that I was beginning to use the "mind's eye," to see things, and not merely to think them.

The Times was brought to my bedside at eight, and I opened it eagerly. There was the judgement in my case, delivered, as I had expected, by Boland. It ran not to a whole column, but to less than three-quarters; but I had been right on one point—it was broken up into three paragraphs. The substance of the judgement was much as I had foreseen, but I had not been lucky in guessing the wording, and Boland had referred to only two of the cases I had marked down for him...

But there was one amazing thing. He had used the sentence about *uberrimae fidei*—very much in the form I had anticipated. More—far more. The Times had that rare thing, a misprint: it had *uberrimi*, the very blunder I had made myself in my anticipatory jottings.

This made me feel solemn. My other correct anticipations might be set down to deductions from past knowledge. But here was an indubitable instance of anticipatory perception.

From that hour I date my complete conversion. I was as docile now as Sally, and I stopped trying to reason. For I understood that, behind all the régime and the exercises, there was the tremendous fact of Professor Moe himself. If we were to look into the future it must be largely through his eyes. By the sheer power of intellect he had won a gift, and by some superabundant force of personality he was able to communicate in part that gift to others.

I am not going to attempt to write in detail the story of the next two days, because external detail matters little; the true history was being made in the heads of the seven of us. I went obediently through the prescribed ritual. I pored over The Times as if my salvation depended upon it. I laboured to foresee the next day's issue, and I let my mind race into the next year. I felt my imagination becoming more fecund and more vivid, and my confidence growing hourly. And always I felt behind me some mighty impetus driving me on and holding me up. I was in the charge of a Moses, like the puzzled Israelites stumbling in the desert.

I spent the intervals with a rod beside the Arm, and there I first became conscious of certain physical symptoms. An almost morbid nervous alertness was accompanied by a good deal of bodily lassitude. This could not be due merely to the diet and lack of exercise, for I had often been sedentary for a week on end and lived chiefly on bread and cheese. Rather it seemed that I was using my nervous energy so lavishly in one direction that I had little left for the ordinary purposes of life... Another thing. My sight is very good, especially for long distances, and in dry-fly fishing I never need to use a glass to spot a fish. Well, in the little fishing I did that day, I found my eyes as good as ever, but I noted one remarkable defect. I saw the trout perfectly clearly, but I could not put a fly neatly over him. There was nothing wrong with my casting; the trouble was in my eye, which had somehow lost its liaison with the rest of my body. The fly fell on the water as lightly as a thistle-down, but it was many inches away from the fish's nose.

That day the Professor made us fix our minds principally on the lay-out of June tenth, next year. He wanted to have that date orientated for us with relation to other recurrent events—the Derby, Ascot, the third reading of the Budget, the conference of Empire Journalists and so forth. Also he provided us with sheets of blank paper, the size of The Times, which were to be, so to speak, the screen on which the magic lantern of our prevision cast its picture. He was very careful, almost fussy, about this business. The sheets had nothing printed on them, but they had to be exactly right in size, and he rejected the first lot that Sally provided.

But I cannot say that I paid much attention to these or any other details. I was in a mood of utter obedience, simply doing what I was told to do to the best of my power. I was in the grip of a power which I had no desire to question, and which by some strong magic was breaking down walls for me and giving me a new and marvellous freedom. For there was no doubt about it—I could now set my mind at will racing into the future, and placing before me panoramas which might or might not be true, but which had all the concrete sharpness of reality. There were moments when I seemed almost to feel one sphere of presentation give place to another, as the driver of a car changes gear.

Dinner that night—Sally had sent the Professor to bed after tea—was as lively as the meal of the previous evening had been dull—lively, that is, for the rest of the party, not for us seven. For we seven suddenly developed a remarkable capacity for making sport for the populace, by a kind of mental light-heartedness, similar to my clumsiness with the trout. Our minds seemed to have jolted out of focus. There is a species of *bêtise*, which I believe at Cambridge is named after some don, and which consists in missing completely the point of a metaphor or a joke, in setting the heavy heel of literalness on some trivial flower of fancy. It is a fault to which the Scots are supposed to be prone, and it is the staple of most of the tales against that nation. The classic instance is Charles Lamb's story of how he was once present at a dinner given in honour of Burns, at which a nephew of the poet was to be present. As the company waited on the arrival of the guest, Lamb remarked

that he wished the uncle were coming instead of the nephew: upon which several solemn Scotsmen arose to inform him that that was impossible, because Burns was dead.

That night we seven became unconscious Caledonians. Reggie Daker began it, by asking a ridiculous question about a story of Evelyn's. At first Evelyn looked wrathful, suspecting irony, and then, realising Reggie's guilelessness, he turned the laugh against that innocent. The extraordinary thing was that we all did it. Sally was the worst, and Charles Ottery a good second. Even Mayot fell into the trick—Mayot, who had a reputation for a quick and caustic wit. George Lamington was talking politics. "A Bengali Cabinet in England," George began, and was interrupted by Mayot with, "But, hang it, man, there's no Bengali Cabinet in England!" The fact that I noted our behaviour would seem to prove that I was not so deeply under the spell as the others.

We made sport, as I have said, for the company, and some of them enjoyed the pleasant sense of superiority which comes when people who have a reputation for brains make fools of themselves. Yet the mirth struck me as a little uneasy. There was a sense somewhere that all was not well, that odd things were going on beneath the surface. Pamela Brune, I remember, let her eyes rest on Charles Ottery as she left the room, and in those eyes I read bewilderment, almost pain.

Next morning we began the drug. There were in all three doses—the first with morning tea, the second at three in the afternoon, and the third after dinner. For myself I felt no particular effects, but I can testify that that day, the last day of our preparation, my mood changed.

For the first time I found some dregs of fear in my mind. My confidence in Moe was in no way abated, but I began to feel that we were moving on the edge of things, not mysterious only but terrible. My first cause for uneasiness was the Professor himself. When I met him that morning I was staggered by his looks. His colour was like white wax, and the gauntness of his face was such that it seemed that not only flesh had gone but muscle and blood, so that there remained only dead skin stretched tight over dead bone. His eyes were alive, and no longer placid pools, but it was a sick life, and coughing shook him as an autumn wind shakes the rafters of a ruined barn. He professed to be well enough, but I realised that his experiment was draining his scanty strength. The virtue was going out of him into us, and I wondered if before the appointed time the dynamo might not fail us.

My other anxiety was Goodeve. He had begun by being the most sceptical of the lot of us, but I noticed that at each conference with Moe he grew more silent, his face more strained, and his eyes more unquiet. There was now something positively furtive in them, as if he were in dread of some menace springing out at him from ambush. He hung upon the Professor's words with dog-like devotion, very odd in a personality so substantial and well defined. By tacit consent none of us ever spoke of the experiment, as if we felt that any communication among ourselves might weaken the strong effluence from our leader's mind, so I could not put out any feelers. But the sight of Goodeve at luncheon increased my lurking fear that we were getting very near the edge of some indefinable danger.

I felt very drowsy all day, and dozed in a garden chair between the exercises. I usually dream a good deal of nights, but now I slept like a log—which may have been due to nervous fatigue, or more likely to the switching of the dream-world over into the waking hours. The strangest thing about the whole experience was that I never felt one moment of boredom. I was doing something infinitely monotonous, and yet my powers bent themselves to it as readily as if every moment were a new excitement. That, too, rather frightened me. If this stimulus was so potent for a flat nature like mine, what must be its power over more mercurial souls?

I must record what happened at tea. Nearly all the guests were there, and a cheerful party of young people had come over from a neighbouring house. Now Sally had a much-loved terrier, a Dandie Dinmont called Andrew, who had been on a visit to the vet and had only returned that afternoon. Andrew appeared when tea was beginning, and was received by his mistress with every kind of endearment. But Andrew would not go near her; he fled, knocking over a table, and took refuge between Evelyn's legs, and nothing would draw him from his sanctuary. He used to be a friend of mine, but he met my advances with a snap and the most dismal howling. There he stood, pressed against Evelyn's shins, his teeth bared, his big head lowered and bristling. He seemed to have no objection to the others, only to Sally and me. Then Mayot came in with Tavanger, and again Andrew wailed to the skies. Charles Ottery and Reggie received the same greeting; Goodeve, too, who sat down next to Evelyn, and thereby drove Andrew yelping to a corner. After that he recovered a little and accepted a bit of bread and butter from Pamela Brune, by whose side he had ensconced himself. I was deeply interested in the whole performance, for it was not humanity that Andrew disliked, but that section of it which was engaged in the experiment. I was pondering on this marvel, when there came a howl like nothing on earth, and I saw Andrew streaking out of the drawing-room, slithering over rugs and barging into stools, with Evelyn after him. I also saw that Moe had just entered by another door, looking like a death-in-life.

The Professor sat himself by me, and drank his tea thirstily. The tiny cup seemed almost too great a weight for the mighty hand to raise. He turned to me with the ghost of a smile.

"That dog pays tribute to our success," he said. "The animal has instinct and the man reason, and on those terms they live together. Let a man attain instinct and the animal will flee from him. I have noted it before."

Some neighbours came to dinner, so we made a big party, and the silent conclave passed unnoticed, though Sally's partner must have wondered what had become of her famous sparkle, for she was the palest and mutest of spectres. I felt myself an observer set at a distance not only from the ordinary members of the party but from our coterie—which proves that I must have been less under Moe's spell than my companions. For example, I could not only watch with complete detachment the behaviour of the cheerful young people, and listen to George Lamington's talk of his new Lancia, but I

could observe from without Sally's absent-mindedness and stammered apologies, and Goodeve's look of unhappy expectation, and Charles Ottery's air of one struggling with something on the edge of memory, and Tavanger's dry lips—the man drank pints of water. One thing I noticed. They clearly hated those outside our group. Sally would shrug her shoulders as if unbearably tried, and Mayot looked murderously now and then at Evelyn, and Charles Ottery, who sat next to Pamela Brune, regarded her with hard eyes. I was conscious of something of the same sort myself, for most of my fellows had come to look to me like chattering mannikins. They bored me, but I did not feel for them the overwhelming distaste which was only too apparent in the other members of the group. Their attitude was the opposite of Miranda's cry—

“O brave new world That has such people in't.”

I doubt if they thought the world brave, and for certain they had no illusion about its inhabitants.

It was a very hot night, and I went out beyond the terrace to sniff the fragrance of Sally's rock garden. As I sat dangling my legs over the parapet I felt a hand on my arm, and turned to find Pamela Brune.

“Come for a walk, Uncle Ned,” she said. “I want to talk to you.”

She slipped her arm through mine, and we went down the long alley between yews at the end of the Dutch garden. I felt her arm tremble, and when she spoke it was in a voice which she strove to make composed.

“What has happened to you all?” she asked. “I thought this Whitsuntide was going to be such fun, and it began well—and now everybody is behaving so oddly, Sally hasn't smiled for two days, and Reggie is more half-witted than ever, and you look most of the time as if you were dropping off to sleep.”

“I am pretty tired,” I replied.

“Oh yes, I know,” she said impatiently. “There are excuses for you—and for Sally perhaps, for she has been overdoing it badly... But there is a perfect epidemic of bad manners abroad. Tonight at dinner I could have boxed Charles Ottery's ears. He was horribly rude.”

“You haven't been very kind to him,” I said lamely.

She withdrew her hand.

“What do you mean? I have always been civil... and he has been very, very unkind to me... I hate him. I'll never speak to him again.”

Pamela fled from me down the shadowed alley like a nymph surprised by Pan, and I knew that she fled that I might not see her tears.

Later that night we had our last conference with Moe, for next morning at seven in my sitting-room we were to meet for the final adventure. It was a short conference, and all he seemed to do was to tighten the cords with which he had bound us. I felt his influence more sharply than ever, but I was not in such perfect thralldom as the others, for with a little fragment of my mind I could still observe and think objectively...

I observed the death-mask of the Professor. That is the only word by which to describe his face. Every drop of blood seemed to have fled from it, and in his deep pits of eyes there was no glimmer of life. It was a mask of death, but it was also a mask of peace. In that I think lay its compelling power. There was no shadow of unrest or strife or doubt in it. It had been purged of human weakness as it had been drained of blood. I remembered “grey-haired Saturn, quiet as a stone.”

I thought—what did I think? I kept trying as a desperate duty to make my mind function a little on its own account. I cast it back over the doings of the past days, but I could not find a focus... I was aware that somehow I had acquired new and strange gifts. I had become an adept at prospecting the immediate future, for, though I made many blunders, I had had an amazing percentage of successes. But the Professor did not set much store apparently by this particular expertise, and my main task had been long-range forecasts a year ahead. These, of course, could not be verified, but I had managed to create a segment of a future world as shot with colour and as diversified with incident as the world of sense around me...

About that there were some puzzles which I could not solve. In guessing the contents of the next day's Times I had a mass of concrete experience to build on, but I had not that experience to help me in constructing what might happen across the space of a year, with all a year's unaccountable chances ... Then I reflected that the power of short-range forecasts had come in only a small degree from the exercise of my reason upon past experience. That was but a dim light: it was the daemonic power of the Professor's mind which had given me those illuminations. Could the strong wings of that spirit carry seven humdrum folk over the barriers of sense and habit into a new far world of presentation?

That was my last thought before I fell asleep, and I remember that I felt a sudden horror. We were feeding like parasites upon something on which lay the shadow of dissolution.

I was up and dressed long before seven. The drug, or the diet, or the exercises, or all combined, made me sleepy during the day, but singularly alert at first waking. Alert in body, that is—the feeling that I could run a mile in record time, the desire for something to task my bodily strength. But my brain these last mornings had not been alert. It had seemed a passive stage over which a pageant moved, a pageant of which I had not the direction... But this morning the pageant had stopped, the stage was empty, or rather it was brooded over by a vast vague disquiet.

It was a perfect midsummer morning, with that faint haze in the distance which means a hot noon. The park under my window lay drenched and silvered with dew. The hawthorns seemed to be bowed over the grasses under their weight of blossom. The birds were chattering in the ivy, and two larks were singing. Just under me, beyond the ha-ha, a foal was standing on tottering legs beside its mother, lifting its delicate nozzle to sniff the air. The Arm, where the sun caught it, was a silver crescent, and there was a little slow drift of amethyst smoke from the head keeper's cottage in a clump of firs. The scene was embodied, deep, primordial peace, and though, as I have said, my ordinary perception had become a little dulled, the glory of the June morning smote me like a blow.

It wakened a thousand memories, and memories of late had been rare things with me... I thought of other such dawns, when I had tiptoed through wet meadows to be at the morning rise— water lilies, and buckbean, and arrowhead, and the big trout feeding; dawn in the Alps, when, perched on some rock pinnacle below the last ridge of my peak, I had eaten breakfast and watched the world heave itself out of dusk into burning colour; a hundred hours when I had thanked God that I was alive... A sudden longing woke in me, as if these things were slipping away. These joys were all inside the curtain of sense and present perception, and now I was feeling for the gap in the curtain, and losing them. What mattered the world beyond the gap? Why should we reach after that which God had hidden?...

Fear, distaste, regret chased each other through my mind. Something had weakened this morning. Had the mystica catena snapped?... And then I heard a movement in my sitting-room, and turned away from the window. My mind might be in revolt, but my will was docile.

We sat in a semicircle round the Professor. It was a small room with linen-fold panelling, a carved chimney-piece, and one picture—a French hunting scene. The morning sun was looking into it, so the blinds were half-lowered. We sat in a twilight, except in one corner, where the floor showed a broad shaft of light. I was next to Sally at the left-hand edge of the circle. That is all I remember about the scene, except that each of us had a copy of *The Times*—not the blank paper we had had before, but that morning's *Times*, the issue for the tenth of June in that year of grace.

I must have slipped partly out of the spell, for I could use my eyes and get some message from them. I dare say I could have understood one of *The Times* leaders. But I realised that the others were different. They could not have made sense of one word. To them it was blank white paper, an empty slate on which something was about to be written. They had the air of dull, but obedient pupils, with their eyes chained to their master.

The Professor wore a dressing-gown, and sat in the writing-table chair—deathly white, but stirred into intense life. He sat upright, with his hands on his knees, and his eyes, even in the gloom, seemed to be probing and kneading our souls... I felt the spell, and consciously struggled against it. His voice helped my resistance. It was weak and cracked, without the fierce vitality of his face.

"For three minutes you will turn your eyes inward—into the darkness of the mind which I have taught you to make. Then—I will give the sign—you will look at the paper. There you will see words written, but only for one second. Bend all your powers to remember them."

But my thoughts were not in the darkness of the mind. I looked at the paper and saw that I could read the date and the beginning of an advertisement. I had broken loose; I was a rebel, and was glad of it. And then I looked at Moe, and saw there something which sent a chill to my heart.

The man was dying—dying visibly. With my eyes I saw the body shrink and the jaw loosen as the vital energy ebbed. Now I knew how we might bridge the gap of Time. His personality had lifted us out of our world, and, by a supreme effort of brain and will, his departing soul might carry us into a new one— for an instant only, before that soul passed into a timeless eternity.

I could see all this, because I had shaken myself free from his spell, yet I felt the surge of his spirit like a wind in my face. I heard the word "Now," croaked with what must have been his last breath. I saw his huge form crumple and slip slowly to the floor. But the eyes of the others did not see this; they were on *The Times* pages.

All but Sally. The strain had become more than she could bear. With a small cry she tilted against my shoulder, and for the few seconds before the others returned to ordinary consciousness and realised that Moe was dead, she lay swooning in my arms.

In that fateful moment, while the soul of a genius was quitting the body, five men, staring at what had become the simulacrum of a *Times* not to be printed for twelve months, read certain things.

Mayot had a vision of the leader page, and read two sentences of comment on a speech by the Prime Minister. In one sentence the Prime Minister was named, and the name was not that of him who then held the office.

Tavanger, on the first City page, had a glimpse of a note on the formation of a great combine, by the Anatilla Corporation, of the michelite-producing interests of the world.

Reggie Daker, on the Court page, saw an account of the departure of an archaeological expedition to Yucatan, and his name appeared as one of the members.

Goodeve and Charles Ottery—the one on the page opposite the leaders and the other on the first page of the paper—read the announcement of their own deaths.

II. — MR ARNOLD TAVANGER

*“For mee (if there be such a thing as I)
Fortune (if there be such a thing as shee)
Spies that I beare so well her tyranny,
That she thinks nothing else so fit for mee.”*

—John Donne

I

Tavanger's life was a little beyond my beat. Your busy city magnate does not dine out a great deal, and as a rule he fights shy of political circles. Before that Flambard Whitsuntide I had met him occasionally at public dinners, and once I had had to cross-examine him in a case in the Commercial Court, and a very tough proposition I found him. I was attracted by something solid and dignified in his air, and I thought his taciturnity agreeable; your loquacious financier is the dullest of God's creatures. During the early autumn I found myself occasionally wondering whether Tavanger had seen anything under Moe's spell, for he had had the look of a convinced disciple. I was certain that he would play up to whatever vision he had been vouchsafed, for your financier is as superstitious as a punter and will act boldly on hints which he never attempts to rationalise. Then, in the beginning of the Michaelmas term, fortune brought us together.

I was invited to arbitrate in a case sent me by a firm of city solicitors who often briefed me. It concerned the ownership of a parcel of shares in a Rhodesian company. Tavanger had bought and paid for them, but there was some question about the title, and another party, representing a trust estate, had put forward a claim. It was a friendly affair, for the trustees only wished to protect themselves, and instead of making a case in court of it they had agreed, to save expense, to submit it to me as arbitrator—a growing practice in those days when there was little money to spend on litigation. The case, which turned on the interpretation of certain letters and involved a fairly obvious point of law, presented no great difficulty. I sat for four hours on a Saturday afternoon, and, after a most amicable presentation of both sides, I found for Tavanger.

This happened at the end of October, and interfered with a Saturday to Monday which I had meant to spend at Wirlesdon. It upset Tavanger's plans also, and, as we were leaving my chambers, he suggested that, since we were both left at a loose end, we should dine together. I agreed willingly, for I had taken a strong liking to Tavanger. He had given his evidence that afternoon with a downright reasonableness which impressed me, and I had enjoyed watching his strong, rather sullen face, enlivened by his bright humorous eyes. His father, I had been told, had come originally from Geneva, but the name had been anglicised to rhyme with “scavenger,” and the man himself was as typical a Briton as you could picture. He had made a great reputation, and, incidentally, a great fortune, by buying wreckage and working it up into sound business. In whatever direction he moved he had a crowd of followers who trusted his judgement, but they trusted him blindly, for he was not communicative. He had done bold things, too, and more than once had defied City opinion and won. His name stood high for integrity as well as for acumen and courage, but he was not regarded as companionable. He was a bachelor, living alone in a big house in Kensington, and his hobbies were a hospital, which he ran brilliantly, and his collection of Dutch pictures. Nobody claimed to know him well, and I own to having been a little flattered when he showed a taste for my company. I had a notion that he might want to talk about Moe.

He didn't, for Flambard was never mentioned. But he had a good deal to tell me about the Rhodesian company, the Daphne Concessions, which had been the subject of the arbitration. I had observed with some curiosity that he had taken special pains to acquire the seventeen thousand ordinary shares, and had paid a stiffish price for them, and I had wondered what purpose was at the back of his head. For when the papers had first come to me I had happened to meet the stockbroker who looked after my investments, and had asked him casually about the Daphne company. He had shaken his head over it. The shares were not quoted, he told me, and were presumably strongly held, but the mine had been going for five years without paying a dividend. Personally he did not believe in the future of michelite, but if I wanted a gamble there were plenty of shares of the chief producing company, the American Anatilla, to be had at round about sixteen shillings.

I am ashamed to say that I had only a very hazy idea what michelite was, and from Tavanger I sought information. I learned that it was a metal used chiefly in the manufacture of certain kinds of steel, and that it could also be applied to copper and iron. It gave immense hardness and impenetrability, and complete freedom from corrosion, and could therefore be used, like ferrochrome, for the construction of aeroplanes, projectiles, and armour-plates; but the product was less costly than chrome steel and easier to work. Tavanger thought that its use must soon be greatly extended, especially in the automobile industry. The difficulty lay in smelting the ore, a process which required very special fluxes and was still an expensive one; nevertheless, in spite of the cost, many industries would find it indispensable. It was found in large, but still undefined, quantities in a very few areas. In the Urals, of course, the home of all minerals, but there the deposits were little worked. In two places in the Balkans and one in Transylvania, where the owners were a German company, the Rosas-Sprenger, which had been the pioneer in the whole business. In Central America—Nicaragua, I think—under the Anatilla Corporation. These two companies, the Anatilla and the Rosas-Sprenger, virtually controlled the product now on the market.

“Prosperous?” he said in reply to my question. “No, not yet. They live in hope. The Anatilla has Glaubsteins behind it, and can afford to wait. The Rosas-Sprenger, I fancy, has a bit of a struggle, but they have Sprenger with them, who first discovered how to smelt the stuff—I'm told he is one of the greatest living metallurgical chemists. Sooner or later their chance is bound to come, unless the engineering trade goes bust altogether.”

"How about our friends of the afternoon?" I asked.

"Oh, the Daphne is not yet a serious producer. It has always been a bit short of working capital. But we have assets the others don't possess. They have to mine their ore, and have pretty high working costs, whereas we quarry ours—quarry it out of a range of hills which seems to be made of it. Also our stuff is found in a purer form, and the smelting is simpler—not easy or cheap, but easier and cheaper than theirs. When a boom comes we shall be in a favourable position... Would you like some shares? I daresay it could be managed."

"No, thank you," I said. "I have no time to watch speculations, so I stick to gilt-edged... You have a solid lump of the ordinary stock. Are you looking for more?"

He laughed. "For all I can get. I have taken a sudden fancy to michelite, and I usually back my fancies. The mischief is to know where to find the shares. Daphnes seem to be held by a legion of small folk up and down the world, none of whom want to sell. I have to stalk them like wild deer. You're not in this business and won't queer my pitch, so I don't mind telling you that I mean to have a controlling interest in Daphnes before I'm many months older."

After that we talked about Hobbema. As I walked back to my rooms I had two clear impressions in my mind. One was that I should not like to be up against Tavanger in any business on which his heart was set. There was that in the set of his jaw and the dancing light in his eyes which made him look immensely formidable. The second was that he knew something about the Daphne Concession which others did not know, and knew it with absolute certainty. As I went to bed it suddenly occurred to me that he might have got this knowledge at Flambard, but as to its nature I could make no guess.

II

I did not meet Tavanger again till the week after Christmas. An unexpected piece of business had brought me up from Devonshire, and it lasted so long that I was forced to spend the night in Town. It was that dead patch at the end of December when London seems more deserted than in August, and, since I felt disinclined to face the howling desert of a club, I dined at the Savoy. There I found Tavanger marooned for the same cause. He had been shooting in Norfolk, and had been dragged up to an urgent conference.

He looked a different man from my last recollection of him—leaner in body, thinner in the face, deeply weathered, with the light patches round the eyes which you get from long blinking in a strong sun. I asked him what he had been doing with himself, and he laughed.

"Wait till I have ordered my dinner and I'll tell you. I'm short of good food and trying to make up for it. I want to get my teeth into decent beef again... What about wine? It's cold enough for Burgundy."

When he had arranged a menu to his satisfaction he began an account of his recent doings. It lasted through the meal and long afterwards over a pipe in my rooms. Tavanger was a good narrator in his dry way, and instead of an evening of sleepy boredom I had excellent entertainment, for I heard a tale of activities which few middle-aged men would have ventured upon...

Having got a list of the chief shareholders in Daphne Concessions, he set out to bargain for their holdings in the speediest way, by personal visitation. I gathered that time was of the essence of the business.

First of all he flew to Berlin. There he had an interview with the president of one of the big air services, and, having a good deal of purchase, obtained certain privileges not usually granted to the travelling public. The said president gave a dinner for him at the Adlon, at which he met two people with whom he had long conversations. One was Dilling, the airman, one of the few German aces who had survived the War, who was now busy blazing the trails in commercial aviation. He was specialising at the moment in trans-African flights, and hoped to lower the record from Europe to Cape Town. Tavanger made friends with Dilling, who was a simple soul wholly engrossed in his profession.

The other guest was Sprenger, the metallurgical chemist who had first discovered the industrial uses of michelite. Sprenger was an untidy little man of about sixty, the kind of genius who has never reaped the fruit of his labours and is inclined to be peevish. But he went on doggedly with these labours under considerable difficulties, living on certain small fees for patent rights and on a modest salary paid him by the not very flourishing Rosas-Sprenger company. Tavanger had a remarkable gift of winning people's confidence, and he made Sprenger talk freely, since the latter had no notion that his companion had any michelite interests, though he showed an intelligent appreciation of the metal's possibilities. Three things Tavanger discovered. The first was that Sprenger was ill-informed about the Daphne Concessions, from which it might be deduced that his company was equally in the dark. Therefore no immediate competition for the Daphne shares need be looked for from that quarter. The second was that he was desperately loyal to his own company, and would never be seduced into a rival concern. This solved one problem for Tavanger, who had been ready to pay a considerable price for Sprenger's services. The third was that the little chemist was toiling away at michelite problems, especially the major difficulty of the smelting costs, and was inclined to hope that he was on the brink of a great discovery. Any such discovery would of course belong to his company, but Tavanger ascertained that the Rosas-Sprenger had an agreement with the Anatilla to pool any devices for lessening costs. The Anatilla no doubt provided some of the working capital which enabled the German company to experiment.

The dinner convinced Tavanger that there was no time to be lost. He flew to Salonika by the ordinary Middle East service, and then changed into a seaplane which took him to Crete. The famous antiquary, Dr Heilbron, was busy there

with his Minoan excavations. Heilbron had some years before been engaged in investigating the Zimbabwe remains, and had spent a considerable time in Rhodesia. For some reason or other he had been induced to put money into Daphne Concessions at the start, and owned a block of five thousand shares which he had almost forgotten about.

I could guess at the masterly way in which Tavanger handled Heilbron and got what he wanted. He appeared to be the ordinary traveller, who had dropped in on his way to Egypt to get a glimpse of the antiquary's marvellous work. Being well read, he no doubt talked intelligently on the Minoan civilisation. He let drop that he was a businessman with South African interests, and drew from Heilbron the story of his Daphne investment. The antiquary was comfortably off, but excavation consumes a good deal of money, and he seems to have jumped at Tavanger's offer to buy his shares, which he had long ago written off as worthless when he thought of them at all. Tavanger offered a good price for them, but insisted on Heilbron consulting his stockbroker. The answer was favourable, and the transfer was arranged by cable.

While in Crete Tavanger received another cable which perturbed him. The big block of Daphne shares which he had acquired was not all in his own name; the registered holders of a third were his nominees and quite obscure people. This had been done with a purpose. He wanted to know if the Anatilla people were coming into the market; if they did, they were not likely to approach him in the first instance, but to go for the humbler holders. The cable told him that an offer had been made to one of his nominees—a handsome offer—and that this had been traced by his intelligence department as coming through two firms who were known to handle a good deal of Glaubsteins' European business.

Tavanger had had a long experience of Glaubsteins' methods, and he was aware that they did not enter any market for fun. If they were buyers of Daphnes at all they were out for complete control, and, being people of his own stamp, would not let the grass grow under their feet. They had obviously started on the road which was to lead to a great combine. The bulk of the shareholders were in South Africa, and he was morally certain that at this moment representatives of Glaubsteins' were on steamers bound for the Cape. Well, it behoved him to get there before them, and that could not be done by returning to England and embarking in a South African boat. No more could it be done by the Messageries line and the East African route. A bolder course was required, and, faced with apparently insurmountable difficulties, Tavanger began to enjoy himself.

He cabled to the Aero president in Berlin and to Dilling, and then set his face for Egypt. Here he struck a snag. There was no direct air line from Crete to Cairo, and if he went back to Salonika the journey would take him six days. But he managed to pick up a coasting steamer from the Piraeus, and by bribing the captain induced it to start at once. The weather grew vile, and the wretched boat took five days to wallow through the Eastern Mediterranean, while Tavanger, a bad sailor, lay deathly sick in a smelly cabin. He reached Cairo, pretty much of a physical wreck, only one day earlier than by the comfortable Salonika route.

But, as it happened, that one day made all the difference, for it enabled him to catch Dilling before he started on his southward journey. With Dilling he had all sorts of trouble, for the airman, in spite of the recommendation of the Aero president, showed himself most unwilling to take a passenger. He was flying a new type of light machine, and he wanted as his companion a skilled mechanic. I don't know how Tavanger managed to overcome his reluctance; he called in some of his airmen friends at the Cairo station, and he got the British authorities to make an international favour of the thing, but I fancy the chief weapons were his uncommon persuasive power and his personal magnetism. Anyhow, after a hectic afternoon of argument, Dilling consented.

Then began a wild adventure. Tavanger had never flown much, only pottered between Croydon and the continent, and now he found himself embarked on a flight across the wildest country on earth, with a pilot who was one-fourth scientist and three-fourths adventurer, and who did not value his own or anybody else's life at two pence. Tavanger admitted to me that at first his feet were cold. Also, Dilling on a big flight was a poor companion. His eagerness affected his temper, and his manners were those of a slave-driver and his conversation mostly insults.

As long as they were in the Nile Valley things went well enough. But in the basin of the Great Lakes they ran into a chain of thunderstorms, and after that into head-winds and massive sheets of rain. The bucketing they got played the deuce with the light machine, and engine trouble developed. They had to make a forced landing in very bad forest ground on the skirts of Ruwenzori, where they found that something had gone wrong with the petrol pump and that some of the propeller and cylinder bolts had worked loose. For forty hours they toiled in a tropical jungle cloaked in a hot wet mist, Dilling cursing steadily. Tavanger said that before they had got the machine right he had learned a good deal about air mechanics. When they started again they found that they had two lizards and a snake in their fuselage!

After that they had many minor troubles, and Dilling's temper had become so vile, owing to his disappointment at the rate of speed, that Tavanger had much ado to keep the peace. He himself had contracted a chill, and for the last ten hours of the journey had a high temperature and a blinding headache. When they reached Bulawayo and he crawled out of his seat he could scarcely stand. Dilling, having made port, became a new man. He kissed Tavanger on both cheeks, and wept when he said goodbye.

Tavanger went to an hotel, sent for a doctor, and cured himself in two days. He could not afford to waste time in bed. Also he permitted himself to be interviewed by the local press, for his journey with Dilling, in spite of the delays, had been something of a feat. He told the reporters that he had come to South Africa for a holiday, but that he hoped, while in the country, to have a look round. This of course meant business, for Tavanger's was a famous name in the circles of high finance. He mentioned no particular line, but hinted at the need for the establishment in South Africa of a certain type of steel-making plant to meet local requirements, with a possible export trade to India. He had considerable steel interests in

Britain, and all this sounded quite natural. He knew that it would be cabled home, and would be read by the Anatilla people, and it seemed to him the best camouflage. If rumours got about that he was enquiring about Daphnes, they would be connected with this steel scheme and not taken too seriously.

He now controlled twenty-two thousand odd of the hundred thousand ordinary shares. There were five people in South Africa—about a dozen possibles, but five in particular— from whom he hoped to acquire the balance which would give him a controlling interest. The first was a retired railway engineer, who lived at Wynberg, near Cape Town. The second was a lawyer who had a seat in the Union Parliament, and the third was a Johannesburg stockbroker. The other two were a mining engineer employed at a Rhodesian copper mine, and a fruit farmer in the Salisbury district. Tavanger decided that he had better begin at Cape Town, for that was the point which the Anatilla emissaries would reach first, and he must not be forestalled. The Anatilla people were of course in possession of all the information about the shareholders that he had himself.

So, reflecting that he was playing a game which seemed to belong to some crude romance of boyhood, Tavanger flew to Cape Town, and put up at the Mount Nelson. He had various friends in the city, but his first business was to study a passenger list of the incoming steamers. The tourist traffic to South Africa does not begin till after Christmas, so he found the lists small, and most of the people, with the help of the shipping clerks, he was able to identify. None of the passengers gave an American address, but he decided that the Anatilla representative was one or other of two men, Robson and Steinacker. Then he gave a luncheon to some of his friends, and proceeded to sound them cautiously about the retired railway man at Wynberg, whose name was Barrowman.

It turned out that he was a well-known figure, a vigorous youth of sixty whose hobbies were botany and mountaineering. Now, Tavanger in his youth had been an active member of the Alpine Club—he had begun climbing as a boy with his Swiss relations—and he was delighted to find a ready-made link.

It was arranged that he should meet Barrowman at dinner at the house of one of his friends at Muizenberg, and presently, on a superb moonlit night, with the long tides breaking beneath them on the white sands, he sat on the Muizenberg stoep next a trim little man who overflowed with pent-up enthusiasms. Barrowman had made a comfortable small fortune by his profession, and was now bent on sampling all the enjoyments which had been crowded out of a busy life. He was a bachelor, and had settled at Wynberg in order that he might be near Table Mountain, on whose chimneys and traverses he was the chief authority. Tavanger conjured up his early ardour, asked eagerly concerning the different routes and the quality of the rock, and gladly accepted Barrowman's offer to take him next day to the summit of the mountain.

They spent some very hot and fatiguing hours in kloofs which were too full of vegetable matter for comfort, and reached the summit by a difficult and not over-safe chimney. Tavanger was badly out of practice and training, and at one point was in serious danger. However, the top was won at last, and Barrowman was in the best of tempers, for it pleased him to find one, who was some years his junior and who had done most of the legendary courses in the Alps, so manifestly his inferior in skill and endurance. So as they ate their luncheon on the dusty tableland he expanded happily.

It appeared that he thought of retiring for good to England. He had climbed everything in South Africa worth climbing, including the buttresses of Mont Aux Sources, and he wanted to be nearer the classic ground of his hobby. Also he dreamed of an English garden where he could acclimatise much of the Cape flora... He would like, however, to realise some of his South African holdings. All his eggs were in the one basket, and, if he was going to settle at home, he ought to distribute them better. In England one could not watch South African stocks with the requisite closeness. "The trouble," he said, "is that it's a rotten time to change investments. Good enough for the buyer, but the devil for the seller... Do you know anything about these things?"

"A little," Tavanger answered. "You see, they're more or less my profession. I should be delighted to help you. If your things are sound, there is generally a fair market to be had, if you take a little pains to find it."

So three hours later in the Wynberg bungalow he went with Barrowman over his holdings. Most were good enough—town lots in Johannesburg, Bulawayo and Durban, investment company debentures, one or two deep-level gold properties which were paying high dividends; but there was a certain amount of junk, mostly land development companies where Barrowman had come in on the ground-floor. "Oh, and there's those Daphnes," Barrowman said wryly. "God knows why I ever got let in for them. There was a man at Salisbury who swore by them, and as I was rather flush of money at the time I plunged. I meant to realise in a month or two, but the darned things have never paid a penny, and no one will look at them. I've tried to get rid of them, but I was never bid more than five bob."

Tavanger took a lot of pains with Barrowman's list, and, since he seemed to possess uncanny knowledge of the markets of the world and was a fellow-mountaineer, Barrowman accepted all he said for gospel. He advised holding on to the town lots and the debentures, but taking the first favourable moment to sell the deep levels, the producing life of which was limited. As the dividends were high they would fetch a reasonable figure. As to the unsaleable junk, Barrowman had better hold on; you never knew how a dud might turn out. "I can get you a fair price for your Daphnes," he added. "They're not everybody's stock, but they might have their uses."

"What sort of price?" Barrowman asked. "I bought them at par, you know."

"I can get you sixteen and six," was the answer. "At least, I think I can ... I tell you what I'll do. This is my own line of country, and as a speculation I'll buy them from you at that price. Call it a small return for your hospitality."

This was the price that Tavanger had paid in London, and Barrowman jumped at it. "I felt so generous," Tavanger told me, "that I took over also a block of shares in a thing called the Voortrekkers, a land company which owned a lot of Portuguese bush-veld, and had sat tight on its undeveloped holding for twenty years. Barrowman almost wept when I gave him my cheque for the lot. I really felt that I had done well by him, for, when you added the worthless Voortrekkers, I had paid pretty nearly par for the Daphne shares."

The next step was easy. The lawyer-politician, Dove by name, Tavanger had already met. He was frankly hard up, for he had spoiled a good practice by going into Parliament, and at the same time was determined to stick to politics, where his chief ambition lay. He knew all about Tavanger by repute, and actually sought him out to consult him. Tavanger was friendly, and declared himself anxious to help a man who had so sound a notion of the future of the Empire. A directorship or two might be managed—he controlled various concerns with South African boards—he would look into the matter when he got home. He counselled Dove to give as much time as he could to the Bar—he would do what he could to put work in his way. Thus encouraged, Dove opened his heart. He wanted money, not in the future but now—there were payments due on certain irrigated lands which he owned, and he did not want to have the mortgages foreclosed. But everything was at such ruination prices, and if he sold any of his sound investments it would be at a hideous loss. Tavanger asked him what he had, and in the list given him was a block of Daphne shares about which Dove was blasphemous. Tavanger appeared to consider deeply.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said at length. "I'll buy your Daphnes. I might make something of them. They're not worth half a crown to the ordinary operator, but they're worth more than that to me. To ME, and I believe to scarcely anybody else. I'll give you sixteen and sixpence for them."

Dove stared and stammered. "Do you mean it? It's tremendous. But I can't take it, you know. It's pure charity."

"Not a bit of it," said Tavanger. "I quote you sixteen and six because I happen to know that that was the price paid for a block in London the other day by a man who was very much in my position. It's a gamble, of course, but that's my business."

As Tavanger was leaving the club, where he had been having an early lunch with Dove, he ran into Barrowman in the company of a lean, spectacled gentleman, whose particular quality of tan proclaimed that he had just landed from a sea voyage. Barrowman was effusive in his greetings and longings for another talk before Tavanger sailed. "I can't wait now," he said. "I've got to give a man luncheon. A fellow called Steinacker, an American who has an introduction to me from one of my old directors."

Tavanger took the night mail to Johannesburg, feeling that he had won his first race by a short head.

The next proposition was tougher. The Johannesburg stockbroker, Nall by name, to whom he had taken the precaution of being introduced by cable from London, received him royally, insisted on putting him up in his big house in the Sachsenwald, and gave a dinner for him at the Rand Club, to which most of the magnates of the place were bidden. Tavanger was of course a household name in these circles, and there was much curiosity as to what he was doing in South Africa. He stuck, both in private talk and in his interviews with the Press, to his original story: he was there for a holiday—had long wanted to fly Africa from north to south—was becoming interested in commercial aviation—hoped to get some notion of how South Africa was shaping—had some idea of a new steel industry. He made a speech at the Rand Club dinner in which he expounded certain views on the currency situation throughout the globe and the importance of discovering new gold-fields. For three days he feasted and talked at large, never saying anything that mattered, but asking innumerable questions. Nall watched him with a quizzical smile.

On the third evening, in the seclusion of the smoking-room, his host took off his glasses and looked at him with his shrewd eyes, a little bleared with the Rand dust.

"Seriously, Mr Tavanger, what are you here for? That steel business story won't wash, you know."

"Why not?" Tavanger asked.

"Because you have already turned down that proposition when it was made to you."

"May not a man have second thoughts?"

"He may, but not you—not after the reasons you gave last year."

Tavanger laughed. "All right. Have it your own way. Would you be surprised to learn that the simple explanation is true? I wanted a holiday. I wanted to fling my heels and get rid of London for a month or two. I was getting infernally stale. Are you clever enough to realise that the plain reason is often the right one?... But being here, I had to pretend that I had some sort of business purpose. It's a kind of lèse-majesté for people like me to get quit of the shop."

"Good," said Nall. "That is what I thought myself. But being here, I take it you're not averse to doing a little business."

"By no means. I have had my fling, and now I'm quite ready to pick up anything that's going. What have you to suggest? I had better say straight off that I don't want gold-mines. I don't understand that business, and I've always made it a rule never to touch them. And I don't want town lots. I carry enough of the darned things in the city of London."

"Good," said Nall again. "Now we understand each other. I wonder what would interest you."

That was the first of several long and intricate talks. If Tavanger brought up the subject of Daphnes, at once Nall would

become suspicious and ask a fancy price—or refuse to sell at all, for there was no such motive as in the cases of Dove and Barrowman. His only hope was to reach the subject by the method of exhaustion. So Tavanger had to listen while all the assets of South Africa were displayed before him—ferrous and nonferrous metals, rubies in the Lebombo hills, electric power from the streams that descended the Berg, new types of irrigation, new fruits and cereals and fibres, a variety of fancy minerals. He professed to be interested in a new copper area, and in the presence of corundum in the eastern mountains. Then Nall mentioned michelite. In a level voice Tavanger asked about it, and was given a glowing account of the possibilities of the Daphne Concessions.

“That subject rather interests me,” Tavanger said, “for I know a German chemist, Sprenger, who is the chief authority on it. They’re up against every kind of snag, which they won’t get over in our time, but it might be the kind of thing to buy and lock away for one’s grandchildren.”

Nall demurred. On the contrary, michelite was on the edge of a mighty boom, and in a year Daphnes would be soaring. When Tavanger shook his head, he repeated his view, and added, by way of confirmation, that he held twenty thousand Daphnes which he meant at all costs to stick to.

“I have some michelite shares, I think,” said Tavanger, after an apparent effort of reminiscence, “and like you, I shall stick to them. Indeed, I wouldn’t mind getting a few more. My children will curse me, but my grandchildren may bless me.”

Again and again they went over the list, and Tavanger gave the impression that he was seriously interested in corundum, moderately in copper, and very mildly in michelite, though he thought the last not practical business at the moment. He adopted the pose of a man who had no desire for anything more, but might take a few oddments if his capricious appetite were tempted. Presently he discovered that Nall was very keen about the corundum affair, and was finding it difficult to get together the requisite working capital. Tavanger poured all the cold water he could on the scheme, but Nall’s faith was proof against it.

“I want you to help, Mr Tavanger. I want your money, but still more I want your name.”

Tavanger yawned. “You’ve been uncommonly kind to me,” he said, “and I’d like to give you a hand. Also I rather fancy picking up some little thing wherever I go, just as a tripper buys souvenirs. But your Lebombo business is quite outside my beat.”

“Is that final?” Nall asked.

“Yes... Well, no—I’ll tell you what I’ll do. You want ready money, and I have a little in hand. I’ll put up ten thousand for the Lebombo, and I’ll buy your Daphne shares. There’s no market for them at present, you tell me. Well, I’ll make you a fair offer. I’ll give you sixteen and six, which was about the best price last year for Anatillas.”

Nall wrinkled his brow.

“Why do you want them?” he asked.

“Because they are in my line, which corundum isn’t. I have already some michelite shares, as I told you, and I believe it’s a good investment for my family.”

“I would rather not sell.”

“Then the whole deal is off. Believe me, my dear fellow, I shall be quite happy to go home without putting a penny into South Africa. I came out here literally for my health.”

Then Nall tried to screw up the price for Daphnes, but there he met with such a final negative that he relinquished the attempt. The result was that two days later Tavanger took the train for Delagoa Bay, with ten thousand more Daphnes to his credit and a liability for ten thousand pounds, his share in the underwriting of the coming flotation of the Lebombo Corundum Corporation.

From Lourenço Marquez he sailed to Beira, and ascended to the Rhodesian plateau. There he stepped off the plank into deepish waters. The two remaining holders of Daphnes lived in the country north of Salisbury, both a long distance from railhead, but fairly near each other. Tavanger decided to take Devenish first, who had a fruit farm in the hills about forty miles from a station. He was a little puffed up by his successes, and anticipated no difficulties; he did not trouble to enquire about Devenish or the other man, Greenlees, or to get introductions to them; he was inclined now to trust to his unaided powers of persuasion, and meant to drop in on them as a distinguished stranger touring the country.

It was early summer in those parts, when rain might be looked for, but so far the weather had been dry. The roads were in good order and Tavanger hired a car in Salisbury in which he proposed to make the trip. But he had not gone twenty miles before the heavens opened. The country had been smoking with bush-fires, but these were instantly put out by a torrential deluge. The roads had never been properly engineered and had no real bottom, and in an hour or two the hard red grit had been turned into a foot or two of gummy red mud, while the shallow fords had swollen to lagoons. With immense difficulty the car reached the dorp on the railway line, which was the nearest point to Devenish’s farm. Tavanger put up at the wretched hotel, and made enquiries. He got hold of an old transport driver called Potgieter, who told him that the car was as useless as a perambulator. His only chance of getting to Devenish next day was by cape-cart and a span of mules, and that, unless the rain stopped, was not very rosy.

Tavanger left the car and the driver in the dorp, and started next morning with Potgieter in the same relentless deluge. The transport-rider was an old hand at the game, but even he confessed that he had never travelled in worse conditions.

The road was mostly impossible, so they took to the open veld among ant-heaps and meerkat holes which threatened to wrench the wheels off. The worst trouble was with the streams that came down from the hills on their left, each a tawny torrent. Also they struck many patches of marsh, which they had to circumnavigate, and in one vlei they spent an hour getting the wheels of the cart out of the mire. The mist hung close about them, and if Potgieter had not known the road like his own hand, they would have been wandering in circles. At a native village half-way, they heard that a bigger stream in front was impassable, but they managed to cross with the mules swimming, while Potgieter performed miracles with his long whip. But the end came when they were still five miles from their destination. The cape-cart smashed its axle in an extra deep mud-hole, and the rest of the journey was performed on foot, with Potgieter driving the mules before him. Soaked to the bone and mud to the eyes, Tavanger presented himself at Devenish's little farm. Instead of arriving in a lordly way in a touring car, he appeared out of the mist, a very weary, hungry, and dishevelled tramp.

As it turned out it was the best thing that could have happened. Devenish was a simple, hospitable soul with a taste for letters, who had lately taken to himself a like-minded wife. He was profoundly suspicious of the dwellers in cities, especially the financial folk who played tricks with the market for his fruit and tobacco. He had inherited his Daphne holding from an uncle, and had personally never bought or sold a share in his life. Had Tavanger arrived in a smart car with the air of a moneyed man of affairs, Devenish would have looked on him with deep distrust. But this muddy and famished stranger, who was obviously an educated man, he took to his heart, prepared a hot bath for him, lent him dry clothes, and fed him handsomely on broiled chicken, green mealies and Afrikander sausages.

That night, while Potgieter puffed his deep-bowled pipe and dozed, Tavanger and Devenish talked of books and home. As luck would have it Mrs Devenish came from that part of Norfolk where Tavanger for a long time had had a shoot, and they were able to identify common friends. The fruit-farmer was very much in love with his job, but both he and his wife were a little starved of conversation with their own kind, and the evening was a great occasion for them. Mrs Devenish played Schubert on the cottage piano, and they all went to bed very good friends. Not a word had been spoken of business, for Tavanger had sized up his host and realised that he must proceed cautiously.

But the thing proved to be simplicity itself. Next morning came one of those breaks in the rain, when a hot sun shone on a steaming earth. Devenish conducted his guest round his property—the orchards of peach and apricot and naartje, the tobacco lands, the dam shining like a turquoise amid the pale emerald of the alfalfa fields. He told him the tale of his successes and his difficulties; even with the bad prices of tobacco he was covering costs (he had some private income to live on), but he badly needed more capital for development. He wanted to make a second dam and lay out a new orchard for a special kind of plum, but he was determined not to mortgage his farm. Where was the money to come from? Tavanger enquired tactfully about his possessions, and heard about the seven thousand Daphne shares which he had inherited. Devenish had already made some attempt to sell these, for he had no views on the subject of michelite, but had found them unsaleable except at a price which he regarded as a swindle. He was such an innocent that he believed that if a share was nominally worth a pound any man who offered him less was trying to cheat him... The upshot was that Tavanger bought the seven thousand Daphnes, but had to buy them at par. He realised that he might argue till Doomsday before he got Devenish to understand the position, and that any attempt at bargaining would awake suspicions in his host. He had never met a man so compounded of caution and ignorance.

Devenish had a blacksmith's shop on his farm, and his overseer was a good mechanic, so the cape-cart was fetched from the mud-hole and given a new axle. The rain kept off that day, but the next morning when they started for Greenlees' mine it began again in grim earnest. They had about fifty miles to go through a wild bit of country, which did not contain even a native village, and the road was at its best only a scar on the veld, and, when it ran through bush, scarcely wider than a foot-track. Devenish insisted on providing them with plenty of food, which was fortunate, for they took three days to reach Greenlees...

This was the best part of Tavanger's story, but I must confine myself to the bare outline. They struck a river at what was usually a broad shallow ford, but was now a lake of yeasty water. It was the only possible place, for above and below the stream ran a defile among rocks, and the whole outfit was nearly drowned before they made the crossing. But they found themselves on an island, for another branch of the river, broader, deeper and swifter, confronted them a hundred yards farther on. This proved hopeless, and Potgieter tried to recross the first branch, with the notion of making a circuit and finding an easier ford farther up. But the water was rising every minute, and even the transport-rider's stout heart failed him. He announced that there was nothing to be done except to wait for the river to fall. Happily the island was high ground, so there was no risk of its being overflowed.

They spent two nights and a day in that dismal place, which in twelve hours had shrunk to the limits of about a couple of acres. It was covered with low scrub, but this was no shelter from the unceasing rain. Potgieter made a scherm for the mules out of wait-a-bit thorns, and inside it rigged up a sort of tent with the cover of the cape-cart. It was as well that he did this, for the two men were not the only refugees on the island. Various kinds of buck had been cut off by the flood, and bush-pig, and the mules were in a perpetual ferment, which Potgieter said was due to lions. Tavanger more than once thought he saw a tawny, slinking shadow in the undergrowth. They got a sort of fire going, but there was no decent fuel to burn, and the best they could do was a heap of smoking twigs. Potgieter shot a brace of guinea-fowl, which they cooked for dinner in the scanty ashes. He would not let Tavanger stir from the scherm, for he said that the island would be full of storm-stayed snakes and other unhallowed oddments. So the wretched pair had to twiddle their thumbs for thirty-six hours in an atmosphere like a Turkish bath, coughing and choking by the greenwood fire, and subsisting for the most part on Devenish's cold viands. Unluckily they had neither tea nor coffee, and their tobacco ran out. Tavanger got a furious cold

in his head and rheumatic pains in his back, but the worst discomfort was the utter boredom; for Potgieter had no small talk, and slept most of the time.

Late on the second night the rain ceased, and revealed a wonderful sky of stars. On the second morning the river had fallen sufficiently to be forded, and mules and men, very stiff and miserable, started off for Greenlees. But their troubles were not over, for the valley they presently struck seemed to have melted into primeval slime, and when they got on to the higher ground they had to make lengthy detours to circumvent landslips. It was almost dark when they reached the mine, and it took Greenlees some time, Tavanger said, to realise that they were human. When he did, when he understood who Tavanger was—having spent some time in a London office he knew him by repute—and recognised Potgieter as a man with whom he had once hunted, he was hospitable enough. In an empty rondavel he filled two wooden tubs with scalding water, into which he put a tin of mustard and a can of sheep-deep, declaring that it was the only way to stave off pneumonia.

Greenlees proved the simplest of the five to deal with, for he was an enthusiast about michelite. He was a Scotsman from Berwickshire, who had had a sound university training and knew a good deal about metallurgical chemistry as well as about engineering. He had been employed at the Daphne mine when it first began, and had believed so firmly in its prospects that he had scraped up every penny he could muster at the time and bought a biggish holding. Then he had quarrelled with the manager, but his faith in the concern had not wavered. He declared that it was abominably managed, that the costs were far too high, and the marketing arrangements rudimentary, but nevertheless, he was convinced that before long it would be one of the most lucrative concerns in the country. He anticipated, for one thing, some discovery which would bring down the smelting costs. “I’ll hold on,” he said, “though I should have to go wanting the breeks to do it.”

Tavanger, seeing the sort of man he had to deal with, put his cards on the table. He told Greenlees frankly that he meant to control Daphne. He described, as only Tavanger could describe, the manoeuvres by which he had acquired the big London block, his journey to South Africa (“God, but you’re the determined one,” said Greenlees), his doings at the Cape and in Johannesburg, and his wild trek in the Rhodesian rains.

“I want to buy your holding, Mr Greenlees,” he concluded. “I will pay any price you fix, and will contract to sell you the shares back on demand any time after next June at the price I gave for them. What I want is control of the stock till then, and for the privilege I am ready to pay you a bonus of one thousand pounds.”

Of course Greenlees consented, for he saw that Tavanger was a believer like himself, and so far he had not met another. He asked various questions. Tavanger said nothing about the coming combine, but let him think that his views were the same as his own, a belief that presently a scientific discovery would make michelite a commodity of universal use. He mentioned having talked with Sprenger in Berlin, and Greenlees nodded respectfully.

They sat late into the night discussing the future. Greenlees explained the system at work at the Daphne mine, and how it could be bettered, and Tavanger then and there offered him the managership. It was a London company, and its annual shareholders’ meeting fell in January; Tavanger proposed drastically to reconstruct both the English and South African boards and to reform the management.

“What about having a look at the place?” Greenlees asked. “You could easily look in on your way down country.”

Tavanger shook his head. “I’m not a technical expert,” he said, “and I would learn very little. I’ve always made it a rule never to mix myself up with things I don’t understand. But I reckon myself a fair judge of men, and I shall be content to trust you.”

As they went to bed Greenlees showed him a telegram. “Did you ever hear of this fellow? Steinacker or Stemacker his name is. He wants to see me—has an introduction from the chairman of my company. I wired to him to come along, and he is turning up the day after tomorrow.”

This was the story which Tavanger told me that night in my rooms. His adventures seemed to have renewed his youth, for he looked actually boyish, and I understood that half the power of the man—and indeed of anyone who succeeds in his line—lay just in a boyish readiness to fling his cap on the right occasion over the moon.

“I deserve to win out, don’t you think?” he said, “for I’ve risked my neck by air, land and water—not to mention black mambas... I should like to have seen Steinacker’s face when he had finished gleaning in my tracks... The next thing is to get to grips with Glaubsteins. Oh yes, I’ll keep you informed. You’re the only man I can talk to frankly about this business, and half the fun of an adventure is to be able to gossip about it.”

I saw nothing of Tavanger again till the end of February, when he appeared as a witness for the defence in a case in which I led for the plaintiff, and I had the dubious pleasure of cross-examining him. I say "dubious," for he was one of the most formidable witnesses I have ever met, candid, accurate, self-possessed and unshakable. Two days later I had to make a speech—an old promise to him—at the annual meeting, in the hall of the Fletchers' Company, of the children's hospital of which he was chairman. There I saw a new Tavanger, one who spoke of the hospital and its work as a man speaks of his family in a moment of expansion, who had every detail at his fingers' end and who descanted on its future with a sober passion. I was amazed, till I remembered that this was one of his two hobbies. He was Master of the Company, so he gave me tea afterwards in his private room, and expanded on the new dental clinic which he said was the next step in the hospital's progress.

"I mean to present the clinic," he told me, "if things turn out well. That is why I'm so keen about this Daphne business..." "He stopped and smiled at me.

"I know that I'm reputed to be very well off, and I can see that you're wondering why I don't present it in any case, since presumably I can afford it. Perhaps I can, but that has never been my way. I have for years kept a separate account which I call my 'gambling fund,' and into it goes whatever comes to me by the grace of God outside the main line of my business. I draw on that account for my hobbies—my pictures and my hospital. Whatever I make out of Daphnes will go there, and if my luck is in I may be able to make the hospital the best-equipped thing of its kind on the globe. That way, you see, I get a kind of sporting interest in the game.

"Oh, we have brisked up Daphnes a bit," he said in reply to my question. "I'm chairman now—my predecessor was an elderly titled nonentity who was easily induced to retire. We had our annual meeting last month, and the two vacancies on the directorate which occurred by rotation were filled by my own men. We've cleaned up the South African board too. Greenlees is now chairman, as well as general manager of the mine. He has already reduced the costs of mining the stuff, and we're getting a bigger share of the British import... No, there's been no reduction of price, though that may come. We stick to the same price as the other companies. There is a modest market for our shares, too, when they're offered, which isn't often. The price is about fifteen shillings, pretty much the same as Anatillas.

"I own fifty-two thousand shares out of the hundred thousand ordinaries," he went on, "just enough to give me control with a small margin. They have cost me the best part of seventy thousand pounds, but I consider them a good bargain. For Glaubsteins have opened the ball. They're determined to get Daphne into their pool, and I am quite willing to oblige them—at my own price." Tavanger's smile told me the kind of price that would be.

"Oh yes, they're nibbling hard. I hear that Steinacker managed to pick up about ten thousand shares in South Africa, and now they are stuck fast. They must come to me, and they've started a voluptuous curve in my direction. You know the way people like Glaubsteins work. The man who approaches you may be a simple fellow who never heard of them. They like to have layers of agents between themselves and the man they're after. Well, I've had offers for my Daphnes through one of my banks, and through two insurance companies, and through"—he mentioned the name of a solid and rather chauvinistic British financial house which was supposed to lay a rigid embargo on anything speculative. His intelligence department, he said, was pretty good, and the connection had been traced.

"They've offered me par," he continued. "The dear innocents! The fact is, they can't get on without me, and they know it, but at present they are only manoeuvring for position. When we get down to real business, we'll talk a different language."

As I have said, I had guessed that Tavanger was working on a piece of knowledge which he had got at Flambard, and I argued that this could only be a world-wide merger of michelite interests. He knew this for a fact, and was therefore gambling on what he believed to be a certainty. Consequently he could afford to wait. I am a novice in such matters, but it seemed to me that the only possible snag was Sprenger. Sprenger was a man of genius, and though he was loyal to the German company, I had understood from Tavanger that there was a working arrangement between that company and the Anatilla. At any moment he might make some discovery which would alter the whole industrial status of michelite, and no part of the benefit of such a discovery would go to the Daphne Concessions. I mentioned my doubt.

"I realise that," said Tavanger, "and I am keeping Sprenger under observation. Easy enough to manage, for I have many lines down in Berlin. My information is that for the moment he has come to a halt. Indeed, he has had a breakdown, and has been sent off for a couple of months to some high place in the Alps. Also Anatilla and Rosas are not on the friendliest terms at present. Glaubsteins have been trying to buy out the Germans, and since they have lent them money, I fancy the method of procedure was rather arbitrary. They'll get them in the end, of course, but just now relations are rather strained, and it will take a fair amount of time to ease them."

The word "time" impressed me. Clearly Tavanger believed that he had a free field up to the tenth of June—after which nothing mattered.

"I'm a babe in finance," I said. "But wouldn't it be wise to screw up Anatilla to a good offer as soon as possible, and close with it. It's an uncertain world, and you never know what trick fortune may play you."

He smiled. "You're a cautious lawyer, and I'm a bit of an adventurer. I mean to play this game with the stakes high. The way I look at it is this. Glaubsteins have unlimited resources, and they believe firmly in the future of michelite. So for that matter do I. They want to have control of the world output against the day when the boom comes. They can't do without

me, for I own what is practically the largest supply and certainly the best quality. Very well, they must treat."

"Yes, but they may spin out the negotiations if you open your mouth too wide. There is no reason why they should be in a hurry. And meantime something may happen to lower the value of your property. You never know."

He shook his head.

"No. I am convinced they will bring things to a head by midsummer."

He looked curiously at something which he saw in my face. In that moment he realised, I think, that I had divined his share in that morning session at Flambard.

IV

A few weeks later I happened to run across a member of the firm of stockbrokers who did my modest business.

"You were asking about michelite in the autumn," he said. "There's a certain liveliness in the market just now. There has been a number of dealings in Daphnes—you mentioned them, I think—at rather a fancy price—round about eighteen shillings. I don't recommend them, but if you want something to put away you might do worse than buy Anatillas. For some reason or other their price has come down to twelve shillings. In my opinion you would be perfectly safe with them. Glaubsteins are behind them, you know, and Glaubsteins don't make mistakes. It would be a lock-up investment, but certain to appreciate."

I thanked him, but told him that I was not looking for any new investments.

That very night I met Tavanger at dinner and, since the weather was dry and fine, we walked part of the way home together. I asked him what he had been doing to depress Anatillas.

"We've cut prices," he replied. "We could afford to do so, for our costs of getting michelite out of the ground have always been twenty-five per cent lower than the other companies'. We practically quarry the stuff, and the ore is in a purer state. Under Greenlees' management the margin is still greater, so we could afford a bold stroke. So far the result has been good. We have extended our market, and though we are making a smaller profit per ton, it has increased the quantity sold by about twenty per cent. But that, of course, wasn't my real object. I wanted to frighten Anatilla and make them more anxious to deal. I fancy I've rattled them a bit, for, as you seem to have observed, the price of their ordinaries has had a nasty jolt."

"Couldn't you force them down farther?" I suggested. "When you get them low enough you might be able to buy Anatilla and make the merger yourself."

"Not for worlds!" he said. "You don't appreciate the difference between the financier and the industrialist. Supposing I engineered the merger. I should be left with it on my hands till I could sell it to somebody else. I'm not the man who makes things, but the man who provides the money for other people to make them with. Besides, Glaubsteins would never sell—not on your life. They've simply got to control a stuff with the possibilities of michelite. With their enormous mineral and metal interests, and all their commercial subsidiaries, they couldn't afford to let it get out of their hands. They're immensely rich, and could put down a thousand pounds for every hundred that any group I got together could produce. Believe me, they'll hang on to michelite till their last gasp. And rightly—because they are users. They have a policy for dealing with it. I'm only a pirate who sails in and demands ransom because they've become a little negligent on the voyage."

I asked how the negotiations were proceeding.

"According to plan. We've got rid of some of the agency layers, and have now arrived at one remove from the principals. My last step, as I have said, woke them up. Javerts have now taken a hand in it, and Javerts, as you may or may not know, do most of the English business for Glaubsteins. They are obviously anxious to bring things to a head pretty soon, for they have bid me sixty shillings a share."

"Take it, man," I said. "It will give you more than a hundred per cent profit."

"Not enough. Besides, I want to get alongside Glaubsteins themselves. No intermediaries for me. That's bound to happen too. When you see in the press that Mr Bronson Jane has arrived in Europe, then you may know that we're entering on the last lap."

We parted at Hyde Park Corner, and I watched him set off westward with his shoulders squared and his step as light as a boy's. This Daphne adventure was assuredly renewing Tavanger's youth.

Some time in May I read in my morning paper the announcement of Sprenger's death. The Times had an obituary which mentioned michelite as only one of his discoveries. It said that no chemist had made greater practical contributions to industry in our time, but most of the article was devoted to his purely scientific work, in which it appeared that he had been among the first minds in Europe. This was during the General Election, when I had no time for more than a hasty thought as to how this news would affect Daphne.

When it was all over and I was back in London, I had a note from Tavanger asking me to dinner. We dined alone in his big house in Kensington Palace Gardens, where he kept his picture collection. I remembered that I could not take my eyes off a superb Vermeer which hung over the dining-room mantelpiece. I was in that condition of bodily and mental

depression which an election always induces in me, and I was inclined to resent Tavanger's abounding vitality. For he was in the best of spirits, with just a touch of that shamefacedness with which a man, who has been holidaying extravagantly, regards one who has had his nose to the grindstone. He showed no desire to exhibit his treasures; he wanted to talk about michelite.

Sprenger was dead—a tragedy for the world of science, but a fortunate event for Daphne. No longer need a bombshell be feared from that quarter. He seemed to have left no records behind him which might contain the germ of a possible discovery; indeed, for some months he had been a sick and broken man.

"It's a brutal world," said Tavanger, "when I can regard with equanimity the disappearance of a great man who never did me any harm. But there it is. Sprenger was the danger-point for me, and he was Anatilla's trump card. His death brought Bronson Jane across the Atlantic by the first boat. His arrival was in the papers, but I dare say you haven't been reading them very closely."

It appeared that Jane had gone straight to Berlin, and, owing to the confusion caused by Sprenger's death, had succeeded in acquiring the control of Rosas for Anatilla. That was the one advantage he could get out of the catastrophe. It was a necessary step towards the ultimate combine, but in practice it would not greatly help Anatilla, for Daphne remained the keystone. Two days ago Jane had arrived in England, and Tavanger had seen him.

"You have never met Bronson Jane?" he asked. "But you must know all about him. He is the new thing in American big business, and you won't find a more impressive type on the globe... Reasonably young—not much more than forty—rather good-looking and with charming manners... A scratch golfer, and quite a considerable performer at polo, I believe... The kind of education behind him which makes us all feel ignoramuses—good degree at college, the Harvard Law School, then a most comprehensive business training in America and Europe... The sort of man who is considered equally eligible for the presidency of a college, the charge of a department of State, or the control of a world-wide business corporation. We don't breed anything quite like it on this side. He is over here for Glaubsteins, primarily, but he had to dash off to Geneva to make a speech on some currency question, and next week he is due in Paris for a conference about German reparations. Tomorrow I believe he is dining with Geraldine and the politicians. He dined here last night alone with me, and knew rather more about my pictures than I knew myself, though books are his own particular hobby. A most impressive human being, I assure you. Agreeable too, the kind of man you'd like to go fishing with."

"Is the deal through?" I asked.

"Not quite. He was very frank. He said that Glaubsteins wanted Daphne because they could use it, whereas it was no manner of good to me. I was equally frank, and assented. Then he said that if I held out I would be encumbered with a thing I could not develop—never could develop, whereas Glaubsteins could bring it at once into their great industrial pool and be working day and night on its problems. All the more need for that since Sprenger was dead. Again I assented. He said that he believed firmly in michelite, and I said that so did I. Finally, he asked if I wanted anything more than to turn the thing over at a handsome profit. I said I wanted nothing more, only the profit must be handsome.

"So we started bargaining," Tavanger continued, "and I ran him up to eighty shillings. There he stuck his toes into the ground, and not an inch could I induce him to budge. I assume that that figure was the limit of his instructions, and that he'd have to cable for fresh ones. He'll get them, I have no doubt. We've to meet again when he comes back from Paris."

"It seems to me an enormous price," I said. "In a few months you've forced the shares up from under par to four pounds. If it was my show I should be content with that."

"I want five pounds!" he said firmly. "That is the figure I fixed in my mind when I first took up the business, and I mean to have it."

He saw a doubt in my eye and went on. "I'm not asking anything unreasonable. Anatilla must have their merger, and in a year or two Daphnes will be worth more than five pounds to them—not to everybody, but to them. My terms are moderation itself compared with what Brock asked and got for his tin-pot railway in the Central Pacific merger, or Assher for his rotten newspaper. I'm giving solid value for the money. You should see Greenlees' reports. He says there is enough michelite in prospect to supply every steel plant on earth for a century."

We smoked afterwards in the library, and I noticed a sheaf of plans on the table. Tavanger's eye followed mine.

"Yes, that's the lay-out for the new clinic. We mean to start building in the autumn."

v

I was in my chambers, dictating an opinion, when my clerk brought me Tavanger's card. I had seen or heard nothing of him since that dinner at his house, and the financial columns of the press had been silent about michelite. All I had noticed was a slight rise in Anatilla shares owing to the acquisition of Rosas, the news of which had been officially published in America. Bronson Jane seemed to be still in England, judging from the press, and he had been pointed out to me on the other side of the table at a City dinner. It was a fine June evening, and I was just about to stretch my legs by strolling down to the House.

"The weather tempted me to walk home," said Tavanger, when I had dismissed my clerk and settled him in my only armchair, "and it suddenly occurred to me that I might catch you here. Can you give me ten minutes? I've a lot to tell you."

"It's all over? You've won, of course," I said. His air was so cheerful that it must mean victory.

He laughed—not ironically, or ruefully, but with robust enjoyment. Tavanger had certainly acquired a pleasant boyishness from this enterprise.

"On the contrary," he said, "I have found my Waterloo. I have abdicated and am in full retreat."

I could only stare.

"What on earth went wrong?" I stammered. "Who was your Wellington?"

"My Wellington?" he repeated. "Yes, that's the right question to ask. I struck a Wellington who was not my match perhaps, but he had the big battalions behind him. It wasn't Bronson Jane. I had him in a cleft stick. It was a lad who was raised, I believe, in a Montana shack."

Then he told me the story. Sprenger had been under agreement with Anatilla to communicate to them from time to time the data on which he was busy. To these Glaubsteins had turned on their own research department, and they had put in charge of it a very brilliant young metallurgical chemist called Untermeyer. He had been working on michelite for the better part of two years, chiefly the problems of a simpler and more economical method of smelting. Well, as luck would have it, he stumbled on the missing link in the process which poor Sprenger had been searching for—had an inkling of it, said Tavanger with awe in his tone, just after Sprenger's death, and proved it beyond a peradventure on the very night when Bronson Jane had dined in Kensington Palace Gardens. Jane's cable for permission to make a higher bid for the Daphne shares was answered by a message which put a very different complexion on the business.

Glaubsteins had lost no time. They had cabled to take out provisional patents in every country in the world, and they had opened up negotiations with the chief American steel interests. There could be no doubt about the success of the new process. Even in its present form it brought down smelting costs by half, and it was doubtless capable of improvement. Michelite, instead of being a commodity with a restricted market, would soon have a world-wide use, and those who controlled michelite would reap a rich harvest.

Michelite PLUS the new patented process. That was the whole point. The process had been thoroughly proven, and Tavanger said that there was no doubt that it could be fully protected by patents. The steel firms would work under a licence from Glaubsteins, and one of the terms of such a licence would be that they took their michelite from Anatilla. The steel industry on one side became practically a tied-house for Glaubsteins, and Daphne was left in the cold.

"It's a complete knock-out," said Tavanger. "Our lower mining costs and our purer quality, which enabled us to cut the price, don't signify at all. They are all washed out by the huge reduction in smelting costs under the new process. Nobody's going to buy an ounce of our stuff any more. It's quite true that if michelite gets into general use Glaubsteins will want our properties. But they can afford to wait and starve us out. They have enough to go on with in the Anatilla and Rosas mines. There never was a prettier calling of a man's bluff."

I asked what he had done.

"Chucked in my hand. It was the only course. Bronson Jane was quite decent about it. He gave me par for my Daphne shares, which was far better than I could have hoped. Also, he agreed to my condition about keeping on Greenlees in the management. I am only about twenty thousand pounds to the bad, and I've had a lot of sport for my money. Funny to think that three weeks ago I could have got out of Daphne with a cool profit of one hundred and forty thousand."

"I am sorry about the clinic," I said.

"You needn't be," was the answer. "I mean to present it just the same. This very afternoon I approved the final plans. It will be provided for out of my 'gambling fund,' according to my practice. I shall sell my Vermeer to pay for it... It's a clinic for looking after children's teeth, but in the circumstances it would have been more appropriate if it had been for looking after their eyes. The gift is a sacrifice to the gods in token of my own blindness."

Tavanger had suddenly become serious.

"I think you guessed all along that I saw something that morning at Flambard. Well, I did, and I believed in it. I saw the announcement of the world-merger arranged by Anatilla. That is to say, I knew with perfect certainty that one thing was going to happen. If I hadn't known it, if I had gone in for Daphnes as an ordinary speculation, I would have been content to take my profit at two or three or four pounds. As it is, that infernal atom of accurate knowledge has cost me twenty thousand.

"But it was worth it," he added, getting up and reaching for his hat, "for I have learned one thing which I shall never forget, and which I commend to your notice. Our ignorance of the future has been wisely ordained of Heaven. For unless man were to be like God and know everything, it is better that he should know nothing. If he knows one fact only, instead of profiting by it he will assuredly land in the soup."

III. — THE RT. HON. DAVID MAYOT

*"I once did see
In my young travels through Armenia,
An angrie Unicorne in his full carier*

*Charge with too swift a foot a Jeweller,
That watcht him for the Treasure of his browe;
And ere he could get shelter of a tree,
Naile him with his rich Antler to the Earth."*

—George Chapman, Bussy D'Ambois.

I

I must make it clear at the outset that I was not in Mayot's confidence during the year the events of which I am about to record. Goodeve and Reggie Daker confided in me, and, through a series of accidents, I stumbled into Tavanger's inner life. Also I came to have full knowledge of Charles Ottery's case. But I only knew Mayot slightly, and we were opponents in the House, so, although our experiences at Flambard brought us a little nearer, we were far from anything like intimacy. But I realised that, under Moe's spell, he had seen something which had affected him deeply, and I studied closely his political moves to see if I could get a clue to that something. As a matter of fact, before Christmas I guessed what the revelation had been, and my guess proved correct. Later, when the whirligig of politics had brought Mayot and myself into closer touch, I learned from him some of the details which I now set forth.

First of all let me state exactly what he saw. For a second of time he had a glimpse of the first Times leader a year ahead; his eyes fell somewhere about the middle of it. The leader dealt with India, and a speech of the Prime Minister on the subject. By way of variation the writer used the Prime Minister's name in one sentence, and the name was Waldemar. Now, the Labour Party was then in office under Sir Derrick Trant, and Mr Waldemar was the leader of the small, compact, and highly efficient Liberal group. Within a year's time, therefore, a remarkable adjustment of parties would take place, and the head of what was then by far the smallest party would be called upon to form a Government.

This for a man like Mayot was tremendous news—how tremendous will appear from a short recital of the chief features in his character. He was that rare thing in the class to which he belonged, a professional politician. A trade-union secretary looks to a seat in Parliament as a kind of old-age pension, and the ranks of Labour are for the most part professional. But nowadays the type is uncommon—except in the case of a few famous families—among the middle and upper classes. Mayot would have made a good eighteenth-century politician, for the parliamentary game was the very breath of his nostrils. All his life he had been the typical good boy and prize pupil. At school he had not been regarded as clever, but he had worked like a beaver; at the University there were many who called him stupid, but nevertheless he had won high honours in the schools. It was the same with games. He was never a good cricketer, but he was in his School Eleven, and at Cambridge, by dint of assiduous professional coaching in the vacations, he managed to attain his Blue—and failed disastrously in the 'Varsity match. He seemed to have the knack of just getting what he wanted with nothing to spare, but, since the things that he wanted were numerous and important, he presented a brilliant record to the world.

He was the only son of a well-to-do Lancashire manufacturer, and had no need to trouble about money. He was devouringly ambitious—not to do things, but to be things. I doubt if he cared much for any political cause, but he was set upon becoming a prominent statesman. He began as a Tory democrat, an inheritor of some threads of Disraeli's mantle. He went to Germany to study industrial problems, lived at a settlement in Rotherhithe, even did a spell of manual labour in a Birmingham factory—all the earnest gestures that are supposed to imply a tender heart and a forward-looking mind. He got into Parliament just before the War as a Conservative Free-trader for a Midland county constituency where his father had a house, and made himself rather conspicuous by a mild support of the Government's Irish Home Rule policy. In the War he lay very low; he had opportunely remembered that his family had been Quakers, and he had something to do, from well back at the base, with a Quaker ambulance. After peace he came out strong for the League of Nations, bitterly criticised the Coalition, was returned in '22 as an Independent, made a spectacular crossing of the floor of the House, and in '23 was the Labour member for a mining area in Durham, with a majority of five figures. He was an under-secretary of the Labour Government of '29, and, when Trant became Prime Minister, he entered his Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade. As such he was responsible for the highly controversial Factory Bill to which I have referred earlier in this story.

A rich bachelor, he had no other interest than public life, or rather every other interest was made to subserve that end. He used to say grandly, in Bacon's phrase, that he had "espoused the State," which was true enough if husband and wife become one flesh, for he saw every public question through the medium of his own career. In many ways he was not a bad fellow; indeed, you would have said the worst of him in calling him an arriviste and a professional politician.

The first point to remember is that he had not a very generous allowance of brains, but made his share go a long way. He carefully nursed his reputation, for he knew well that he had no great margin. He cherished his dignity, too, cultivated a habit of sardonic speech, and obviously longed to be respected and feared. A few simple souls thought him formidable and most people esteemed his industry, for he toiled at every job he undertook, and left nothing to chance. For myself, I never could take him quite seriously. He was excellent at a prepared statement, which any Treasury clerk could do as well as a Minister, but when you got to grips with him in debate he funked and rode off on a few sounding platitudes. Also I cannot imagine any man, woman or child being moved by his harangues, for he had about as much magnetism as a pillar-box.

The second thing to remember is that he knew that he was second-rate, in everything except his industry and the intensity of his ambition. Therefore he was a great student of tactics. He was determined to be Prime Minister, and believed that by a close study of the possible moves of the political cat he might succeed. So far he had done well, for he would never have had Cabinet rank if he had remained a Tory. But one realised that he was not quite easy, and that his

eyes were always lifting anxiously over the party fence. Let me add that most people did not suspect his gnawing ambition, or his detachment from anything that might be called principles, for there was a heavy, almost unctuous, earnestness about his oratorical manner. He was clever enough, when the ice was thin, not to be too fluent, but to let broken sentences and homely idioms attest the depth of his convictions.

Believing firmly in Moe, he believed in the fragment of revelation which had been vouchsafed him, and was set on making the most of it. Waldemar, the Liberal leader, would be Prime Minister a year hence, and he pondered deeply how he could turn this piece of news to his advantage... The first thing was to discover how it could possibly come about. He naturally thought first of a coalition between Labour and Liberal, but a little reflection convinced him of its unlikelihood, for Trant and Waldemar were the toughest kind of incompatibles.

Waldemar was a relic of Victorian Liberalism, a fanatical Freetrader, an individualist of the old rock. He was our principal exponent of the League of Nations, and had made an international reputation by his work for world peace. By profession a banker, he looked like a most impressive cleric—Anglican, not Nonconformist—with his lean, high-boned face, his shaggy eyebrows, and his superb, resonant voice. He was far the best speaker in the House, for he could reel off, without preparation, model eighteenth-century prose, and he was also a formidable debater; but he was a poor parliamentarian, for his mind lacked flexibility. He awed rather than conciliated, and, with his touch of fanaticism, was apt to be an inept negotiator.

Derrick Trant was his exact opposite. He was the most English thing that God ever made, and, like most typical Englishmen, was half Scots. He had drifted into the Labour Party out of a quixotic admiration for the doings of the British rank-and-file in the War, and he proved extraordinarily useful in keeping that precarious amalgam together. For all sections both liked and trusted him, the solid Trade Union lot and the young bloods alike, for his simplicity and single-heartedness. He had clearly no axe to grind, and the ordinary Labour man was willing to be led by one whose ancestors had fought at Crécy; the extremists respected his honesty, and the moderates believed in his common sense. He represented indeed the greatest common denominator of party feeling. He had instincts rather than principles, but his instincts were widely shared, and his guileless exterior concealed a real shrewdness. I have heard him again and again in the House pull his side out of a mess by his powers of conciliation. He made no secret of his dislike of Waldemar. It was the secular antipathy of the nationalist to the internationalist, the Englishman to the cosmopolitan, the opportunist to the doctrinaire, the practical man to the potential fanatic.

Mayot soon decided that there was nothing doing in that quarter. The alliance, which would put Waldemar into office, must be with the Tories. At first sight it seemed impossible. The party to which I have the honour to belong had been moving steadily towards Protection, and had preached a stringent policy of safeguarding as the first step towards the cure of unemployment. Waldemar had taken the field against us, and seemed to hope to engineer a Liberal revival on a Free-trade basis, and so repeat the triumph of 1906. On the other hand, there was the personality of our leader to be remembered. Geraldine was by far the greatest parliamentarian of our time and the adroitest party chief. Like Mayot, he was a professional, and the game was never out of his mind. Being mostly Irish in blood, he had none of Trant's Englishness or Waldemar's iron dogmas; his weapons were endless ingenuity, audacity and humour. He wanted to return to power, and might use the Liberals to oust the Government. But in that case why should Waldemar be Prime Minister? Geraldine would never kill Charles to make James king... Mayot could reach no conclusion, and resolved to wait and watch.

The parliamentary session through six blistering weeks dragged itself to a close. The Budget debate was concluded after eight all-night sittings, the Factory Bill passed its third reading and went to the Lords, and there was the usual massacre of lesser measures. It had been Mayot's habit to go to Scotland for the autumn vacation, for he had a good grouse moor and was a keen shot. But that year he changed his plans and resolved to stalk Waldemar.

Now, Waldemar was something of a valetudinarian, and every year, after the labours of the session, was accustomed to put himself for some weeks in the hands of an eminent physician who dwelt in the little town of Erdbach in the Black Forest. Moreover, Waldemar was not like Geraldine and Mayot himself; he had hobbies other than politics, and, just as Sir Derrick Trant was believed to be more interested in Gloucester cattle, wild white clover and dry-fly fishing than in Parliament, so Waldemar was popularly supposed to prefer the study of birds to affairs of State. Mayot, professing anxiety about his blood pressure, became an inmate of Dr Daimler's kurhaus, and prepared himself for his task by a reading of small popular works on ornithology.

At Erdbach he spent three weeks. I happened to meet him there, for I stopped at the principal hotel for two days while motoring to Switzerland, and ran across him in Waldemar's company while taking an evening walk. Waldemar had no particular liking for Mayot, but he had nothing definitely against him except his politics, and the two had never been much pitted against each other in the House. When I saw them they seemed to have reached a certain degree of intimacy, and Mayot was listening intelligently to a discourse on the Alpine swift, and trying to identify a specimen of tit which Waldemar proclaimed was found in Britain only in the Spey valley. The Liberal leader was in a holiday mood, and he was flattered, no doubt, by Mayot's respectful docility.

He talked, it seemed, a great deal of politics, and one of Mayot's suspicions was confirmed. He was slightly more civil about the Tories than about the Government. Geraldine, indeed, he profoundly distrusted, but he was quite complimentary about certain of Geraldine's colleagues. And he made two significant remarks. British politics, he thought, were moving back to the old two-party division, and in his opinion the most dangerous reactionary force was Sir Derrick Trant. Trant was the legitimate leader and the natural exponent of diehard Conservatism—a class-consciousness which would in the

long run benefit the capitalist, and a chauvinism which might plunge his country into war... After a rather tedious three weeks Mayot returned to his neglected grouse, with a good deal of vague information about birds, and a clear conviction that there had been several pourparlers between Waldemar and the Tories. He seemed to have got the pointer he wanted.

But a fortnight later he changed his mind. Geraldine's chief lieutenant, a man of whom Waldemar had spoken with approval, addressed a political demonstration in the park of an Aberdeenshire castle. The speech, which became famous as the "Issachar speech," was a violent attack upon the Liberals. Labour was dismissed as a confusion of thought based upon honourable inclinations, but Liberalism was denounced as a deliberate blindness, an ossification of heart and an atrophy of brain. What were the boasted "Liberal principles," the speaker asked, but dead and decomposing relics? Waldemar was described as Issachar, an "ass between two burdens," one being his precious dogmas and the other a deadweight of antediluvian jealousies and fears.

Mayot, who read the speech one evening after coming in from a grouse-drive, decided with a sigh that he must try a cast on another line.

II

The autumn session began under the shadow of unemployment. The figures were the worst since the War, and it was generally believed would pass the three million point by Christmas. Industries which six months before had been slightly on the upgrade were now going back, and industries which had been slightly depressed were now going downhill with a rush. People began to talk of a national emergency Government, and a speech of Trant's was interpreted as a feeler. Mayot pricked up his ears and set himself to study the omens.

It was clear that there was no friendliness between Waldemar and Geraldine. The spirit of the Issachar speech was apparent in the first debate, and there were some brisk passages in the House between the two leaders. Then Geraldine went on the stump in Scotland and the industrial north. His one theme was unemployment, and he had enormous meetings everywhere, with enthusiastic overflows. He really felt the tragedy of the situation, and he gave the unemployed the feeling that he understood their case and would stick at nothing to find a remedy. There was no doubt that he made headway as against the inertness of the Prime Minister, who was in the hands of the Treasury officials, and the stubborn formalism of Waldemar.

At Durham he outlined his programme, the chief point in which was a new emigration policy. Thousands, he said, had been permanently disinherited from the work for which they had been trained; certain industries must face the fact of a permanent reduction to a lower level; what was to be done with the displaced? Trant had a transference scheme working, but it could only account for a fraction. The resources of the Empire must be brought in to meet the deficiencies of one part of it. The Dominions had virgin land, unharnessed power; Britain had the human material; the situation was ripe for a deal. Geraldine proposed to short-circuit the whole existing emigration machinery. He had been in Canada the year before, and had fixed upon two areas, one in British Columbia and the other on the Peace River, for a great national experiment. He proposed to buy or lease the land from the Canadian Government, exactly as a private citizen might acquire a Canadian estate. Then he proposed to call the best business talent in Britain and Canada to his aid, and to establish a new chartered company to develop the area. Roads and railways would be built, townships laid out, water and electric power provided, just as in a scheme of private development. Unskilled jobs in the preliminary construction would be found at once for thousands of the unemployed in Britain, and in the meantime others would be put into training for farm and industrial work later. The new settlements would be not only agricultural, but also industrial, and whole industrial units would be transplanted bodily from Britain. Each British district would contribute its quota of emigrants, and it was believed that, in a scheme which appealed so strongly to the imagination, so far from there being a disinclination to emigrate there would be a brisk competition to get on the quota. He foreshadowed a new chartered company of adventurers, like the Hudson Bay and the East India Companies, and he hoped to have it run by able business men whose reputation would be pledged to its success. It would be financed by a twenty million loan, issued with a guarantee by the British Government, and Geraldine believed that a good deal of money would be forthcoming for the purpose from the Dominions and even from the United States.

This policy, preached in depressed areas with Geraldine's eloquence to audiences deep in the mire of unemployment, had a considerable success. Waldemar was, of course, in violent opposition. He harped on the iniquities and corruption of chartered companies in the past, and he ingeminated the word "inflation." Trant pooh-poohed the whole thing. You could not cure an ill, he said, by running away from it; he was a simple Englishman, who disliked a grandiose Imperialism run for the benefit of Jews. But the most serious disapproval was in Geraldine's own party—the "big business" group, who were afraid of the effect of such a loan on the markets. The younger Tories as a whole were enthusiastic, and, what is more—significant, the Left Wing of Labour blessed it cordially. It was their own line of country, the kind of thing they had been pressing on their otiose leader. Trant's life was made a burden to him by endless questions in the House from his own people, and Collinson, a young Labour member from the Midlands, declared that Geraldine was the best Socialist of them all, since he alone had the courage to use in an emergency the corporate power and intelligence of the State.

Mayot considered hard. The omens pointed to an alliance between Waldemar and the Tory Right Wing. But how was that possible? The anti-Geraldine Tories were to a man Protectionists, and Waldemar and his party would die in the last ditch for Free Trade... What about a grouping of the Labour Left and the Tory Left? On the matter of ultimate principles, no doubt, there was a deep cleavage, for the most progressive young Tory would have nothing to do with Marxism. But

after all, Marxism was becoming a very shadowy faith, and in practical politics it was easy to conceive Tory and Labour youth lining up. Both were natural Protectionists, and abominated Whiggism and all its ways. He noticed how in the House the two groups seemed to be friendly, and mingled constantly in the smoking-room. A volume of political essays had recently been published, to which Geraldine had written a preface, and the contributors included Collinson, Macleish, the Glasgow firebrand, and young Tories like Lord Lanyard and John Fortingall... But no! It was impossible, he decided. For the leader of such a combination would be Geraldine, whereas, as he knew, in eight months Waldemar would be Prime Minister. Victory would not follow such banners, so he tried another cast.

At this point Sally Flambard took a hand. She suddenly appeared as a political hostess, and I do not think that Mayot had anything to do with it. Her husband was of course a Tory of an antique school, but Sally had not hitherto shown any political interest. Now she discovered that she believed in constitutional government and the old ways, and profoundly distrusted both Labour and Geraldine. The move, I think, was only another phase of Sally's restless activity. She had had her finger in most pies, and wanted a new one. Also she had acquired a regard for Waldemar. Being a New Englander, she had in her bones an admiration for the type of statesman represented by the fathers of her country—large, grave, gnomish, rhetorical men—and Waldemar seemed to her to be a judicious compound of Daniel Webster and Abraham Lincoln.

Anyhow, she took to giving luncheon parties in Berkeley Square, at which much nonsense was spoken, especially by the hostess. You see, she misread Waldemar, and the initial mistake spoiled all her strategy. She thought that he was a natural leader and an original thinker, whereas he was primarily a mechanical instrument, discoursing—very beautifully no doubt—traditional music. She was convinced that she had only to bring him into touch with some of the solidier Conservatives for them to feel that he was a demonic figure, a wedder of current realities to historic wisdom. So she got together some amazing gatherings of incompatibles. The materials, so far from being the essentials of good fare to be cooked by a skilful hand, were more like chemicals turned by their juxtaposition into explosives.

Mayot was to be the trait d'union, the adroit outsider, who could combine the ill-assorted guests, preparatory to Waldemar's treatment. I don't know where she got her notion of him—probably from himself. I attended two of the luncheons, and they gave me some idea of Mayot's game. The plan was to unite the Tory Right and Centre (minus Geraldine) with the Liberals through a common dislike of viewy extravagance and a common trust in Waldemar.

The result was high comedy. Waldemar, honest man, did his best. He tried to be civil to everybody in his pleasant old-fashioned way, but he had no single thing in common with nine out of ten of the Tories who sat at Sally's table. I could see Mayot trying to guide him into diplomatic paths, but Waldemar was far too hardset a being to play a part, even if he had wished to. He talked books and the classics to Sir Penton Furbast, the press magnate, who was more or less illiterate. He told stories of Gladstone, and expatiated on the glory that had died with him, to old Isaac Isaacson, whose life had been spent in a blind worship of Disraeli. Once he thought he had got hold of a batch of country gentlemen, and discoursed on a scheme he had for lightening the burdens on rural land by means of an ingenious tax on inflated stock-exchange values; but it was champagne, not country air, that gave them their high colour—all were noted market operators, and his talk scared them into fits. An impish fate seemed to brood over those luncheons. Waldemar talked disarmament to the chairman of the Navy League, and acidly criticised America to Wortley-Dodd, who had an American mother and mother-in-law. His only success was with me, for I had always rather liked him, and could talk to him about birds and the inaccuracies of the Greville Memoirs. But the real rock on which the thing shipwrecked was Protection. Every one of Sally's Tories was an earnest Protectionist, and, at the last luncheon just before Christmas, Waldemar told Ashley Bridges that Protection meant four million unemployed and the dissolution of the Empire, and Bridges retorted in so many words that he was a fool.

Sally's parties were a most valuable experience for Mayot. He was progressing in his quest by the time-honoured method of trial and error. By this time he was perfectly clear on one point. No alliance was conceivable between Waldemar and the Tory rank-and-file, for a strong dislike of Trant and a growing suspicion of Geraldine would never surmount the tariff difficulty. So he turned to the only remaining combination which would suit his book—the Liberals and the Labour Right.

I should have said that hitherto Mayot had never identified himself with any group in his party. He had been of the Centre, a Labour man sans phrase; one who would be able, without any compromising past, to incline, when the occasion arose, to the Right or to the Left. But clearly this detachment would soon be impossible. If Waldemar was to form a Government, it could only be with the help of the Labour Right, for it was difficult to imagine Collinson and his like having anything to do with one whom they had repeatedly described in public as a fatted calf. If he, Mayot, were to play a prominent part in that Government, it was therefore obligatory to get some hold on the section of his party which would support Waldemar. He must edge discreetly towards the Right Wing.

Discretion was essential, and secrecy. He could not afford as yet to break with the Left, and he must give no sign of disloyalty to Trant. He needed a confederate, and he found in old Folliot the man he wanted.

Folliot, as I have mentioned, was an elderly gossip, who had been a notable figure in the Edwardian era, but who since the War had become a bore. He appeared less regularly at smart dinner-parties, and fewer country houses were open to him. When I first came to London men drew near him, when the women had left the room, to hear his stories, and youth in the clubs made rather a cult of him. I remember congratulating myself on the privilege of being acquainted with one who had known all the great men in Europe for half a century. Now the poor old fellow was allowed to drink his port in lonely silence. He was a pathetic figure, and what chiefly grieved him was his exclusion from politics. He had never been anything of a serious politician, though he had twice sat for short terms in the House, but he had been a useful go-between. One of

his virtues was that, though a notorious gossip, he could be trusted to be as secret as the grave in any business in which he was employed. He used never even to mention the things he had done—his negotiations as a young man with the Liberal-Unionists, or his very useful work over the House of Lords question in 1910—only grinned and looked wise when the topics came up. Folliot had his own point of honour.

Lately he had come to affect Labour out of disgust at the neglect of his own people. He did not love Trant, who laughed at him, but he had some vogue among the feudal aristocracy of the trade unions, who liked what they regarded as a link with historic British policy. Mayot easily enlisted him, for he was a gullible old gentleman, and was flattered at being consulted. He discovered that he had a mission to restore the two-party system by a union of all soberly progressive forces. He himself had begun life as a follower of Harrington, and so had never cared for the straiter sect of the Carlton Club, and had always had his doubts about Protection. He foresaw a chance of reviving that decorous Whiggism for which he had always hankered, based upon the two solidest things in Britain—the middle-class Liberal and the intelligent working man.

So during the early part of the new year he was happily busy. He gave a great many dinners, sometimes at his flat and sometimes at Brooks', to which were bidden trade-union members of Parliament, one or two members of the Government who were supposed to be disaffected towards Trant, and a number of carefully selected Liberals. Waldemar came once or twice and Mayot was invariably present. These dinners seem to have gone off very well, and no hint of them leaked into the press. It was a game which Mayot could play to perfection. He could see that already he was regarded with favour by the Liberal stalwarts, and a certain type of Labour man was coming to look with a new respect upon one who could interpret his honest prejudices and give them an air of political profundity. By the end of January he was very well satisfied. He had decided that he had forecast correctly the process which would lead to Waldemar's premiership, and had put himself in a position to reap the full advantage of his foreknowledge. What he hoped for, I think, was the Exchequer.

III

But with February came one of the unlooked-for upheavals of opinion which make politics such a colossal gamble. The country suddenly awoke to the meaning of the unemployment figures. These were appalling, and, owing to the general dislocation of world credit and especially to the American situation, held no immediate hope of improvement. The inevitable followed. Hitherto sedate newspapers began to shout, and the habitual shouters began to scream. Hunger-marchers thronged the highways to London; there were mass-meetings in every town in the North; the Archbishops appointed a day for public prayer; and what with deputations, appeals, and nagging questions in the House, the life of Trant became a burden.

The crisis produced a prophet, too. It is curious how throughout our history, whenever there is a strong movement from below, the names of the new leaders are usually queer monosyllables. It was so in Jack Cade's rebellion, and in Venner's business during the Commonwealth, and in the early days of the Labour movement; and now we had the same phenomenon, as if the racial maelstrom at the foot of the ladder had thrown up remnants of a long-hidden world. The new prophet bore the incredible name of Chuff. From Tower Hill to Glasgow Green he stumped the land, declaring that our civilisation had broken down, that the crisis was graver than at the outbreak of the War, and demanding that the Government should act at once or admit their defeat. The remarkable thing about Chuff was that he was not an apostle of any single nostrum. He was a rather levelheaded young man, who had once been a sailor, and he was content to bring home to the national conscience the magnitude of the tragedy; the solution, he said, he left to cleverer people. He had real oratorical gifts, and what with Chuff on the platform and Collinson and his friends in the House, there was high confusion in domestic politics.

Opinion was oddly cross-divided, but presently it sorted itself out into two groups. The Activists demanded instant and drastic action, and the Passivists—the name was given them by their opponents and made prejudice owing to its resemblance to Pacifists; they called themselves Constitutionalists—counselled patience, and went on steadily with local relief works, transference, the expediting of one or two big public utilities, and the other stock remedies. The Activists were a perfect Tower of Babel, all speaking different tongues. Some wanted an immediate application of Marxian Socialism. A big section, led by Collinson, had a fantastic scheme of developing the home markets by increased unemployment pay—a sort of lifting up of one's self by the hair. Most accepted Geraldine's emigration policy; and a powerful wing advocated a stringent tariff with a view to making the Empire a self-contained economic unit. The agreed point, you might say, of all sections was direct and immediate action, a considerable degree of State Socialism, and a very general repudiation of Free Trade.

Activism, as I have said, cut clean across parties. Roughly its strength lay in the Labour Left and the Tory Left, and it was principally a back-bench movement, though Geraldine gave it a somewhat half-hearted blessing. Lord Lanyard and Collinson appeared on the same platforms in the country, and one powerful Tory paper supported the cause and sent special commissioners into the distressed areas to report. There was a debate on the Ministry of Labour estimates, in which the Labour Whips found themselves confronted with something very like a revolt. The Government was saved by the Liberals, but John Fortingall's motion was only lost by seven votes. This incident made the Passivists sit up and organise themselves. They had on their side Trant and the Labour Right and Centre, the whole of Waldemar's following, and the bulk of the Tories, Geraldine sitting delicately on the fence. But the debating ability—except for Waldemar and Mayot—was conspicuously with their opponents.

It was now that Mayot became something of a figure. The path was being prepared for a Labour-Liberal coalition with

Waldemar as leader—though he could not quite realise how the latter event would come about. In such a combination, if it took office, Trant might become Foreign Secretary, while he must make sure of the Exchequer. He made sure by hurling himself into the controversy with a vigour hitherto unknown in his career. He, who had always been a little detached and a good deal of a departmentalist, who had moreover been very respectful to his own extremists, now became a hard-hitting fanatic for moderation. He picked up some of Waldemar's apocalyptic mannerisms, and his parliamentary style acquired a full-throated ease. It shows how much the man was in earnest about his ambitions, that in a few weeks he should have forced himself to acquire a host of new arts. At that time I was so busy at the Bar that I was very little in the House, but, my sympathies being rather with the Activists, I had one or two brushes with Mayot. I found him a far more effective antagonist than before, for, though he was no better at argument, he could do what is usually more effective—denounce with apparent conviction.

Events in March played into his hands, for India suddenly boiled over, and the new constitution which we had laboriously established there seemed to be about to fail. There was a good deal of rioting, which had to be suppressed by force, and a number of patriots went to gaol. This split the Activist group asunder, for Collinson went out bald-headed against what he called the "fascist" policy of the Government, and most of the Labour Left followed him, while the young Tories took precisely the other line and shudderingly withdrew from their colleagues, like a prim virgin who opportunely discovers deeps of infamy in her lover. Lanyard, indeed, who had humanitarian leanings, seized the occasion to become an Independent, and no longer received the party Whips, but John Fortingall and the others returned hastily to the fold. The Government handled the Indian situation with firmness, said its supporters—with cheap melodrama and blind brutality, said its critics—and it had behind it three-fourths of its own people, all the Liberals, and every Tory except Lanyard. Peace had revisited the tents of Israel.

Mayot in those days was a happy man, for the world was ordering itself exactly according to his wishes. The course of things was perfectly clear. Unemployment was the issue that blanketed all others, and unemployment had to all intents obliterated party lines. India had broken up the Activist phalanx. The advocacy of quack remedies was left to a few wild men. Geraldine's grandiose emigration dream had faded out of the air, and the Tories were back in their old Protectionist bog, in which he was confident that the bulk of the country would never join them. He thought that he had trained himself to look at facts with cold objective eyes, and such was his reading of them. The economic situation was very grim, and likely to become grimmer, and the solution must be some kind of national emergency Government in which Waldemar would take the lead, for he alone had the requisite prestige of character and was in the central tradition of British policy, Trant would be glad to be a lieutenant instead of a leader, and he himself, as the chief liaison officer between Liberal and Labour, would have his choice of posts. His only anxiety concerned Flotter, now at the Exchequer. But Flotter was nearer the Left than himself, and farther from the Liberals, and could never command his purchase. Flotter was a dismal old man, whose reputation had been steadily decreasing, whereas in recent months he himself had added cubits to his political stature.

So Mayot began to talk discreetly in private about the National Government which facts were making imperative. I heard him airing his views one night at a dinner of Lady Altrincham's, and at a luncheon of Folliot's, where I sat next to him, he did me the honour to throw a fly over me. I asked him what his selections would be, and he replied that such a Government would have all responsible Labour to choose from, and all the Liberal talent.

"What about us?" I asked.

He looked wise. "That is harder, since Geraldine sticks to his Protection. But we should be glad to have some of you—on terms. You yourself, for instance."

"What puzzles me is, how you distinguish a National Government from a Coalition," I said. "Remember the word Coalition still stinks in the nostrils of most people."

"A Coalition," he said gravely, "only shares the loot, but a National Government pools the brains."

I grinned, and thanked him for the compliment.

IV

Just before the Easter recess I lunched with Sally Flambard. Her craze for Waldemar had gone, she had never liked Geraldine, and, save for Mayot, she had had very little to do with the Labour people. But now she had discovered Trant. She had been staying at a house in his own county, and he had come to dine, and she had at once conceived for him one of her sudden affections. There was a good deal of reason for that, for Trant was an extraordinarily attractive human being, whatever his defects might be as a statesman. Evelyn liked him too, though deploring his party label, for they were both sportsmen and practical farmers. The consequence was that Trant had become for the past month a frequent guest in Berkeley Square. It was a pleasant refuge for him, for he was not expected to talk politics, and he met for the most part people who did not know the alphabet of them.

Trant and I had always been good friends, and on that April Wednesday when we found ourselves side by side, I had from him—what I usually got—a jeremiad on the boredom and futility of his profession.

"I'm not like you," he lamented. "You've got a body of exact knowledge behind you, and can contribute something important—legal advice, I mean. But here am I, an ordinary ill-informed citizen, set to deal with problems that no mortal man understands and no human ingenuity can solve. I spend my time clutching at imponderables."

I said something to the effect that his modesty was his chief asset—that at least he knew what he did not know.

“Yes,” he went on, “but, hang it, Leithen, I’ve got to fight with fellows who are accursedly cocksure, though they are cocksure about different things. Take that ass Waldemar...”

Trant proceeded to give an acid, and not unjust, analysis of Waldemar and the way he affected him. The two men were as antipathetic as a mongoose and a snake. He was far too loyal to crab any of his own side to an opponent, but I could see that he was nearly as sick of Collinson and his lot, and quite as sick of Mayot. In fact, it looked as if there was now no obvious place for Trant in his party, since he was at war with his own Left Wing, and Mayot had virtually taken over the leadership of the Right and Centre. At that time we were all talking about the alliance of Liberal and Labour, and this conversation convinced me that it would not include Trant.

Then he began to speak of ponderable things like fishing. He was just off to a beat on the Wye, and lamented the bad reports of the run of fish. Just as we were leaving the table he said something that stuck in my memory. He asked me what was the best text of the Greek Anthology, attributing to me more scholarship than I possessed... Now, Trant had always been bookish, and had a number of coy literary ambitions. I remembered that once, years before, he had confessed to me that, when he was quit of public life, he meant to amuse himself with a new translation of the Anthology. Meleager, I think, was his special favourite.

I walked down to the House that afternoon with one assured conviction. Trant was about to retire. His air had been that of a schoolboy who meant to defy authority and hang the consequences. He had the manner of one who knew he was going to behave unconscientiously and dared anybody to prevent him. Also there was his Greek Anthology scheme.

By this time I had a pretty shrewd idea of Mayot’s purpose. That afternoon I sat next to him in the tearoom and tried to sound him. He looked at me sharply.

“Have you heard anything?” he asked, and I told him “Not a word,” but the whole situation seemed to me fluid.

“Trant won’t go till he has made certain of his successor,” said Mayot. “And that won’t be yet awhile.”

But Trant did go, leaving the succession gloriously unsettled. A fortnight later the papers published a letter from him to Flotter, the chairman of his party. It was a dignified performance, and there was finality in every syllable. Trant said he had placed his resignation in His Majesty’s hands and that it had been graciously accepted. He proposed to retire altogether from public life, and would not be a candidate at the next election. He made no complaints, but offered his most grateful thanks to his party for their unfailing loyalty in difficult times, and expressed his warm hopes for a brilliant future... I had a line from him from the Spey, chiefly about fishing; but it ended with: “You did not think Master Silence a man of this mettle? Thank God it’s over. Now I shall have peace to make my soul.”

I ran across Mayot next day, and he was fairly walking on his toes with excitement. His face was prim with weighty secrets. “The Consuls must see to it that the Republic takes no hurt,” he said impressively. He was swollen with delicious responsibilities, and clearly believed that his hour had come.

The next event was the party meeting. Mayot was generally fancied as Trant’s successor, but to everybody’s surprise, Flotter, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was elected by nine votes. Flotter was of Mayot’s persuasion, but he was slightly nearer to the Left perhaps; at any rate, he had not been so controversial a figure as Mayot, so he had the support of Collinson’s merry men. Mayot did not seem to take the defeat much to heart, for he was looking well ahead. In a few weeks Waldemar would be Prime Minister, and he was the chief link between Waldemar and Labour.

I was, of course, not in the confidence of the Cabinet, and can only judge by results. But I fancy that the decision to ask for a dissolution must have been chiefly Mayot’s. You see, he knew one fact which was hidden from all the world, and he had to consider how this fact was coming to birth. If Flotter took office at once he would not readily be induced to resign, though he was an old man, not very strong in body, and never credited with much ability. An election was desirable on every ground for both the Labour and the Tory Parties were deeply divided, and the verdict of the polls would clear the air. Mayot had no doubt that the country was on the whole on the side of the kind of cautious progress represented by Waldemar and himself. The Tory Left had not been making much headway; Collinson and his group were discredited because of their attitude on India; and the appeal of the redoubtable Chuff had lost its first freshness. His chief fear was Geraldine, whose tactical skill he profoundly respected. But an immediate election would spike Geraldine’s guns, since he had no new policy to urge, and, if he improvised one, would not have time to elaborate it.

So Flotter was sent for by the King, and asked for a dissolution, which was granted. His Budget resolutions were hastily passed by a House whose interests were elsewhere, and in the second week of May the campaign began.

I have fought in my time seven elections, and can recollect a good many more, but I never knew one like this. My own seat was safe enough, and I was able to speak for our side up and down the land during the hottest May that I ever remember. But the whole thing was a nightmare, for in twenty-four hours all creeds and slogans were mixed up in a wild kaleidoscope. Very few candidates knew quite where they stood, and desperate must have been the confusion of the ordinary voter. Laboriously devised programmes became suddenly waste paper.

The supreme fact was that Waldemar went mad, or had a call, or saw a vision like Paul on the road to Damascus. You can take which explanation you choose. He had been lying low for some weeks, touring about the country and scarcely opening

his mouth. He must have discovered the horrors of unemployment for himself, just as Geraldine had discovered them seven months before when he started his emigration scheme. Out of the provinces came Waldemar, like Mahomet from the desert, to preach a new gospel.

It was a complete reversal of all that he and Mayot had stood for. He was still a Free Trader, he proclaimed, and would have nothing to do with a self-contained Empire, chiefly on the ground that it would be a barrier to that internationalism on which the future of humanity depended. But he was quite prepared to prohibit the import of certain rival commodities altogether as an emergency measure, and he had a great scheme for State purchase in bulk and the regulation of prices. He went farther. He, who had once moaned "inflation" when Geraldine's loan was proposed, was now a convert to a huge loan for emergency public works. Moreover, he swallowed wholesale most of Collinson's stuff about increasing our home power of consumption, and proposed measures which made the hair of the ordinary economist stand on end.

But it was not so much what Waldemar said as the way he said it. The old Activism was a stagnant pool compared to his furious torrent. He preached his heresies with the fire and conviction of an Israelitish prophet, and brought into the contest the larger spirit of an earlier age. He was quite frank about his conversion. He had had his eyes opened, and, like an honest man and a patriot, must follow the new light. It was the very violence of the revolution in his creed that made it so impressive. We had got into the habit of saying that the day of oratory was over, and that all that mattered was that a leader should be able to broadcast intelligibly. Waldemar disproved this in two days. He was a great orator, and he swept over the North and the Midlands like a flame. Gladstone's Midlothian campaign was beaten hollow. He motored from town to town in a triumphal procession, and every gathering he addressed was like a revivalist meeting, half the audience in tears and the rest too solemnised to shout. Wild as his talk was, he brought hope to those who had none, and stirred up the political waters as they had not been moved since the War.

It was an awful position for everybody else. His own party, with a few exceptions, accepted him docilely, though they had some difficulty in accustoming themselves to the language. You see, the Liberals, having been long in the wilderness, were prepared to follow any Moses who would lead them across Jordan. There was a half-hearted attempt to make a deal about seats, so as to prevent unnecessary fights between Liberal and Labour, but it was a little too late for that, and we had the curious spectacle in many constituencies of official opponents saying precisely the same thing. Geraldine was in an awkward fix, for he had been a bit of an Activist and had his young entry to consider. He did the only thing possible—relapsed upon sobriety PLUS Protection, and did the best he could with tariffs and the Empire. But his form was badly cramped, and he had to face the unpleasing truth that he, the adroit tactician, had been tactically caught bending. His party, however, was well disciplined, and managed, more or less, to speak with one voice, though it was soon clear that many former Tory voters were being attracted by Waldemar.

The Labour people were in a worse hole. Flotter, who was very little use in an election, steered a wary course, welcoming some of Waldemar's ideas, but entering a caveat now and then to preserve his consistency. His programme was a feeble stammering affair, for he was about as much of a leader to his party as a baggage pony in a mountaineering expedition. It was Collinson who took charge. He ranged the Labour Left solidly under Waldemar's banner, and became Waldemar's most efficient henchman. In the whirlwind tour before the poll he never left his leader's side.

For the unhappy Mayot there was no place. Miracles do not happen in batches. What in the case of one man may be ascribed to the vouchsafement of divine light will in a second case be put down to policy. Mayot simply could not turn in his tracks. If he had, he would have become a public laughing-stock. His denunciation of Activism had been too wholehearted, his devotion to economic sanity too complete. So he did nothing. He never spoke outside his own constituency, where he was opposed by the formidable Chuff, who stood as a Labour Independent. I gather that he talked a lonely Waldemarism, which Waldemar himself was busily engaged in tearing to tatters.

I got the final results at a Perthshire inn. Mayot was badly beaten: a small thing in itself, for another seat would have been found for him if he had mattered anything to any party— which he did not. There had been the expected defection of Tory voters. The Liberals had done well at our expense owing to Waldemar's name, and all the Labour Left were back with big majorities. So far as I remember, the figures were 251 Labour, 112 Liberals, 290 Tories, and 12 Independents. The country had approved a Coalition.

I went down to stay with Trant for a weekend in the May-fly season. The new Cabinet had just been announced—Waldemar, Prime Minister; Collinson at the Ministry of Labour; Flotter back at the Exchequer; and Lord Lanyard at the Foreign Office.

Trant, in disreputable clothes, was soaking gut and tying on flies.

"There has been a good deal of trouble," he told me. "Our party didn't want Waldemar. They thought that the leader should come from them, and I gather that Waldemar would have been quite willing to stand down if there had been anybody else. But there wasn't. You couldn't put Flotter in charge.

"Poor old Mayot," he went on, his pleasant face puckered into a grin. "Politics are a brutal game, you know. Here is an able fellow who makes one mistake and finds himself on the scrap-heap. If he hadn't been so clever he would be at No. 10 today... Of course he would. If he had even been like Flotter, and trimmed from sheer stupidity, he would have been Prime Minister ... I must say I rather respect him for backing his fancy so steadily. He was shrewd enough to spot the winner, but not the race it would win. Thank God, I never pretended to have any cleverness...."

IV. — MR REGINALD DAKER

*“As when a Gryfon through the wilderness,
With wingèd course o’er Hill or moarie Dale,
Pursues the Arimaspians.”*

—John Milton, Paradise Lost

I

I can tell this story out of the fullest knowledge, for Reggie Daker had long made it a habit to pour out to me his inmost mind. But he was such an inconsequent being that it was not always easy to follow the involutions of that mind. So if my narrative has ragged edges it is because of its principal figure, who had a genius for discontinuity.

He had read in that upper room at Flambard quite clearly an announcement of an expedition to Yucatan, of which he was a member, and which was alleged to have left England on June ninth the following year. Now, Reggie believed in Moe more implicitly than any of us, for one of his chief traits was a profound credulity. But he did not in the least believe in the announcement. Or rather let me put it that, while he was quite certain that the words he read would be in *The Times* a year hence, he was not less certain that they did not concern him. Nothing would induce him to go to Yucatan or any place of the kind. He did not trouble to consider how he was to square his belief in the accuracy of this piece of foreknowledge with his determination that it should not be true in fact. He only knew that he was not going to budge from England.

He did not know where Yucatan was, for he had the vagueness about geography which distinguishes the products of our older public schools and universities, and he had not the curiosity to enquire. He fancied that it must be in the East; places ending in “-tan” were always in the East; he remembered Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Gulistan. But, east or west, it mattered nothing to him. A man could not be hustled off abroad unless he wanted to, and nothing was farther from his inclinations.

Reggie was one of a type created by the post-war world. My nephew Charles, who was seven years his senior, and had been much battered by campaigning, said that it comforted him to look at Reggie, for it made him realise that the War chapter was really closed. His mother had died when he was a baby, and his father fell in the Yeomanry fight at Suvla, leaving him a small family property in the Midlands. A sudden industrial expansion made this property valuable, and in the boom year after peace his trustees sold it for a big sum, so that Reggie went to Oxford with a considerable income and no encumbrances. He was not distinguished at the University except for his power to amass friends. He had the family gift of horsemanship, and for a time showed extraordinary energy in riding in “grinds” and country steeplechases. Reggie, with his kit in a brown-paper parcel, might have been seen catching very early trains for remote places. But the craze passed, though his love of horses endured, and Reggie settled down to make a comfortable nest for himself in life.

His intellectual powers were nothing to boast of, but no man had a finer collection of interests. He had a knack of savouring the quality of a variety of things, never going far below the surface, but getting the maximum of pleasure for the minimum of pains. He dabbled in everything—art, literature, field sports, society, even a little corner of philanthropy. He was modest, eager, enthusiastic, and as generous a soul as God ever made. Also he had a pretty talent for sheer farcical fun. The result was that he was widely popular, for in his innocent way he oxygenated the air around him. He had been a member of Pop at Eton, though he had no athletic or scholastic distinctions, and he went down from the University with a larger equipment of friends—not acquaintances merely, but friends—than any of his contemporaries.

He cast about for a job, for he had a conscience of a sort, but, as I have already mentioned, he was a difficult creature to fit into any niche. He was too mercurial, and after a week or two managed to tumble out. But all the time he had his own private profession. His purpose was to make an art of English life. The ritual of that life had been badly dislocated by the War, but enough remained to fascinate Reggie. He was in love with every detail of the ordered round which carried youth of his type from January to January. He adored London in all her moods—the snugness of her winters, new faces at dinner-parties, the constant meetings of friends, plays and books, glossy ponies and green turf at Roehampton, cricket matches and race meetings, the view over St. James’s Park in May, Piccadilly in summer, Kensington Gardens in their October russet. Nor did he appreciate less the rural background to London’s life—riverside lawns, a cutter on the Solent in a fresh breeze, smoky brown coverts in the December dusks, purple Scots twilights when the guns moved homeward from the high moors. Reggie was supremely content with the place where his lines had been cast. It seemed to him that, if he lived to the age of Methuselah, he could not exhaust England.

He had a pleasant little house near the Brompton Road, where an elderly couple looked after his wants. He belonged to two good clubs—one a young man’s and the other an old man’s—and enjoyed them both. He hunted regularly with the Saturday Bicester, had a rod on a dry-fly stream in Berkshire, went every year on a round of Scots visits, and, being an excellent shot, was a welcome guest at covert shoots. Indeed, Reggie was a welcome guest anywhere, for he had the gift of making whatever he did seem better worth doing to those who companioned him. His enthusiasm, which was never boring, put colour and light into other people’s worlds. I have come down to breakfast before a day’s partridge shooting, apathetic about the prospect, and have been compelled by Reggie to look forward to it with the ardour of a boy. Small wonder he was popular; many people remain young, but few can communicate youthfulness.

You must understand that he was no indiscriminating epicurean. Every day he was developing a more perfect technique of appreciation. It sounds a selfish and effeminate mode of spending one’s time, and certainly there was nothing of the strenuous life about Reggie. He had no inclination to buffet opponents about the head and build up the Empire. But he was

so warm-hearted and friendly that people were very ready to condone a slight lack of virility, the more so as he had considerable repute as a bold man to hounds. For myself, though now and then he exasperated me, on the whole it did me good to contemplate anyone so secure and content.

Reggie was wise enough to see that he needed some string to unite his many interests and give some sort of continuity to his life. So he was on the look-out for a regular job, occasionally found one, and invariably lost it. Then he decided that his avocation lay in the sale of old books. He had always been rather bookish, and had picked up a good deal of general information on the subject. It fitted in perfectly with his other tastes and the general tenour of his existence. He took to frequenting sales, cultivated dealers and collectors, enlarged his American acquaintance, and on a country-house visit made a point of investigating the library.

So at the time of the Flambard Whitsuntide party he had started in a modest way as a dealer in old books, specialising in the English seventeenth century. He had had a few successes, and was full of hope. Here was a profession which in no way interfered with his rule of life, was entrancing in itself, and might repair the ravages which the revenue authorities were making in his private income.

He came to lunch with me in London in July, and I realised that the impression made by Moe was fast disappearing. "Terrible business," said Reggie. "I'm hanged if I quite know what happened, for, looking back, I think we were all asleep. Oh, I read *The Times* all right. It said I had started off to a place called Yucatan with an expedition. Rotten idea!"

I asked him if he believed in the reality of his vision.

"Of course," he replied. "I can't explain how—no one can, except poor old Moe, and he's dead—but I read the words in the paper as clearly as I am seeing you."

"You think they are true—will be true?"

"I think that they will appear in *The Times* of June tenth next year. True in that sense. But not true in the sense that I shall have gone to Yucatan. Catch me doing anything so idiotic! Forewarned, forearmed, you know."

And Reggie plunged into an account of the pirated pre-first edition of the *Religio Medici*, of which he had heard of a copy.

II

So he went off to Scotland for the Twelfth, quite easy in his mind. He rarely thought about the Moe business, and, when he did, it was only to reflect with some amusement that in ten months' time an eminent newspaper would be badly out in its facts. But he was thinking a great deal about Pamela Brune.

We have all our own Scotlands, and Reggie's was not mine, so we never met north of the Tweed. He would have abhorred the rougher kind of deer forest, for he would never have got up the mountains, and he was no salmon fisherman. The kind of place he liked was a civilised country house where the comforts of life were not forgotten. He was a neat shot at driven grouse, and loved a day on a mild moor where you motored to the first butts and had easy walks to the others. He liked good tennis and golf to be available on by-days, and he liked a large house-party with agreeable women. Reggie was the very opposite of the hard-bitten sportsman; sport was for him only one of the amenities of life, a condiment which should not be taken by itself, but which in combination gave flavour to the dish. So he selected his visits carefully, and was rarely disappointed.

This year he had an additional purpose; he went where he thought it likely that he might meet Pamela Brune. He believed himself to be very much in love, and he still had hopes; for in the last few weeks of the season Pamela had been a little kinder. She had been rather gentle and abstracted, and he hoped that her heart might be softening towards him.

He did not meet Pamela Brune, for reasons which I shall have to record elsewhere. But he had a very pleasant two months in comfortable dwellings, varied with a week in a yacht among the Western Isles. It was a fine autumn in the north, and Reggie returned with a full sketch-book—he dabbled in water-colours—and a stock of new enthusiasms. He had picked up a lot of folklore in the Hebrides, had written a good deal of indifferent verse in Pamela's honour, had conceived a scheme for the making of rugs with Celtic designs coloured by the native Highland dyes, and had learned something about early Scottish books—David Lyndesay and the like—on which he hoped to specialise for the American market. He meant to develop these lines in the pleasant London winter to which he was looking forward.

Only one visit had been a failure. He had known Lamancha for some years as a notable connoisseur of pictures, and he had gladly accepted an invitation to Leriot. But Lamancha in Scotland was a very different person from Lamancha in London. Reggie found a party of men only, and with none of them, not even his host, did he appear to have much in common. They shot all day on the famous Leriot moors, and there he acquitted himself reasonably well, though he found the standard higher than elsewhere. But it was the evenings that proved out of joint. Eight sleepy men gossiped in the smoking-room till they stumbled to bed, and the talk was of two things only. All except Reggie had served in the War, and half the evenings were spent in campaign reminiscences which bored him profoundly. "Worse than golf shop," he complained to me. But the conversation of the other half scared him, for it was all about adventures in outlandish parts of the globe. It seemed that everyone but himself had sojourned in the oddest places. There was Maffit who had solved the riddle of the Bramaputra gorges, and Beavan who had been the first to penetrate the interior of New Guinea and climb Carstensch, and Wilmer who had been with the second Everest expedition, and Hurrell who had pursued his hobby of birds

to the frozen tundras of the Yenesei. Apparently they were not garrulous; but they spoke of their doings with a quiet passion which frightened Reggie. They were all men of some distinction in English life, but they talked as if what they were now doing was the merest triviality, and the real world for them lay across the seas. Even Lamancha, who was supposed to have the ball at his feet in politics, confessed that he would give up everything for the chances of being the first man to cross the great desert of southern Arabia.

To me later Reggie waxed eloquent on his discomfort.

"You never saw such a set of toughs," he said. "Real hearties."

I grinned at the word, and pointed out that "hearty" scarcely described the manner of Lamancha or Hurrell or Beavan.

"Oh, I don't mean that they were the cheery, backslapping type of lad. Their style was more like frozen shell-fish. But they were all the lean, hard-bitten, Empire-building breed. To listen to them you would think it was a kind of disgrace to enjoy life at home as long as there was some filthy place abroad where they could get malaria and risk their necks. They made me feel an abject worm... And, hang it all, you know, they began to infect me with their beastly restlessness. I was almost coming to believe that I was a cumberer of the ground, and should take up the white man's burden or do something silly. They were such cocksure pagans—never troubled to defend their views, but took it for granted that everybody but a hermaphrodite must share them."

There had been one exception, a middle-aged man called Tallis, who had a place in Wales. He was an antiquary of sorts, and appeared in his time to have done his bit of globe-trotting, but he was now settled at home, and had inherited a fine library about which he was willing to talk. But the rest had been repellent, and what scared Reggie was that they had not been repellent enough. He had been attracted against his will; he had felt himself being slowly drawn into an atmosphere utterly at variance with all his tastes. He uneasily remembered Flambard. These men were mostly Oriental travellers, and somewhere in the East lay Yucatan... Reggie cut short his visit to Leriôt, and fled for safety to Town.

There he found what seemed to be complete sanctuary, and presently the memory of Leriôt and its outlanders grew dim. He lapped himself in urban peace. By Christmas he had realised that Pamela Brune was not for him, and, being a philosophic soul, accepted the fact with resignation. He found many consolations in his life. The economic troubles which hit most people did not greatly affect a rentier like Reggie, whose modest but sufficient investments were widely and wisely distributed. He had enough exercise and fresh air to keep him fit—regular golf, an occasional day with the Bicester and an occasional covert-shoot, and he took care that the company he kept was very different from that of Leriôt. The people he met on his shooting visits were mostly from the City, and their one aim was to recover a lost stability. The older men talked with longing of the comfortable Edwardian days, and Reggie wholeheartedly shared their regrets. All the world he mixed with seemed to be converted to his own view of life, Lamancha, making speeches in the House and presiding at public dinners, was very unlike the savage who at Leriôt had sighed for the Arabian desert. Even Hurrell, whom he saw occasionally in one of his clubs, was a respectable black-coated figure, more concerned with a paper he was to read to the Royal Society than with the Siberian tundras.

Reggie had rarely spent more agreeable months. During November and December there was a good deal of frost, and London had never seemed at once so tonic and so cosy. Being a good-hearted fellow he did a little mild philanthropy, and sat on a committee which took care of several distressed mining villages, besides putting in one evening a week at his boys' club. For the rest he had his pleasant little dinners of selected friends, his club luncheons, his researches at the Museum, his plays and picture shows, and his steadily growing bibliophilic fervour. And behind everything he did was the delicious background of London, which linked up the centuries and made even the new and the raw seem long-descended—an atmosphere which at once soothed and stimulated—the last perfection of man's handiwork—the true setting for a civilised life.

He made real progress, too, with his book-selling, and it looked as if he had found at last the thing he could do well. It was the kind of subject which Reggie could cope with, for he had an excellent memory, and, when his interest was actively engaged, a real power of absorbing knowledge. Also the times suited him, for there was a slump in everything but books. Pictures, furniture, houses, land—there were plenty of sellers and few buyers; but in books the demand kept level with the supply. Hard-up country gentry put their libraries into the market, and it was often possible to buy these privately at modest prices. Reggie had several such lucky speculations, and found that often half a dozen volumes returned him his outlay with a handsome profit.

Then in January a little thing happened which had momentous consequences.

He picked up a cheap lot of books at a sale in the Midlands, and one of these was a copy of a little-known political poem of Thomas Gray, called, I think, *The Candidate*. It was printed in the familiar Caslon type of the Strawberry Hill press, and it had on the fly-leaf a long inscription to a certain Theophilus Tallis, in which comment was made on the poet and his work. The inscription was signed "HW," and on the inside of the cover was the armorial bookplate of Tallis of Libanus Hall. If this inscription were genuine, here was an "association" book of a high order. Reggie compared it with many specimens of Horace Walpole's handwriting, with the general style of which it seemed to agree. Could he establish the identity of Theophilus Tallis, and ascertain that he had been a friend of Walpole's, the authenticity would be complete... Then he remembered the man he had met at Leriôt. His name was Tallis, and he had a place on the Welsh border. Reggie had scribbled down his club address, so he wrote to him there and asked him for information. In a day or two a reply came from Libanus Hall. The Theophilus in question was his great-grandfather, said the writer, and doubtless the book had strayed from his library. Such things often happened— an undergraduate would carry off a volume to Oxford and forget about it, or a guest would borrow and fail to return. The old Theophilus had left many papers which had never been examined, but in which the connection with Walpole could no doubt be traced. Let Reggie pay him a visit, for there were many things in his library to interest him.

So in the last week of January Reggie departed for the Welsh marches. The association of Tallis with Leriôt gave him no anxiety, for recently he had been so lapped in urban life that he had forgotten about Leriôt and its uneasy guests, and in any case Tallis had been different from the others. Tallis had not looked like them, for he was a man of a comfortable habit of body, with a round, high-coloured face—a hunting squire with a dash of the *bon vivant*. Reggie remembered with satisfaction how he had criticised Lamancha's port. It was true that he seemed to have travelled much, but his wandering years were over. He had merely hinted at his doings abroad, but he had spoken at length and with gusto about his collections and his library.

Libanus proved to be a dwelling after Reggie's heart, a Tudor manor-house, built round a border keep, according to the fashion of the Welsh marches. It stood on a shelf in a shallow river valley, backed with low, scrub-clad hills, and behind them were wide, rolling moorlands. It was a bachelor establishment, very well run, and Tallis was the perfect host. The collections did not interest Reggie—stone plaques, and queerly marked tiles, and uncouth stone heads which suggested a more primitive Epstein. He took them for Assyrian, and when Tallis called them "Mayan" the word conveyed nothing to him. But the library far surpassed his hopes. It had been founded in the seventeenth century, when Wales was full of lettered squires, by a certain John Tallis, who had obligingly kept a notebook in which he recorded his purchases and the prices he paid for them. It was especially rich in authors with a Welsh connection, like Henry Vaughan and the Herberts, but there was a fine set of Donne, two of the Shakespeare folios, and many of the Cavalier lyrics, besides a quantity of devotional and political rariora. The other collector in the family had been Theophilus Tallis in the reign of George III. He had specialised in illustrated books, mostly French, but he had also added to the shelves some notable incunabula, for he lived into the day of the Roxburghe and Heber libraries. Reggie hunted up Theophilus in the family archives, and found that he had been a friend of Gray and a frequent correspondent of Horace Walpole. There were batches of letters from both, which had never been published.

Tallis was also a master of foxhounds, a mountainy pack, with some of the old shaggy Welsh strain in them, which hunted about a hundred square miles of wild country at the back of Libanus. The river valley was pockety and swampy, but the short bent of the moors made splendid going. Reggie was well mounted by his host, it was soft, grey weather in which scent lay well, and he had several glorious days up on the roof of things. "You never saw such a place," he wrote to me. "Nothing much to lep, but you must ride cunning, as on Exmoor, if you want to keep up with hounds. I couldn't keep my eye on them for the scenery. One was on a great boss, with a hint far away of deeper valleys, and with lumps of blue mountain poking up on the horizon—foreshortened, you know, like ships coming into sight at sea. It fairly went to my head. Then the hunt was pure Sir Roger de Coverley— hard-riding farmers and squires that had never stirred from their paternal acres. I felt as if I had slipped through a chink of time into an elder England."

Reggie enjoyed every moment, for it was the precise ritual in which his fancy delighted. He and Tallis would get home in the twilight, and have poached eggs and tea by the library fire. Then would come a blessed time in slippers with a book or a newspaper; then a bath and dinner; and after that a leisurely ranging among the shelves and pleasant sleepy armchair talk. Tallis was an ideal host in other ways than as a provider of good sport, good quarters and good fare. He never obtruded his own interests, never turned the talk to the stone monstrosities in the hall which he had given half his life to collect, or expounded the meaning of "Mayan." With Reggie he was the bibliophile and the rural squire, prepared to agree with him most cordially when he proclaimed that there was no place on earth like his own land and wondered why anyone was foolish enough to leave it.

"Fate," said Tallis. "Something switches you abroad before you know where you are. I've always started unwillingly, but there has never been any alternative if I wanted to get a thing done."

Reggie shook his head, implying that he would prefer the thing to remain undone.

He was in this mood of comfort, sentimentality and complacency when Verona Cortal came to dine. Tallis was apologetic. "The Reeces at Bryncoch have a niece staying with them—she comes every year for a week or two's hunting—and I always give Jim Jack a hand to entertain her. She's rather a pleasant child, and deserves something nearer her age

than an old buffer like me. I hope you don't mind. She's pretty knowledgeable about books, you know—been to college and that sort of thing.” So the following evening Reggie found himself seated at dinner next to an attractive young woman with whom he had no difficulty in conversing. Miss Cortal was of the marmoreal blonde type, with a smooth white skin and a wealth of unshingled fair hair. Her eyes were blue, not the pale lymphatic kind, but a vivacious masterful blue. She was beautifully turned out, polished to a high degree, and to the last degree composed and confident. Reggie did not think her pretty; she was a trifle too substantial for one who was still under the spell of Pamela Brune's woodland grace; but he found her an entrancing companion.

For she seemed to share his every taste and prejudice. They talked of the countryside, for which she had a lively enthusiasm. Her own home was in Gloucestershire, to which her people had moved from the West Riding, where they had been local bankers till they amalgamated with one of the London banks. Her father was dead, but her brothers were in business in London, and she lived partly with them and partly with her mother in the country. Reggie had never met anyone, certainly no woman, who seemed to savour so intelligently the manifold delights of English life, as he understood them. Pamela had been blank and derisory when he tried to talk of such things, but this girl seemed instinctively to penetrate his moods and to give his imponderables a clean-cut reality. It was flattering to be so fully comprehended. They talked of books, and it appeared that she had taken a degree in history at Oxford, and was making a study of the Roman remains in Cotswold. They discovered that they had friends in common, about whose merits and demerits they agreed; and presently in a corner of the shabby drawing-room, while her aunt dozed and Jim Jack and Tallis were deep in hounds, they advanced to the intimacy which comes to those who unexpectedly find themselves at one in their private prepossessions. Reggie saw the Bryncoch car depart with the conviction that he had never before met quite so companionable a being.

It only needed some little thing to set Verona in a romantic light, and that something befell next day. The soft grey weather broke up into one of those clear, late-winter afternoons which are a foretaste of spring. The hounds, after various false starts in the morning, had run right to the top of the moorlands, and killed near the standing stones called the Three Brothers. Verona's mare got an overreach in a bog, and she and Reggie were left behind to make their way home alone in the gathering dusk. The girl looked well on horseback, and the excitement of the day and the winds of the moor had given her a wild-rose colour and abated the trimness of her get-up. As they jogged home Reggie wondered that he had not thought her pretty before; the polished young lady had gone, and in its place was something very girlish and young, something more primitive and more feminine. They rode slowly under a sky of lemon and amethyst, and stopped to watch the sunset flaming over the remote western hills, or to look east to where the shadows were creeping over the great hollow which was England. Then they descended by green drove-roads to the valley woods, and saw the lights' twinkle, miles apart, of their respective homes. It was dark now, and Reggie had to help with the limping mare in some of the dingles. On one such occasion she laid a light hand on his arm.

“What a day!” she said, in a rapt whisper. “This is what I love best—to come out of the wilds into ancient, habitable peace. You can only do it in England. What a land! Who was it called it ‘Merlin's Isle of Gramarye’?”

“What a girl!” thought Reggie. “She knows what I want to think before I have thought it.”

Two days later he went to Bryncoch to luncheon. Verona was delightful. At Libanus she had been the accomplished woman of the world; on the moors she had been touched with romance; but here she was a child, eager to show her playthings to another child. She dragged him through the library, and out of a wilderness of forestry journals and reports of agricultural societies unearthed volumes worthy of a bibliophile's eye. She acted showman to the architectural curiosities of the house, and after luncheon led him to the old-fashioned walled garden. “They used to be able,” she told him, “to grow all kinds of hothouse fruits here out of doors. Do you know why?” She pointed out the flues which ran from a furnace at each corner through the immense brick walls. “That is how they beat the frost and the east winds. They kept the walls all winter at an even temperature. They could do it a hundred years ago, when coal cost little more than the price of carting it from the pit-heads over the hills.”

“I love all these relics,” she said with the prettiest sentiment. “I want the memory of them to survive. We should keep the past next door to us in our lives and be always looking back to it.”

Reggie warmly approved, for it was his own philosophy. But he was a little surprised when she embarked on a most businesslike discussion as to the price of coal, and what it would cost to do the same thing today. She quoted figures like an accountant. He was spurred to tell her of his own work, of his book-selling schemes, the successes he had had and his plans for the future. She listened eagerly and made what seemed to him some acute suggestions.

He went back to London next day with his mind in a pleasant confusion. He did not think that he was in love with Miss Cortal, but he decided that in her he had found a most congenial comrade. To have discovered someone so like-minded, so able to justify the faith they shared, gave him a welcome sense of security. Whatever was in store for him he had now a puissant ally.

I do not want to give the impression that Reggie was a vapid, sentimental young man. He was very much the other way. He had plenty of shrewdness, and had all the reticences of his kind. No virginity was ever more fastidiously guarded than the sacred places of the English male in youth. He would perish sooner than confess the things nearest to his heart. If anyone had told Reggie in his presence that he was an artist in life, a connoisseur of evasive sensations, the charge would have been hotly denied. He believed himself to be a normal person, who rejoiced in running with the pack. I guessed his

creed, but it was only from casual unguarded phrases and his manner of life, never from his own confession. He would have blushed to say the things which Verona was always saying. But in her mouth they delighted him, for she put into words what he was incapable of expressing himself—incapable partly from shamefacedness and partly from simple lack of the gift for definition. She was magnificently explicit, and carried it off. I have been told that, when you can adequately formulate a grief, you have removed half the sting of it, and I fancy that in the case of the pleasing emotions the same explication doubles the pleasure. That is the virtue of the poets, since they do for the ordinary man what he cannot do for himself. Verona was Reggie's bard. She gave a local habitation and a name to his airy nothings, and in so doing she confirmed him in his faith. He felt that the things he cared for were given a new stability when she became their most competent prophet.

They had arranged to meet in London, and next week he dined at the Cortals' large, dull house in Eaton Square. I happened to be a guest, for my nephew Charles was connected with the Cortals in business, and I had been their counsel in a complicated House of Lords appeal. It was the first occasion on which I met the daughter of the house.

It was a big dinner-party, representative of the family's many interests, starred with celebrities, none of whom were quite of the first order, except Geraldine, the Tory leader. There was a corps commander in the late War, who had taken up politics and hankered after a British variant of Fascism; Lord Lavan, who had governed some Dominion; a Royal Academician, who painted mystical topical allegories, a sort of blend of Blake and Frith; a director of the Bank of England; Smithers, the Cambridge economist; one or two city magnates; Claypole, the buxom novelist, whom his admirers regarded as an English Balzac; a Cotswold master of hounds up in London to visit his dentist; nothing young except Reggie.

The dinner was the elaborate affair which used to be in fashion when I first came to London—two dishes in every course, and the old-fashioned succession of wines instead of the monotonous champagne of today. Mrs Cortal sat beaming at her end of the table, with the blank amiability of the stone deaf, and the duties of hostess fell upon her daughter. I did not then realise her power over Reggie, but I watched her with admiration. She sat between Geraldine and Claypole, and she kept a big section of the table going. Her manner was a gentle alertness, quick to catch the ball of talk and return it, but never for one moment asserting itself. She had a pleasant trick of turning to a speaker with bright eyes and slightly raised brows, a trick which was an invitation to confidences. Being opposite her, I had a chance on such occasions of observing her face in profile, and it struck me that when she grew older she would have a look of Queen Victoria—the same ripeness and authority. Her performance was extraordinarily efficient, for she managed to make her neighbours talk as freely as if it had been a tête-à-tête, and at the same time broadcast the results to a considerable part of the company. Claypole's bubbling utterances were clarified by her into good conversation, and used as baits to entice Geraldine. The novelist's pose was that of a detached observer of life, a kindly and half-contemptuous critic of the ordinary struggle for success, whereas Geraldine was frankly an adept at the game, who made no concealment of his devotion to it. Claypole's mild cynicism, as interpreted by Verona, was just the thing to rouse the latter, who was adroitly led into spirited confessions of faith. There is no talker to compare with Geraldine when he is stirred, with his Irish humour, his dazzling overstatements, and his occasional flights into serious passion, and I have rarely heard him better than under Verona's stimulus. Claypole was flattered, for he was not in the habit of consorting with ex-Prime Ministers; the others were flattered, for they seemed to be privileged to share a great man's confidences. I saw Reggie's eyes fixed on the girl in respectful wonder.

When the women rose I had a talk with one of her brothers. There were two of them, very much alike except that one was fair and one was dark; both were clean shaven, and both wore eyeglasses. One was a director of the bank which had absorbed the family business, and the other was a partner in a well-known financial house. It was the latter who took the chair beside me, and presently I found myself able to place the Cortal family. The brothers belonged to the type which in my irreverent youth we called the "blood stockbroker"—the people who wanted to be gentlefolk first and city men afterwards, but were determined to be a complete success in both rôles. They had been to the best public school and the most fashionable college, and had acquired a manner blended of the guardsman, the country squire and the man of affairs. Young Mr Michael talked hunting to me and the prospects of the National, touched upon spring salmon and his last year's experience in Scotland, and told an excellent story which he had heard that afternoon in White's; but he also said some shrewd things about politics, and when I asked him a question about certain rumours in the City I got a crisp and well-informed reply. The Cortals were assuredly a competent family, though I decided that there was most quality in the girl. There had been something Napoleonic in that graceful profile which I had studied during dinner.

Afterwards in the drawing-room I saw Verona and Reggie in a corner. They were smiling on each other like old friends, and she was saying something to him with an affectionate, almost maternal air. I had decided that she would make an excellent wife for an ambitious politician, but now I began to wonder if she were not the wife for Reggie. Far more suitable than Pamela Brune, whose rarity and subtlety required a different kind of mate. Reggie needed somebody to form him and run him, somebody who would put order into the attractive chaos of his life. Those firm white hands of hers might do much with such plastic stuff.

That dinner was followed by many meetings between the two. Verona dined with him in his little house, they went to the play together, she mounted him with her own pack, the Myvern, and they had several days with the Bicester. The first dinner in Eaton Square was soon succeeded by another, this time a family party—the four Cortals, a maiden aunt, a married uncle and several cousins. Reggie was the only stranger, and he was there as an adopted member of the clan, Verona's chosen friend. Not a suitor but a friend. There was as yet no suggestion of love-making. It was one of these newfangled, cold-blooded companionships between the sexes.

But at this dinner it was apparent that the Cortal family had taken up Reggie seriously. He had already expounded his

bookselling ambitions to Verona, as the kind of activity which made an appropriate background for the life he desired, and she had approved. Now it appeared that the whole family knew of it, and were acutely interested. There was a good opportunity, said the uncle—his name was Shenstone, and he was a member of a shipping firm which had done well during the War—for men like Reggie, who had the entry to many corners of English society, to establish himself as an honest broker between those who had, and wished to sell, and those who had not, and wished to buy. At present, he said, both sides went to the big dealers, and there was no human touch, but the human touch was needed in what should be more than a matter of cold business.

“Take pictures,” said Mr Shenstone, who was a connoisseur. “I see very little fun in picking up what I want at a big sale at Christie’s. What I like is to run something to earth in some odd corner of England, and get it by friendly negotiation. When I look at it on my walls, I remember the story behind it as well as its artistic merits. It stands for an episode in my life, like a stag’s head which recalls a good stalk. I must say I am always grateful to anyone who puts me in the way of this sporting interest in collecting.”

The others agreed. Mr Algernon, the elder brother, expanded the theme. “Reggie,” he declared (they had very soon got on to Christian name terms), “can be the link between supply and demand, and a benefactor to both sides. He might be a sort of English Rosenbach. In every shire there are families who just manage to keep going. They have family possessions which they are far too proud to send to a sale, except in the very last resort. But very often they would gladly sell a picture or a book privately, if they knew how to do it, and such a sale might make all the difference to their comfort.”

The maiden aunt assented, and told how a family of her acquaintance in Shropshire had been saved from penury by a discovery in a garret, through the medium of a visiting Cambridge don, of three Shakespeare quartos. One of the cousins recounted a similar event in Westmorland.

“Money is tight, no doubt,” continued Mr Algernon, “but there’s more of it about than people imagine. Fortunes are made on a falling as well as on a rising market. And people who have it do not know how to invest it. Industrials are too precarious, Government stocks have lost caste, and, since every part of the globe is under the weather, there is not the old attraction about foreign securities. I believe that there will be a growing tendency for people who have an ample margin of income to do what the Germans did when the mark was tumbling, and buy objects of art. But it must be something which is going to increase in value. Now, the fashion in pictures fluctuates, but not in books. There are only, say, twenty copies of an old book known to exist, and the numbers cannot be added to. An association book—say one which Walter Scott presented to Wordsworth with an autograph inscription—can never be duplicated. These things are better than bank-notes—they are solid bullion. The Americans have recognised this. A new millionaire in the States, as soon as he has made his pile, starts to found a library, though he may be scarcely literate. He knows what is certain to appreciate. He remembers the Huth and the Britwell sales.”

“And think of the charm of the business!” said Verona. “You are dealing in spiritual as well as in commercial values. And the cleanness of it!”

“But it needs careful handling,” said Mr Shenstone. “You cannot depend upon yourself, Mr Daker. You must get a staff together, and lay down your lines carefully, for what you want is an intelligence department and a scientifically arranged clearinghouse. You have to organise the buying side, and know just where to lay your hands on what you want. And you have to organise your customers—to get into touch with the people on both sides of the Atlantic who are hungering for your services. Your watchword must be organisation.”

“Rationalisation,” said Mr Michael with a pleasant smile. “You must be in the fashion, my dear Reggie.”

Reggie was flattered that his ideas should be taken so seriously by such a company, for he had the reverence for the businessman which is often an obsession with the unbusinesslike. He was excited, too. He saw himself becoming a figure, a power, a man of wealth, all that he had ruled out as beyond his compass—and this without sacrifice of the things he loved ... But, as he caught Verona’s beaming eyes, he had far down in his heart a little spasm of fear. For he seemed to see in them a hint of fetters.

v

The transformation of Reggie into a businessman was begun at once, and it was Verona who took charge of it. Politics at the moment were exciting, and in order to attend critical divisions I had to dine more than I liked at the House. The result was a number of improvised dinner-parties there, and at one of them I found Verona. No doubt Reggie had talked to her about me, so she treated me as if I were his elder brother. I thought her attractive, but I am bound to say a little formidable also, for I have rarely met any woman who knew her own mind so clearly.

The first thing to do was to get Reggie to organise his life. “You cannot achieve anything,” she said sagely, “unless you make a plan.” It was idle to think of running a business from the house in Brompton, so she had induced him to take an office—a pleasant little set of rooms which were fortunately vacant in the Adelphi neighbourhood. She had got him a secretary, a girl who had been at college with her, and she had started a system of card indexes, on which she dwelt lovingly. There was one for books, another for possible buyers, and a third for his acquaintances. She made a great point about codifying, so to speak, Reggie’s immense acquaintance, for it was his chief asset in the business. Properly managed, it should give him access to quarters into which no dealer could penetrate. She nodded her head, and emphasised her points by tapping her right-hand fingers on her left-hand palm, exactly like a pretty schoolmistress. And several times she

said “we,” not “he,” when she mentioned the undertaking.

She thought that he had better limit its scope. Incunabula and missals and such-like might be put aside as too ambitious. He should specialise on his old love, the seventeenth century, with excursions into the eighteenth and early nineteenth. There was already a vigorous interest in the Augustans, and she predicted a revival in the post-Romantics and the Victorians. Above all, he should specialise in “association books” and manuscripts, which were the kind of thing to which he was likely to have access. More was needed than an intelligence bureau: they wanted a research department to verify provenances. There would have to be a good deal of work in the Museum, and for this she could enrol several young women who had been with her at Oxford. She was compiling a list of experts in special branches, university dons and so forth, to whom they could turn in special cases for advice... Also they must make friends with the dealers, for it was no use antagonising the professionals; they could work in with them up to a point, and put little things in their way. Reggie knew a good many, and they were having some carefully selected luncheon-parties to extend his acquaintance. As for buyers, her brothers could help, for, being in the City, they knew where money was. Especially with America, she thought; both Algernon and Michael had a great deal of American business passing through their hands, and were frequently in New York. The American rich, she said, were an easier proposition than the English, for they talked freely of their hobbies instead of hiding them away like a secret vice.

I confess that I was enormously impressed by the girl’s precision and good sense, and I was still more impressed when a few days later I ran across Reggie in the Athenæum, a club which he had taken to frequenting. She had made a new man of him, a man with a purpose, tightened up and endowed with a high velocity. His eagerness had always been his chief charm, but now, instead of being diffused through the atmosphere, it seemed to have been canalised and given direction. “I’m one of the world’s workers,” he announced. “Office hours ten to five, and longer if required. I hop about the country too, like a bagman. I never knew that a steady grind was such fun.”

“How is your colleague?” I asked.

“Marvellous!” It was his favourite adjective. “By Jove, what a head she has! Already she has forgotten more about my job than I ever knew!”

“What do you call yourself?”

“Ah, that’s a puzzler. We must have a little private company, of course. We rather thought of ‘The Interpreter’s House.’ Bunyan, you know. You see the idea—the place where things are explained to people and people are explained to themselves. It was Verona’s notion. Jolly good, I think.”

It seemed an ambitious name for a dealer in old books, but it was not for me to damp Reggie’s ardour. I could only rejoice that someone had managed to break him to harness, a task in which his friends had hitherto conspicuously failed. I met him occasionally in the company of the Cortal brothers, and I fancied that these glossy young men had something of the air of horsebreakers. They peered at the world through their glasses with a friendly proprietary air, and clearly regarded Reggie as their property. I was never quite at ease in their presence, for their efficiency was a little too naked; they were too manifestly well equipped, too elaborately men of the world. But Reggie was fascinated. He, whose clothes had never been his strong point, was now trim and natty, and wore, like them, the ordinary City regimentals.

I asked my nephew Charles what he thought of the brothers, and he laughed. “The shiny Cortals!” he replied. “Good enough chaps in their way, I believe. Quite a high reputation in their own line. Can’t say I care much for them myself. Their minds are too dashed relevant, if you know what I mean. No margin to them—no jolly waste—everything tidied up and put to its best use. I should think more of them if now and then they condescended to make a bloomer. Their gentility is a little too self-conscious, too. Oh, and of course they haven’t a scrap of humour—not what you and I would call humour.”

One night I dined with one of the livery companies, and sat next to the uncle, Shenstone, who was prime warden. Under the influence of some wonderful Madeira he became talkative, and I realised that the harness laid upon Reggie’s back was going to be something more than a business set. For Shenstone spoke of him as if he were a member of the family, with just that touch of affectionate candour with which one speaks of a promising but still problematical relative. “Dear old Reggie,” said the uncle. “Best of good fellows and full of stuff, you know. Slackly brought up, and needs to learn business habits, but improving every day.” I forbore to mention Verona’s name, for I feared confidences. But I understood that Reggie was no more the unattached spectator of life; he had been gathered into the fold of a tightly knit and most competent clan.

Just before I went abroad for Easter I dined again in Verona’s company, and had the privilege of a long and intimate talk. I learned why the name of “Interpreter’s House” had been selected. Verona had visions which soared far beyond the brokerage of old books. She wanted to make the firm a purveyor of English traditions, a discreet merchant of English charm. It would guide strangers of leisure into paths where they could savour fully the magic of an ancient society. It would provide seekers with a background which, unless they were born to it, they could never find. It would be a clearing-house for delicate and subtle and indefinable things. It would reveal and interpret the sacred places of our long history. In a word, it would “rationalise” and make available to the public the antique glamour of these islands.

It all sounds preposterous, but there was nothing preposterous about her exposition. She had a trick, when excited, of half-closing her lids, which softened the rather hard vitality of her eyes, and at such times she lost her usual briskness and was almost wistful. “YOU MUST understand what I mean. We are all agreed that England is Merlin’s Isle of Gramarye.” (I quote her exact words.) “But to how many is that more than a phrase? It is so hard to get behind the veil of our noisy modernism to the lovely and enduring truth. You know how sensitive Reggie is to such things. Well, we want to help people

who are less fortunate. Strangers come to London—from the provinces—from America—steeped in London's romance which they have got from books. But the reality is a terrible anticlimax. They need to be helped if they are to recapture the other Londons which are still there layer on layer, the Londons of Chaucer and the Elizabethans, and Milton and Dr Johnson and Charles Lamb and Dickens... And Oxford... and Edinburgh... and Bath... and the English country. We want to get past the garages and petrol pumps and county council cottages to the ancient rustic England which can never die."

"I see. Glamour off the peg. You will charge a price for it, of course?"

She looked at me gravely and reprovingly, and her lids opened to reveal agate eyes.

"We shall charge a price," she said. "But moneymaking will not be our first object."

I had offended her by my coarse phrase, and I got no more confidences that evening. It was plain that Reggie was being equipped with several kinds of harness; his day was mapped out, he was inspanned in a family team, and now his vagrant fancies were to be regimented. I thought a good deal about him on my holiday, while I explored the spring flowers of the Jura. One of my reflections, I remember, was that Moe's moment of prevision had failed badly so far as he was concerned. Reggie was not likely to undertake any foreign adventure, having anchored himself by so many chains to English soil.

VI

Some time in May I began to have my doubts about the success of the partnership.

May is the pleasantest of months for a London dweller. Wafts of spring are blown in from its green cincture, the parks are at their gayest, there is freshness in the air, and the colours, the delicate half-shades of the most beautiful city on earth, take on a new purity. Along with late October, May had always been Reggie's favourite season. First there would be the early canter in the Park. Then a leisurely breakfast, the newspaper, and his first pipe, with the morning sun making delectable patterns on the bookshelves. He would write a few letters and walk eastward, dwelling lovingly on the sights and the sounds—the flower-girls, the shoppers, the bustle of the main streets, the sudden peace of the little squares with their white stucco and green turf and purple lilacs and pink hawthorns. Luncheon at one of his clubs would follow, or perhaps an agreeable meal at a friend's house. In the afternoon he had many little tasks—visits to the Museum, the sales or the picture galleries, researches in bookshops, excursions into queer corners of the City. He liked to have tea at home, and would spend the hours before dinner over books, for he was a discriminating but voracious reader. Then would come dinner; with a group of young men at a club or restaurant; or at some ceremonial feast, where he enjoyed the experience of meeting new people and making friendly explorations; or best of all at home, where he read till bedtime.

He had his exercise, too. He played a little polo at Roehampton and a good deal of tennis. He was an ardent fisherman, and usually spent the weekends on a Berkshire trout stream, where he had a rod. He would have a delightful Friday evening looking out tackle, and would be off at cockcrow on Saturday in his little car, returning late on the Sunday night with a sunburnt face and an added zest for life... I always felt that, for an idle man, Reggie made a very successful business of his days, and sometimes I found it in my heart to envy him.

But now all this had changed. I had a feverish time myself that May with the General Election, which did not, of course, concern Reggie. When I got back to Town and the turmoil was over, I ran across him one afternoon in the Strand, and observed a change in him. His usual wholesome complexion had gone; he looked tired and white and harassed—notably harassed. But he appeared to be in good spirits. "Busy!" he cried. "I should think I was. I never get a moment to myself. I haven't had a rod in my hand this year—haven't been out of London except on duty. You see, we're at the most critical stage—laying down our lines—got to get them right, for everything depends on them. Oh yes, thanks. We're doing famously for beginners. If only the American slump would mend..."

I enquired about Miss Cortal, as I was bound to do. No engagement had been announced, but such a relationship could only end in marriage. People had long ago made that assumption.

"Oh, Verona's very well. A bit overworked like me." There was an odd look in his eyes, and something new in his voice—not the frank admiration and friendliness of the pre-Easter period—something which was almost embarrassment. I set it down to the shyness of a man in first love.

I asked him to dine, but he couldn't—was full up for weeks ahead. He consulted a little book, and announced his engagements. They all seemed to be with members of the Cortal family. Luncheon was the same. On my only free days he was booked to Shenstone, the maiden aunt, and cousins from Norfolk who had taken a house in Town. He left me with the same hustled, preoccupied face... Next day I saw him on the Embankment walking home with the Cortal brothers. They were smiling and talking, but somehow he had the air of a man taking exercise between two genial warders.

I spoke to my cynical nephew about it. "The Shinies!" Charles exclaimed. "Not the Sheenies—there's nothing Jewish about Cortal Frères. When will the world realise that we produce in England something much tougher than any Hebrew? We call them the Shinies, because of their high varnish... Old Reggie is corralled all right, shoes off, feet fired and the paddock gates bolted!... Will he marry the girl? I should jolly well think so. He's probably up to his ears in love with her, but even if he loathed her name he would have to go through with it... And he'll espouse a dashed lot more than the buxom Miss Verona—all her uncles and her nephews and her cousins and her aunts for ever and ever. They say that when a man marries a Jewess he finds himself half-smothered under a great feather-bed of steamy consanguinity. Well, it will be the same with the Cortals, only the clan will be less sticky. Reggie will never again call his soul his own. I'm not sure that he'll

want to, but anyhow he won't. They'll never let him alone. He used to be rather a solitary bird, but now he'll have his fill of relations, all as active as fleas. What does the Bible say? 'He shall receive an hundredfold houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers—with persecutions...' 'With persecutions, mark you. Reggie is for it all right.'

As it happened I was so busy with arrears of cases that my life was cloistered during the last week of May and the first of June, and I thought no more of Reggie's fortunes. But on the seventh day of June I had a letter from him, enclosing the proof of a kind of prospectus and asking me what I thought of it.

I thought many things about it. It was a statement of the aims of the "Interpreter's House," which was to be circulated to a carefully selected list in England and America. In every sentence it bore the mark of Verona's fine Roman hand. No man could have written it. There was an indecency about its candour and its flat-footed clarity from which the most pachydermatous male would have recoiled.

In its way it was horribly well done. It was a kind of Stores List of the varieties of English charm and the easiest way to get hold of them. Merlin's Isle of Gramarye had at last got its auctioneer's catalogue. Not that it was written in the style of an estate-agent. It was uncommonly well written, full of good phrases and apposite quotations, and it carried a fine bookish flavour. But ye gods! it was terrible. Relentlessly it set down in black and white all the delicate, half-formed sentiments we cherish in our innermost hearts, and dare not talk about. It was so cursedly explicit that it brushed the bloom off whatever it touched. A June twilight became the glare of an arc lamp, the greenery of April the arsenical green of a chemist's shop. Evasive dreams were transformed into mercantile dogmas. It was a kind of simony, a trafficking in sacred things. The magic of England was "rationalised" with a vengeance... There could be no doubt about its effectiveness. I could see the shoddy culture of two continents seizing upon it joyously as a final statement of the "English proposition." It was a magnificent commercial prospectus for the "Interpreter's House." But I wondered how Reggie felt about it—Reggie who had always had a maidenly shyness about his inner world.

It seemed to me that the time had come for a heart-to-heart talk with him. I resolved to be very careful, for I was dealing with perilous stuff. If he was in love with Verona I dared not speak my mind, and even if there was no love, there were deep obligations of gratitude.

He dined with me at the House on the evening of June eighth, and afterwards we talked in a corner of the terrace. His looks made me uneasy, for he seemed both listless and restless. He kept looking nervously about him, as if at any moment something hostile might attack him. He had the air of a smallish rabbit caught in a largish trap.

But it was a stoical rabbit, for to me he made no complaint. In a leaden voice he announced that he was the most fortunate of men. His business was flourishing, and in the autumn it was proposed to form a company... At last he had found a vocation in life. Yet there was as much conviction in his voice as in the babbling of a sleep-walker.

I asked him baldly when he was going to be married. In even tones he replied that nothing had as yet been settled. But the form of his answer implied that something would soon be settled. I forbore to enquire further, for his gaze was fixed glassily on the tower of Lambeth Palace.

Then of his own accord he asked me what I had thought of the prospectus. I hastily resolved that no good could come of candour. Reggie had made his bed and meant to lie on it, and it was not for me to put in extra thorns.

"Very well done," I said; "what the Germans call appetitlich. It should give you an excellent send-off."

"You didn't think it vulgar?"

"Not a bit," I lied. "Half-tones and broken lights won't do in business. You must be emphatic."

He nodded. "I agree with you. She wrote it, you know. Michael revised it, but in substance it was her work."

I said something silly about having detected the finer female touch. Then he rose to go—he had an appointment with an American at the Savoy. It had been the most hopeless evening, for I had never come near him. He seemed to be separated from me by a vast thicket, and I felt that if I laid an axe to the bushes they would scream like mandrakes.

When we said good-bye, I felt a sudden wave of liking and pity. I patted him on the shoulder. "I hope you're going to be very happy, old man," I said, but he made no answer.

As I went back to my rooms I suddenly thought with grim amusement of what had happened at Flambard a year before. That story, so far as Reggie was concerned, was over. Youth's infinite choice of roads had given place to a rigid groove, presided over by a relentless marmoreal blonde.

VII

But I was wrong. It may have been merely the sight of me as part of his old life, or it may have been my last words, but something that night brought Reggie to breaking-point. When he got home he rang up Tallis at Libanus, found that he was in London, ran him to ground at the Travellers', and arranged to meet him the following morning. I do not know why he turned to Tallis, except that it was at his house that he had first met Verona, and that he seemed to stand for him on the dividing-line between a world which he had loved and a world which he had come to hate and fear.

Tallis told me this part of the story. They lunched together, and talked afterwards beside the fireplace in the hall. He had not seen Reggie for nearly six months, and was shocked at the change in him. As he expressed it, Reggie's coat was all sulky

and his body like a cab-horse.

According to Tallis, Reggie plunged at once into his tale, telling it with a kind of angry vehemence, rather dim about details, but desperately clear on the main points. He had lost everything he cared for in life, he said; he was involved in a juggernaut of a business, ground under a juggernaut of a family, and about to be tied up for life to a juggernaut of a girl. This last he only implied, for he spoke no disrespectful word of Verona.

“You haven’t proposed to her?” Tallis asked.

Reggie said he hadn’t, but that everybody expected him to, including, he feared, the lady herself. There was to be a Cortal family dinner the following night, and it had been gently but firmly hinted to him that that would be a fitting moment to announce the engagement.

“I gather that you’re not in love with her?” said Tallis.

Reggie looked wooden. He was trying to live up to his code. “I admire her immensely,” he stammered. “And I’m grateful to her—far more grateful than I can ever express—I owe her a tremendous lot... She has worked like a slave for me—given up most of her time—oh, she’s a marvel! Unselfish, too... Nobody has ever taken such an interest in me...”

“I know, I know. But do you love her?”

Then, just as an ice jam cracks on a river, Reggie’s decorum went with a rush.

“No, by God,” he cried wildly. “I don’t love her! And she doesn’t love me. She has taken me up, and she’ll stick to me till I’m in my grave, but she doesn’t love me. She couldn’t love anybody—not made that way. I’m only her business partner, the thing she needed to round off her life... Love her! O Lord, I’m nearer hating her. I’m in terror of her. She mesmerises me, like a stoat with a rabbit. She has twenty times my brains, and I’ve simply got to do as I’m told... And then there’s her awful family. I’m lapped in them, suffocated by them. I loathe her infernal apes of brothers—they’re so cursed gentlemanlike and efficient and patronising. Dash it all, man, there are times when I can scarcely keep from hitting their blinking faces.”

He dragged a paper from his pocket, and flung it at Tallis.

“There’s worse still. Look at that. Read it carefully and smack your lips over its succulent beastliness. That’s the Cortal idea of what I’m going to give my life to. That’s the prospectus of my business. The ‘Interpreter’s House,’ by God! It has interpreted them to me all right. Do you grasp the perfect hell of it? I’m to spend my days with the things I thought I cared about, but the gloss is rubbed off every one of them. I’m to be a sort of Cook’s guide to culture on a sound commercial basis. Damn it, I’d rather clean out drains in Chicago, for then I should know that there was a jolly world to which I might some day return. But it’s just that jolly world that’s been blasted for me.”

He dropped his head on his hands and groaned.

“There’s no way out except to cut my throat, and that wouldn’t be playing the game. I suppose I must go through with it. I mustn’t behave like a cad ... Besides, I daren’t. I simply haven’t the nerve.”

Tallis was smiling cryptically.

“Funny you should tell me this. For the same thing happened to me about a quarter of a century ago.”

Reggie looked up quickly. “Gospel truth?” he asked.

“Gospel truth. She was an American—from Philadelphia—very pretty, and sweet, and sticky as barley sugar. She had a family, too, just like the Cortals, and she had a business mind. She took me up, and meant to run me, and at first I was fascinated. Then I saw that it would mean Gehenna—Gehenna for both of us.”

“What did you do?” The question came like a pistol crack.

“I did the only thing. Ran away and hid myself. Very far away—to western Tibet. I thought at the time that I was behaving like a cad, but now I know that it would have been far more caddish to have gone on. Marriage by capture doesn’t suit people like you and me.”

Reggie stared.

“I am not going to Tibet,” he said. He had forgotten all about Moe and Flambard, but something remained by way of an inhibition against the Orient.

“No need to. The world is wide. There’s plenty of other places.”

Tallis rose and rang a bell.

“I’m an abstemious man,” he said; “but I always drink brandy in moments of crisis. This is a crisis for you, my lad, and I’m going to take charge of it. You must run away and hide, like a little boy. It’s the only thing to do, and it’s also the wisest and the most courageous thing. Cut the painter, burn the ship, hew down the bridge behind you.”

There was light in Reggie’s dull eyes.

“Where shall I run to?” he asked, and his voice had lost its flatness.

“Come with me,” said Tallis. “I’m off tomorrow morning, and shall be away for the better part of a year. I have a bit of work to do before I can finish my book. I have shut up Libanus and sent my valuables to the bank. We go up to Liverpool

tonight, so you will just have time to make your arrangements.”

“I’m not going east,” said Reggie, as the vague recollection rose again in him.

“No more am I. I am going west.”

Tallis fetched a sheet of club notepaper on which he wrote with a fat gold pencil.

“We must proceed according to Cocker,” he said. “No secret shuffling out of the country. This is an announcement of my departure which will appear in the press tomorrow, and I have added your name. It is your Declaration of Independence to all whom it may concern. Also you are going straight from here to see Verona and tell her. That will correspond to the tea chests in Boston Harbour. The train for Liverpool leaves at ten minutes past seven. We can dine on it.”

“What shall I say to her?” Reggie faltered, but not as one without hope.

“That’s your concern. You will find words if you really mean business. You are improving on my conduct, for I never made my adieux to the lady, but then Verona has done a good deal for you, and she is old Jim Jack’s niece. After all, it’s a kindness to her, for a girl with her brains can do better for herself than a chap like you. When you get home, you’ll find that she has espoused some appalling magnate.”

Reggie was on his feet, his lassitude gone, his shoulders squared. He spruced himself up with the help of an adjacent mirror, and his movements were brisk.

“Right,” he said. “The seven-ten at Euston. I needn’t take much luggage, for I can buy what I want in... ” He stopped short. “New York is no good. I can’t hide myself there. The Cortals know half the place, and those blighted brothers are always hopping over.”

Tallis was paying for the brandy.

“You needn’t worry about that,” he said. “New York is only our jumping-off point. We are bound for farther south... Central America... a place called Yucatan.”

V. — SIR ROBERT GOODEVE

*“A covert place
Where you might think to find a din
Of doubtful talk, and a live flame
Wandering, and many a shape whose name
Not itself knoweth, and old dew,
And your own footsteps meeting you,
And all things going as they came.”*

—D G Rossetti, The Portrait.

I

For five months after that Whitsuntide at Flambard I saw and heard nothing of Goodeve. But I could not get him out of my mind, for of all the party he had struck me as the one to whom the experience meant the most, the one who had been the most tense and expectant. Whatever he had seen on the phantasmal Times page of a year ahead he would take with the utmost seriousness. I liked him so much that I was a little anxious about him. He was finer clay than the others.

My own attitude towards Moe’s experiment varied during these months. Sometimes I was inclined to consider the whole thing the vagary of a genius gone mad. But there were moments when I remembered his brooding pits of eyes and the strange compulsion of his talk, and came again under his spell. I made an opportunity to see Landor—the man I had telephoned from Flambard before my first conversation with Moe—and tried to discover what substance a trained scientist might find in Moe’s general theory. But Landor was not very helpful. The usual reaction had begun, and I gathered that at the moment the dead man had more critics than followers. Landor declared that he did not profess to understand him, but that the common view was that the speculations of his last years had been a sad declension from his earlier achievements in physics and mathematics. “It is the old story,” he said. “Age means a breaking down of partition walls, and the imagination muddies the reason. Moe should have ended as a poet or a preacher. He had got a little beyond science.” I tried to put limply Moe’s theory of Time, and Landor wrinkled his brows. “I know that there are people working on that line,” he said, “but I don’t think they have made much of it. It’s rather outside my beat. More psychology than physics.”

This conversation did little to reassure me. So far as Goodeve was concerned, it was not the actual validity of Moe’s doctrine that mattered, but his own reactions to the experience. And an incident in the last week of October rather shook the scepticism which I had been trying to cultivate. For I opened the newspaper one morning to learn that young Molsom had been appointed a Lord of Appeal straight from the Bar, a most unexpected choice. Yet I had expected it, for in my efforts to throw my mind a year forward under Moe’s direction I had had a vision of the future House of Lords tribunal. The figure on the Woolsack had been blurred, but Molsom had been perfectly clear, with his big nose and his habit of folded arms.

In the beginning of November Sir Thomas Twiston died, and Goodeve, the prospective candidate, had to face a by-

election. The Marton division of Dorset was reckoned one of the safest Tory seats in the land, but this contest had not the dullness of the usual political certainty. Goodeve was opposed, and though the opposition was futile, the election gave an opportunity for some interesting propaganda. It fell just after Geraldine had concluded his tour in the North, where he had made a feature of unemployment and his new emigration policy—a policy which, as I have already mentioned, was strongly disliked by many of his own party. Goodeve, who had always been an eager Imperialist, saw his chance. He expounded his leader's views with equal eloquence and far greater knowledge. The press reported him at length, for his speeches were excellent copy; he dealt wittily and faithfully with both Waldemar and the Liberals and the "big business" group in his own party. Before the contest was over he had become a considerable personality in politics.

In fulfilment of an old promise I went down to speak for him on the eve of the poll. We had three joint meetings, and I was much impressed by his performance. Here was a new voice and a new mind, a man who could make platitudes seem novelties, and convince his hearers that the most startling novelties were platitudes. He looked vigorous and fit, and his gusto seemed to dispose of my former anxieties.

But at the hotel on the evening of the election day I realised that he had been trying himself high. His fine, dark face was too sharp for health, and his wholesome colour had gone. He was so tired that he could scarcely eat a mouthful of supper, but when I wanted him to go to bed he declared that it was no good, since he could not sleep. He kept me up till the small hours, but he did not talk much—not a word about the election and its chances. Next day he looked better, but I was glad when the declaration of the poll was over. He was in by an immense majority, nearly fourteen thousand, and there was the usual row in the streets and a tour of committee rooms. I had meant to get back to Town for luncheon, but something in his face made me change my plans. "Won't you spare me one night?" he begged. "Come back with me to Goodeve. I implore you, Leithen. You do me more good than anybody else on earth, and I need you to help me to recover my balance." I could not resist the appeal in his eyes, so I sent off a few telegrams, and in the late afternoon escaped with him from Marton.

It was a drive of about forty miles through a misty November twilight. He scarcely uttered a word, and I respected his mood and also kept silence. The man was clearly dog-tired. His house received us with blazing fires and the mellow shadows of the loveliest hall in England. He went straight upstairs, announcing that he would have a bath and lie down till dinner.

At dinner his manner was brisker. He seemed to feel the comfort of release from the sickening grind of an election, and I realised that the thing had been for him a heavy piece of collar work. Goodeve was not the man to enjoy the debauch of half-truths inevitable in platform speeches. I expected him to talk about politics, which at the time were in a considerable mess. I told him that he was entering Parliament at a dramatic moment with a reputation already made, and said the sort of encouraging things which the ordinary new member would have welcomed. But he did not seem much interested in the gossip which I retailed. When I speculated on Geraldine's next move he yawned.

He was far more inclined to talk about his house. I had never stayed at Goodeve before, and had fallen at once under the spell of its cloudy magnificence. I think I used that very phrase, for such was my main impression. It had an air of spaciousness far greater than its actual dimensions warranted, for all its perspectives seemed to end in shadows, to fade away into a world where our measurements no longer held... When I had first talked with him at Flambard he had been in revolt against the dominance of the old house which was always trying to drag him back into the past, and had spoken of resisting the pull of his ancestors. Now he seemed to welcome it. He had been making researches in its history, and was full of curious knowledge about his forbears. After dinner he had the long gallery on the first floor lit up, and we made a tour of inspection of the family portraits.

I was struck, I remember, by the enduring physical characteristics of his race. Most of his ancestors were dark men with long faces, and that odd delicacy about mouth and chin which one sees in the busts of Julius Caesar. Not a strong stock, perhaps, but a fine one. Goodeve himself, with his straight brows, had a more masterful air than the pictures, but when I looked at him again I thought I saw the same slight over-refinement, something too mobile in the lips, too anxious in the eyes. "Tremulous, impressional," Emerson says that the hero must be, and these were the qualities of the old Goodeves which leaped at once from their portraits. Many had been heroes— notably the Sir Robert who fell at Naseby and the Sir Geoffrey who died with Moore at Corunna—but it was a heroism for death rather than for life. I wondered how the race had managed to survive so long.

Oddly enough it was their deaths that seemed chiefly to interest Goodeve. He had all the details of them—this one had died in his bed at sixty-three, that in the hunting-field at forty, another in a drinking bout in the early twenties. They appeared for the most part to have been a short-lived race and tragically fated...

By and by this mortuary tale began to irritate me. I preferred to think of the cuirassed, periwigged or cravated gentlemen, the hooped and flounced ladies, as in the vigour of life in which the artist had drawn them. And then I saw that in Goodeve's face which set me wondering. On his own account he was trying to puzzle out some urgent thing—urgent for himself. He was digging into his family history and interrogating the painted faces on his walls to find an answer to some vital problem of his own.

What it might be I could not guess, but it disquieted me, and I lent an inattentive ear to his catalogue. And then I suddenly got enlightenment.

We had left the gallery and were making our way to the library through a chain of little drawing-rooms. All had been lit up, and all were full of pictures, mostly Italian, collected by various Goodeves during the Grand Tour. They were cheerful

rooms, papered not panelled, with a pleasant Victorian complacency about them. But in the last the walls were dark oak, and above the fireplace was a picture which arrested me. Goodeve seemed to wish to hurry me on, but when he saw my interest he too halted.

It was a Spanish piece, painted I should think by someone who had come under El Greco's influence, and had also studied the Dutch school. I am no authority on art, but if it be its purpose to make an instant and profound impression on a beholder, then this was a masterpiece. It represented a hall in some great house, paved with black and white marble. There was a big fire burning in an antique fireplace, and the walls blazed with candles. But the hangings were a curious dusky crimson, so that in spite of the brilliant lighting the place was sombre, suggesting more a church than a dwelling. The upper walls and the corners were in deep shadow. On the floor some ten couples were dancing, an ordered dance in which there was no gaiety, and the dancers' faces were all set and white. Other people were sitting round the walls, rigidly composed as if they were curbing some strong passion. At the great doors at the far end men-at-arms stood on guard, so that none should pass. On every face, in every movement was fear—fear, and an awful expectation of something which was outside in the night. You felt that at any moment the composure might crack, that the faces would become contorted with terror and the air filled with shrieks.

The picture was lettered "La Peste," but I did not need the words to tell me the subject. It was a house in a city where the plague was raging. These people were trying to forget the horror. They had secluded themselves in a palace, set guards at the door, and tried to shut out the world. But they had failed, for the spectre rubbed shoulders with each. They might already have the poison in their blood, and in an hour be blue and swollen. One heard the rumble of the dead-cart on the outer cobbles making a dreadful bass to the fiddles.

I have never received a stronger impression from any picture. I think I must have cried out, for Goodeve came close to me.

"My God, what a thing!" I said. "The man who painted that was a devil!"

"He understood the meaning of fear," was the answer.

"Not honest human fear," I said. "That is the panic of hell."

Goodeve shook his head.

"Only fear. Everybody there has still a hope that they may escape. They are still only fearful and anxious. Panic will come when the first yellow pustules show on the skin. For panic you must have a certainty."

Something in his tone made me turn my eyes from the picture to his face. He had become like all his ancestors; the firm modern moulding had slackened into something puzzled and uncertain, as of a man groping in a dim world. And in his eyes and around his lips was the grey shadow of a creeping dread.

My mind flew back to Flambard. I knew now that on that June morning Goodeve had received some fateful message. I thought I could guess what the message had been.

II

We drifted to the library, and dropped into chairs on each side of the hearth. It was a chilly night, so the fire had been kept high, and the room was so arranged that the light was concentrated around where we sat, and the rest left in shadow. So I had a good view of Goodeve's face against a dusky background. He had lit a pipe, and was staring at the logs, his whole body relaxed like a tired man's. But I caught him casting furtive glances in my direction. He wanted to tell me something; perhaps he saw that I had guessed, and wanted me to ask a question, but I felt oddly embarrassed and waited.

He spoke first.

"Moe is dead," he said simply, and I nodded.

"It is a pity," he went on. "I should have liked another talk with him. Did you understand his theories?"

I shook my head.

"No more did I," he said. "I don't think I ever could. I have been reading Paston and Crevalli and all round the subject, but I can't get the hang of it. My mind hasn't been trained that way."

"Nor mine," I replied. "Nor, as far as I can gather, that of anybody living. Moe seems to have got into a world of his own where no one could keep up with him."

"It's a pity," he said again. "If one could have followed his reasoning and been able to judge for one's self its value, it would have made a difference... perhaps."

"I ought to tell you," I said, "that I've been making enquiries, and I find that our best people are not inclined to take Moe as gospel."

"So I gather. But I'm not sure that that helps. Even if his theories were all wrong, the fact would still remain that he could draw back the curtain a little. It may have been an illusion, of course, but we can't tell... yet."

He stared into the fire, and then said very gently, "You see—I got a glimpse inside."

"I know," I said.

“Yes,” he went on, “and I believe you have guessed what I saw.”

I nodded.

“Let me tell you everything. It’s a comfort to me to be able to tell you ... You’re the only man I could ever confide in... You were there yourself and saw enough to take it seriously... I read, for about a quarter of a second, my own obituary. One takes in a good deal in a flash of time if the mind is expectant. It was a paragraph about two inches long far down on the right-hand side of The Times page opposite the leaders—the usual summary of what is given at length in the proper obituary pages. It regretted to announce the death of Sir Robert Goodeve, Baronet, of Goodeve, MP for the Marton division of Dorset. There was no doubt about the man it meant... Then it said something about a growing political reputation and a maiden speech which would not be soon forgotten. I have the exact words written down.”

“Nothing more?”

“No... yes. There was another dead man in the paragraph, a Colonel Dugald Chatto, of Glasgow... That was all.”

Goodeve knocked out his pipe and got to his feet. He stretched himself, as if his legs had cramped, and I remember thinking how fine a figure of a man he was as he stood tensely in the firelight. He was staring away from me into a dim corner of the room. He seemed to be endeavouring by a bodily effort to shake himself free of a burden.

I tried to help.

“I’m in the confidence of only one of the others,” I said. “Reggie Daker. He read the announcement of his departure for Yucatan on a scientific expedition. Reggie knows nothing about science and hates foreign parts, and he declares that nothing will make him budge from England. He says that forewarned is forearmed, and that he is going to see that The Times next June is put in the cart. He has already forgotten all about the thing... There seems to me to be some sense in that point of view. If you know what’s coming you can take steps to avoid it... For example, supposing you had given up your parliamentary candidature, you could have made The Times wrong on that point, so why shouldn’t you be able to make it wrong on others?”

He turned and bent his strong dark brows on me.

“I thought of that. I can’t quite explain why, but it seemed to me scarcely to be playing the game. Rather like funking. No. I’m not going to alter my plan of life out of fear. That would be giving in like a coward.”

But there was none of the boisterousness of defiance in his voice. He spoke heavily, as if putting into words an inevitable but rather hopeless resolution.

“Look here, Goodeve,” I said. “You and I are rational men of the world and we can’t allow ourselves to be the sport of whimsies. There are two ways of looking at this Flambard business. It may have been pure illusion caused by the hypnotic powers of a tremendous personality like Moe, with no substance of reality behind it. It may have been only a kind of dream. If you dreamed you were being buried in Westminster Abbey next week you wouldn’t pay the slightest attention.”

“That is a possible view,” he said. But I could see that it was not the view he took himself. Moe’s influence upon him had been so profound, that, though he could not justify his faith on scientific grounds, he was a convinced believer.

I had a sudden idea.

“Listen to me. I can prove that it is illusion. Moe told us that our minds could get a larger field of observation, which would include part of the future. Yes, but the observing thing was still our mind, and that presupposes a living man. Therefore for a man to see the report of his death is a contradiction in terms.”

He turned his unquiet eyes on me.

“Curious that you should say that, for I raised the very point with Moe. His answer was that the body of the observer might be dead, but that the mind did not die... I was bound to admit his argument, for, you see, I, too, believe in the immortality of the soul.”

There was such complete conviction in his tone that I had to give up my point, though I was not convinced, even on Goodeve’s hypothesis.

“Very well. The other view is that, by some unknown legerdemain, you actually saw what will be printed in The Times on the next tenth of June. But it may be a hoax or some journalistic blunder. False news of a man’s death has often been published. You remember Billy Devereux seven years ago. Reggie Daker isn’t going to Yucatan, and there’s no more reason why you should be dead.”

He smiled, and his voice was a little more cheerful. “I would point out,” he said, “that there is a considerable difference between the cases. Going to Yucatan is a voluntary act which, requires the actor’s co-operation, while dying is usually an involuntary affair.”

“Never mind,” I cried. “We are bound to believe in free will up to a point. It’s the condition on which life is conducted. What you must try to do is to banish the whole thing from your mind. Defy that damned oracle. You’ve begun right by getting into Parliament. Go on and make the best maiden speech of the day. Fate will always yield if you stand up to it.”

“Thank you, Leithen,” he said. “I think that is sound advice. I’m ashamed to have let you see that the thing worried me. Nobody else in the world has the slightest notion... But you’re an understanding fellow. If you’re willing, you can be a

wonderful stand-by to me, for I'm a lonely bird and apt to brood... I've another comfort, for there's that second man in the same case. I told you that I read the name of Colonel Dugald Chatto. I've made enquiries about him. He's a Glasgow wine merchant, who was a keen Territorial, and commanded a battalion in the War. Man about forty-seven, the hard, spare, scratch-man-at-golf type that never was ill in its life. Health is important, for The Times would have said 'killed,' if it had been death by accident. I've noticed that that's its custom."

"There's nothing much wrong with your health," I put in.

"No. I'm pretty fit."

Again he stretched his arms, as if pushing an incubus away from him. He looked down at me with an embarrassed smile. But the next moment his eyes were abstracted and back in the shadowy corners.

III

Goodeve took his seat in the House, and then for a fortnight sat stolidly on the back Opposition benches. Everybody was curious about him, and our younger people were prepared to take him to their hearts. They elected him straight off a member of a group of Left-wing Tories, who dined together once a week and showed signs of becoming a Fourth Party. But he seemed to be shy of company. He never went near the smoking-room, he never wrote letters in the library, one never saw him gossiping in the lobbies. He was polite and friendly, but as aloof as the planet Mars. There he sat among the shadows of the back benches, listening attentively to the debates, with a queer secret smile on his face. One might have thought that he was contemptuous of it all, but for his interested eyes. He was watching closely how the game was played, but at the same time a big part of his mind was sojourning in another country.

There was general interest in his maiden speech, and it was expected that it would come soon. You see, what was agitating the country at the moment was Geraldine's new crusade, and Goodeve had fought his election on that, and had indeed proved himself as good an exponent of the new Imperialism as his leader. Some of his sentences had already passed into the stock stuff of the press and the platform. He got the usual well-meant advice from the old hands. Members who did not know him would take him aside, and advise him to get the atmosphere of the place before he spoke. "It won't do," they told him, "to go off at half-cock. You've come here with a good deal of prestige, and you mustn't throw it away." Others thought that he should begin modestly and not wait for a full-dress occasion with red carpets down. "Slip into the debate quietly some dinner-hour," they counselled, "and try out your voice. The great thing is to get the ice broken. You'll have plenty of chances later for the bigger thing." Goodeve's smiling reticence, you see, made many people think that he would be nervous. I asked him about his plans, and he shook his head. "Haven't got any, I shall take my chance when it comes. I'm in no hurry." And then he added what I did not like. "It's a long time till the tenth of June."

I asked our Whips, and was told that he had never spoken to them about the best moment to lift up his voice. They seemed to find him an enigma. John Fortingall, who ran the dining group I have mentioned, confessed himself puzzled. "I thought we had got an absolute winner," he declared, "but now I'm not so sure. There's no doubt about the brains, and they tell me he can put the stuff across. Everybody who knows him says he's a good fellow too. But all I can say is, he's a darned bad mixer. He looks at you as if you were his oldest friend, and then shoves you gently away as if you were going to pinch his tie-pin. Too frosty a lad for my taste."

Goodeve told nobody about his plans, and he succeeded most successfully in surprising the House. He chose the most critical debate of the early session, which took place less than three weeks after he entered Parliament. It was a resolution of no confidence moved by Geraldine, and was meant to be a demonstration in force against the Government, and also a defiance to the stand-patters on our own side.

There was no hope of success, for Waldemar and the Liberals would vote against it, and we could not count on polling our full strength, but it was believed that it might drive a wedge into Labour and have considerable effect in the country. Goodeve must have had some private arrangement with the Speaker, but he said nothing to his Front Bench. The Leader of the Opposition was as much taken by surprise as anybody.

Geraldine moved the resolution in one of the best speeches I ever heard from him—conciliatory and persuasive, extraordinarily interesting, and salted with his engaging humour. He deliberately kept the key low, and attempted none of the flights of eloquence which had marked his campaign in the North. Mayot replied—the Prime Minister was to wind up the debate—and Mayot also was good. His line was the sagacious enthusiast, welcoming Geraldine's ideals, approving his general purpose, but damping down his ardours with wholesome common sense—the kind of speech which never fails of appeal to Englishmen. Then came Waldemar in a different mood. It was a first-class debating performance, and he searched out the joints in Geraldine's harness and probed them cunningly. He was giving no quarter, and there was vitriol on his sword's point. He concluded with a really fine defence of the traditional high-road of policy, and a warning against showy bypaths, superbly delivered and couched in pure, resounding, eighteenth-century prose. When he sat down there was nearly a minute of that whole-hearted applause which the House gives, irrespective of party, to a fine parliamentary achievement.

Then Goodeve was called, and not, as was expected, the ex-Foreign Secretary. He had a wonderful audience, for the House was packed, and keyed up, too, by Waldemar, but it was the kind of audience which should have made the knees of a novice give under him. There had been three speeches by old parliamentary hands, each excellent of its kind, and any maiden effort must be an anticlimax. But Goodeve seemed to be unconscious of the peril. He was sitting at the corner of

the second bench above the gangway, and had been taking notes unconcernedly while the others were speaking. He had a few slips of paper in his hand, and that hand did not shake. He looked around his audience, and his eye was composed. He began to speak, and his voice was full and steady...

The House expects a new member to show a becoming modesty. A little diffidence, an occasional hesitation, are good tactics in a maiden speech, whether or not there be any reason for them. But there was no halting, no deprecatory air with Goodeve, and after the first minute nobody expected it. It would have been absurd, for this was clearly a master, every bit as much a master of the spoken word as Waldemar or Geraldine... I understood the reason for this composure. Goodeve knew that success was predestined.

He began quietly and a little dully, but the House was held by its interest in his first appearance and by his pleasant voice. First he dealt with Mayot, and his courtesy could not prevent his contempt from peeping out. Mayot and his kind, he said, were mongers of opinion, specialists in airy buildings, but incapable of laying one solid brick on another on solid earth—a view received with enthusiasm by Collinson and some of the Labour Left Wing. Mayot, who was very ingenious at digging out awkward sentences from past Tory speeches, had quoted something from Arthur Balfour. Goodeve retorted with a most apposite quotation from Canning: “It is singular to remark how ready some people are to admire in a great man the exception rather than the rule of his conduct. Such perverse worship is like the idolatry of barbarous nations, who can see the noonday splendour of the sun without emotion, but who, when he is in eclipse, come forward with hymns and cymbals to adore him.”

But on the whole he dealt lightly with Mayot; it was when he turned to the more formidable Waldemar that he released his heavy batteries. He tore his speech to pieces with a fierce, but icy, gusto. There was no strained or rhetorical word, no excited gesture, no raising of the even, soothing voice, but every sentence was a lash flicking off its piece of skin. It was less an exposure of a speech than of a habit of mind and a school of thought. Waldemar, he said, was one of those to whom experience meant nothing, whose souls existed in a state of sacred torpidity prostrated before cold altars and departed gods. His appeal to common sense was only an appeal to the spiritual sluggishness which was England’s besetting sin, and which in the present crisis was her deadliest peril. Waldemar’s peroration had really moved the House, but Goodeve managed to strip the glamour from it and make it seem tinsel. He repeated some of the best sentences, and the connection in which he quoted them and the delicate irony of his tone made them comic. Members tittered, and the Liberal Front Bench had savage faces. It was one of the cleverest and cruellest feats I have ever seen performed in debate.

Then he turned on the “big business” section of his own party, who were hostile to Geraldine, and had begun to coquet with Waldemar. Here he fairly let himself go. He addressed the Speaker, but every now and then wheeled slowly round and looked the wrathful, high-coloured magnates in the face. The extraordinary thing was that they made no audible protest; the tension of the House was too great for that. In Mayot he had trounced the timid visionary, in Waldemar the arid dogmatist, and in these gentry he dealt with the strong, silent, practical man. He defined him, in Disraeli’s words, as “one who practises the blunders of his predecessors.” They were always talking about being consistent, about sticking to their principles, about taking a strong line. What were their principles? he asked urbanely. Not those of the Tory Party, which had always looked squarely at realities, and had never been hidebound in its methods. Was it not possible that they mistook stupidity for consistency, blind eyes for balanced minds? As for their vaunted strength, it was that of cast-iron and not of steel, and their courage was the timidity of men who lived in terror of being called weak. In the grim world we lived in there was no room for such fifth-form heroics.

All this was polished and deadly satire which delighted everyone but its victims. And then he suddenly changed his mood. After a warm expression of loyalty to Geraldine, he gave his own version of the road to a happier country. It was a dangerous thing for a man who had been making game of Waldemar’s eloquence to be eloquent on his own account, but Goodeve attempted it, and he brilliantly succeeded. His voice fell to a quiet reflective note. He seemed to be soliloquising, like a weary man who, having been in the dust of the lists, now soothes himself with his secret dreams. The last part of his speech was almost poetry, and I do not think that in my long parliamentary experience I ever heard anything like it. Certainly nothing that so completely captured its hearers. Very gently he seemed to be opening windows beyond which lay a pleasant landscape.

He spoke for a few minutes under the hour, an extravagant measure for a maiden speech. There was very little applause, for members seemed to be spell-bound. I have never seen the House hushed for so long. Then an extraordinary thing happened. The Prime Minister thought it necessary to rise at once, but he had a poor audience. The House emptied, as if members felt it necessary to go elsewhere to get their bearings again and to talk over this portent.

Goodeve kept his place till Trant finished, and then he followed me out of the House. We went down to the terrace, which was empty, for it was a grey November afternoon with a slight drizzle. After a big oratorical effort, especially a triumphant effort, a man generally relaxes, and becomes cheerful and confidential. Not so Goodeve. He scarcely listened to my heartfelt congratulations. I remember how he leaned over the parapet, watching the upstream flow of the leaden tide, and spoke to the water and not to me.

“It is no credit to me,” he said. “I was completely confident... You know why... That made me able to put out every ounce I had in me, for I knew it would be all right. If you were in for a race and knew positively that you would win, you would be bound to run better than you ever ran before.”

I have a vivid recollection of that moment, for I felt somehow that it was immensely critical. Here was a man who by his first speech had turned politics topsy-turvy. Inside the Palace of Westminster every corridor was humming with his name;

in the newspaper offices journalists were writing columns of impressions, and editors preparing leaders on the subject; already London tea-tables would be tooting it, and that night it would be the chief topic at dinner. And here was the man responsible for it all as cold as a tombstone, negligent of the fame he had won, and thinking only of its relation to a few lines of type that would not be set up for half a year.

My problem was his psychology, not facts, but the way he looked at them, and I gave him what I considered sound advice. I told him that he had done a thing which was new in the history of Parliament. By one speech he had advanced to front-bench status. Party politics were all at sixes and sevens, and he had now the ear of the House as much as Trant and Geraldine. If he cared he could have a chief hand in the making of contemporary history. He MUST care, and for this reason—that it was the best way to falsify The Times paragraph. If he went on as he had begun, in six months anything that might happen to him would not get half a dozen lines but a column and half-inch headings. He had it in his own power to make that disquieting glimpse at Flambard an illusion... You see, I was treating the Flambard affair seriously. I had decided that that was the best plan, since it had so eaten into Goodeve's soul.

I remember that he sighed and nodded his head, as if he agreed with me. He refused an invitation to dine, and left without going back to the Chamber. Nor did he return for the division— an excited scene, for Geraldine's motion was only lost by seventeen votes, owing to many Labour members abstaining.

IV

Next week old Folliot asked me to luncheon. It was about the time when, under Mayot's influence, he was beginning to sidle back into politics. I had known him so long that I had acquired a kind of liking for him as a milestone—he made me feel the distance I had travelled, and I often found his tattle restful.

We lunched at his club in St James's Street. The old fellow had not changed his habits, for he still had his pint of champagne in a silver mug, and his eye was always lifting to note people whose acquaintance he liked to claim. But I found that what he wanted was not to impart the latest gossip but to question me. He was acutely interested in Goodeve, and wished to know everything about him.

"It is the sorrow of my life," he told me, "that I missed his speech. I had a card for the Distinguished Strangers' Gallery, as it happened, and I meant to go there for the opening of the debate. But I had some American friends lunching with me, and we stayed on talking and I gave up the idea. You heard it, of course? Did it sound as well as it read? I confess it seemed to me a most refreshing return to the grand manner. I remember Randolph Churchill..." Folliot strayed into reminiscences of past giants, but he always pulled himself up and came back to the point, for he seemed deeply curious about Goodeve. "His assurance now—astonishing in a young man, but I understand that it did not offend the House... Of course the speech must have been carefully prepared, and yet it had real debating qualities. That quip about Waldemar's reference to Mr G, for example—he could not have anticipated that Waldemar would give him such a chance... With the close, I confess, I was less impressed. Excellent English, but many people can speak good English. Ah, no doubt! Better to hear than to read. They tell me he has a most seductive voice."

I could tell him little, for I had only known Goodeve for six months, but I expanded in praise of the speech. Folliot cross-examined me closely about his manner. Was there a proper urbanity in his satire? Did he convince the House that he was in earnest? Was there no pedantry?—too many quotations, possibly? The House did not relish the academic. Above all, was there the accent of authority? Could he keep the field together as well as show it sport?

"He may be the man we have all been looking for," he said. "On paper he certainly fills the bill. Young enough, good-looking, well-born, rich, educated, fine War record, considerable business knowledge. He sounds almost too good to be true. My one doubt is whether he will stay the course. You see, I know something about the Goodeves. I knew his uncle, old Sir Adolphus."

I pricked up my ears. Folliot was beginning to interest me.

"A singular family, the Goodeves," he went on. "Always just about to disappear from the earth, and always saved by a miracle. This young man was the son of the parson, Adolphus' brother, who was cut off with a hundred pounds because he took up with the High Church lot, while his father was a crazy Evangelical. Adolphus avenged him, for he wasn't any sort of Christian at all. I remember the old man well. He was a militant Agnostic, a worshipper at the Huxley and Tyndall shrines—dear me, how all that has gone out today! He used to come to Town to address meetings in the Essex Hall, to which he invited a selection of the London clergy. They never went, but some of us young men used to go, and we were always rewarded. The old fellow had quite a Disraeli touch in vituperation. He was a shocking scarecrow to look at, though he had a fine high-nosed face. Not always washed and shaven, I fear. His clothes were a disgrace—his trousers were half-way up his legs, and his hat and coat were green with age. He never spent a penny he could avoid, always travelled third class and had only one club, because it did not charge for bread and cheese and beer, and so he could lunch free. He had a dread that he might die in beggary—scattered his money in youth, and then got scared and relapsed into a miser. He died worth a quarter of a million, but all the cash they found in the house was ninepence. Hence the comfortable fortune of your young friend. That was so like the Goodeves—they were always having notions—panics, you might call them— which perverted their lives."

Folliot had more to say about Sir Adolphus. He had been a distinguished marine biologist in his youth, and had made an expedition to the Great Barrier Reef and written a notable book about it. Then he had suddenly cut adrift from the whole

business. Something gave him a distaste for it—the handling of an octopus, Folliot suggested, or too close an acquaintance with a man-eating shark. “Terribly high-strung people,” said Folliot. “They didn’t acquire dislikes, so much as horrors. People used to say that Adolphus’ aversion to Christianity was due to his having been once engaged to Priscilla Aberley. She was very devout in those days, and was by way of saving his soul, so, when she jilted him for Aberley, Adolphus had no more use for souls in the parson’s sense.”

“He died only a year or two ago,” I put in. “Did you see anything of him in his last days?”

Folliot smiled. “Not I. Nobody did, except the doctor. I understand that he wouldn’t have this young man near the place. He shut himself up, and nursed his health as he nursed his money. He must have launched out at last, for he had a scientific valet to see that his rooms were kept at an even temperature, and he had a big consultant down from London if he had as much as a cold in his head... A little mad, perhaps. It looked as if he were in terror of death. Odd in a man who did not believe in any kind of after-life. I fancy that was one of the family traits.”

“I can’t agree,” I said. “They were a most gallant race. I’ve poked a little way into the family history, and there was hardly a British war in which a Goodeve did not distinguish himself and get knocked on the head. Unlucky, if you like, but not a trace of the white feather.”

Then Folliot said a thing which gave me some respect for his intelligence. “No doubt that is true. They could face death comfortably if it came to them in hot blood. But they could not wait for it with equanimity. They had spirit, if you like, but not fortitude.”

I was so struck by this remark that I missed what Folliot said next. Apparently he was talking about a Goodeve woman, a great-aunt of my friend. She had been some sort of peeress, but I did not catch the title, and her Christian name had been Portia.

“Old Lady Manorwater knew her well, and used to speak much of her. She had been a raging beauty in her youth, and no better than she should be, people said. Lawrence painted her as Circe—they have the picture at Wirlesdon in the green drawing-room—you must remember it. When she married she ranged herself and gave no further occasion for scandal, but she was still the despair of other wives, for their husbands hung round her like flies round honey. The Duke of Wellington was said to write to her every day, and his brougham stopped at her door twice a week. Melbourne dangled about her skirts, and the young Disraeli wrote her infamous poetry... And then something snapped. She began to get crises of religious terror, and would have parsons to pray with her half the night. Gay as a bird in between, you understand, but when the cloud descended she was virtually a mad-woman. It heightened her beauty and made it more spiritual, for there was a haunted, other-world look in her face. There’s a passage about her in one of Carlyle’s letters. He met her somewhere, and wrote that he could not get her out of his head, for she had eyes like a stricken deer’s. ‘God pity the man or woman’—I think these are his words—‘on whom the fear of Jehovah has fallen. They must break the world, or be themselves broken.’”

Folliot saw my interest and was flattered, for he omitted to fuss about the club port.

“Well, she broke,” he continued. “She died... quite young. They called it a decline, but old Lady Manorwater said it was fear—naked fear. There was nothing the matter with her body... Yes, there were children. Rupert Trensham is her grandson, but the Trensham stock is prosaic enough to steady the Goodeve blood.”

I had to hurry back to chambers, and left Folliot ordering a liqueur.

“A queer race,” were his parting words. “That is why I wonder if this young man will last the course. They have spirit without fortitude.”

My appreciation of that phrase had pleased the old fellow. I knew that for the next fortnight he would be repeating it all over London.

v

During the next three months I had the miserable job of looking on at what was nothing less than a parliamentary tragedy. For I watched Goodeve labouring to follow my advice and dismally failing.

He began with every chance. The impression made by his maiden speech was a living memory; he was usually called by the Speaker when he got up, and the House filled when the word went round that he was on his feet. Geraldine’s new policy was still the chief issue, and, after its author, Goodeve was its chief exponent. Moreover, he had established a reputation for wit, and for dealing faithfully with opponents, and the House loves a gladiatorial show.

Having started with fireworks, he attempted in the orthodox way to get a name for solid sense and practical knowledge. His next effort, a week later, was on some supplementary estimates, a rather long and quite prosaic analysis of a batch of figures. I heard much of it, and was on the whole disappointed. It was all too laboured; he did not make his points cleanly enough; indeed, it was just the kind of thing which your city man fires off once every session to a small and inattentive House. It had none of the art of his first speech and, though he got a good press, it had no real effect upon the debate.

Then he took to intervening briefly in every kind of discussion. He was always more or less relevant, but what he said was generally platitudinous. On the occasions I heard him I missed any note of distinction. He was the ordinary, fairly intelligent member putting up ordinary, fairly intelligent debating points. Our Whips loved him, for he was always ready to keep a debate going when called upon, and I think members approved his modesty in not reserving himself for full-dress

occasions. But I could not disguise from myself the fact that his reputation was declining. He, who had got well ahead of other people, had now decorously fallen back into the ranks.

All this time he mixed little with his fellows. He only once attended a dinner of his group, and then scarcely uttered a word. Sally Flambard attempted in vain to get him to her political luncheons. So far as I knew, he never talked politics with anybody. But he rarely missed a division, and would sit solidly to the close of the dreariest debate. He had taken his seat near the end of the third bench below the gangway, so I had no chance of watching his face. But one evening I made an opportunity by going up into the opposite gallery. He sat very still and composed, I remember, with his eyes narrowed and his head a little bent forward. But the impression I got was of a terrific effort at self-restraint. He was schooling himself to something which he hated and dreaded, bracing himself to an effort on which fateful things depended, and the schooling had brought his nerves to cracking-point.

I did not see him during the Christmas vacation. Then in February came the crisis which I have already recorded, when the nation suddenly woke up to the meaning of the unemployment figures, and Chuff began his extra-mural campaign, and parties split themselves up into Activists and Passivists. You would have said that it was the ideal occasion for Goodeve to take the lead. It was the situation which his maiden speech had forecast and it was the spirit of that maiden speech which was needed. Waldemar and Mayot were the leading Passivists, and, Heaven knows, they gave openings enough for a critic. Judging by his early form, Goodeve could have turned them inside out and made them the laughing-stock of the country, and he could have made magnificent play with the Prime Minister's shuffling. He could have toned down Collinson's violence, and steadied some of the younger Tories who were beginning to talk wildly. Above all, he could have produced an Activist policy based on common sense, which was the crying need. Geraldine could not do it; he was always the parliamentarian rather than the statesman.

Goodeve tried and most comprehensively failed. He simply could not hold the House—could hold it far less than Lanyard, who had a voice like a pea-hen, or John Fortingall, who stuttered and hesitated and rarely got a verb into his sentences. At his first appearance he had shown an amazing gift of catching the atmosphere of the assembly and gripping its attention in a vice. His air had had authority in it, his voice had been compelling, his confidence had impressed without offending. But now... great God! he seemed a different man. I heard him try to tackle Mayot, but Mayot, who had looked nervous when he rose, beamed happily as he continued and laughed aloud when he sat down. There was no grip in him, no word spoken out of strong belief, no blow launched with the weight of the body behind it. He seemed to be repeating—hesitatingly—a lesson which he had imperfectly learned by heart. His personality, once so clean-cut and potent, had dissolved into a vapour.

I missed none of his speeches, and with each my heart grew heavier. For I realised the cause of his fiasco... Goodeve was a haunted man, haunted by a dreadful foreknowledge of fate. In his maiden speech fate had been on his side, since he had a definite assurance that he must succeed. But now he was fighting against fate. The same source, which gave him the certainty of his initial triumph, had denied him the hope of further success. As I had advised, he was striving now to coerce fate, to alter what he believed to be his destiny, to stultify what had been decreed... He could not do it. That very knowledge which had once given him confidence was now keeping it from him. He had no real hope. He was battling against what he believed to be foreordained. How could a man succeed when he understood in his heart that the Eternal Powers had predestined failure?

Yet most gallantly he persevered, for it was a matter of life and death. I alone knew the tragedy of it. To other people he was only a politician who was not living up to his promise, the "Single-speech Hamilton" of our day. But behind the epigrams which did not sting, the appeals which rang feebly, the arguments which lacked bite, the perorations which did not glow, I saw a condemned man struggling desperately for a reprieve.

His last speech was on the Ministry of Labour estimates, when John Fortingall's motion nearly brought the Government down. He rose late in the debate, when the House was packed and the air was electric, since a close division was certain. Waldemar had made one of his sagacious, polysyllabic, old-world orations, and Collinson from the Labour benches had replied with a fiery appeal to the House to give up ancestor-worship and face realities. For one moment I thought that Goodeve was going to come off at last. He began briskly, almost with spirit, and he looked the Treasury bench squarely in the face. His voice, too, had a better ring in it. Clearly he had braced himself for a great effort... Then he got into a mesh of figures, and the attention of members slackened. He managed them badly, losing his way in his notes, and, when one item was questioned, he gave a lame explanation. He never finished that section of his case, for he seemed to feel that he was losing the House, so he hurried on to what he must have prepared most carefully, a final appeal somewhat on the lines of his maiden speech. But ah! the difference! To be eloquent and moving one must have either complete self-confidence or complete forgetfulness of self, and Goodeve had neither. He seemed once again to be repeating a lesson badly learned; his voice broke in a rotund sentence so that it sounded falsetto; in an appeal which should have rung like a trumpet he forgot his piece, and it ended limply. Never have I listened to anything more painful. Members grew restless and began to talk. Goodeve's voice became shrill, he dropped it to a whisper, and then raised it to an unmeaning shout... He paused—and someone tittered... He sat down.

When Trant rose an hour later to wind up the debate Goodeve hurried from the House. To the best of my belief he never entered it again.

Towards the end of March I had to speak in Glasgow, and since my meeting was in the afternoon I travelled up by the night train. I was breakfasting in the hotel, when to my surprise I saw Goodeve at an adjacent table. Somehow Glasgow was not the kind of place where one expected to find him.

He joined me, and I had a good look at him. The man was lamentably thin, but at first sight I thought that he looked well. His dusky complexion was a very fair imitation of sunburn, and that and his lean cheeks suggested a man in hard training. But the next moment I revised my view. He moved listlessly and wearily, and his eyes were sick. It was some fever of spirit, not health, that gave him his robust colouring.

I had to hurry off to do some business, so I suggested that we should lunch together. He agreed, but mentioned that he had invited a man to luncheon—that very Colonel Dugald Chatto whose name he had read in the same obituary paragraph as his own. I said that I should like to meet him, and asked how Goodeve had managed to achieve the acquaintance. Quite simply, he said. He had got a friend to take him to golf at Prestwick, where Colonel Chatto played regularly, had been introduced to him in the club-house, and had on subsequent occasions played several rounds with him... “Not a bad fellow,” he said, and then, when he saw my wondering eyes, he laughed. “I must keep close to him, for, you see, we are more intimately linked than any other two people in the world. We are like the pairs tied up by Carrier in his *noyades* in the Loire—you remember, in the French Revolution. We sink or swim together.”

You could not have found a starker opposite to Goodeve than Chatto if you had ransacked the globe. He was a little stocky man, with a scraggy neck, sandy hair and a high-coloured face, who looked as if he took a good deal of both exercise and whisky. He said he was pleased to meet me, and he thumped Goodeve on the back. He was a cheerful soul.

He ate a hearty luncheon and he was full of chat in the juiciest of accents. He had grievances against the War Office because of their treatment of the Territorial division in which he had served, and he had some scathing things to say about politicians. His sympathies were with the Right Wing of our party, which Goodeve disliked. “I’m not blaming you, Sir Edward,” he told me. “You’re a lawyer, and mostly talk sense, if you don’t mind my saying so. But Goodeve here used to splash about something awful. I remember reading his speeches, and wishing I could get five minutes with him in a quiet place. I tell you, I’ve done a good job for the country in keeping him out of Parliament, for he hasn’t been near it since him and me foregathered. I’m making quite a decent golfer of him, too. A wee bit weak in his short game still, but that’ll improve.”

He was a vulgar, jolly little man with nothing in his head, and no conversation except war reminiscences, golf shop, and a fund of rather broad Scots stories. Also he was a bit of an angler, the kind that enters for competitions on Loch Leven. When I listened to him I wondered how the fastidious Goodeve could endure him for half an hour. But Goodeve did more than endure him, for a real friendship seemed to have sprung up between them. There was interest, almost affection, in his eyes. Chatto, no doubt, thought it a tribute to his charms, and being a simple soul, he returned it. He did not know of the uncanny chain which linked the two incompatibles. I can imagine, if Goodeve had told him, the stalwart incredulity with which he would have received the confession.

The hotel boasted some old brandy which Chatto insisted on our sampling. “Supplied by my own firm, gentlemen, long before I was born.” After that he took to calling Goodeve “Bob.” “Bob here is coming with me to Macrihanish, and we’re going to make a week of it.”

“Don’t forget that you’re coming to me for the May-fly,” Goodeve reminded him.

“Not likely I’ll forget. That’ll be a new kind of ploy for me. I’m not sure I’ll be much good at it, but I’m young enough to learn... Man, I get younger every day. I got a new lease of life out of that bloody war. Talk about shellshock! I’m the opposite! I’m shell-stimulated, if you see what I mean.”

He expanded in recollections, comments, anticipations, variegated by high-flavoured anecdotes. He had become perhaps a little drunk. One could not help liking the fellow, and I began to feel grateful to him when I saw how Goodeve seemed to absorb confidence from his company. The man was so vital and vigorous that the other drew comfort from the sight of him. Almost all the sickness went out of Goodeve’s eyes. His comrade in the *noyades* was not likely to drown, and his buoyancy might sustain them both.

Goodeve saw me off by the night train. I said something complimentary about Chatto.

“There’s more in him than you realise at first,” he said, “and he’s the kindest little chap alive. What does it matter that he doesn’t talk our talk? I’m sick of all that old world of mine.”

I said something about Chatto’s health.

“Pretty nearly perfect. Now and then he does himself a little too well, as at luncheon today, but that was the excitement of meeting a swell like you. Usually he is very careful. I’ve made enquiries among his friends, and have got to know his doctor. The doctor says he has a constitution of steel and teak.”

“And you yourself?” I asked. “You’re a little fine-drawn, aren’t you?”

For a moment there was alarm in his eyes.

“Not a bit of it. I’m very well. I’ve been vetted by the same doctor. He gave me the cleanest bill of health, but advised me not to worry. That’s why I have cut out Parliament and come up here. Being with Chatto takes me out of myself. He’s as good for me as oxygen.”

When I asked about his plans he said he had none. He meant to be a good deal in the North, and see as much of Chatto as possible. Chatto was a bachelor with a country-house in Dumbartonshire, and Goodeve was in treaty for a shooting nearby. I could see the motive of that: it was vital for him to pretend to himself that the coming tenth of June meant nothing, and to arrange for shooting grouse two months later.

I entered my sleeping-berth fairly well satisfied. It was right that Goodeve should keep in close touch with the man whom destiny had joined to him, and it was the mercy of Providence that this man should be an embodiment of careless, exuberant life.

VII

May was of course occupied with the General Election, and for the better part of it I had no time to think of anything beyond the small change of political controversy. I saw that Goodeve was not standing again for the Marton division, and I wondered casually if the florid Chatto had spent the May-fly season on the limpid and intricate waters which I knew so well. I pigeonholed a resolution to hunt up Goodeve as soon as I got a moment to turn round.

Oddly enough, the first news I got of him was from Chatto, whom I met at a Scottish junction.

"Ugh, ay!" said that worthy. "I've been sojourning in the stately homes of England. Did you ever see such a place as yon? I hadn't a notion that Bob was such a big man in his own countryside? Ay, I caught some trout, but I worked hard for them. Yon's too expert a job for me, but, by God, Bob's the fine hand at it."

I asked him about Goodeve's health and whereabouts. "He's in London," was the answer. "I had a line from him yesterday. He was thinking of going on a wee cruise in a week or two. One of those yachting trips that the big steamship companies run—to Norway or some place like that. His health, you say? 'Deed, I don't quite know how to answer that. He wants toning up, I think. Him and me had a week at Macrihanish and, instead of coming on, his game went back every day. There were times when he seemed to have no pith in him. Down at Goodeve he was much the same. There's not much exertion in dry-fly fishing, but every now and then he would lie on his back and appear as tired as if he had been wrestling with a sixteen-foot salmon rod on the Awe. And yet he looks as healthy as a deep-sea sailor. As I say, he wants toning up, and maybe the sea-air is the thing for him."

The consequence of this talk was that I wired to Goodeve, and found that he was still in London on some matter of business. Next day—I think it was May thirty-first—we dined together at his club. This time I was genuinely scared by his looks, for in the past five or six weeks he had gone rapidly downhill. His colour was still high, but now it was definitely unwholesome, and his thinness had become emaciation. His clothes hung on him loosely and there were ugly hollows at his temples. Also—and this was what alarmed me—his eyes had the gaunt, hungry, foreboding look that I remembered in Moe's.

Of course I said nothing about his health, but his first enquiry was about Chatto's, when he heard that I had seen him. I told him that I had never seen such an example of bodily well-being, and he murmured something which sounded like "Thank God!"

It was no good beating about the bush, for the time for any pretence between us had long passed.

"In another fortnight," I said, "you will be rid of this nightmare. Now, what is the best way of putting in the time? I'm thinking of your comfort, for, as you know, I don't believe there is the slightest substance in all that nonsense. But it is real to you, and we must make our book for that."

"I agree," he said. "I thought of going for a cruise in the North Sea. The boat's called the Runeberg, I think—a Norwegian steamer chartered by a British firm. I fancy it's the kind of thing for me, for these cruises are always crowded—a sort of floating Blackpool. There's certain to be nobody I know on board, and the discomfort of a rackets company will keep me from brooding. If we get bad weather, so much the better, for I'm a rotten sailor. I've booked my cabin, and we sail from Leith on the sixth."

I told him that I warmly approved. "That's the common sense of the thing," I said. "You must bluff your confounded premonitions. On June tenth you'll be sitting on deck inside the Skerrygard, forgetting that there's such a thing as a newspaper. What's Chatto doing?"

"Going on as usual. Business four days a week and golf the rest. He has no foreboding to worry him. I get frequent news of his health, you know. I have a friend in a Glasgow lawyer's office, who knows both him and his doctor, and he sends me reports. I wonder what he thinks of it all. A David and Jonathan friendship, I hope; but these Glasgow lawyers never let you see what is inside their mind."

On the whole I was better pleased with the situation. Goodeve was facing it bravely and philosophically, and Chatto was a sheet-anchor. In a fortnight it would be all over, and he could laugh at his tremors. He was due back in Town from the cruise on the twentieth, and we arranged to dine together. I could see that he was playing up well to his plan, and filling up his time with engagements beyond the tenth.

I asked him what he proposed to do before he sailed. There was a weekend with Chatto, he said, and then he must go back to Goodeve for a day or two on estate business. I had to return to the House for a division, and, being suddenly struck afresh by Goodeve's air of fragility, I urged him, as we parted, to go straight to bed.

He shook his head. "I'm going for a long walk," he said. "I walk half the night, for I sleep badly. My only chance is to tire out my body."

"You can't stand much more of that," I told him. "What does your doctor say?"

"I don't know. It isn't a case for doctors. I'm fighting, you see, and it's taking a lot out of me. The fight is not with the arm of flesh, but the flesh must pay."

"You're as certain to win as that the sun will rise tomorrow." These were my last words to him, and I put my hand on his shoulder. He started at the touch, but his eyes looked me steadily in the face. God knows what was in them— suffering in the extreme, fear to the uttermost, courage, too, of the starkest. But one thing I realised—they were like Moe's eyes; and I left the club with a pain at my heart.

VIII

I never saw Goodeve again. But the following are the facts which I learned afterwards.

He went to Prestwick with Chatto and played vile golf. Chatto, who was on the top of his game and in high spirits, lost his temper with his pupil, and then began in his kindly way to fuss about his health. He asked a doctor friend in the club-house to have a look at him, but Goodeve refused his attentions, declaring that he was perfectly fit. Then, after arranging to lunch with Chatto in Glasgow on the sixth before sailing from Leith, Goodeve went south.

It was miserable weather in that first week of June, wet and raw, with a searching east wind. Chatto went to Loch Leven to fish, and got soaked to the skin. He came home with a feverish cold which developed into pleurisy, and on the fifth was taken into a nursing-home. Early on the sixth he developed pneumonia, and before noon on that day Goodeve's Glasgow lawyer friend had sent him this news.

Goodeve should have been in Glasgow that morning, since he was to sail in the Runeberg in the late afternoon. But he had already cancelled his passage—I think on the fifth. Why he did that I do not know. It could have had nothing to do with Chatto's illness, of which he had not yet heard. He may have felt that a sea-voyage was giving an unnecessary hostage to destiny. Or he may have felt that his own bodily strength was unequal to the effort. Or some overpowering sense of fatality may have come down like a shutter on his mind. I do not know, and I shall never know.

What is clear is that at Goodeve before the sixth his health had gravely worsened. He could not lie in bed, and he refused to have a doctor, so he sat in a dressing-gown in his shadowy library, or potted weakly about the ground-floor rooms. His old butler grew very anxious, for his meals were left almost untasted. Several times he tried to rally his spirits, and he drank a little champagne, and once he had up a bottle of the famous port. He had a book always with him, the collected works of Sir Thomas Browne, but according to the butler, it was generally lying unread on his knee. When he got the telegram about Chatto's illness, his valet told me, he read it several times, let it drop on the floor, and sat for a minute or two looking fixedly before him. Then he seemed to make an effort to pull himself together. He ordered fires to be lit in the long gallery upstairs, and said that henceforth that should be his sitting-room.

For three days Goodeve lived in that cloudy chamber under the portraits of his ancestors with their tremulous, anxious eyes. There was a little powdering-closet next door, where he had a bed made up. Fires were kept blazing night and day on all the four hearths, for he seemed to feel the cold. I believe that he had made up his mind that Chatto must die, and that he must follow. He had several bulletins daily from Glasgow, and, said his valet, seemed scarcely to glance at them. But on the ninth he asked eagerly for telegrams, as if he expected one of moment. He was noticeably frailer, the servants told me, and he seemed sunk in a deep lethargy, and sat very still with his eyes on the fire. Several times he walked the length of the gallery, gazing at the portraits.

About six o'clock on the evening of the ninth the telegram came announcing Chatto's death. Goodeve behaved as if he had expected it, and there came a flicker of life into his face. He sent for champagne and drank a little, lifting up his glass as if he were giving a toast. He told his valet that he would not require him again, but would put himself to bed. The last the man saw of him he was smiling, and his lips were moving...

In the morning he was found dead in his chair. The autopsy that followed resulted in a verdict of death from heart failure. I alone knew that the failure had come about by the slow relentless sapping of fear.

There was wild weather in the North Sea on the eighth, and in the darkness before dawn on the ninth the Runeberg was driven on to a reef and sank with all on board. As it chanced, Goodeve's name was still on its list of passengers, and it was because of the news of the shipwreck that The Times published his obituary on the tenth. Next day it issued the necessary correction, and an extended obituary which recorded that his death had really taken place at his country house.

VI. — CAPTAIN CHARLES OTTERY

"And because time in it selfe... can receive no alteration, the hallowing must consist in the shape or countenance which we put upon the affaires that are incident in these dayes."

—Richard Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*.

The announcement on the first page of *The Times*, which Charles Ottery read at Flambard, and every letter of which was printed on his mind, ran thus:

"OTTERY—Suddenly in London on the 9th inst., Captain Charles Ottery, late Scots Fusiliers, of Marlcote, Glos., at the age of 36."

It fitted his case precisely. The regiment was right (the dropping of the "Royal" before its title was a familiar journalistic omission), Marlcote was his family place, and in June of the following year he would have just passed his thirty-sixth birthday.

I had known Charles since he was a schoolboy, for he was my nephew's friend, and many a half-sovereign I had tipped him in those days. He was the only child of a fine old Crimean veteran, and had gone straight from school into the family regiment, for a succession of Otterys had served in the Royal Scots Fusiliers, though they had not a drop of Scots blood. They came originally, I believe, from Devonshire, but had been settled for a couple of centuries in the Severn valley. Charles was a delightful boy, with old-fashioned manners, for he had been strictly brought up. He always called his father "sir," I remember, and rose when he entered the room. He had a rather sullen, freckled face, tawny hair which curled crisply, and pale-blue eyes which could kindle into a dancing madness, or freeze into a curious mature solemnity. What impressed one about him as a boy was the feeling he gave of latent power. He never seemed to put all of himself into anything—there was an impression always of heavy reserves waiting to be called up. He was the average successful schoolboy, not specially brilliant at anything except at court-tennis, but generally liked and greatly respected. No one ever took liberties with Master Charles, for the sheath of pleasant manners was felt to cover a particularly stiff bone.

The War broke out when he had been a soldier for six months, and Charles went to France in September 1914. As his friends expected, he made an admirable regimental officer—one of the plain fighting men who were never sick or sorry during four gruelling years. Being a regular, he had no sensational advancement; he got his company during the Somme, and later had one or two staff jobs, from which he always managed to wangle a speedy return to his battalion. He was happy, because he was young and healthy and competent, and loved his men. After the Armistice he had the better part of a year in Ireland, a miserable time which tried him far more sorely in mind and body than his four years in France. Then his father died, and as soon as the Scots Fusiliers had finished their Irish tour Charles left the Service.

He inherited a large and unluccrative landed estate; he was devoted to Marlcote, and he had to find some means of earning money if he wanted to retain it. Through the influence of an uncle he was taken into a London firm of merchant-bankers, and in his quiet resolute way set himself to learn his job. He proved to have a genuine talent for business. His mind was not quick, but it was powerful, and he used to burrow his way like a mole to the bottom of a question. Also there was something about his stability and force of character which made men instinctively trust him, and he earned that reputation for judgement the price of which is above rubies. No one called him clever, but everyone believed him to be wise. In three years he was a junior partner in his firm, and after that his advance was rapid. He became a director of the Bank of England, the youngest man, I believe, except Goschen, who ever entered the Bank Parlour; he sat on more than one Government Commission, and he was believed to be often consulted by the Treasury. He figured also in the public eye as an athlete, for he played his favourite court-tennis regularly, and had been twice runner-up for the amateur championship.

Then into his orderly life, like a warm spring wind upon a snowfield, came Pamela Brune. Pamela was my god-daughter, and I had watched with amazement her pass from a plain, solemn child to a leggy girl and then to the prettiest debutante of her year. Almost in a moment, it seemed to me, the lines of her body changed from angularity to grace, the contours of her small face were moulded into exquisiteness, and her thin little neck became a fit setting for her lovely head. She was tall for a woman, nearly as tall as Charles, but so perfectly proportioned that her height did not take the eye; exquisiteness was the dominant impression, and a kind of swift airy vigour. In her colouring she had taken after her father, and I can best describe it as a delicate ivory lit up, as it were, from within, and nobly framed by her dusky hair. Her eyes were grey, with blue lights in them. Beyond doubt a beauty, and of a rare type. The transformation in her manner was not less striking. She had been a shy child, rather silent and reflective, a good companion on a long walk, when she would expound to me her highly original fancies, but apt at most times to escape notice. Now she was so brilliant to look at that such escape was not for her, and she had developed a manner which was at once defiant and defensive. Young men were a little afraid of her, her eyes were so compelling, taking in much and revealing little, and her deep voice had a disquieting candour.

Charles fell headlong in love, and I could see from the start that the affair would not go smoothly. To begin with, she was very young—scarcely nineteen—and was like a bird preening her wings for flight, whereas Charles was thirty-five and fixed solidly on his perch. He was a little set in his ways and cocksure in his opinions, while she had the sceptical and critical innocence of youth. They became friends at once, but their friendship seemed slow to ripen into anything deeper. Pamela had nothing of the flirt in her, and though young men swarmed round her, there was no other suitor to give Charles heart-disease. The trouble was that he got no farther forward. One reason, perhaps, was that he was far too eligible. The girl had a notion that everyone desired the match, and that her parents counted on it, so naturally she revolted. Another thing—she was quicker-witted than Charles, and had a dozen interests to his one, so that his circumscription was apt to show up poorly in contrast. This was bad for him, for it cast him into a kind of irritable despair, and bad for Pamela, since it made her more critical. When he was schoolmasterish, the pupil put him to shame; when his mood was humble, hers was arrogant.

So during the month before the Flambard party the course of true love did not run smooth. The effect of a grand passion

on Charles's tough solidity was what might have been looked for. His nature was not elastic, and instead of expanding under heat was in danger of warping. He was so desperately in love that all his foundations were upset. He could not fit his passion into his scheme of life, so his scheme of life went by the board. He was miserably conscious of being in a world which he did not understand, of dealing with imponderable things over which he had no mastery. A hasty word, a cold glance from Pamela would thrust this man, who had always prided himself upon his balance, into a fever of indecision...

And just before Whitsuntide they had had something like a quarrel. He had been magisterial and she had been pert—no, “pert” is not the word—rather disdainful in a silken way, airily detached and infinitely distant. She had not sulked—that would have been far easier for Charles: she had simply set him back firmly among the ranks of her acquaintances. So he had gone to Flambard in a wretched state of mind, and her treatment of him there had been like an acid to his wounds. He found himself in a condition which he had never dreamed of—cut off from the common-sense world which he understood, and condemned to flounder among emotions and problems as evasive as dreams and yet with a terrible potency of torture. Moe was right: Charles Ottery was profoundly unhappy.

II

He had entered upon the experiment at Flambard with a vague hope that he might learn something about the future which would ease his mind. What he did learn was that in a year's time he would be dead.

His first reaction was anger. For four years he had faced the daily possibility, even the likelihood, of death. Now, if during those years anyone had prophesied his certain death at a certain time, he would have assaulted the prophet. That kind of thing was a breach of the unwritten rules of the game: one had to pretend to one's self and to the world that one would continue to live: it was the assumption which alone made war endurable. Therefore Charles Ottery's first feeling was wrathful and contemptuous. The Professor was dead; otherwise he would have had something to say to him.

This mood lasted perhaps two days—no longer. Gradually it dawned on his mind that this was a revelation altogether outside the control of the human will. He had believed completely in Moe, and he had seen *The Times* announcement with a blinding clarity which precluded the idea of a mistake. Pamela had shaken him out of his old world, and now he had fallen into a far stranger one, altogether beyond the kindly uses of humanity. He tried to be sceptical, but he had never had much gift for scepticism. Critical in any serious sense he could not be, for he had not the apparatus for criticism. Anger was succeeded by a fear which was almost panic. Charles was a notably brave man, and his courage had been well disciplined and tested. He had always been perfectly willing to run risks, and, if need be, to face death with his eyes open. But this was different—this undefined but certain fate towards which he must walk for the next twelve months. He discovered that he passionately wanted to live. Pamela had dropped out of his thoughts, for she was now utterly beyond him—a doomed man could not be a lover—but his passion for her had enriched and deepened the world for him and therefore increased his love of life.

The first panic passed, and Charles forced himself into a kind of stoicism. Not scepticism, for he could not disbelieve, but a resolution to face up to whatever was in store. He felt hideously lonely, for not only was he too proud to confide in anyone, but he could think of no mortal man who had ever been in a like predicament. If he could have discovered a parallel case, past or present, he would have been comforted. So since there was no one to whom he could unburden his soul, he started to keep a diary... I was not at this time in his confidence, but I have had the use of that diary in telling this story. In it he put down notes of his daily doings and of his state of mind, together with any thoughts that seemed to him cheering or otherwise. It is a scrappy and often confused record, but very illuminating, for he was honest with himself.

His first duty was to keep a stout face to the world, and therefore he must try to forget *The Times* paragraph in violent preoccupations. He could not face the society of his fellows, so he went little into the City, but he strove to crowd his life with intense activities. He practised his court-tennis for several hours each day, played a good deal of golf, and took to keeping a six-tonner on Southampton Water and making weekend expeditions along the coast. From the diary it appeared that this last pursuit was the best aid to forgetfulness, so long as the weather was bad. In a difficult wind he had to concentrate all his faculties on managing the boat, but when there was no such need, he found the deck of his little yacht too conducive to painful meditation.

Presently he realised that these anodynes were no manner of good. Each spell of freedom from thought was succeeded by a longer spell of intense brooding. He had found no philosophy to comfort him, and no super-induced oblivion lasted long. So he decided that he must seek a different kind of life. He had an idea that if he went into the wilds he might draw courage from the primeval Nature which was all uncertainties and hazards. So in August he set off for Newfoundland alone, to hunt the migratory caribou.

Purposely he gave himself a rough trip. He went up-country to the Terra Nova district, and then with two guides penetrated far into the marshes and barrens of the interior. He limited his equipment to the bare necessities, and courted every kind of fatigue. He must have taken a good many risks in his river journey, for I heard from a man who followed his tracks for the brief second season in October that his guides had sworn never again to accompany such a madman. You see, he knew for certain that nothing could kill him for many months. The diary, written up at night in his chilly camps, told the story fully. He got with ease the number of stags permitted by his licence—all of them good beasts—for, since he did not care a straw whether he killed or not, he found that he could not miss. But the interesting things were his thoughts, as they came to him while watching in the dusk by a half-frozen pond, or lying awake in his sleeping-bag looking at the cold stars.

He had begun to reflect on the implications of death, a subject to which he had never given much heed before. His

religion was of the ordinary public-school brand, the fundamentals of Christianity accepted without much comprehension. There was an after-world, of course, about which a man did not greatly trouble himself: the important thing, the purpose of religion, was to have a decent code of conduct in the present one. But now the latter did not mean much to him, since his present life would soon be over... There were pages of the diary filled with odd amateurish speculations about God and Eternity, and once or twice there was even a kind of prayer. But somewhere in the barrens Charles seems to have decided that he had better let metaphysics alone. What concerned him was how to pass the next eight months without disgracing his manhood. He noted cases of people he had known who, when their death sentence was pronounced by their doctor, had lived out the remainder of their days with a stiff lip, even with cheerfulness.

The conclusion of this part of the diary, written before he sailed for home, seems to have been that all was lost but honour. He was like a man on a sinking ship, and owed it to himself to go down with fortitude. There were no entries during the voyage from St John's, so the presumption is that this resolve gave him a certain peace.

That peace did not survive his return to England. He went back to the City, where he was badly needed, for the bottom was falling out of business. But he seemed unable to concentrate on his work. The sight of his familiar surroundings, his desks, his clerks, the business talks which assumed the continuity of life, the necessity of making plans which would not mature before the following June, put him into a fever of disquiet. I think that he had perhaps overtired himself in Newfoundland, and was physically rather unstrung; anyhow, on the plea of health, he again began to absent himself from his work. He felt that he must discover an anodyne to thought, or go mad.

The anodyne he tried was the worst conceivable. Charles had never led the life of pleasure, and had no relish for it; so now, when he attempted it, it was like brandy to a teetotaller. He belonged to Dillon's, and took to frequenting that club, and playing cards for high stakes. Now, it is a dangerous thing to gamble if you have the mania for it in your blood, but it is more dangerous if your object is to blanket your mind. He won a good deal of money and lost a good deal, and he played with a cold intensity which rather scared his partners... Also he, who had always been abstemious, took to doing himself too well. I met him one night in St James's Street, and got the impression that the sober Charles was rather drunk... Then there was hunting. He had not had time for years to do much of that, but now he kept horses at Birkham, and went out twice a week. He behaved as he had behaved in the Terra Nova rapids, and took wild risks because he believed that nothing could harm him. For a couple of months he rode so hard that he made himself a nuisance in the field... Then his confidence suddenly deserted him.

It occurred to him that any day he might have a smash, and linger bed-ridden till the following June. So he got rid of his hunters and fled from Birkham.

The result of all this was that before Christmas he had begun to get for himself a doubtful name. At first no one believed that this decorous young man could run amok, but nobody's repute is iron-clad, and presently too many people were ready to surmise the worst. City men reported that he rarely showed up at his office, and was useless when he did. Hunting men had tales to tell of strange manners in the field and an insane foolhardiness. My nephew, who was one of his oldest friends, and belonged to Dillon's, would say nothing at first when I asked him about the stories, but in the end he admitted reluctantly that they were true. "Charles has got mixed up with a poor lot," he said. "Drunken swine like L—, and half-witted boys like little E—and fine old-fashioned crooks like B—. He hardly recognises me when we meet in the club, for he knows I don't like his bunch. In the evening he's apt to be tight after ten o'clock.

"God knows what's done it!" said my nephew dismally. "Looks as if he weren't able to take his corn. Too big a success too soon, you know. Well, he won't be a success long... I put it down to a virtuous youth. If you don't blow off steam under twenty-five, you're apt to have a blow up later and scald yourself... No, I don't think it is unrequited affection. I've heard that yarn, but I don't believe it. I saw Lady Pam at a dinner last week, and she had a face like a death's head. She's going the pace a bit herself, but she's not enjoying it. Whoever is behaving badly, it ain't her. My notion is that Charles hasn't given the girl a thought for months. Don't ask me for an explanation. Something has snapped in him, the way a racehorse goes suddenly wrong."

I confess that at the time I was more anxious about my goddaughter than about Charles. I knew him fairly well and liked him, but Pamela was very near my heart. I could not blame him, for it was she who had hitherto caused the trouble, but now it was very clear that things were not well with her... She had refused to pay her usual Scots visits, and had gone off with the Junipers to their place on the Riviera. The Juniper girl had only been an acquaintance, but she suddenly blossomed into a bosom friend. Now, the Junipers were not too well regarded by old-fashioned people. Tom and Mollie Nantley hated the business, but they had always made it a rule never to interfere with their daughters, and certainly up to now Pamela had deserved their confidence. It must have been gall and wormwood to them to see the papers full of pictures of the Juniper doings, with Pamela bathing and playing tennis and basking on the sands in the most raffish society... After that she went on a cruise to the Red Sea with some Americans called Baffin. The Nantleys knew very little about the Baffins, so they hoped for the best; but from what I learned afterwards the company on the yacht was pretty mixed—a journalistic peer, two or three financiers, and a selection of amorous and alcoholic youth.

Pamela returned to England before the end of November. The family always stayed on at Wirlesdon till well into the new year, but she insisted on taking up her quarters in London. She acted in several entertainments got up for charity, and became the darling of the illustrated press. I saw her once in December, at a dinner given for a ball, and was glad that Mollie Nantley was not present. The adorable child that I had known had not altogether gone, but it was overlaid with tragic affectations. She had ruined her perfect colouring with cosmetics, and her manner had acquired the shrill vulgarity

which was then the fashion. She was as charming to me as ever, but in her air there was a curious defiance. Her face had been made up to look pert, but in repose it was tragic. I realised that it was all a desperate bravado to conceal suffering.

III

Lamancha had a Christmas party at his house in Devonshire, and I went there on the twenty-seventh. After tea my hostess took me aside.

"We've made an awful gaffe," she said. "Charles Ottery is here, and I find to my horror that Pamela Brune is coming tomorrow. I can't very well put her off, but you know that things have not been going well with her and Charles, and their being together may be very painful for both of them."

I asked if Charles knew that Pamela was coming.

"I told him this morning, but he didn't seem interested. I hoped he would discover that he had an engagement elsewhere, but not a bit of it—he only looked blank and turned away. What on earth has happened to him, Ned? He is rather quarrelsome, when he isn't simply deady dull, and he has such queer moping moods. There is something on his mind, and I don't believe that it's Pamela."

"Couldn't you let her know he is here?" I asked.

"I wired to Mollie Nantley, but the only reply I got was about Pamela's train. She is evidently coming with her eyes open."

Pamela duly arrived during the following afternoon, when we were out shooting Lamancha's hedgerow pheasants. I did not see her till dinner, and I had to go off at dawn next morning to London for an unexpected consultation. But that evening I had a very dear and most disquieting impression of her and Charles. Her manner was shrill and rather silly; she seemed to be acting a part which was utterly unsuited to her kind of beauty and to her character as I had known it. The house-party was not exciting, only pleasant and friendly, and she succeeded in making us all uncomfortable. I did not see her first meeting with Charles, but that evening she never looked at him, nor he at her. He drank rather too much wine at dinner, and afterwards played bezique owlishly in the smoking-room. I had tried to get a word with him, but he shunned me like the plague.

What happened after I left I learned from the diary. Behind the mask he had been deeply miserable, for the sight of the girl had brought back his old happier world. He realised that far down below all his anxieties lay his love for her—that indeed this love was subconsciously the cause of his frantic clutch on life. He had tried stoicism and had failed; he had tried drugging himself by excitement into forgetfulness and had failed not less dismally. Pamela's presence seemed to recall him to his self-respect. He did not notice any change in her—his eyes had been too long looking inward to be very observant: he only knew that the woman who had once lit up his life was now for ever beyond him—worse still, that he had dropped to a level from which he could not look at her without shame. He fell into a mood of bitter abasement, which was far healthier than his previous desperation, for he was thinking now less of the death which was in store for him than of the code of honourable living to which he had been false.

That night he slept scarcely a wink, and next morning he did not show up at breakfast. He told the servant who called him that he was going for a long walk, and slipped out of the house before anybody was down. He felt that he had to be alone to wrestle with his soul.

The diary told something of his misery that day on the high Devon moors. The weather was quiet and tonic with a touch of frost, and he walked blindly over the uplands. Charles was too stiff-backed a fellow to indulge in self-pity, but his type is apt to be a prey to self-contempt. He can have seen nothing of the bright landscape, for he was enveloped in a great darkness—regrets, remorse, a world of wrath with the horror of a deeper shade looming before him. He struggled to regain the captaincy of his soul, but he had no longer the impulse to strive, since he seemed to himself to have already foresworn his standards. There was nothing before him but a dreadful, hopeless passivity, what the Bible calls an "awful looking-for of judgement." The hours of spiritual torment and rapid movement wore down his strength, and in the afternoon he found that he was very weary. So he walked slowly homeward, having dulled his bodily and mental senses but won no comfort.

In the dusk, at the head of one of the grassy rides in the home woods, as the fates ordained it, he met Pamela. She, unhappy also, had fled from the house for a little air and solitude. Both were so full of their own thoughts that they might have passed without recognition had they not encountered each other at a gate. Charles opened it, and held it wide for the stranger to pass, and it was the speaking of his name that enlightened him as to the personality of the stranger.

"Good evening, Captain Ottery," Pamela said.

He started and stared at her. Something in his appearance held her eyes, for a man does not go through hell without showing it. In those eyes there must have been wonder; there must have been pity too. He saw it, dulled though his senses were, and perhaps he saw also some trace of that suffering which I had noticed in London, for the girl was surprised and had no time to don her mask.

"Pamela!" he cried, and then his strength seemed to go from him, and he leaned heavily on the gate, so that his shoulder touched hers.

She drew back. "You are ill?"

He recovered himself. "No, not ill," he said. He could say no more, for when a man has been wrestling all day with truth he cannot easily lie.

She put a hand on his arm. "But you look so ill and strange."

And then some of the old tenderness must have come into her eyes and voice. "Oh, Charles," she cried, "what has happened to us?"

It was the word "us" that broke him down, for it told him that she too was at odds with life. He had a sudden flash of illumination. He saw that what he had once longed for was true, that her heart was his, and the realisation that not only life but love was lost to him was the last drop in his cup. He stood holding the gate, shaking like a reed, with eyes which, even in the half-light, seemed to be devoured with pain.

"You must have thought me a cad," he stammered. "I love you—I loved you beyond the world, but I dared not come near you... I am a dying man... I will soon be dead."

His strength came back to him. He had a purpose now. He had found the only mortal in whom he could confide—must confide.

As they walked down the ride in the winter gloaming, with the happy lights of the house in the valley beneath them, he told her all, and as he spoke it seemed to him that he was cleansing his soul. She made no comment—did not utter a single word.

At the gate of the terrace gardens he stopped. His manner was normal again, and his voice was quiet, almost matter-of-fact.

"Thank you for listening to me, Pamela," he said. "It has been a great comfort to me to tell you this... It is the end for both of us. You see that, don't you?... We must never meet again. Goodbye, my dear."

He took her hand, and the touch of it shivered his enforced composure. "I love you... I love you," he moaned...

She snatched her hand away.

"This is perfect nonsense," she said. "I won't..." and then fled down an alley, as she had once fled from me at Flambard.

Charles had some food in his room, and went to bed, where he slept for the first time for weeks. He had been through the extremes of hell, and nothing worse could await him. The thought gave him a miserable peace. He wrote a line to his hostess, and left for London by the early train.

IV

He was sitting next afternoon in his rooms in Mount Street when a lady was announced, and Pamela marched in on the heels of his servant. The room was in dusk, and it was her voice that revealed her to him.

"Turn on the light, Crocker," she said briskly, "and bring tea for two. As quick as possible, please, for I'm famishing."

I can picture her, for I know Pamela's ways, plucking off her hat and tossing it on to a table, shaking up the cushions on the big sofa, and settling herself in a corner of it—Pamela no longer the affected miss of recent months, but the child of April and an April wind, with the freshness of a spring morning about her.

They had tea, for which the anxious Crocker provided muffins, rejoicing to see once again in the flat people feeding like Christians. Pamela chattered happily, chiefly gossip about Wirlesdon, while Charles pulled himself out of his lethargy and strove to rise to her mood. He even went to his bedroom, changed his collar and brushed his hair. When Crocker had cleared away the tea, she made him light his pipe. "You know you are never really happy with anything else," she said; and he obeyed, not having smoked a pipe since Newfoundland.

"Now," she said at last, when she had poked the fire into a blaze, "I want you to repeat very carefully all that rubbish you told me yesterday."

He obeyed—told the story slowly and dispassionately, without the emotion of the previous day. She listened carefully, and wrote down from his dictation the exact words he had read in *The Times*. She knitted her brows over them. "Pretty accurate, aren't they?" she asked. "Not much chance of mistaken identity."

"None," he said. "There are very few Otterys in the world, and every detail about me is correct."

"And you believe in it?"

"I must."

"I mean to say, you believe that you really saw that thing in *The Times*? You didn't dream it afterwards?"

"I saw it as clearly as I am seeing you."

"I wondered what tricks that old Professor man was up to at Flambard, but I had no notion it was anything as serious as this. What do you suppose the others saw? Uncle Ned is sure to know—I'll ask him."

"He saw nothing himself—he told me so. Lady Flambard fainted, and he was looking after her."

"She saw nothing either, then? I'm sorry, for I can't ask any of the men. I don't know Mr Tavanger or Mr Mayot or Sir

Robert Goodeve, and Reggie Daker is too much of a donkey to count. It would be too delicate a subject to be inquisitive about with strangers... You really are convinced that the Professor had got hold of some method of showing you the future?"

"Convinced beyond any possibility of doubt," said Charles dismally.

"Good. That settles one thing... Now for the next point. The fact that you saw that stuff is no reason why it should happen. Supposing you had dreamed it, would you have allowed a dream, however vivid, to wreck your life?"

"But, Pamela dear, the case is quite different. Moe showed us what he called 'objective reality.' A dream would have been my own concern, but this came from outside, quite independent of any effort of mine. It was the result of a scientific experiment."

"But the science may have been all cock-eyed. Most science is—at any rate, it changes a good deal faster than Paris fashions."

"You wouldn't have said that if you had been under his influence. He didn't want me to die—he didn't make The Times paragraph take that form—he only lifted the curtain an inch so that I could see what had actually happened a year ahead. How can I disbelieve what science brought to me out of space, without any preparation or motive? The whole thing was as mathematical and impersonal as an eclipse of the moon in an almanack."

"All right! Let's leave it at that. Assume that The Times is going to print the paragraph. The answer is that The Times is going to be badly diddled. Somebody will make a bloomer."

Charles shook his head. "I've tried to think that, but well—you know, that kind of mistake isn't made."

"Oh, isn't it? The papers announced Dollie's engagement to three different men—exact as you please—names and dates complete."

"But why should it make a blunder in this one case out of millions? Isn't it more reasonable to think that there is a moral certainty of its being right?"

Pamela was not succeeding with her arguments. They sounded thin to her own ears, in spite of her solid conviction at the back of them. She sat up, an alert, masterful figure, youth girt for command. She had another appeal than logic.

"Charles," she said solemnly, "this is a horrible business for you, and you've got to pull yourself together. You must defy it. Make up your mind that you're not going to give it another thought. Get back to your work, and resolve that you don't care a lop-eared damn for Moe or science or anything else. Lose your temper with fate and frighten the blasted hussy." Tom Nantley had a turn for robust speech in the hunting-field, and his daughter remembered some of it.

Charles shook his head miserably.

"I've tried," he said, "but I can't. I simply haven't the manhood... I know it's the right way, but my mind is poisoned already. I've got a germ in it that fevers me... Besides, it isn't sense. You can't stop what is to be by saying that it won't be."

"Yes, you can," said the girl firmly. "That's the meaning of Free Will."

Charles dropped his head into his hands. The sight of Pamela thus restored to him was more than he could bear.

Then she had an inspiration.

"Do you remember the portrait in the dining-room at Wirlesdon of old Sir Somebody-Ap-Something—Mamma's Welsh ancestor? You know the story about him? He was on the side of Henry Tudor, and raised his men to march to Bosworth. But every witch and warlock in Carmarthen got on to their hindlegs and prophesied—said they saw him in a bloody shroud, and heard banshees wailing for him, and how Merlin had said that when the Ap-Something red and gold crossed Severn to join the Tudor green and white it would be the end of the race—all manner of cheery omens. Everybody in the place believed them, including his lady wife, who wept buckets and clung to his knees. What did the old sportsman do? Told all the warlocks to go to the devil, and marched gaily eastward, leaving his wife sewing his shroud and preparing the family vault."

"What happened?" Charles had lifted his head.

"Happened? He turned the day at Bosworth, set the Tudor on the throne, got the Garter for his services—you see it in the portrait—and about half South Wales. He and his men came merrily home, and he lived till he was ninety-three. There's an example for you!"

Pamela warmed to her argument.

"That sort of thing happened all the time in the old days. Whenever anybody had a down on you he got a local soothsayer to prophesy death and disaster in case you might believe it and lose your nerve. And if you had been having a row with the Church, some priest or bishop had an unpleasant vision about you. What was the result? Timid people took to their beds and died of fright, which was what the soothsayers wanted. Bold men like my ancestor paid not the slightest attention, and nothing happened—except that, when they got a chance, they outed the priest and hanged the soothsayer."

Charles was listening keenly.

"But the soothsayers were often right," he objected.

"They were just as often wrong. The point is, that there were men brave enough to defy them—as you are going to do."

"But the cases aren't the same," he protested. "That was ordinary vulgar magic, with a personal grudge behind it. I'm up against the last word in impersonal science."

"My dear Charles," she said sweetly, "you've let your brains go to seed. I never knew you miss a point before. Magic and astrology and that kind of thing were all the science the Middle Ages had, and they believed in them just as firmly as you believe in Moe. The point is that, in spite of their belief, there were people bold enough to defy it—and to win, as you are going to do. A thousand years hence the world may think of Moe and Einstein and all those pundits as babyish as we think the old necromancers. Beliefs change, but courage is always the same. Courage is the line for you, my dear."

At last she had moved him. There was a light in his eyes as he looked at her, perplexed and broken, but still a light.

"You think..." he began, but she broke in...

"I think that you're face to face with a crisis, Charles dear. Fate has played you an ugly trick, but you're man enough to beat it. It's like the thing in the Bible about Jacob wrestling with the angel. You've got to wrestle with it, and if you wrestle hard enough it may bless you."

Her voice had lost its briskness, and had become soft and wooing. She jumped up from the sofa and came round behind his chair, as if she did not want him to see her face.

"I refuse to give another thought to the silly thing," she said. "We are going to behave as if Moe had never been born." Her hand was caressing his hair.

"But YOU are not condemned to death," he said.

"Oh, am I not?" she cried. "It's frightfully important for me. On June tenth of next year I shall be starting on my honeymoon."

That fetched him out of his chair.

He gazed blindly at her as she stood with her cheeks flushed and her eyes a little dim. For a full minute he strove for words and none came.

"Have you nothing to say?" she whispered. "Do you realise, sir, that I am asking you to marry me?"

v

It was now that I entered the story. Mollie Nantley came to Town and summoned me to a family conclave. She and Tom were in a mood between delight and anxiety.

"You got my wire?" she asked. "The announcement will be in the papers tomorrow. But they are not to be married till June. Too long to wait—I don't like these long engagements."

"You are pleased?" I asked.

"Tremendously—in a way. But we don't quite know what to think. They never saw each other for six months, and then it all came with a rush. Pam has been rather odd lately, you know, and Tom and I have been very worried. We saw that she was unhappy, and we thought that it might be about Charles. And Charles's behaviour has been something more than odd—so odd that Tom was in two minds about consenting to the engagement. You know how fond we were of him and how we believed in him, but his conduct before Christmas was rather shattering. You are too busy to hear gossip, but I can assure you that Charles has been the most talked-of man in London. Not pleasant gossip either."

"But the explanation seems quite simple," I said. "Two estranged lovers, both proud and both miserable and therefore rather desperate. Chance brings them together, misunderstandings disappear, and true love comes into its own."

Mollie bent her brows.

"It's not as simple as that. If that had been the way of things they ought to be riotously happy. But they're not—not in the least. Pam is as white as a sheet, and looks more like a widow than a bride. She's very sweet and good—very different from before Christmas, when she was horribly tiresome—but you never saw such careworn eyes. She has something heavy on her mind... And as for Charles! He is very good too and goes steadily to the City again, but he's not my notion of the happy lover. Tom and I are at our wits' end. I do wish you would have a talk with Pamela. She won't tell me anything—I really don't dare to ask—but you and she have always been friends, and if there is any trouble you might help her."

So Pamela came to tea with me, and the first sight of her told me that Mollie was right. In a week or two some alchemy had changed her utterly. Not a trace now of that hard, mirthless glitter which had scared me at the Lamanchas'. Her face was pale, her air quiet and composed, but there was in her eyes what I had seen in Charles Ottery's, an intense, anxious preoccupation.

She told me everything without pressing. She could not tell her parents, she said, for they would not understand, and, if they did, their sympathy would make things worse. But she longed for someone to confide in, and had decided on me.

I saw that it would be foolish to make light of the trouble. Indeed, I had no inclination that way, for I had seen the tortures that Goodeve was undergoing. She told me what she had said to Charles, and the line they were taking. I

remember wondering if the man had the grit to go through with it; when I looked at Pamela's clear eyes I had no doubt about the woman.

"He has gone back to his business and has forced himself to slave at it. He is crowding up his days with work. And he is keeping himself in hard training... You see, he has tried the other dopes and found them no good... But he has to fight every step of the road. Oh, Uncle Ned, I could howl with misery sometimes when I see him all drawn at the lips and hollow about the eyes. He doesn't sleep well, you see. But he is fighting, and not yielding one inch."

And then she quoted to me her saying about Jacob wrestling with the angel. "If we keep on grappling with the brute, it MUST bless us."

"I have to hold his hand all the time," she went on. "That's his hope of salvation. He is feeding on my complete confidence... Oh no, it's not easy, but it's easier than his job. I've to pretend to be perfectly certain that we'll be married next June tenth, and to be always talking about where we shall go for our honeymoon, and where we shall live in Town, and how we shall do up Marlcote."

She smiled wanly.

"I chatter about hotels and upholsterers and house-agents when I want to be praying... But I think I understand my part. I have a considerable patch of hell to plough, but it's nothing like as hot as Charles's... No, you can't help, Uncle Ned, dear. We have to go through with this thing ourselves—we two— nobody else. Charles must never know that I have told you, for if he thought that anyone else knew it would add shyness to his trouble... But it's a comfort to me to feel that you know. If anything happens... if we fail... I want you to realise that we went down fighting."

She kissed me and ran away, and I sat thinking a long time in my chair. She was right: no one could help these two through this purgatory. My heart ached for this child not out of her teens who was trying to lift her lover through the Slough of Despond by her sheer courage. I do not think that I have ever in my life so deeply admired a fellow-mortal. Pamela was the very genius of fortitude, courage winged and inspired and divinely lit... I told myself that such a spirit could not fail if there was a God in Heaven.

I can only guess at what Charles suffered in the first months of the year. The diary revealed something, but not much, for the entries were scrappy: you see, he was not fighting the battle alone, as he had done in the autumn; he had Pamela for his guide and confessor.

He stuck like a leech to his work, and from all accounts did it well. My nephew said that old Charles had "taken a pull on himself, but had become a cheerless bird." People in the City, when I asked about him, were cordial enough. He had been put on a new economic commission at which he was working hard. One man said that his examination of a high Treasury official was one of the most searching things he had ever heard. Our financial affairs at that time were in a considerable mess, and Charles was bending all his powers to straightening them out.

It was much to have got his brain functioning again. But of course it did not mean the recovery of his old interests. He had only one interest—how to keep his head up till June, and one absorbing desire—to be with Pamela. The girl gave him more than the sustenance of her confidence; there were hours when the love of her so filled his mind that it drove out the gnawing pain, and that meant hours of rest. As sleep restores the body, so these spells of an almost happy absorption restored his spirit.

But he had patches of utter blackness, as the diary showed. He held himself firm to his resolution by a constant effort of will. He could not despair when Pamela kept her courage... But he would waver at moments, and only recover himself out of shame. There were times, too, when he bitterly reproached himself. He had brought an innocent child into his tortured world, and made her share in the tortures. Another life besides his own would be ruined. Out of such fits of self-contempt he had to be dragged painfully by Pamela's affection. She had to convince him anew that she preferred Tophet in his company to Paradise alone.

In March Pamela told me that she had offered to marry him at once, and that he had refused. He was on his probation, he said, and marriage was to be the reward of victory. Also, if he was to be in the grave on June tenth, he did not want Pamela to be a widow. The girl argued, she told me, that immediate marriage would be an extra defiance to Fate, and a proof of their confidence, but Charles was adamant. I dare say he was right: he had to settle such a question with his own soul.

I met him occasionally during those months. Never in ordinary society: by a right instinct Pamela and he decided that they could not go about together and be congratulated—that would make too heavy demands on their powers of camouflage. But I ran across him several times in the street; and I sat next to him at a luncheon given by the Prime Minister to the American Debt Commission. Knowing the story, I looked for changes in him, and I noted several things which were probably hidden from other people. He had begun to speak rather slowly, as if he had difficulty in finding the correct words. He did not look an interlocutor in the face, but fixed his eyes, while he spoke, steadily on the tablecloth. Also, though his colour was healthy, his skin seemed to be drawn too tight around his lips and chin, reminding me of a certain Army Commander during the bad time in '18.

I asked about Pamela.

"Yes, she's in Town," he said. "The Nantleys have been up since January. She has caught a beastly cold, and I made her promise to stay indoors in this bitter weather."

Two days later I picked up an evening paper and read a paragraph which sent me post-haste to the telephone. It announced that Lady Pamela Brune was ill with pneumonia, and that anxiety was felt about her condition.

VI

The diary told the tale of the next three weeks. Charles had to return to his diary, for he had no other confidant. And a stranger story I have never read.

From the first he was certain that Pamela would die. He was quite clear about this, and he had also become assured of his own end. Their love was to be blotted out by the cold hand of death. For a day or two he was in a stupor of utter hopelessness, waiting on fate like a condemned man who hears the gallows being hammered together and sees the clock moving towards the appointed hour.

Some of the entries were clear enough. He thought that Pamela would die at once while he himself must wait until June, and there were distraught queries as to how he could endure the interval. His appointed hour could not be anticipated, and a world without Pamela was a horror which came near to unhinging his mind. His writing tailed away into blots and dashes. In his agony he seemed several times to have driven his pen through the paper ...

Then suddenly the mist cleared. The diary was nothing but jottings and confused reflections, so the sequence of his moods could not be exactly traced, but it was plain that something tremendous had happened...

It seemed to have come suddenly late at night, for he noted the hour—one thirty—and that he had been walking the Embankment since eight. Hitherto he had had a dual consciousness, seeing Pamela and himself as sufferers under the same doom, and enduring a double torture. Love and fear for both the girl and himself had brought his mind almost to a delirium, but now there descended upon it a great clarity.

The emotion remained, but now the object was single, for his own death dropped out of the picture. It became suddenly too small a thing to waste a thought on. There were entries like this: "I have torn up the almanack on which I had been marking off the days till June tenth... I have been an accursed coward, God forgive me... Pamela is dying, and I have been thinking of my own wretched, rotten life."

He went on steadily with his work, because he thought she would have wished him to, but he never moved far from a telephone. Meanwhile, the poor child was fighting a very desperate battle. I went round to South Audley Street as often as I could, and a white-faced Mollie gave me the last bulletins. There was one night when it seemed certain that Pamela could not see the morning, but morning came and the thread of life still held. She was delirious, talking about Charles mostly, and the mountain inn in the Tyrol where they were going for their honeymoon. Thank God, Charles was not there to listen to that!

He did not go near the house, which I thought was wise, but the diary revealed that he spent the midnight hours striding about Mayfair. He was waiting for her death, waiting for Mollie's summons to look for the last time upon what was so dear...

He was no longer in torment. Indeed, he was calm now, if you can call that calm which is the uttermost despair. His life was bereft of every shadow of value, every spark of colour, and he was living in a bleak desert, looking with aching eyes and a breaking heart at a beautiful star setting below the sky-line, a star which was the only light in the encroaching gloom to lead him home. That very metaphor was in the diary. He probably got it out of some hymn, and I never in my life knew Charles use a metaphor before.

And then there came another change—it is plain in the diary—but this time it was a wholesale revolution, by which the whole man was moved to a different plane...

His own predestined death had been put aside as too trivial for a thought, but now suddenly Death itself came to have no meaning. The ancient shadow disappeared in the great brightness of his love.

Every man has some metaphysics and poetry in his soul, but people like Charles lack the gift of expression. The diary had only broken sentences, but they were more poignant than any eloquence. If he had cared about the poets he might have found some one of them to give him apt words; as it was, he could only stumble along among clumsy phrases. But there was no doubt about his meaning. He had discovered for himself the immortality of love. The angel with whom he had grappled had at last blessed him.

He had somehow in his agony climbed to a high place from which he had a wide prospect. He saw all things in a new perspective. Death was only a stumble in the race, a brief halt in an immortal pilgrimage. He and Pamela had won something which could never be taken away... This man of prose and affairs became a mystic. One side of him went about his daily round, and waited hungrily for telephone calls, but the other was in a quiet country where Pamela's happy spirit moved in eternal vigour and youth. He had no hope in the lesser sense, for that is a mundane thing; but he had won peace, the kind that the world does not give...

Hope, the lesser hope, was to follow. There came a day when the news from South Audley Street improved, and then there was a quick uprush of vitality in the patient. One morning early in May Mollie telephoned to me that Pamela was out of danger. I went straightway to the City and found Charles in his office, busy as if nothing had happened.

I remember that he seemed to me almost indecently composed. But when he spoke he no longer kept his eyes down, but

looked me straight in the face, and there was something in those eyes of his which made me want to shout. It was more than peace— it was a radiant serenity. Charles had come out of the Valley of the Shadow to the Delectable Mountains. Nothing in Heaven or earth could harm him now. I had the conviction that if he had been a poet he could have written something that would have solemnised mankind. As it was, he only squeezed my hand.

VII

I went down to Wirlesdon for the wedding, which was to be in the village church. Charles had gone for an early morning swim in the lake, and I met him coming up with his hair damp and a towel over his shoulder. I had motored from London and had *The Times* in my hand, but he never glanced at it. Half an hour later I saw him at breakfast, but he had not raided the pile of newspapers on the side-table.

It was a gorgeous June morning, and presently I found Pamela in the garden, busy among the midsummer flowers—a taller and paler Pamela, with the wonderful pure complexion of one who has been down into the shades.

“It’s all there,” she whispered to me, so that her sister Dollie should not hear. “Exactly as he saw it... We shall have a lot of questions to answer today... I showed it to Charles, but he scarcely glanced at it. It doesn’t interest him. I believe he has forgotten all about it.”

“A queer business, wasn’t it?” Charles told me in the autumn. “Oh yes, it was all explained. There was an old boy of my name, a sort of third cousin of my great-grandfather. I had never heard of him. He had been in the Scots Guards, and had retired as a captain about fifty years ago. Well, he died in a London hotel on June ninth. He was a bachelor, and had no near relations, so his servant sent the notice of his death to *The Times*. The man’s handwriting was not very clear, and the newspaper people read the age as thirty-six instead of eighty-six... Also, the old chap always spoke of his regiment as the Scots Fusilier Guards, and the servant, not being well up in military history, confused it with the Scots Fusiliers... He lived in a villa at Cheltenham, which he had christened *Marlcote*, after the family place.”

THE END

A PRINCE OF THE CAPTIVITY

JOHN BUCHAN



BOOK I

PART 1

CHAPTER 1

On a warm June evening three men were sitting in the smoking-room of a London club. One was an old man, with a face which had once been weather-beaten and was now intricately seamed with veins and wrinkles. His bearing, his shoulders trimly squared even at seventy, spoke of the old style of British regimental officer. The second was in his early thirties, a heavy young man, with nothing of the Guardsman about him except his tie. The third might have been any age between forty and sixty, and had writ plain upon him the profession of the law.

The newsboys were shouting in Pall Mall.

"They can't have got the verdict yet," said the last. "Jenks was only beginning to sum up when I left. We shall hear nothing for another hour."

The old man shivered. "Good God! It is awful to be waiting here to know whether Tom Melfort's boy is to go to prison for six years or ten. I suppose there's no chance of an acquittal."

"None," said the lawyer. "You see, he pled guilty. Leithen was his counsel, and I believe did his best to get him to change his mind. But the fellow was adamant."

The young soldier, whose name was Lyson, shook his head.

"That was like Adam. There never was a more obstinate chap in his quiet way. Very easy and good-natured till you presumed just a little too much on his placidity, and then you found yourself hard up against a granite wall."

"How well did you know him?" the lawyer asked.

"I was at school with him and we passed out of Sandhurst together. He was a friend, but not what you would call an intimate. Too clever, and a little too much of the wise youth... Oh yes, he was popular, for he was a first-class sportsman and a good fellow, but he had a bit too much professional keenness for lazy dogs like me. After that he went straight ahead, as you know, and left us all behind. Somebody told me that old Mullins said he was the most brilliant man they had had at the Staff College for a generation. He had got a European war on the brain, and spent most of his leave tramping about the Ardennes or bicycling in Lorraine."

"If this thing hadn't happened, what would you have said about his character?"

"Sound as the Bank of England," was the answer. "A trifle puritanical, maybe. I used to feel that if I ever did anything mean I should be more ashamed to face Adam Melfort than any other man alive. You remember how he looked, sir," and he turned to the old man. "Always in training—walked with a light step as if he were on the hill after deer—terribly quick off the mark in an argument—all fine and hard and tightly screwed together. The grip of his small firm hand had a sort of electric energy. Not the kind of man you would think likely to take the wrong turning."

"I am not very clear... What exactly happened?" asked the old man.

"Common vulgar forgery," the lawyer replied. "He altered a cheque which was made out to his wife—part of her allowance from a rich great-uncle. The facts were not in doubt, and he made no attempt to dispute them. He confessed what he had done, and explained it by a sudden madness. The funny thing was that he did not seem to be ashamed of it. He stood there quite cool and collected, with a ghost of a smile on his face, making admissions which he must have known were going to wreck him for good. You say he was wrapt up in his career, but I never saw anyone face a crash more coolly... The absence of motive puzzles me. Were the Melforts hard up? They never behaved as if they were."

"Adam was supposed to be fairly well off. He was an only son, and his father died years ago. But I fancy his lady wife made the money fly."

"I saw her in the witness-box," said the lawyer. "Pretty as a picture and nicely dressed for the part. She gave her evidence in a voice like music and wept most becomingly. Even old Jenks was touched... Poor little soul! It isn't much fun for her... Who was she, by the way? Somebody told me she was Irish."

"She was Camilla Considine," said Lyson. "Sort of far-away cousin of my own. Adam first met her hunting with the Meath. I haven't seen a great deal of them lately, but I shouldn't have said that the marriage was made in Heaven. Oh yes! She was—she is—angelically pretty, with spun-gold hair and melting blue eyes—the real fairy-tale princess type. But I never considered that she had the mind of a canary. She can't be still, but hops from twig to twig, and her twigs were not the kind of perch that Adam fancied. They each went pretty much their own way. There was a child that died, you know, and after that there was nothing to hold them together... Adam had his regimental duties, and, when he got leave, as I have said, he was off to some strategic corner of Europe. Camilla hunted most of the winter—she rode superbly, and there were plenty of people ready to mount her—and in London she was always dancing about. You couldn't open a picture-paper without seeing her photograph."

"No," he continued in reply to a question, "I never heard any suggestion of scandal. Camilla lived with rather a raffish set, but she was not the kind of woman to have lovers. Not human enough. There was something curiously sexless about her. She lived for admiration and excitement, but she gave passion a miss... She and Adam had one thing in common—they were both fine-drawn and rarefied—not much clogged with fleshly appetites. But while Adam had a great brain and the devil of a purpose, Camilla was rather bird-witted—a lovely inconsequent bird. God knows how he ever came to be attracted by her! I thought the marriage absurd at the time, and, now that it has crashed, I see that it was lunacy from the start. I reckoned on disaster, but not from Adam's side."

"It's the motive I can't get at," said the lawyer. "If, as you say, Melfort and his wife were more or less estranged, why should

he risk his career, not to speak of his soul, to provide her with more money? The cheque was made out to her, remember, so she must have been privy to the business. I can imagine a doting husband playing the fool in that way, but I understand that they scarcely saw each other. He didn't want money for himself, did he? Had he been speculating, do you suppose?"

"Not a chance of it. He had no interests outside soldiering—except that he used to read a lot... I daresay Camilla may have outrun the constable. Her clothes alone must have cost a pretty penny... No, I can't explain it except by sudden madness, and that gets us nowhere, for it's not the kind of madness that I ever connected with Adam Melfort. I can see him killing a man for a principle—he had always a touch of the fanatic—but cheating, never!"

The newsboys' shouting was loud in Pall Mall. "Let's send for the last evening paper," said the lawyer. "It ought to have the verdict... Hullo, here's Stannix. He may know."

A fourth man joined the group in the corner. He was tall, with a fine head, which looked the more massive because he wore his hair longer than was the fashion. The newcomer flung himself wearily into a chair. He summoned a waiter and ordered a whisky-and-soda. His face was white and strained, as if he had been undergoing either heavy toil or heavy anxiety.

"What's the news, Kit?" the younger soldier asked.

"I've just come from the court. Two years imprisonment in the second division."

The lawyer whistled. "That's a light sentence for forgery," he said... But the old man, in his high dry voice, quavered, "My God! Tom Melfort's boy!"

"Leithen handled it very well," said the newcomer. "Made the most of his spotless record and all that sort of thing, and had a fine peroration about the sudden perversities that might overcome the best of men. You could see that Jenks was impressed. The old chap rather relishes pronouncing sentence, but in this case every word seemed to be squeezed out of him unwillingly, and he did not indulge in a single moral platitude."

"I suppose we may say that Melfort has got off easily," said the lawyer.

"On the contrary," said the man called Stannix, "he has been crushed between the upper and the nether millstone."

"But on the facts the verdict was just."

"It was hideously unjust—but then Adam courted the injustice. He asked for it—begged for it."

Lyson spoke. "You're his closest friend, Kit. What in God's name do you make of it all?"

Stannix thirstily gulped down his drink. "I wish you had seen him when he heard the sentence. You remember the quiet dreamy way he had sometimes—listening as if his thoughts were elsewhere—half-smiling—his eyes a little vacant. Well, that was how he took it. Perfectly composed—apparently quite unconscious that he was set up there for all the world to throw stones at. Think what a proud fellow he was, and then ask yourself how he managed to put his pride behind him... Mrs Melfort was sitting below, and when Jenks had finished Adam bowed to him, and looked down at his wife. He smiled at her and waved his hand, and then marched out of the dock with his head high... I caught a glimpse of her face, and—well, I don't want to see it again. There was a kind of crazed furtive relief in it which made my spine cold."

"You think..." the lawyer began.

"I think nothing. Adam Melfort is the best friend I have in the world—the best man I have ever known—and I am bound to back him up whatever line he takes. He has chosen to admit forgery and go to gaol. He drops out of His Majesty's service and his life is ruined. Very well. That is his choice, and I accept it... But I am going to say something to you fellows which I must say, but which I will never repeat again. I sat through the trial and heard all the evidence. I watched Adam's face—you see, I know his ways. And I came to one clear conclusion, and I'm pretty certain that Ned Leithen reached it too. He was lying—lying—every word he spoke was a lie."

"I see!" said the lawyer. "Splendide mendax!"

The old man, who had not listened very closely, took up his tale. "Lying!" he moaned. "Great God! Tom Melfort's boy!"

Adam Melfort began his new life in a kind of daze. The stone walls which made his prison did not circumscribe him, for he was living in a far narrower enclosure of the mind. The dismal fare, the monotonous routine were scarcely noticed: he was allowed books, but he never opened them; visitors were permitted on certain days, but he did not welcome them, and the few who came—a cousin, a brother officer or two, Christopher Stannix—found a man who seemed to have lost interest in the outer world and had no need of consolation. His wife was not among these visitors.

The truth was, that ever since the tragedy Adam's mind had been busied with a problem of conduct. He believed that he had acted rightly, but doubt intervened with maddening iteration, and a thousand times he had to set the facts in order and review his decision.

It was a long story which he had to recount to himself and it involved a stern inquisition into his past. Much he could pass lightly over—fortunately, for the recollection was like opening graves... His boyhood, for example, the intricate, exciting world of school, the shining months of holiday on Eilean Bàn—the pictures which crowded on him were almost too hard a trial for his fortitude... Sandhurst was easier, for there he had entered manhood and begun the life which had now shipwrecked. There the vague dreams of boyhood had hardened into a very clear purpose which absorbed all his interests, and for which he believed that he had a special talent. Military problems fascinated him, and he had the kind of brain, half-mathematical, half-imaginative, which they demand. There is no higher pleasure in life than to discover in youth a clear aptitude and to look forward to a lifetime to be spent in its development. He had been very serious about the business, and had prided himself on keeping mind and body in perfect discipline, for at the back of his head he had a vision of a time coming when every atom of his power would be requisitioned. He felt himself dedicated to a cause far higher than personal success. But this success had come to him—at Sandhurst, in his regiment, at the Staff College. Adam had little vanity, but he could not be insensitive to the opinion of his colleagues, and that opinion had, beyond doubt, marked him out for high achievement.

Then into his absorbed Spartan life Camilla had come like a disquieting west wind. She was the kind of woman with whom men like Adam have fallen in love since the beginning of time—that Rosalind-youth, which to the mystery of sex adds the mystery of spring, the germinal magic of a re-created earth. He had marvellously idealised her, and had never sought to penetrate the secret of her glancing, bewildering charm. His carefully planned scheme of life went to pieces, and for three tempestuous months he was the devout, unconsidering lover.

Disillusion came in the first year of marriage. The woman he lived with could no longer be set on a pedestal for worship; he had perforce to explore the qualities of head and heart behind the airy graces. His exploration yielded nothing. Camilla was almost illiterate, having been brought up in a ramshackle country-house among dogs and horses and hard-riding squireens. That he had known, but he had not realised the incurable lightness of her mind. During their courtship her eyes had often been abstracted when he talked to her, and he had fancied that this betokened a world of private thought. He learned now that it meant only vacuity. Her brain was featherweight, though she had many small ingenuities in achieving her own purposes. Into his interests and pursuits she stubbornly refused to enter. At first she would turn the edge of graver topics with a laugh and a kiss, but presently she yawned in his face.

He discovered, too, that her tenderness was only skin-deep. Her soft melting eyes were not an index to a sensitive heart. Her nature had a hard glossy enamel of selfishness, and her capacity for emotion seemed to be limited to occasional outbursts of self-pity. Her light laughter could be cruel indeed, and often cut him deep, but he hid his wounds when he saw that she could never understand in what she had offended. She lived for admiration and gaiety, blind to anything but the surface of things. She was curiously obtuse to human values, and made intimates of all who flattered her; but she was safe enough, for she had no passion, and her bird-like flutterings carried her through dangerous places... A child was born after a year of marriage, in whom she took little interest, except now and then to pose with him, as the young mother, to a fashionable photographer. The boy died when he was five years old, and, after an hour's sobbing Camilla tripped again into the limelight. The broken-hearted Adam sat down to face the finality of his blunder. He realised that he had been a romantic fool, who had sought a goddess and found a dancing-girl. His wife was untamable, since there was nothing to tame.

He did not blame her; his reproaches were all for himself. He understood that if she gave him no affection, his affection for her was also long ago dead. He had been in love with a dream, and had awakened to detest the reality. Not detest perhaps; his feelings were rather disillusion, pity, and self-reproach. Especially self-reproach. He blamed himself bitterly for his folly and blindness. He had married this woman on false pretences, loving something which she was not; so from the first the marriage had been stained with infidelity. Adam was one of those people who keep so much space around their souls that they are always lonely, and this leads often to quixotic codes of conduct. The hard good sense which he showed in his profession was absent in his inner world. He tortured himself with remorse; he had domesticated a being without mind or heart, but the blame was wholly his.

So he schooled himself to make reparation. He let Camilla go her own way, and stinted himself that she might have money to spend. His Continental wandering was done in third-class carriages and on a bicycle, while she had the car on the Riviera. Occasionally they dined out together, but for the most part they went their own roads. Some of her doings and many of her companions gravely hurt his pride, but he made no complaint. His manner towards her was always courteous and friendly, and if now and then his face showed involuntary disapproval she did not observe it. She set him down as a part of the conventional background of her life, like the butler or the chauffeur—a pleasant piece of background which was never out of temper.

After seven years of marriage the crash came. Camilla had always been extravagant, and for the past year she had been rapidly amassing debts. Twice she had appealed to Adam, who had paid off all the liabilities she confessed to, liabilities which were far short of the true figure. Then had come a final recklessness, so wild that she was afraid to approach her husband again. For a certain fancy-dress ball she bought a jewel for which she had no means of paying, and, when a little later she was in need of immediate money for a trip to Nice, she sold it at a heavy loss. The jewellers became pressing, her bank refused to allow her a further overdraft and clamoured for a reduction, and in a panic she had recourse to the money-lenders. That settled the jewellers, but it left her the prey to periodical demands which she had no means of meeting. Somewhere at the back of her mind she had a real dread of the fraternity; a tradesman's pertinacity could be overcome, but the soft-spoken people with Scotch names and curved noses would take no denial. For all her light-headedness, she had a certain sense of social decorum, and she shrank from a public scandal like a child from the dark.

For a week or two she was a harassed woman, and then her great-uncle's quarterly cheque seemed to offer a way of escape. He was a rich man and would never notice a few hundreds less to his credit. If she asked him for the money he would be certain to give it to her; but she was afraid to plague an old man in bad health with her affairs. She presumed on his generosity, for he had always been indulgent to her. She was behaving well, she told herself, since she was saving him trouble... She was neat-handed and took pains with the forgery, and when it was done she breathed freely. She paid in the cheque and had once again an easy mind.

But suddenly dreadful things began to happen. It was like a volcanic eruption in ground where no volcano had ever been dreamed of. There were enquiries from the bank, urgent enquiries. Then came a visit of solemn, smooth-faced men who, she realised with terror, were detectives. After that there was a wild fluttering panic, a breakdown in tears, an incoherent confession like that of a bewildered child...

Adam, she thought, behaved well, for he invented a very clever story. She had changed the figure—that could not be denied and she had admitted it—but Adam with a very white face had declared that she had done it by his command, that he had forced her to it... After that no one seemed to trouble about her, only to look at her sympathetically, but they troubled a great deal about Adam. It appeared that he had done something very wrong—or said he had—Camilla was rather confused about the whole affair. Of course he had not touched the cheque, but perhaps he was right, and she had altered it under his influence—she had heard of such things happening—anyhow, Adam always spoke the truth. She was sorry for him, but immensely relieved that she was out of the scrape, and soon she was far more sorry for herself. For Adam had to leave the house and be tried in a court and perhaps go to prison, and that would be a terrible business for her...

For a moment Camilla had felt a glow of gratitude towards him, but that was soon swamped in self-pity. If only she had not meddled with the wretched cheque! But Adam said he was responsible for that and she would not let herself think further about it... After all, she did not care much for him, though he seemed to care for her. Their marriage had been comfortable but nothing more. And now the comfort was gone, and she foresaw endless worries. Camilla took refuge in tears.

Adam's action had surprised himself, but he realised that it was the consequence of a long process of thought. For years he had been convincing himself that he had wronged Camilla, and that it was his duty to make restitution, and his sudden resolve on that tragic morning in Eaton Place was the result of this premeditation... For a little the necessity of playing a part and brazening it out kept him from thinking, but during the trial he had been beset with doubts.

He had smashed his career. Well, that was inevitable, for in making reparation something must be broken... He had cut himself off from serving his country. That was more serious, but private honour must come first with a man... But this private honour! That was what most concerned him. He had lied deliberately, and never in his life had he lied before. Adam felt himself smirched and grubby, fallen suddenly out of a clean world into the mire. He was no casuist, and this tormenting doubt pursued him to the dock, and from the dock to his prison cell. A man was entitled to sacrifice much in the way of duty, but was he entitled to sacrifice his soul?

Peace came to him at last because of one reflection. The alternative was that Camilla should be sitting in this place of bare walls and rude furniture. Such a wheel would have broken the butterfly. God would forgive, thought Adam, a man's sin if it was designed to shield the weak.

The peace did not last long. He had settled a scruple, but he had still to face the litter of a broken life. He had been desperately in love with his work, and had developed a loyalty to his service and to his regiment the stronger because it had no rival in his home. The task of a modern soldier is a curious compound of those of the mathematician and the imaginative creator, for he has to work meticulously at intricate combinations of detail, and at the same time allow for the human factor's innumerable permutations. Adam's mind had wrought happily among the undergrowth, but he had also an eye for the trees, and in his moments of insight for the shape of the wood. It was these last flashes of pre-vision which had been the high moments in his career, and had impressed his colleagues. He had always been an assiduous student of military history, and that had led him into other history, and he had learned the major part played by economics and civil statesmanship in the art of war. As he studied Europe he seemed to see forces everywhere straining towards the point of clash, and he had set himself to work out the problems which that clashing involved. Along with one or two other young men he had established a new school of military thought, to which one distinguished statesman had been converted. There was a cognate school in the French Army, and the two exchanged memoranda. Academic for the moment, but soon, he believed, to be an urgent reality... And now this happy activity, this happier companionship, was gone for ever.

For days Adam lived in blank, unrelieved misery. This was not a problem to be solved, but a judgment to be endured, and he could only meet it with a leaden stoicism... He had settled a large part of his income on Camilla, but he had enough left to support existence. Existence it would be, not life. He was a disgraced man to whom all honourable careers were closed. His interest had been so concentrated on his profession that outside it the world was blank. He struggled to attain fortitude by reminding himself of others who had built up broken lives—disgraced men who had fought their way back, blind men who had won new energy from their handicap... But what could he do? He had but the one calling, and he could not force the gate that had clanged behind him. There was the Foreign Legion, of course. But could he face the blind monotony of the rabble at the foot of the tower when he had once been the watchman on the battlements?

He slept badly, and would lie and torture himself with a retrospect like a chess-board. He saw everything in cold black and white, so that what he looked at seemed scarcely human life, but a kind of cosmic puzzle for which there was no solution.

One morning he woke with an odd feeling that something pleasant had happened. He had been dreaming of Eilean Bàn.

It was different from the island which he remembered. There were the white sands that he knew, and the white quartz boulders tumbled amid the heather. There were the low hills, shaped into gracious folds, with the little sea-trout river running through green pastures to the sea. There was the forest of wild-wood on Sgurr Bàn, where the first woodcock came in October, and Sgurr Bàn, with its queer stony fingers that used to flush blood-red in the sunset. There was the whitewashed lodge among the dwarfish oaks and birches, the mossy lawn, and the pond where the wildfowl thronged in winter.

But the place seemed to have grown larger. Beyond Sgurr Bàn should have been the cliffs where the choughs bred, and the long slopes of thyme and bent stretching to that western sea which in the stillest summer weather did not cease its murmur. But now the sea had fled from Sgurr Bàn. In his dream he had been walking westward, for he wanted to visit again the sandy cove where he used to bathe and look out to the skerries where the great grey seals lived. But it seemed to him that the thymy downs now extended for ever. He had stridden over them for hours and had found delectable things—a new lochan with trout rising among yellow water-lilies, a glen full of alders and singing waters, a hollow with old gnarled firs in it and the ruins of a cottage pink with foxgloves. But he had never come within sight of the sea, though it seemed to him that the rumour of its tides was always in his ear.

That dream opened a new stage in Adam's life. His mind ceased to move in a terrible wheel of abstractions, and he saw concrete pictures again. Two especially, on which he would dwell with an emotion that had in it more of comfort than pain.

The first was a small child slowly ascending the steep stairs in a London house that led from the day-nursery to the night-nursery. Nigel, named after Adam's grandfather, was a solemn, square boy with a Roman head set finely upon stalwart little shoulders. Adam led a busy life in those days, but he usually contrived to return home just as the child, his hair still damp from his bath, was moving bedwards. Nigel would never permit himself to be carried by the nurse up those stairs. Very slowly he made his progress, delaying on each step, impeded by bedroom slippers slightly too large for him. He carried in both hands his supper, a glass of milk, and a plate containing two biscuits, an orange or a banana. It was part of the ritual that he should be his own food-bearer, and it was his pride that he never spilled a drop of milk, except on one disastrous day when over-lengthy new pyjamas had tripped him up, and he and his supper had cascaded back to the landing. Adam generally found him on the second lowest step, and used to applaud his grave ascent. Then he would tuck him up in bed, when the supper was eaten, and listen to his prayers repeated slowly and dogmatically to his Scotch nurse. Sometimes, when there was no dinner engagement, Adam would tell Nigel a story, most often a recollection from his own childhood and always about Eilean Bàn.

Camilla rarely appeared on these occasions, except to hurry Adam's dressing when they were dining out. She had not much to say to Nigel, or he to her. But the father and the son had an immense deal to confide to each other. The child was fanciful, and had invented a batch of familiar spirits out of his sponge, his tooth-brush, his dressing-gown, and an old three-pronged poker which stood by the nursery fireplace. He would recount the sayings of these familiars, who held strong and damnable views on unpleasant duties like nail-cutting and hair-washing and visits to the dentist. But especially he would question his father about Eilean Bàn. Adam drew many maps of the island in a realistic Elizabethan

manner, and Nigel would make up stories about sundry appetising creeks and provocative skerries. He never visited Eilean Bàn, for Camilla was bored by it when she was taken there at the end of her honeymoon, so it had been let for a term of years to a Glasgow manufacturer. But any seaside place to which Nigel journeyed was contrasted by him unfavourably with that isle of dreams. There were too many houses at Bournemouth, and too many people at Broadstairs, and a horrible band in green jackets at Eastbourne, and a man who made ugly faces at Littlehampton, but at Eilean Bàn there would be only his father and the sea and the grey seals and the curlews and a kindly genie called "Peteross."

When Nigel died of meningitis after two days' delirium the bottom dropped out of Adam's world. Fortunately at the time he was desperately busy, and his duties took him on a two months' mission to a foreign capital. He drugged himself with work, and when the strain slackened and his mind could again make timid excursions, he found that he could patch up his world with stoicism. Stoicism had always been Nigel's strong suit, for the little boy had been wonderfully brave, and had taken pride in never whimpering. Adam told himself that he must do likewise to be worthy of the child who had so brightened his house of life. One regret tormented him—that he had never taken Nigel to Eilean Bàn. He put the thought of the place from him in distaste, for it awoke an unavailing bitterness.

But now he found that by some happy magic the two memories had intertwined themselves. Nigel had taken possession of Eilean Bàn. He was to be met with not only on the nursery stairs in Eaton Place, but on the white island sands and on the slopes of the hills, a tiny figure in shorts and a light blue jersey, with hair the palest gold against a sunburnt skin.

Adam had found a companion for his dream revisitings. He would let himself fall into a waking trance, and spend happy hours recaptured from childhood... Nigel was a delight to behold. It had been a hot summer when he died, and the child had been ailing a little before his last illness. Adam remembered meeting him one sultry evening as he returned with his nurse from the Park, and a pang had gone through his heart at the sight of the small pale face and clammy forehead. He had then and there resolved to send him to the country; indeed, the very day when the child sickened he had been negotiating for rooms in a Cotswold farm... But now Nigel was as firm and sweet as a nut, and nearly as brown. It was a joy to see his hard little legs twinkle as he ran shouting in the ripples of the tide.

In Nigel's company Adam seemed to live over again his very early childhood, when the place was as big as a continent, and as little explored as central Arabia. Peter Ross, the keeper, was the tutelary deity of those days. Peter was a very old man who did not belong to the islands, but had come centuries before from the mainland in the time of Adam's grandfather. The Melforts had been a mainland family, until Kinloch Melfort was sold by the grandfather in the time when Highland deer-forests fetched fancy prices. That grandfather had been a famous diplomat, whose life had been mostly spent out of England, and he had longed for an island in which to spend his old age. Consequently the lodge at Eilean Bàn was filled with strange foreign things, rugs on which were pictured funny little men and horses, great jars of china and many-coloured metals, and heads of grim wild beasts among which the island deer-horns looked shy and feeble. To the boy's eye the house had been full of enchantments, but Peter Ross made the out-of-doors more magical still.

Peter was full of stories in all of which he had himself played a part. He had been down among the whales like Jonah, and he had heard the silkies singing at dawn on farther islets than St Kilda, and he had seen in the gloaming the white hind, which means to the spectator death or fortune according as he behaves in face of the portent. Peter could tell tales far more exciting than those in the big Grimm in the nursery, since most of them were laid in Eilean Bàn. There was a mermaid who once lived on Craiglussa, and her songs used to wile ships on to cruel reefs; at low tide you could see some of the timbers of the lost merchantmen. Up in a cave on Sgurr Bàn a holy man had dwelt, so holy that his prayers could bring the fish into Ardmore bay, and immobilise pirates so that they remained stuck fast a mile from shore, where they danced in fury on their decks. The tumbled grey stones in the heather as you went south to Silver Strand had once been the house of a witch who flew daily to France to dine in the French king's kitchen. The old folk knew the sound of her flight, which was like the whistle of gigantic wild geese before a frost. And Peter had other stories into which the great ones out of history entered. The good King Robert had sat on the topmost rock of Sgurr Bàn watching for the spire of smoke from the far mainland which would tell him that he might safely go back to Scotland and take up his quest for the crown; and only the other day, so Peter reckoned it, a young prince with yellow hair had hidden for a week in the caves beyond the Strand, while English ships, his enemies, quartered the seas. Peter had sung many songs about this prince, and he called him the Prionnsa Bàn, which made Adam fancy that Eilean Bàn must have been his peculiar kingdom.

So the whole island had been a haunted place, and every day an adventure. Adam went over in minutest detail each step of the ritual. There was the waking to the sound of clucking hens, and corncrakes in the meadow, and very far off the tinkle of anvil and hammer in John Roy's smithy. Through the open window drifted the scent of climbing white roses and new-cut hay. That was part of the morning smell of the house, and the rest was a far-off odour of cooking, a faint flavour of paraffin lamps, and the delicious mustiness of an old dwelling. When he went to school there was a corner in one of the passages where you could get the same kind of smell, and Adam used to hang about and sniff it hungrily till his eyes filled... Then came breakfast—porridge and milk, with the stern eye of a lady called Missmass watching to see that the bowl was tidily emptied. Miss Mathieson was part housekeeper and part governess, a kindly dragon who could be cajoled into providing a snack of scones and jelly, and permitting a meal to be eaten on the hills or by the sea instead of in the nursery. But she was iron on one point—that all expeditions beyond the garden and the home meadow should be accompanied by Peter Ross...

Then with beating heart Adam would set out with Peter—Peter with his old gun in the crook of his arm, and at his heels a wall-eyed retriever called Toss. Sometimes they fished, with worm when the Lussa was red and swollen, but more often with black hackles of Peter's dressing. Sometimes Adam was permitted to fire a shot, the gun resting on a dyke, at a

ruffian hoodie crow. Usually Adam would go into camp, on his honour not to stray beyond certain limits, while Peter departed on his own errands. These were the happiest times, for the boy could make a castle for himself and defend it against the world; or play the explorer in deep dells of the burn where the water-crows flashed and sometimes an otter would slide into a pool; or climb the little rocks at the tide's edge and discover green darting crabs and curious star-fish. When they returned home Adam felt that he had been roaming the wide earth and had been in touch with immense mysteries. There were certain specific smells which belonged to those wonderful days—thyme hot in the sun, bog-myrtle crushed in grubby hands, rotting seaweed, and the salty wind which blew up the Sound from the open seas of the south. Freshness above all, freshness which stung the senses like icy water.

For a time Adam in his memories stuck to his childhood, for he wanted Nigel's company. But gradually he seemed to be growing up in the dream world, while the little boy remained the same. Almost before he knew he had become a youth, and was no longer at Eilean Bàn in June, that month which is the high tide of the northern spring. He was at school now, in his last year there, and his holiday was at Easter, when the shadow of winter had scarcely lifted... Nigel was still at his ageless play in the glen below the house and on the nearest beach under Peter Ross's eye, but Adam himself went farther afield. He remembered the first time he climbed Sgurr Bàn and saw the mysterious waters on the far side, and the first sea-trout caught by himself in the Lussa's sea-pool, which filled and emptied with the tides. Once in a long day he had walked the whole twenty-three miles of the island's circumference. The place, before so limitless, had now shrunk to a domain which could be mastered. Soon he knew every cranny as well as Peter Ross himself.

But if the terrestrial horizon had narrowed the spiritual was enlarged. Adam was back in the delirious mood when youth is first conscious of its temporal heritage. In those April days he would stride about Eilean Bàn with his thoughts half in the recesses of his own soul and half in the undiscovered world which lay beyond the restless seas. The landscape suited his mood, for it was still blanched with the winter storms, and the hills would look almost transparent under the pale April skies, the more since a delicate haze of moorburn brooded over them. The hawthorns, which in June were heavy with blossom, were scarcely budding, and this bareness discovered the primrose clumps at their roots. The burns were blue and cold, and there was a perpetual calling of migrant birds. To Adam it seemed the appropriate landscape and weather for his now-conscious youth, for it was tonic and austere, a spur to enterprise, a call to adventure... He had discovered poetry, too, and his head was a delectable confusion of rhymes. As he sat in his narrow cell he had only to shut his eyes, and croon to himself the airs which he had then sung, to recover the exquisite delirium of those April days. Shakespeare especially, it was Shakespeare's songs that had haunted him then. Blow, blow, thou winter wind—that had been his accompaniment on tempestuous mornings, when from the south-west came the scurries of chill rain. Sigh no more, ladies, had been for him the last word in philosophy. O mistress mine! where are you roaming?—was there not in that all the magic of youth and spring? He hummed it to himself now without a thought of Camilla, for the mistress he had sung of was not of flesh and blood. And then there was Fear no more the heat o' the sun, which made a noble conclusion to the whole matter. The race must have a goal, or it would be no race; some day man must take his wages and go bravely home.

A scent is the best reviver of memories, but there were no scents in his cell except those of scrubbed wood, yellow soap, and new linoleum. But a tune is the next best, and, as Adam soothed to himself the airs which had entranced the boy, he seemed to slip happily into his old world.

Gradually the feeling grew upon him that everything was not lost. He had still Eilean Bàn, and only now he understood that it was the dearest thing to him in life. It was still his—the lease to the Glasgow manufacturer would be up in a year's time. It was there waiting for Nigel and himself. The thought of it obliterated all the misery of the last years. To return there would be like the sick Naaman bathing in the waters of Jordan.

For a little while Adam was happy in this resolution. He would go back to the home of his fathers, and live as they had lived in simpler days. The world had broken him, so he would flee from the world. People had gone into monasteries after disasters to re-make their souls, and why not he? The very thought of the green island gave him a sense of coolness and space and peace. Youth was waiting there to be recaptured, youth and happiness. And Nigel too—Nigel would be lonely without him. He had dreamed himself into a mood in which the little figure in shorts and blue jersey was as much a part of his home as Sgurr Bàn itself.

And then one morning he had a dismal awakening. All the rosy veils of fancy seemed to be ripped from the picture as if by a sharp east wind, and he saw the baselessness of his dreams.

For what had been the magic of Eilean Bàn to the heart of youth? A call to enterprise, nothing less. A summons to go out and do great things in the world. Once, long ago, when he had realised his passion for the place, he had toyed with the notion of making his life in it, and had instantly rejected the thought. Eilean Bàn would scorn such a weakling. Its ancient peace was not for the shirker. It was a paradise from which a man might set out, and to which he might return when he had fought his battles, but in which he dared not pitch his camp till he had won a right to rest.

Miserably he understood that the peace for which he had longed had to be fought for... But now he was tragically out of the fighting-line for ever.

There followed a week of more bitter emptiness than he had ever known before. He had let his dreams run away with him, and had suddenly awoke to their baselessness. Eilean Bàn seemed to slip out of the world into some eternal ocean where Nigel, for ever out of his reach, played on its sands. He felt himself naked, stripped to the buff, without a rag to call his own.

Those were days of dull misery and nights of dreamless sleep and unrefreshed awakening... And then one morning he awoke with a verse in his head. He had always been a voracious reader of poetry, and had remembered the things which caught his fancy. This verse was about the soul and body being ploughed under by God. He had forgotten the author, but bit by bit he managed to build up one quatrain, and it seemed to run something like this:

*"Come ill, come well, the cross, the crown,
The rainbow or the thunder—
I fling my soul and body down
For God to plough them under."*

There was a strange fascination in the idea. Adam had the underlying fatalism which is the bequest of ancestral Calvinism, even though its specific tenets may have been long ago forgotten. He had always drawn comfort from the thought that, while it was a man's duty to strive to the uttermost, the result was determined by mightier things than man's will. He had believed most devoutly in God, though he would have been puzzled to define his creed. Suddenly there came over him a sense of the microscopic littleness and the gossamer fragility of human life. Everything lay in the hands of God, though men fussed and struggled and made a parade of freedom. Might not there be a more potent strength in utter surrender?

His mind became acid-clear. He had nothing—nothing. His chances in life, so zealously cherished, had departed like smoke. His reputation was shattered for ever. He had sunk into the underworld of those who are eternally discounted... But if he was stripped to the bone, that meant also that he had nothing to lose—nothing but Eilean Bàn, which was not really of this world... But had he nothing left? He had health and an exercised body—brains—much knowledge. Was there no use to be made of these even in the underworld of the disconsidered? Might there not be a tremendous power in complete submission? If soul and body were offered to God to plough under, might not there be a harvest from the sacrifice?

The thought came upon him with the force of a revelation. His feebleness had suddenly become strength. He asked nothing of life, neither length of days, nor wealth, nor fame, nor comfort. He was out of the daylight and honour of the firing-line, but there must be work to do in dark places for one who was prepared to keep nothing back. Desperate men he had been told were always formidable, but desperation was commonly a wild neurotic thing, incalculable and undirected, based on ignoble passions like jealousy and fear. What of a desperation which had in it no taint of self, which was passionless and reasoned, not a wayward lightning but a steady flame? He might win the right to Eilean Bàn by other means than the glittering career he had once mapped out for himself.

A new kind of peace fell upon him. It was not the peace of the fakir who has renounced everything for the high road and the begging-bowl, but something more absolute still, for Adam did not ask for a hope of Heaven. Even Eilean Bàn dropped out of his picture. He was content to lay himself under the eternal plough... He took to prayer, which was a kind of communing with his own soul... And finally there came a night when he dedicated himself humbly yet exultingly to whatever uttermost service might be asked, and rose from his knees with the certainty that his vow had been accepted.

Christopher Stannix, who was his most regular visitor, noticed a change in Adam. The muddy prison colour in his face had given place to the hue of health, which was inevitable, for he was now striving consciously to keep his body fit. His old alertness had returned, and, instead of the dull apathy of the first days, he showed a lively curiosity about events in the outer world. He asked for books, and an odd collection they made. Milton was the only poet—naturally, Stannix thought, for Adam seemed to have pulled himself together and to be making a stand against fortune, and Milton in his blindness had done the same. There were various books of philosophy, including a newly published volume of Bergson, and various works on the higher mathematics. Also there was a mass of travel literature, and many grammars. There was no request for any military books.

Adam had resolved to equip himself for his task in this enforced leisure which had been granted him. The first thing was to keep his mind bright and clear, so he toiled at the stiffest mental gymnastics which he could find. The second was to enlarge his knowledge, for one who worked in the shadows must know more than those in the daylight. He had decided that soldiering, the scientific side of it at any rate, was no more for him, so he put his old interests aside. Since he did not know where his future service might lie, he set about informing himself on those parts of the globe which were strange to him. He had always had a passion for geography, and now, by much reading and poring over maps, he acquired an extensive book-knowledge of many countries. Languages, too, for which he had a turn. He already spoke French and German well—German almost like a native, and he had a fair knowledge of Italian and Spanish. To these he now added Russian and Turkish, and, having in his youth learned enough Icelandic to read the Sagas, he made himself a master of the Scandinavian tongues. He found his days pass pleasantly, for he had an ordered programme to get through, and he had the consciousness that he was steadily advancing in competence. Every scrap of knowledge which he acquired might some day, under God's hand, be of vital import.

But there were two tasks which he could not yet touch—the most urgent tasks of all. He must school his body to endure the last extremes of fatigue and pain and prison gave him no chance for such a training. Also he must acquire a

courage like tempered steel. It was not enough to hold one's life cheap: that was merely a reasoned purpose; what was needed was to make fortitude a settled habit, so that no tremor of nerves should ever mar his purpose. On that point alone he had qualms. He had still to lift his body, with all its frailties, to the close-knit resolution of his mind.

CHAPTER 5

Adam came out of prison in March 1914. His lawyer had seen to the preliminaries, and Camilla intended to divorce him for desertion under Scots law. He had settled upon her most of his income, leaving himself one thousand pounds a year, apart from Eilean Bàn. She ultimately married a hunting baronet in Yorkshire, and passed out of his life. The island he let for a further term of seven years to its former tenant. If he was ever to return there, he had a heavy road to travel first.

Most of the summer was spent in getting back his body to its former vigour, for the effects of a long spell of confinement do not disappear in a day. He took rooms at a farmhouse in Northumberland and set himself to recruit his muscles and nerves as steadily as if he had been preparing for an Olympic race. He spent hours daily on the moors in all weathers, and the shepherds were puzzled by the man with the lean face and friendly eyes who quartered the countryside like a sheep-dog. At one of the upland fairs he entered for a hill race, and beat the longest-legged keeper by half a mile. His mind needed no recruitment, for it had been long in training. He spent the evenings with his books, and once a week walked to the nearest town to get the London newspapers. He was waiting for a sign.

That sign came in the first days of August with the outbreak of war.

PART 2

CHAPTER 6

In Whitehall on an August morning Adam met Stannix.

The latter had just left the War Office, which had changed suddenly from a mausoleum to a hive. He was in uniform, with scarlet gorget-patches, and was respectfully saluted by whatever wore khaki. At sight of Adam he cried out.

"The man in all the world I most want to see! Where have you come from?"

"From Northumberland, where I have been getting fit. It looks as if I had finished the job just in time."

"And where are you bound for?"

"To join up."

"As a private?"

"Of course. I'm no longer a soldier."

"Nonsense, man. That can't be allowed. We're running this business like a pack of crazy amateurs, but there's a limit to the things we can waste. Brains is one."

"I must fight," said Adam. "You're doing the same."

"Not I. I'm stuck at home in this damned department store. I want to go out to-morrow, for I've been in the Yeomanry for years and know something about the job, but they won't let me—yet. They told me I must do the thing I'm best fitted for. I pass that on to you."

Adam shook his head.

"I'm fit for nothing but cannon-fodder. You know that well enough, Kit. And I'm quite content. I'll find some way of making myself useful, never fear."

"I daresay you will, but not the best way. This wants perpending. Promise me on your honour that you'll do nothing to-day, and lunch with me tomorrow. By that time I may have a plan."

Adam protested, but the other was so urgent that at last he agreed.

Next day they lunched together and Stannix wore an anxious face.

"I've seen Ritson and Marlake," he said, "and they think as I do. If you join up as a private, you'll presently get your stripes, and pretty soon you'll be offered a commission. But in a battalion you'll be no better than a hundred thousand others. I want you to have a show. Well, it can't be in the open, so it must be in the half-light or the dark. That means risks, far bigger risks than the ordinary fellow is now facing in Flanders, but it also means an opportunity for big service. How do you feel about it?"

Adam's face brightened.

"I haven't much capital left, and I want to spend it. I don't mind risks—I covet them. And I don't mind working in the dark, for that is where I must live now."

Stannix wrinkled his brows.

"I was certain you'd take that view, and I told Ritson so. But Adam, old man, I feel pretty miserable about it. For a chance of work for you means a certainty of danger—the most colossal danger."

"I know, I know," said Adam cheerfully. "That's what I'm looking for. Hang it, Kit, I must squeeze some advantage out of my troubles, and one is that my chiefs should not concern themselves about what happens to me. I'm a volunteer for any lost hope."

"I may be helping to send my best friend to his death," said Stannix gloomily.

"Everybody is doing that for everybody. You'll be doing the kindest thing in the world if you give me a run for my money. I've counted the cost."

The result of this talk was that during the following week Adam had various interviews. The first was with Ritson at the War Office, a man who had been one of his instructors at the Staff College. Ritson, grey with overwork, looked shyly at his former pupil. "This is a queer business, Melfort," he said. "I think you are right. You're the man I would have picked above all others—only of course I couldn't have got you if certain things hadn't happened... You know what's expected of you and what you're up against. Good-bye and God bless you! I'll be like a man looking down into deep water and now and then getting a glimpse of you moving at the bottom."

Thereafter Adam entered upon a varied life. First he made a journey into the City, to a little street in the neighbourhood of Leadenhall Market. On the door of every narrow, flat-chested house were a score of names, mostly attorneys and notaries public. At the foot of one such list he found J. N. Macandrew, who professed to follow the calling of an average-adjuster. Mr Macandrew was hard to come at. Adam was received in a dingy slip of an office by a pallid boy, who took his card and disappeared. He returned and led the way up a maze of wooden stairs and murky passages, till he left him in a room where sunlight was pouring through a dirty window. There for half an hour Adam kicked his heels. The place had all the cheerful features of an attorney's waiting-room. On the walls, where the paper was dark with grime, hung an ancient almanac, a bad print of Lord Chancellor Cairns, and a faded photograph of the court of some livery company in the year 1889. On a rickety table stood three venerable Law Lists, an antediluvian Burke, a London directory and a pile of shipping journals. There was a leather arm-chair which looked as if it had seen service, and a pile of cigarette ends in the

empty grate, which suggested that the room was much in use.

Adam examined the scanty properties, and then stared out of the window at the jumble of roofs and house-backs. The place was oddly depressing. Here in this rabbit-warren life seemed to shrink to an infinite pettiness. What part could it have in the storm which was scourging the world?... He turned, to find that Mr Macandrew had entered the room, though he had heard no door open.

Mr Macandrew's name was misleading, for he was clearly a Jew, a small man with a nervous mouth and eyes that preferred to look downward. He seemed to have been expecting Adam, for he cut short his explanation. "Yes, yes, yes," he said. "Please take a seat. Yes, I know all about you. We can have a little talk, can't we? Will you smoke?"

Adam sat in the rubbed arm-chair, while the other perched himself on the table. It was a curious interview, of which the purpose only gradually became clear. Macandrew asked a few questions about a corner of Belgium which Adam had often visited. Ritson knew about those visits, and might have told him. Then he suddenly broke into the guttural French which is talked in the Meuse valley. "You understand that?" he snapped. "Every word?" Adam replied in the same patois, and was corrected on a point or two. "Pretty good," said Macandrew. "Good enough, perhaps. You have the right gurgle, but not all the idioms."

Then he spoke Flemish, which Adam translated after him. "That is good—very good. You do not need to speak it, but it is well to understand it." He drawled a few sentences in some tongue which sounded mere gibberish. "You do not follow? No matter. That is the speech of the hill people in the high Ardennes—peasant people only, you understand. There are gipsy words in it."

There followed a series of interrogatories. Adam was asked to describe the daily life on a farm in southeast Belgium. "You have stayed in such a place. Now, give me the duties of the farmer's son, beginning with the first daylight." Adam ransacked his memory and did his best, but the catalogue was sketchy. He pleased his interlocutor better with his account of a wayside estaminet, a cattle-fair, and a Sunday pilgrimage. "You can observe," said Macandrew. "Not yet with sufficient nicety. Yet you have eyes in your head."

He was suddenly dismissed. The pallid boy appeared, and Macandrew held out his hand. "Goodbye, Mr More. Perhaps we shall meet again soon."

As Adam re-threaded the labyrinth of stair and passage, he wondered why he had been addressed as More. That must have been Ritson's arrangement, and he had not been told of it because his chiefs assumed that he knew enough to be passive in their hands.

A few days later he found himself a guest in a country house which lay under the Hampshire Downs. The invitation had been sent to him by Ritson, and in it he figured as Mr John More. His host was called Warriner, a fine, old, high-coloured sportsman, who looked as if his winters had been spent in the hunting-field, and his summers in tramping his paternal acres. There was a son, in his early twenties, who had come over from a neighbouring training-camp. It appeared that young Warriner was a noted mountaineer, and Adam remembered his name in connection with ascents in the Caucasus. At dinner the talk was very little of the war, and there was no hint of any knowledge of Adam's past. The father and son, with all the courtesy in the world, seemed to be bent on discovering his tastes in sport and his prowess in games, so that he set them down as the type of Englishman who never outgrows the standards of his public school.

"You look uncommonly fit," said the son, as they left the smoking-room.

"I try to be," said Adam. "I haven't got many things to my credit, but one of them is a hard body."

"Good," was the answer. "We'll have a long day to-morrow. You'll be called at five. Put on something old and light—flannel bags will do—and strong shoes. We have a bit of striding before us."

It was a clear cool morning when they started, and Adam thought that he had never seen such a light-foot walker as Frank Warriner. He led him out of the vale up on to the Downs at a steady pace of nearly five miles an hour. Presently the sun grew hot, but there was no slackening of their speed. Adam's spirits rose, for he understood that his endurance was being tested, and he had little fear of the result. To his surprise their first halt was at a country rectory, where a parson in slippers gave them a tankard of home-brewed beer. He was a fantastic old gentleman, for he directed all his conversation to Adam, and engaged him in a discussion on Norse remains in Britain which appeared to be his hobby. Adam thought it strange that he should have hit on a subject which had always been one of his private interests, and for the half-hour of their visit he did his best to live up to the parson's enthusiasm. "Good," said Frank Warriner, as they left the house. "You managed that quite well."

In the early afternoon they came to a stone wall bounding a great estate. Frank led the way over the wall. "Follow me," he said. "Colonel Ambridge is a devil about his pheasants. We'll have some fun getting through this place." They found themselves in a park studded with coppices, and bordered by a large wood full of thick undergrowth. Frank took an odd way of crossing prohibited ground, for he began by making himself conspicuous, walking boldly across the open in full view of a keeper's cottage. Presently a man's voice was heard uplifted, and the two became fugitives. They doubled back behind a group of trees, and Frank made for the big wood. They were followed, for as Adam looked behind him he saw two excited men running to cut them off.

In the wood Frank led him through gaps in the undergrowth, stopping now and then to listen like a stag at pause. There was no doubt about the pursuit, for the noise of heavy feet and crackling twigs was loud behind them. Frank seemed to know the place well, and he had an uncanny gift of locating sound, for he twisted backward and forward like a rabbit. Adam found running bent double and eel-like crawling through bracken a far harder trial than the speed of the morning, but he managed to keep close to his companion. At last Frank straightened himself and laughed. "Now for a sprint," he

said, and he led the way at a good pace down a woodland path, which ended in an alley of rhododendrons.

To Adam's surprise, instead of avoiding the house they made for it. Frank slowed down at the edge of a carriage drive and walked boldly across the lawn to a stone terrace, and through French windows into a library where a man was sitting. "Hullo, Colonel Ambridge," he said. "We're out for a walk and looked in to pass the time of day. May I introduce my friend Mr More?"

The Colonel, a lean dark man of about sixty, behaved like the parson. He gave them drinks, and plunged into military talk, most of it directed to Adam. This was no somnolent retired soldier, but a man remarkably up-to-date in his calling. He spoke of the French generals whose names were becoming familiar in Britain—of Joffre's colonial service and of Foch's *Principes de la Guerre*, and he was critical of the French concentration in Lorraine. France he maintained had departed from the true interpretation of the "war of manoeuvre," and he was contemptuous of false parallels drawn from Napoleon's *bataillon carrée* at Jena. He seemed to have an exact knowledge of the terrain of the war, maps were produced, and Adam, the sweat on his brow and the marks of brier scratches on his cheek, found himself debating closely on points of strategy. There was something sharp and appraising in their host's eye as they took their leave. "Good," said Frank again. "You handled old Ambridge well. Now for home, for we mustn't be late."

The last part of the ground was covered mainly in a loping trot, which took them back along the ridge of the Downs till they looked down upon the Warriners' house. Adam calculated that they had done nearly thirty miles, but he realised that the day had not been meant as a mere test of bodily endurance. Those queer visits had had a purpose, and he guessed what it was. To his delight it seemed to him that his companion was flagging a little—at any rate the edge was off his keenness—while he himself had got his second wind.

He found a large tea-party at the Warriners'. "I'm going to cut it," Frank said, "but you must show yourself. You look all right. You've kept amazingly tidy." Adam obeyed, for he thought he understood the reason.

He could have drunk pints, but he was only given one small cup of weak tea. But he had a full dose of conversation. It appeared to be the special purpose of everyone to talk to him. He had to listen to schemes of hospital work from local ladies, and to amateur military speculations from an old Yeomanry colonel. A Bishop discussed with him the ethics of the war, and a parliamentary candidate had much to say about the party truce. He felt hot, very thirsty, and rather drowsy, but he collected his wits, for he saw that his host's eye was continually fixed on him. The elder Warriner managed to add himself to any group where Adam talked, and it appeared that he was adroitly trying to draw him out.

"You have been drinking in the peace of England," the Bishop told him. "To-day will be a cool oasis to remember in the feverish months before you."

When the guests had gone and he was left with his host, the rosy country squire seemed to have changed to somebody shrewd and authoritative.

"We shall be alone to-night," he said, "for Frank has gone back to camp. You acquitted yourself well, Mr More. Frank is pretty nearly all out, and he is harder than most people. I daresay you realise the purpose of to-day's performance. In the game you are entering physical fitness is not enough. A man must have full control of his wits, and be able to use them when his bodily vitality is low. The mind must have the upper hand of the carcass, and not be drugged by exertion into apathy. You appear to fill the bill... Now you'll want a bath before dinner."

"By the way," he added, "there's one thing you may like to know. We won't talk about the past, but long ago at school I fagged for your father."

Adam's next visit was of a different kind. Slowly there had been growing in his mind the comforting reflection that he might be of use to the world, since other people seemed to take pains to assess his capacities. He recognised that the tests were only superficial—what could anyone learn of a man's powers from a few experiments?—but that they should have been considered worth while increased his confidence. So when he was sent down to spend a day with a certain Theophilus Scrope in a little market-town in Northamptonshire he speculated on what might next be put to the proof. Certain branches of his knowledge had been probed, and his bodily strength, but no one had attempted to assay his mental powers or the quality of his nerves. The latter, he believed, would now be the subject, and he thought of Mr Scrope as a mixture of psychologist and physician.

Mr Scrope was neither. He was a small elderly man with a Chinese cast of face, who wore a skull-cap, and sat with a tartan plaid round his shoulders, though the weather was warm. He had a dreamy eye, and a voice hoarse with age and endless cigarettes. At first his talk meandered about several continents. It appeared that he had spent much of his life in the East, and he entertained Adam with fantastic tales of the Tibetan frontier. His experiences seemed to have impressed themselves on his face, for he had the air of a wise and ancient Lama. He was fond of quoting proverbs from native languages, and now and then he would deliver oracles of his own, looking sideways under his heavy eyelids to see how they were received.

Adam spent a confused morning, sitting in a little garden heavy with the scents of autumn flowers. Mr Scrope seemed to have a genius for the discursive. But gradually it appeared that his reminiscences were directed to one point especially, the everlasting temperamental differences of East and West. His chief instance was the virtue of courage. The East, he said, which did not fear the hereafter, was apathetic towards the mere fact of death, but it had not the same fortitude about life. It was capable of infinite sacrifice but not of infinite effort—it was apt to fling in its hand too soon, and relapse upon passivity. The West, when it had conquered the fear of death, demanded a full price for any sacrifice. Rightly, said the old man, since man's first duty was towards life.

Then they went indoors to luncheon, which was a modest meal of eggs, cheese and vegetables. After that his host must

sleep for an hour, and Adam was left alone to his reflections in a chair on the veranda... He was beginning to see some purpose in the talk of this ancient, who looked like a Buddhist holy man. Mr Scrope must have been informed about his case, and realised that he was dealing with one who had nothing to lose. The moral of his talk was that desperation was valueless by itself and must be subordinated to a purpose. A man's life was an asset which must be shrewdly bargained for. Adam wondered why he had been sent down into Northamptonshire to hear this platitude.

But when the old man appeared he changed his view. For Mr Scrope, refreshed by sleep, became a shrewd inquisitor, and probed with a lancet Adam's innermost heart. Never had he dreamed that he could so expose his secret thoughts to any man. More, he had his own beliefs made clear to himself, for what had been only vague inclinations crystallised under this treatment into convictions. His companion was no longer a whimsical old gentleman with the garrulity of age, but a sage with an uncanny insight into his own private perplexities. Duty was expounded as a thing both terrible and sweet, transcending life and death, a bridge over the abyss to immortality. But it required the service of all of a man's being, and no half-gods must cumber its altar. Adam felt himself strangely stirred; stoicism was not his mood now, but exaltation. "He that findeth his life shall lose it, but he that loseth his life shall find it," the other quoted. "That is not enough," he added. "He that findeth his soul shall lose it—that is the greater commandment. You must be prepared to sacrifice much that you think honourable and of good report if you would fulfil the whole Law."

There was a kindly gleam in his dim old eyes as he bade his guest good-bye. "You have the root of the matter, I think," were his last words. "You will make your soul, as the priests say, and if you do that you have won, whatever happens—yes, whatever happens." It seemed almost a benediction.

After that Adam was sent back to the City of London. There he was no longer received in the dingy waiting-room, but in Macandrew's own sanctum, a place to which the road was even more intricate. He realised, though he had had no word from Ritson, that his services had been accepted.

For weeks he worked hard under the tuition of a very different Macandrew. His instruction was of the most detailed and practical kind. From plans and books he studied a certain area of Flanders, and was compelled to draw map after map and endure endless cross-examinations till his tutor was satisfied. He was made to learn minutely the routine of the country life. "You will work on a farm," he was told, "but as you will have come from the town you must have urban knowledge, too, and that I will provide." It was provided at immense length, for his master was not easily satisfied. "There is nothing too small to be unimportant," Macandrew said. "It is the very little things that make the difference." He had to commit to memory curious pieces of slang and patois and learn how to interweave them naturally with his talk. Disguises, too; there were afternoons when Adam had to masquerade in impossible clothes and be taught how to live up to them, and to acquire the art of giving himself by small changes a different face. His special part was kept always before his mind. "You must think yourself into it," he was told, "and imagine that you have never been otherwise. That is the only real disguise."

Then there was the whole complicated business of cyphers and codes. These must be subtle and yet simple, for Adam must carry them in his head. He had to practise his powers of memory, and was surprised to find how they developed with exercise. And he was told of certain people who were key-people, the pivots of the intelligence system in which he would serve. This was the most difficult business of all, for these persons would take on many forms, and it was necessary to have certain marks of identification and passports to their confidence. Adam was almost in despair at the mass of knowledge, vital knowledge, which he must keep always in the background of his mind. "It is altogether necessary," said Macandrew. "You are a quick learner and will not fail. The clues are intricate because the facts are intricate. There is no simple key to complex things."

As the weeks passed Adam had moments of impatience. "There will be peace before I am ready," he complained, and was told, "Not so. The war will be very long."

A new Macandrew had revealed himself, a man confident and eager and untiring, but one who still kept his eyes lowered when he spoke. Adam often wondered what was in those eyes. It appeared that his real name was Meyer, and that he was a Belgian Jew, who had long foreseen the war and had made many preparations. Adam discovered one day the motive for his devotion to the British cause. The man was an ardent Zionist, and the mainspring of his life was his dream of a reconstituted Israel. He believed that this could not come about except as a consequence of a great war, which should break down the traditional frontiers of Europe, and that Britain was the agent destined by God to lead his people out of the wilderness. He would not speak much on the subject, but it was the only one which made him raise his eyes and look Adam in the face, and then Adam read in them the purpose which makes saints and martyrs.

When they parted at last he gave Adam a tiny amulet of silver and ebony, shaped like a blunt cross. "You will wear that, please—people will think it a peasant charm—it may be useful when we meet, for I am not quick at faces... Assuredly we shall meet. Are we not both working for the peace and felicity of Jerusalem?"

In the second week of January, in the year 1915, those who passed the untidy farm of the Widow Raus might have seen a new figure busy about the steading. When the neighbours enquired his name they were told that he was the Widow's nephew Jules—Jules Broecker, the only child of Marie, her dead sister. The Widow was volubly communicative. The poor Jules had no near kinsfolk but her, and she could not leave him alone in Brussels, for he was simpler than other folk—and she meaningly tapped her forehead. He would be useful about the farm, for he was a strong lad, and would have his bite and sup and a bed to lie on in these bad times as long as she was above ground. Madame Raus was a short plump woman with grey hair neatly parted in the middle and plastered down with grease. Out of doors—and she was mostly out of doors—she wore a man's cap to keep her head tidy. She had a name for closeness, and she was the soul of discretion, for she did not grumble like most people at the high-handed ways of the local German Commandant. She has no proper feelings, that one, her neighbours said, and they looked on her with cold eyes as being apathetic about her country's wrongs. But the Widow had had an only son who never returned from the Yser, and she did not forget.

Jules Broecker appeared suddenly one morning at the farm, having come on foot from Brussels, his little trunk of bullock-hide following him in a farm-cart. When summoned before the Commandant he had his papers in good order, his certificate of residence in the city, his permission to leave, and the visé on it stamped by the officer at Nivelles. The neighbours knew all about him, for they remembered Marie Broecker and had heard of her simpleton son. But no one had met him on the Brussels road—which was natural, for he came not from Brussels but from the south, having been landed from an aeroplane in a field twenty miles off during the darkness of a January night.

His appearance supported his aunt's commendation. He seemed wiry and strong, though he slouched heavily. He had a wispy blond beard which looked as if it had never been shaved, and sandy hair which was cut at long intervals by the blacksmith in Villers l'Évêque. His clothes were odd, for he wore corduroy trousers, much too small for him, which had once belonged to the deceased Raus, and though the first months of the year were chilly he was generally coatless. His face was always dirty, which, said the neighbours, was a disgrace to the Widow; but on Sundays he was smartened up, and appeared at mass in a celluloid collar and a queer old jacket with metal buttons. From long before the first light he was busy about the farm, and could be heard after dark had fallen whistling lugubriously as he fed the cattle.

The steading was an ill-tended place—a vast midden surrounded by wooden pens and byres, with at one end a great brick barn, and at the other the single-storeyed dwelling-house. There was not much grown in the way of crops, only a few roots and a patch of barley, but the grass-lands along the brook were rich, and the Widow pastured no less than six cows. She had a special permit for this, which was ill-regarded in the neighbourhood, for she was a famous cheese-maker, and sold her cheese (at a starvation price) to the nearest German base-camp. Jules had a hard life of it, for he was cow-herd, milker, and man of all work; but he bore it with a simpleton's apathy, clumping about the dirty yard in his wooden clogs, his shoulders bowed and his head on his chest. Now and then he was observed to straighten his back and listen, when the wind brought from the west the low grumble of distant guns. Then he would smile idiotically to himself, as if it was some play got up for his entertainment.

Clearly a natural, all agreed. Marie's husband was remembered as having been a little weak in his wits, and the son plainly took after him. Jules had large vacant blue eyes, and when he was spoken to his face took on a vacant simper. His habits were odd, for he would work hard for a week and then go off wandering, leaving his aunt to make the rafters ring with maledictions. On such occasions she would reveal shamelessly the family skeleton. "He is Jean Broecker's own son," she would declare, "feckless, witless, shiftless! But what would you have? An old woman cannot control an able-bodied idiot. Would that Raus were alive to lay a dog-whip on the scamp's shoulders!" But the Widow's wrath was short-lived, and when Jules returned he was not given a dog-whip but a special supper, and she would even bathe his inflamed feet. For it appeared that he was a mighty walker, and in his wanderings travelled far up and down the Meuse valley to places which no one in Villers l'Évêque had ever visited. He would tell foolish empty tales of his travels, and giggle over them. Beyond doubt, a natural!

But a harmless one. Jules was not unpopular. For one thing he was socially inclined, and when he was idle would gossip with anyone in his queer high voice and clipped town accent. Sometimes he would talk about his life in Brussels, but his stories never reached any point—he would break off with a guffaw before the end. But he seemed to have picked up some good ideas about farming, and in the Three Parrots estaminet, which was the farmers' house of call, he was sometimes listened to. He liked of an evening, if his work was finished in time, to go down to the village, and he patronised all three of the alehouses. He never stood treat, for he was not entrusted with money, and he never drank himself—did not like the smell of beer and brandy, he said, and made faces of disgust. His one vice was smoking, but unlike the other countryfolk he did not use a pipe—only cigarettes, which he was clever at rolling when anyone gave him tobacco. Now and then he was presented with a packet of cheap caporals which lasted him a long time, and he had generally a cigarette stuck behind his left ear as a sort of iron ration. People tolerated him because he was quiet and simple, and many even came to like him, for so far as his scattered wits allowed he was neighbourly. Also he provided the village with perpetual surprises. He seemed to be oblivious of the severe regime of the military occupation, and many prophesied early disaster.

But no disaster came to this chartered libertine. Villers l'Évêque was a key-point, for it stood at the crossing of two great high roads and not three miles from the junction of two main railways. Therefore the discipline for its dwellers was strict. There were always second-line troops stationed near, and the beer-shops were usually full of Landsturm. At first Jules was made a butt of by the German soldiers, raw young peasants like himself for the most part, with a sprinkling of more elderly tradesmen. They played tricks on him, pulled a chair from beneath him, slipped lighted matches down his neck, and once gave him an explosive cigarette which badly burned his lips. But he was so good-humoured under this

persecution that it presently ceased, and he was treated more like a pet dog or a mascot. They taught him their songs, which he sang in an absurd falsetto that became a recognised evening's entertainment. Also they talked freely to him, for they could not regard anything so feckless as an enemy. Homesick boys who had picked up a little French would tell him of their recent doings—he was a good listener and quick at helping them out when they were at a loss for a word and relapsed into German. His pale eyes had sympathy in them, if little intelligence.

Word of this village natural came to headquarters, and every now and then he had to appear before the local Commandant. These officers were frequently changed, but for the most part they were of the same type—elderly dug-outs who asked only for a quiet life. At such interviews Jules produced his papers, and told in a wailing recitative the simple story of his life. The worst that happened was usually a warning to stay at home and not tramp the country, lest he should find himself one fine day against a wall looking at a firing squad—at which he would grin sheepishly and nod his head. But one day he had a terrifying experience. There was a new Commandant, a Bavarian captain who had been temporarily invalidated from the front line, a young man with an eye like an angry bird's, and no bowels of compassion for simple folk. For two hours he kept Jules under the fire of his questions, which he delivered with a lowering brow and a menacing voice. "That animal may be dangerous," he told his lieutenant. "He is witless, and so can be used as a tool by clever men. A telephone wire, you understand—a senseless thing over which news passes. He must be sent farther east." But this Commandant was moved elsewhere in a week, and nothing more was heard of his threat. A more dangerous man, if Jules had had the sense to realise it, was a friendly, fatherly personage, who tried to draw him into confidences, and would suddenly ask questions in German and English. But Jules only stared dully at such experiments, until his inquisitor shrugged his shoulders and gave them up.

Had anyone from Villers l'Évêque met Jules on the road on one of his tramps he would have seen only a shaggy young peasant—rather better shod than most peasants, since he had got the cobbler to make him a stout pair of marching boots—who seemed in high spirits, for he cried a greeting to every passer-by and would sing silly child's songs in his high falsetto. But much of Jules's travelling was done off the roads, where no one saw him, and in the dark of moonless nights. Then he was a different being. His clumsy gait and slouching carriage disappeared, and he would cover country at a pace which no peasant could have matched. Into queer places his road often took him. He would lie for long in a marshy meadow till a snipe's bleat made him raise his head, and then another man would crawl through the reeds and the two would talk. Once he spent two days in the undergrowth of a wood close to a road where German columns passed without end. He seemed to have many friends. There was an old wood-cutter in the hills between the Meuse and the Ourthe who several times gave him shelter, and foresters in the Ardennes, and a blind woman who kept an inn outside Namur on the Seilles road. Indeed, there was a host of people who had something to say to him in whispers, and when he listened to them his face would lose its vacancy. They seemed to respect him too, and when they spoke to him their tone had not the condescension of the Villers folk...

Sometimes he did strange things. In a lonely place at night he would hide himself for many hours, his head raised like that of a horse at covert-side who waits for the first music of the hounds. Often he waited till dawn and nothing came, but sometimes there would be a beat of wings far up in the air which was not the beat of a Fokker, and the noise would follow of a heavy body crushing the herbage. He would grope his way in the direction of the sound, and a man would appear from the machine with whom he spoke—and that speech was not French or Flemish. By and by the aeroplane would vanish again into the night sky, and Jules would look after it wistfully for a little, before by devious paths he took his road home.

A close observer, had there been one at hand, would have been puzzled by his treatment of cigarettes. On his travels he was always giving and receiving them, and some he never smoked. A barmaid would toss him carelessly a dilapidated caporal, and it would go behind his ear, and no match would come near it. More than once in the Three Parrots a pedlar from Liège, or a drover who had brought to the valley some of the small cattle of the hills, would offer him a box from which he would take two, one to smoke and one to keep. In turn he would give away cigarettes which he had rolled himself, and some went to very special people, who did not smoke them, but carried them with them in their travels, and in the end handed them secretly to somebody else. If such cigarettes had been unrolled, it would have been found that the paper was stiffer than the ordinary and more opaque, and that on the inner side next the tobacco there was something written in a small fine hand. Jules himself could write this hand, and practised it late at night in his cubby-hole of a bedroom next to Widow Raus's cow-shed.

These cigarettes wandered far, most of them beyond the frontier. A girl who had been a mannequin in a Paris shop took some of them to Holland; some went into the heavens with the airmen whom Jules met in the dark of the night; and some journeyed to Brussels and Antwerp and then by devious ways to the coast and over-seas. There was that in them which would have interested profoundly the Commandant at Villers l'Évêque—notes of German troops and concentrations, and now and then things which no one knew outside the High Command, such as the outline for the Ypres attack in the spring of '15, and the projected Flanders offensive which was to follow the grand assault on Verdun... Only once was Jules in danger of detection, and that was when a Würtemberg captain, who was a little fuddled, plucked the cigarette from his ear and lit it. He swore that the thing drew badly and flung it on the floor, whereupon the provident Jules picked up the stump and himself smoked it to a finish.

Twice he went to Brussels to see his relatives, journeys arranged for by much weary intercession with the Commandant, and duly furnished with passes. On these visits he did not see much of his kin, but he interviewed a motley of queer persons in back streets. Under the strictest military rule there are always a few people who can move about freely—women who are favoured by high officials, bagmen of the right sympathies who keep the wheels of commerce moving, all the class, too, who pander to human vices. With some of these Jules mixed, and Villers would have rubbed its eyes to see how he bore himself. Instead of a disconsidered servant he became a master, and in back rooms, which could only be

reached by difficult alleys and through a multitude of sentries, he would give instructions which were docilely received by men and women who were not peasants.

Once it was necessary that he should cross the Dutch border by what was called in the slang of his underworld the "Allée Couverte." He started his journey as an old mechanic with a permit to take up a plumber's job at Turnhout. But long before he got to Turnhout he changed his appearance, and he had a week in the straw of barns and many anxious consultations with furtive people till early one dark autumn morning he swam a canal, crawled through a gap in the electrified wire (where oddly enough the sentry was for a moment absent) and two hours later breakfasted with a maker of chemical manures who seemed to be expecting him. His host spoke to him in English and lent him clothes which made him look like a young merchants' clerk after he had shaved his beard... Jules spent four days in Holland, and at an hotel in Amsterdam had a meeting, which lasted late into the night, with an English business man who was interested in oil—a business man whose back was very straight for one who spent his days in a counting-house. Jules called him "Sir" and stood at attention till he was bidden to sit down. This Englishman had much to tell him and much to hear, and what he heard he wrote down in a little black note-book. He addressed Jules as "More," but once he slipped and called him "Melfort." Then he seemed to recollect himself. "I think you knew Melfort," he said. "Adam Melfort. You may be interested to hear that his D.S.O. has just been gazetted—he is a second-lieutenant on the Special List."

Jules was absent that time for more than a month from the Raus farm. He returned at last from Brussels with a doctor's certificate duly countersigned by the military, which testified that he had been ill with typhoid in the house of a second cousin. His beard had been shaved during his fever, and his lean cheeks and the sprouting growth on his chin were visible proof of his sickness. He returned to his old routine, except that the Widow for a little did not work him so hard on the farm. "That Jules!" she complained to the neighbours. "The good God is too hard on him. He has bereft him of sense, and now He has made him as feeble as a pullet." Also his wanderings ceased for the space of more than a month.

Time passed and the Widow's half-witted nephew grew into the life of the place, so that he was as familiar an object as the windmill on the rise above the Bois de Villers. Commandant succeeded Commandant, and the dossier of Jules was duly handed on. The tides of war ebbed and flowed. Sometimes the neighbourhood of Villers was black with troops moving westward, and then would come a drain to the south and only a few Landsturm companies were left in the cantonments. There was such a drain during the summer of '16 when the guns were loud on the Somme. But early in '17 the movement from the east began again, and Jules took to wandering more widely than ever. Great things seemed to be preparing on the Flanders front.

In two years he had acquired a routine and a technique. He had taken the advice of Macandrew and thought himself so comprehensively into his part that his instincts and half his thoughts had become those of a Flanders peasant. In a difficulty he could trust himself to behave naturally according to his type. Yet there remained one side of him which was not drugged. He had to keep his mind very bright and clear, quick to catch at gossamer threads of evidence, swift to weave them into the proper deductions, always alert and resourceful and wholly at his command.

It was this continual intellectual stimulus which made bearable a life as brutish as a farm animal's. Now and then, to be sure, he had his moments of revolt which were resolutely suppressed. He had long ago conquered any repugnance to his physical environment, the smells, the coarse food, the bestial monotony, the long toil in mud and filth. But there would come times when he listened to the far-off grumbling guns in the west with a drawn face. His friends were there, fighting cleanly in the daylight, while he was ingloriously labouring in the shadows. He had moods when he longed desperately for companionship. British prisoners would pass on their way to Germany, heavy-eyed men, often wounded and always weary, who tried to keep their heads high. He would have given his soul for a word with them. And once he saw in such a batch some men of his own regiment, including an officer who had joined along with him. The mere sound of English speech was torture. In those moods he had no source of comfort save in the bare conviction that he must stick to his duty. At night on his bed he could recapture no healing memories of Eilean Bàn. He was so deep in a hideous rut that he could not see beyond it to his old world.

He had two experiences which shook his foundations. Once at a midnight rendezvous with an English aeroplane there was a hitch in taking-off, an alarm was given, and soldiers from a German post appeared at the edge of the meadow. Jules knew that with his help the machine could get away, but it would mean a grave risk of discovery. As it was, he obeyed the airman's hoarse injunction, "For God's sake clear out—never mind me," and, crawling down a little brook, found safe hiding in the forest. He saw the airman badly wounded and carried off into captivity, but not before he had reduced the 'plane to ashes; and he realised that he could have saved him. That was a bitter draught of which the taste long remained. It was no good reminding himself that he had done his duty, when that duty seemed a defiance of every honest human inclination...

The other experience was worse. There was a girl who had been a prostitute in Lille, and who served in an estaminet on the Brussels road. She was one of his helpers—M 23 on the register of his underworld. Now a certain Bavarian sergeant, who desired to be her lover, but whom she had repulsed, discovered her in some small act of treachery to the authorities which was no part of Jules's own affair. He exacted his revenge to the full, and Jules happened to enter the estaminet when the sergeant and another soldier were in the act of arresting her. They made a brutal business of it, the sergeant had her arms twisted behind her back, and her face was grey with fear and pain. For an instant Jules forgot his part, the simper left his mouth, his jaw set, and he ran to her aid. But the girl was wiser than he. She flung at him a string of foul names, and the black eyes under the tinted lids blazed a warning. He had to submit to be soundly cuffed by the soldiers, and to see the woman dragged screaming into a covered waggon. After that it took him a long time to recover his peace of mind. The words of the old man in the Northamptonshire village were his chief comfort. "You must be prepared to sacrifice much that

you think honourable and of good report if you would fulfil the whole Law.”

On a certain day in March ‘17 an urchin from the village brought Jules a message which had been left for him by a farmer from the Sambre side—that he had better bestir himself about the summering of the young beasts. It was an agreed password, and it made Jules knit his brows, for it meant that the long chain of intelligence which he supervised was in danger. That night he went on his travels and presently his fears were confirmed. The enemy had discovered one link and might discover the whole, for the interconnection was close, unless his suspicions could be switched on to a different track.

Three nights later Jules found a British aeroplane at a place agreed on for emergency meetings, meetings appointed by a very delicate and bold method which was only to be used in an hour of crisis. There was a passenger beside the pilot, an officer in a great blanket coat, who sat hunched on the ground and listened with a grim face to Jules’s story.

“What devil’s own luck!” he said. “At this time of all others! The Arras affair as you know is due in three weeks—and there are others to follow. We simply cannot do without your crowd. Have you anything to suggest?”

“Yes,” was the answer. “I have thought it all out, and there is one way. The enemy is on the alert and must be soothed down. That can be done only by giving him good ground for his suspicions—but it must not be the right ground. We want a decoy. You follow me, sir?”

The other nodded. “But what—or rather who?” he asked.

“Myself. You see, sir, I think I have done my work here. The machine is working well, and I can safely hand over the direction of it to S. S. I have taught him all I know, and he’s a sound fellow. It’s the machine that matters, not me, so my proposal is that to save the machine I draw suspicion on myself. I know the Germans pretty well, and they like to hunt one hare at a time. I can so arrange it that every doubt and suspicion they entertain can be made to fasten on me. I will give them a run for their money, and after that S. S. and his lads will be allowed to function in peace.”

“Gad, that’s a sporting notion,” said the officer. “But what about yourself? Can you keep out of their hands long enough?”

“I think so. I know the countryside better than most people, and I have a good many possible lairs. I shall want a clear week to make arrangements, for they are bound to be rather complicated. For one thing I must get Mother Raus to a hole where she cannot be found. Then I press the button and become a fugitive. I think I can count on keeping the hounds in full cry for a week.”

“Won’t it be hard to pick you up if the pace is hot?”

“I don’t want to be picked up. I must draw the hunt as far east as possible—away from the front. That will make S. S. and his machine more secure.”

The other did not reply for a little. “You realise that if you’re caught it’s all up with you?” he said at length.

“Of course. But that has been true every moment during the past two years. I’m only slightly speeding up the risks. Besides, I don’t think I shall be caught.”

“You’ll try for Holland?”

“Holland or Germany. It will probably take some time.”

The officer stood up and glanced at his luminous wrist-watch. “We should be safe here for the next hour. I want all the details of the new lay-out—S. S. I mean.”

When this conference was finished he turned to Jules and offered his hand.

“You are right. It’s the only way, and a big part of the fate of the war hangs on it. I won’t wish you good luck, for that’s too feeble for such an occasion. But I’d like to say this to you, More. I’ve seen many gallant things done in my time, and I’ve met many brave men, but by God! for sheer cold-blooded pluck I never knew the like of you. If you win out, I shall have a good deal to say about that.”

Two days later the Widow Raus set off for Brussels to visit her relations. She took with her a great basket of eggs and butter, and she got a lift in a German transport waggon to save the railway fare. Thereafter she disappeared, and though her whereabouts were sought by many they were never discovered. She did not emerge into the light again till a certain day in December 1918, when she was one of many women thanked by her King, and was given a red ribbon to wear on her ample bosom.

Left alone at the farm, Jules went on his travels for two days, during which he had interviews with many people in retired places. Then he returned and showed himself in the Three Parrots. But that night he left the farm, which was occupied next morning by soldiers who were in a hurry. They ransacked every room, slit the mattresses, pulled up the floors, probed in straw heaps in the outhouses. There were wild rumours in the village. Jules the simpleton had, it appeared, been a spy—some said an Englishman—and a confederate had betrayed him. A damning message from him had been found, for it seemed he could write, and he had been drawn into rash talk by a woman in the German pay. Much of the leakage to the Allies of vital secrets had been traced to him. He would be taken soon, of course, and set up against a wall—there was no hope of escape from the fine-meshed net which enveloped the land. But the bravery of it! Many a villager wished he had been kinder to the angel they had entertained unawares, and dolefully awaited the news of his end.

It did not come, for Jules seemed to have slipped out of the world. “He has been taken,” said one rumour. “He will be taken,” said all. But the best-informed knew nothing for certain. Only the discipline was uncomfortably tightened in the countryside, and the German officers looked darkly on every peasant they met. “Curse that Jules!” some began to say. “He has only made our bondage more burdensome.”

Meantime Jules was far away. He had made his plans with care, and began by drawing the hunt northward as if he were making for Brussels. The first day he took pains to show himself at places from which the news could be carried. Then he doubled back to the Meuse valley, and in the dark, in a miller's cellar, shaved his beard, and was transformed into a young woodcutter who spoke the patois of the hills and was tramping to Liège, with papers all complete, to a job in a timber yard. His plan was to change his appearance again in Liège, and, having muddled the trail, to get to Antwerp, where certain preparations had been made in advance.

But on one point he had miscalculated. The chase became far closer than he had foreseen, for Belgium was suddenly stirred to a fury of spy-hunting. The real Jules had been lost sight of somewhere in the beet-fields of Gembloux, but every stranger was a possible Jules, and a man had to be well-accredited indeed before he could move a step without suspicion. He realised that he simply could not afford to be arrested, or even detained, so he was compelled to run desperate risks.

The story of his month's wanderings was never fully told, but these are the main points in it.

In Liège the woodcutter only escaped arrest on suspicion by slipping into a little civilian hospital where he knew the matron, and being in bed with the blankets up to his chin and bandages round his forehead when the military police arrived in quest of him... He travelled by rail to Malines as a young doctor who had taken a Berlin degree, and was ready to discourse in excellent German on the superior medical science of the exalted country where he had had his training. At Malines there was danger, for his permit was not strictly in order, and he realised that five minutes' cross-examination by a genuine doctor would expose the nakedness of the land. So he had to sink again into the gutter, and had a wretched week in a downpour of rain doing odd jobs among the market gardens, where there was a demand for labour. He was now a Dutch subject, speaking abominable French, and had been provided with papers by a little man who wore a skull-cap, was rarely sober, kept a disreputable pawnshop, and was known to certain people by a letter and a numeral...

He tramped his way to Antwerp, and there suffered so severe an interrogation that he did not return for his permission *de séjour*. Instead he found lodging in a street near the docks, where his appearance was considerably improved by the attentions of a lady of doubtful fame who had many friends. He was still a Dutchman, but of a higher class, for he had now a good black coat and a white collar, and his papers showed that he was a clerk in a Rotterdam office, who had come to Antwerp on his firm's business. He had permission to return to Holland, a permission which expired two days ahead.

Then, as bad luck would have it, he fell ill—the first time in two years. The drenchings in the rain and the scanty food had reduced his vitality, and he caught some infection in his squalid lodgings. For twenty-four hours he was in a high fever, and when he rose he could scarcely stagger. He dared not delay. If he stayed he must go to hospital, and there he would suffer a stern inquisition. As it was, before he had the strength to move, he had outstayed by one day the limits of his permit... There was nothing for it but to take the risk. With a blinding headache, and legs that gave at the knees, and a deadly oppression on his chest, he took the tramway which jolted him to the frontier. There he was examined by the German post.

"Back you go," said the sergeant. "You have outstayed your permitted time. This permit must be corrected at the office of the Military Governor."

"Let him pass," said another, who seemed to have more authority. "The Dutchman is sick—mortally sick. We have no use for another bloody consumptive."

The Dutch sentries did no more than glance at his papers. That afternoon he took the train for Rotterdam, drove to a good hotel, and sent a message to a man he knew. Then for the next month he descended into the pit of pneumonia and very slowly climbed up the farther side.

Adam took a long time to recover his strength. There were friends who came to sit with him when he was permitted to receive visitors, one especially who was of a family long settled in Java, and whose dark colouring and yellow-tinged eyeballs suggested a dash of native blood. He called himself Lassom, and seemed to be a man of influence, for he managed to procure little comforts which were hard to come by in that difficult time. On his watch-chain he wore a little amulet of ebony and silver. From him the convalescent got the first news of the progress of the war on all fronts, for hitherto he had been shut up in a narrow enclave. Lassom, whose name had been Macandrew in the office near Leadenhall Street, required an exact report of all that had happened during the past two years in the neighbourhood of Villers l'Évêque.

Once an Englishman came to see Adam as he sat in a corner of the hotel balcony in the sunshine of early summer. "In the Army List," he told him, "you still figure as a second-lieutenant on the Special List. That, however, may not be for long. By the way, they have given you a bar to your D.S.O. for your last performance. I take it that for some time you have been shooting at your limit, as the gunners say. Well, you won't have anything so arduous for a bit—anyhow, till you're fit again. Lassom will give you your instructions when you are ready, and will make all arrangements."

The Englishman was a friendly person, and showed himself ready to gossip, but the man whom he called John More seemed curiously uninterested. The news about the bar to his D.S.O. left him cold. The truth was that he was suffering from a heavy drop in mental vitality. He had been like a squirrel going steadily round a cage, and he found it hard to realise the world outside the bars, or to think of any other form of motion but the treadmill. The fact that so far he had succeeded gave him no satisfaction. Lassom divined his mood and took the best way of doctoring it. Having got the information he wanted, he strove to draw the convalescent out of the abyss of the immediate past and to wash from his memory the Raus farm and all it stood for. There were bigger duties before him, he said, and he tried to divert his thoughts, so to speak, from minor tactics to major strategy, thereby giving his mind new subjects to play with. But above all he looked after his body, and in the beginning of June carried him off to a village on the Texel coast.

There, in a little painted wooden inn above the salty dunes, the invalid became whole again in mind and body. But it was not the wholesome food and the tonic sea winds that worked the cure, but the fact that he had recovered Eilean Bàn. Something in the tang of the air, the scents, and the crying of curlews along the shore did the trick, and Adam, who had long been excluded from the happy isle, found that once more his dreams and his waking visions carried him swiftly to its greenery... Nigel was there unchanged; it was two years since he had been able to see the child clearly, but now he heard his voice, felt the firm cool clutch of his hand, saw the grey eyes light up with recognition... The boy accompanied him in his rambles, a docile little figure trotting at his heels. It was to the west side of Sgurr Bàn that they went most often, where the magical western ocean always sounded in their ears. But they never came within actual sight of its waters, so he could not show Nigel the far skerries, the black ribs of wave-scoured basalt where the grey seals lived. There was always a ridge of hill or a thicket which shut off the view. But Adam felt no impatience. Some day he would cross the last rise and descend upon those sands which were whiter than Barra or Iona.

One day he began to bestir himself and asked about his next job.

"Ha!" cried the delighted Lassom. "For this I have been waiting. You are cured now, and we talk business. In your next job you enter Germany with the approbation of her Imperial Government. You will be a Danish commis-voyageur, who is confided in by the authorities. You will give these authorities information, and most of it will be true—but not all. You will likewise gather information, which must all be true. You will not be alone as in Flanders, for I accompany you. But for the purpose it is necessary that we approach the Fatherland by what you call a voluptuous curve. Next week we cross the Skager Rack.

"You have been happy these last days," Lassom said that night after supper. "Your eyes bear witness. You have been seeing pretty pictures. Tell me."

Then for the first time Adam told another of Eilean Bàn—not much, only a sentence or two about his childhood's home, and its lonely peace. But Lassom understood.

"Ah," he said, "it is as I guessed. We have each our Jerusalem."

The two men had a difficult journey, mostly in coasting smacks, whose skippers demanded a great price before they would tempt the infested seas. In the end they reached Gothenburg, where a noted merchant of the place, who had a Scots name, but whose family had been Swedish for three centuries, assisted them to a change in their mode of life. Adam became a high-coloured business man in early middle age, who wore horn spectacles like an American—he professed to have been much in America—dressed carefully, and had a neat blond moustache. He spoke Swedish like a Dane, said his host. He travelled in wood-pulp propositions, and was minutely instructed in the business by the merchant with the Scots name. Presently he knew enough to talk technicalities, and he met at dinner various local citizens in the same line of business, to whom he paraded his experiences in Britain, Canada, and the States. Lassom also was different. He had let his beard grow, and had trimmed it to a point, and he too wore glasses. He was an American citizen of German descent, and of an extreme German patriotism—by profession a lecturer in chemistry at a Middle Western university. His country's entry into the war on the Allied side had left him without a home, and driven him for comfort to pure science. He had much to say of new processes in the making of chemical wood-pulp, which he hoped to perfect. Altogether a gentle academic figure, who woke up now and then to deliver an impassioned harangue on the wickedness of the world.

The two went to Stockholm at different times and by different routes. In that city of the isles Adam found himself in a society which was strongly sympathetic to Germany, and he met many unobtrusive folk in whom it was easy to recognise German agents. Presently with some of them he began to have highly confidential conversations, especially when Lassom

arrived, for Lassom seemed to have a vast acquaintanceship. One day in an office on the top floor of a fine new apartment-house he had an interview with a thin, grey-bearded man, who spoke openly of his visiting Germany. "It can be arranged," he was told, "for one who is discreet and well-accredited, such as you, Herr Randers." He bent his brows on Adam, and his small bright eyes seemed to hold a world of menace and warning. "You are neutral, yes," he continued, "but neutrality is no protection for the bungler—or the traitor." He gave him certain provisional instructions with the same heavily charged voice and the same lowering brows.

Lassom, when he was told of the interview, laughed. "That is according to plan," he said. "That is he whom we call the Cossack. Formidable, is he not? He has also another name and a number, for he is one of us. He is a Czech, and the Czechs, having no fatherland at present, are the greatest secret agents in this war."

Then they went to Copenhagen, a precarious journey, and in Copenhagen Adam spent two weeks of crowded busyness. His Danish was fluent, but, said his friends, the speech of a man who had been much about the world and had picked up uncouth idioms. But oftenest he found himself talking German, for that tongue was favoured by the men—and women—whom he met by appointment at odd hours in back rooms in hotels and suburban tea-houses and private flats. Lassom did not appear at these conferences, but he was always at hand to advise. "It is necessary that you have open communications behind you," he said, "for you are a channel between an enclosed Germany and the world—one of a thousand channels. You must have a conduit both for your exports and your imports."

Adam met, too, many people in Copenhagen who made no secret of their sympathy with the Allies, and with such he had to be on his best behaviour. The florid bagman had no bias one way or another; the war was not his war, and would to Heaven it was over, that honest men might get to work again! "These folk do not like you," Lassom told him, "but it is necessary that the others should know that you have access to their company... Now, my friend, to work. There is much to talk over between us, for the day after to-morrow you cross the frontier."

Adam left Copenhagen alone. But, when five days later he sat in the lounge of a Cologne hotel, he saw Lassom at the other side of the room behind a newspaper.

Flanders had been lonely enough, but this new life was a howling desert for Adam, because he could not even keep company with himself. For every waking hour he was on the stretch, since he lived in the midst of a crowd and had to maintain a tight clutch on his wits. No more days and nights of wandering when he could forget for a little the anxieties of his task. His existence was passed in a glare like that of an arc-lamp.

Lassom he saw regularly, but only for hurried moments, for Lassom was constantly on the road. He recrossed the Dutch and Danish frontiers frequently; sometimes the Swiss too, for he was busy in mysterious negotiations with neutrals on the supply of vital chemicals. Adam himself had a double rôle. He was supposed to be engaged in various branches of neutral trade, and carried samples which, with Lassom's assistance, were periodically renewed. But his main task in the eyes of the authorities was to be the means of bringing them news through neighbouring countries of the Allied plans. This meant that he, too, occasionally passed the borders, and was fed with tit-bits of confidential information by several people in Zurich and Copenhagen. These tit-bits were mostly of small importance, but they were invariably true, and their accuracy was his prime credential. But now and then came pieces of weightier news, which he made a point of offering diffidently, as if not perfectly sure of their source. Yet, on the credit of the many accurate details he had furnished, these other things were as a rule believed—and acted upon—and their falsity did not shake his credit. For example, there was the report of a British attack due at Lens in February, '18, which led to a wasteful and futile German concentration.

That was one side. The other was not known to the stiff soldiers who received him for regular conferences and treated him so condescendingly. All the time he was busy collecting knowledge for export—knowledge of the condition of the people and the state of the popular mind, and word of military operations, which great folk sometimes discussed in highly technical language in his presence, believing them beyond his comprehension. It was Adam's news that largely filled those desperately secret reports on Germany's internal condition which circulated among the inner Cabinets of the Allies. Now and then he sent them fateful stuff—the story, for instance, of the exact sector and day of the great German assault of March, '18, which the British staff alone believed. Lassom was the principal agency for getting this information out of Germany, but sometimes impersonal means had to be found—sealed Kodak films, the inner packets of chewing-gum, whatever, in the hands of innocent-looking returning nationals, might be trusted to escape the eye of the frontier guards.

Adam had still another task. There was much ingenious Allied propaganda already circulating in the country, based for the most part on Switzerland. It was not anti-German but anti-war, and its distributors were largely members of the Socialist Left Wing. He had to keep an eye on this, and now and then to direct it. It was a delicate business, for it would have been ruin to one of his antecedents to be seen speaking to the intellectuals of the pavement. Yet this was the only duty from which he extracted any comfort, for each encounter involved a direct personal risk which steadied his nerves.

For the rest he hated his work bitterly—far more bitterly than at any moment of his years in Flanders. There was no groove to get into where one could move automatically, since every day, almost every hour, demanded a new concentration of his powers. It was work which he loathed, dirty work, all the dirtier for being done under conditions of comparative bodily comfort. He had nothing to complain of; he lived as well and slept as soft as other people; he had even a certain amount of consideration paid to him; the risk, so long as he kept his head, was not great, and he had a task which kept his mind working at high tension. There were immense ultimate dangers, no doubt, but they did not come within his immediate vision. What irked him was the necessity of thinking another's thoughts and living another's life every minute of his waking hours. He felt the man who had been Adam Melfort slipping away from him, and his place being taken by a hard, glossy, fraudulent being whom he detested.

Now and then he had narrow escapes which helped his self-respect. Once he was all but caught in the kitchen of a man

who had a cobbler's shop in Freiburg, and who had for some time been closely sought in Westphalia. Adam got out of a back window, and had two days of circuitous tramping in snowy forests before he was certain that he had shaken off pursuit. Twice, when his secret information had proved false, he looked into the barrel of a pistol in the hand of a furious Erster Generalstabsoffizier. More than once he was rigorously examined and every detail of his dossier tested. But he had grown an adept at this business, and each syllable of his bourgeois bewilderment rang true.

Once, when his soul was sick within him, he laid it bare to Lassom.

"I have learned nothing," he told him, "except to be an actor of character parts, and to keep the shutter down on my thoughts."

"Not so," said the other. "You have sharpened your mind to a razor edge, and made steel hawsers of your nerves. You have acquired the patience of God. You have taught yourself to look at life uncoloured by the personal equation. What more would you have?"

"Tell me, am I honestly and truly serving my country?"

"You served her nobly in Flanders—that you know as well as I."

"But here?"

Lassom looked grave. "Here you are worth to her—how shall I put it?—more than a division of good troops. More, I think, than an army corps."

There came an hour in May '18 when Lassom arrived by night and sat on his bed.

"There are commands for you to leave Germany," he said. "You have finished your task. This people is breaking, for the last gambler's throw has failed, and your work now lies elsewhere."

"Am I suspected?"

"Not yet. But suspicion is coming to birth, and in a week, my friend, it might be hard for you to cross the frontier."

"And you?"

"I stay. I have still work to do."

"You will be in danger?"

"Maybe. That is no new thing."

"Then I will not leave you."

"You must. You add to my danger, if danger there is. I am a man of many shifts, remember. Also it is your duty to obey orders." He passed to Adam a slip of paper with a few words on it, which Adam read carefully and then burned.

"Au revoir," said Lassom gaily. "We will meet some day outside Jerusalem."

On the fourth morning after that visit Adam was speaking English to two men in a small hotel in a side street of Geneva. A few hours earlier, in the courtyard of a military prison in a certain Rhineland city, a small man with a pointed beard and a nervous mouth had confronted a firing squad. On that occasion he did not look down, as had been his habit, but faced the rifles with steady, smiling eyes.

On the quay at Marseilles, as Adam was embarking in a converted liner, he met Lyson, the brother-officer whom we have seen waiting in the Pall Mall club for the verdict. They said much to each other before they had to separate.

Lyson, who was on his way to Palestine, was now an acting lieutenant-colonel on the staff. He looked curiously at Adam's Special List badge, second-lieutenant's star, and undecorated breast.

"I suppose your rig is part of the game," he said, "but it is a little behind the times. What has become of your order ribbons?"

Adam smiled. "They're not much use in this show. I have been on enemy soil till a week ago, and I fancy I am going back to it."

"Still, you're among friends for the present. I should have thought too that you'd take your proper rank on your travels." When Adam looked puzzled, he exclaimed. "Didn't you know? It was in the Gazette months ago. You have been reinstated in the regiment without any loss of seniority. Also they gave you a brevet."

Adam was surprised that the news excited him so little. The regiment and all it stood for seemed a thing very small and far-away. The name on his passport was John More, and he did not trouble to have it altered. But he held his head a little higher among the crowd of officers, mostly very young, who for the next fortnight voyaged in his company over dangerous seas.

At Salonika after various interviews he was handed over to a Greek doctor, whose profession seemed to embrace many queer duties. In his house he stayed for three days, and during that time he exchanged his khaki uniform for reach-me-down flannels. Also various things were done to his appearance. His face had become very lean, but his skin was puffy and white from a sedentary life, so now it was stained to an even brown. During those days he talked nothing but Turkish, and his host had something to say about his pronunciation. Then one evening, with a brand-new kit-bag, he embarked on a sea-plane and headed eastward. Two days later he was in occupation of a back room in the house of a man called Kuriotes, a Greek fruit-merchant in the town of Kassaba, where the railway line from Smyrna climbs to the Anatolian plateau.

Here he suffered a complete metamorphosis and acquired a new set of papers. It appeared that he was a Hanoverian by birth, who had for ten years been in business in Stambul—there were all kinds of details about his past life set down very fully in close German typescript. His identity card was signed by the German Ambassador, and stamped by the Turkish Ministry of the Interior. It seemed that he had been commissioned, and had served on the Balkan front as an interpreter, and was now to act in the same capacity with a Turkish division.

To the back room came a certain Circassian colonel, Aziz by name, who commanded a battalion in the same division, and from him Adam learned many things. One was that the best German troops had been withdrawn from the Palestine front to stop the gaps in Europe, and that many of the guns now were following. The latter were being replaced by an odd assortment, including Skoda mountain howitzers which had once been destined for the Hedjaz. The word of Germany was now all in all, and Enver was sulking. But the great Liman was not loved, and the Turks were very weary of the business. "They will send us south," said the colonel, "but if Allah wills, the war may be over before we reach Aleppo." He winked, for he had been much in Egypt and had picked up foreign manners.

Adam joined his division at Afium Karahissar on the great Bagdad railway, and found his task as interpreter a delicate one. The Austrian officers of the Skoda batteries were sullen and puzzled, and perpetually quarrelling with the divisional staff... But bit by bit he discovered other duties. His business now was not that of a spy but of a fomentor of mischief, a begetter of delays—for great things were preparing in the south, where Liman was holding a long line in face of an enemy who showed an ominous quiescence. Adam had been instructed in his rôle and he found many helpers. Aziz, for one, who during the endless delays of the journey was very busy and often absent from camp. Everywhere in the army there seemed to be disaffection, and the countryside was plagued with brigandage and full of deserters and broken men. Purposeless brigandage it seemed to be, for there was a perpetual destruction of bridges and culverts and telegraphs, which can have offered no booty to the destroyers. Adam, as the only German officer in the division, was the recipient of the complaints and curses of many furious Teutonic colleagues. More than once he was placed under arrest, and was only released by the intercession of his corps commander. He was set down by his German superiors as lazy and incompetent, one whose natural loutishness had been swollen by the idleness of his years in Stambul. Yet he was quietly busy, and in his own purposes he was rather efficient.

Orders from headquarters, frequently countermanded and habitually misinterpreted, kept the division north of the Bulgar Dagh till early August, and it did not reach Aleppo till the beginning of September. During the summer heats Adam had been a good deal away from headquarters by permission of Colonel Aziz, and had been in many strange places and among many queer folk in his task of tangling up the connections which linked the embarrassed Liman to his base... These were laborious and difficult days, but he found them curiously exhilarating. He felt himself within the electric zone of war, an actor in a drama which was moving to some stupendous climax. The toil of it rejuvenated a body which had been too long cramped and under-exercised. Moreover, he was among novel scenes, and his interest in the unfamiliar revived in him. Almost he became young again.

By way of motor-car, motor-bicycle or weedy horse, and sometimes on his own feet, he prowled about a land which had been for many thousands of years the cockpit of war. It was all pared and gnawed to the bone. He found everywhere irrigated fields where the water-furrows were dry, and orchards which had been felled for firewood. He entered towns where the lattices hung broken, and the mud walls crumbled, and only a lean child or a beggar showed in the narrow streets. He had days of blistering heat, when the sky was copper above and the earth iron below, and when hot winds

stirred the baked mud into dust-devils. He had days, too, when bitter blasts blew from the north-east, or when the rain storms swept in battalions till he could almost cheat himself into the belief that he was on a Scots moor and that the tamarisk scrub was heather. The open air and the weather's moods put new vigour into his body, and never for one moment was he sick or sorry. There was disease everywhere among the troops, but, while his colleagues went down like ninepins with fever and dysentery and heat-stroke, Adam in his shabby field-grey went steadily about his business. "You are a mountaineer like my own folk," said the admiring Aziz. "You are as hard as the hillside quartz."

As they moved south he began to mix with new types—shaggy Druses, sleek Damascenes, Arabs from the Syrian desert as thin and fine as sword-blades. His imagination caught fire, and he had visions of the vast hidden life astir behind the front where Liman played his mechanical game of war. That life was breaking loose from the game, and it was his task to expedite the breaking. For a blow was in preparation, and its force must be aided by defection in the rear, so that when it fell it would strike not a solid but a hollow shell.

The blow came, as all the world knows, at dawn on the 19th of September, by which time Adam's division had not reached the Asian corps in Djevad's Eighth Army to which it had been attached as reserve. It was still a mile or two short of Nablus. Presently it was caught up in the backwash of the great defeat, and turned its face northward. Down upon it came the fog of war, nay the deeper fog of a pell-mell retreat... These were busy days for Adam— and for Aziz and for many obscurer folk. There was a German staff-officer who used to appear mysteriously at cross-roads and give authoritative orders to fleeing columns. He must have been raw to his job, for most of his orders contrived to shepherd those who obeyed them into the arms of Allenby's terrible horsemen.

Adam had one moment of indecision. Liman was routed, so his task must be over. Was not the next step for him to be picked up by the pursuit and restored to his own people? But a thought deterred him. He did not know what might be happening in the north. There might be a stand beyond the Lebanon at Homs or Aleppo, or in Anatolia itself, and work for him to do. So he clung to his fleeing division, and struggled with it past Rayat to the broad-gauge line, and across the Orontes till the minarets of Aleppo rose above its orchards—on past the junction with the Bagdad railway, and up the long slopes of the hills which circle Alexandretta. The division was now only a rabble of scared and starving men, and soon he was convinced that Turkey's last shot was fired, and that for her broken army not even the shores of the Marmora would be a sanctuary. His work was done.

He realised something more—that it was high time for him to go. Aziz had left him, and there were ugly faces turned on him among the troops. He was a reminder of the race that had led the children of Islam into the mire. One night he had to run for it to escape a rifle bullet at the hands of a crazed sergeant. He had for some days dropped his uniform, retaining only his field-boots, and wore a ragged Turkish tunic and greatcoat. He had made ready, too, a slender packet of food, and he had a map, a compass, and twenty rounds for his revolver. Thus equipped, he hid for one night in the scrub of a nullah, and next morning started, like Xenophon's Ten Thousand, on his march to the sea.

For three weeks he was a hunted man, and had his fill of the hardships which those British soldiers suffered who escaped from a Turkish prison-camp. To be sure, there was no pursuit, but there was a more menacing thing, a land where all order and discipline had gone, and a stranger was like a sheep among wolf-packs. The countryside was starving, with the people fighting like wild beasts for food. Also it was strewn with broken men on the same desperate errand as himself, striking out frantically for safety like a weak swimmer in a heavy sea. He moved only by night, and in these weeks he learned the shifts of primeval man whose mind is narrowed to a single purpose—the purpose of the meanest sentient thing. He had schooled his body to need the minimum of food, but even that little was in constant jeopardy. He had twice to fight for his life with famished dogs, and used up four of his pistol cartridges. Once he stumbled on a group of Kurdish soldiers who had set up as bandits, and only the fortunate approach of a moonless night enabled him to escape. Every day he felt his strength growing less, so he husbanded it like a miser. Lightheadedness was what he feared: too often the scrub and the hills would dance about him, and he would lie face down, his fingers pressed on his throbbing eyeballs, till he won touch with earth again.

It was a nightmare time, but he was not unhappy, for a veil seemed to be lifting from his horizon. He had recaptured his own country. The most alien sights and scents were translated into the idiom of home. As he lay in the hot tamarisk at midday he smelled thyme and bracken, and under a sky of glittering stars he could make believe that he was belated on some familiar moorland. Especially in rain could he retrieve these links, for the odour of wet earth seemed to re-create for him a whole world of ancient comfortable things. His body might be stretched to its ultimate endurance, but his mind was at peace...

One afternoon he came over a scarp of hill and looked down at last on the sea. There was a little bay below him and a few fishers' huts; off shore lay a British destroyer, from which a watering-party had just landed. He looked at this assurance of safety with no quickening of the pulse, for he was too weary for such emotion. Besides, he had somehow expected it.

He was taken on board and met by a brisk young lieutenant. There had been a conversation between the lieutenant and a petty officer. "Escaped prisoner, I suppose. Good God, what a scarecrow! I suppose we must take charge of the poor devil. Bring him along at once."

A few words from Adam sent the lieutenant's hand to his cap.

"Adam Melfort! Of course I know all about you, sir! What almighty luck that we put in to this God-forgotten hole! You want a long drink, and then a bath, and a square meal, and then you ought to sleep for a week. I can lend you some kit... Hold on, sir. Perhaps you haven't heard the news. It came through to us last night. The jolly old war is over. Yesterday morning Germany got down from her perch." But Adam scarcely listened, for he was in a happy dream. The lapping of green water and the tang of salt had carried him over great tracts of space and time. He had found Eilean Bàn.

PART 3

CHAPTER 10

In the smoking-room of the club where this story opened Christopher Stannix sat on a warm June evening. It was the day of the Peace celebrations in London, when the returning generals had passed through the streets, and from Pall Mall came the shuffling sound of homing spectators. The war had grizzled Stannix's thick dark hair above the temples, and had slightly rounded his shoulders, for he had spent four years at office work. Also it had hollowed his cheeks, and made faint pencillings at the corners of his eyes. His face was that of a man a decade older than his age. The lawyers' primness of mouth had gone, for he had given up the Bar, and, having been in the House of Commons since 1913, had now turned definitely to politics. He was one of the younger men who were beginning to make their mark in the dull and docile Coalition Parliament.

Lyson, his companion, was in uniform, for he had been engaged in the day's procession. He was skimming an evening paper while the other ordered tea, and dispensing fragments of news.

"Hullo!" he said, "I see Falconet is lost. No word of him for four months, and he is more than a month overdue at his base. You remember him, Kit? The long American who had a hospital at Arville? Began the war as a French airman, till he smashed himself up. He was a bit of a nuisance to us at G.H.Q."

"He was a bit of a nuisance to us at the War Office," said Stannix. "I never saw a man with his temper so handy. I daresay that was due to his left arm giving him neuritis. Also he was some kind of multi-millionaire and used to getting his own way. Well I remember his lean twitching face and his eye like a moulting eagle's. Where do you say he has got to now?"

"That's the puzzle. He has gone over the edge somewhere in Northern Greenland. He always made a hobby of exploring unholy corners of the earth and financed several expeditions, and he had some theory about Greenland, so, as soon as he was certain that the Allies were winning, he bolted off to have a look at it. Funny business, if you come to think of it, changing the racket of the front for the peace of an Arctic desert! And now he has gone and lost himself, and this paper says they're talking of a relief party."

"We're in for a lot of that sort of thing," said Stannix. "There's going to be all kinds of queer byproducts of the war. You know how after a heavy day you are sometimes too tired to sleep. Well, that is the position of a good many to-day—too tired to rest—must have some other kind of excitement—running round like sick dogs till the real crash comes. The big problem for the world is not economic but psychological—how to get men's minds on an even keel again."

"I daresay that is true," said the other. "But the odd thing is that it is not the people who had the roughest time that are the most unsettled. There was a little chap at home who was the local postman. He enlisted at the start in a Fusilier battalion and had four of the most hellish years that ever fell to the lot of man—Gallipoli and France—blown-up, buried, dysentery, trench-fever, and most varieties of wounds. To-day he is back at his old job, toddling round the villages, and you would never guess from his looks or his talk that he had been out of Dorset... Then take Adam Melfort. I suppose he had about as nerve-racking a show as anybody, but you couldn't tell it on him. I ran across him the other day, and, except that he was fined down to whalebone and catgut, he was just the same quiet, placid, considering old bird."

Stannix smiled. "Funny that you should mention Adam, for he was the case I had chiefly in mind. With him it's not so simple an affair as your postman. You see, he was in the war, but not OF it. He stood a little way apart and got a bird's-eye view. For him it was only a spell of training for something much bigger, and now he is looking at the world like a philosopher and wondering what his real job is to be."

Lyson's face kindled into interest. "Tell me about Adam. You see a lot of him, I know, and I don't often manage to run him to ground. I'd give a good deal to get back to the old terms with him."

Stannix shook his head. "You never will. I can't myself. Adam has made his choice. When he crashed, he decided that God meant him to drop out of the firing-line, and had work for him somewhere in the rear. He has gone deliberately underground, and means to stay there. That was why he was by miles the best secret-service man we had—he took to the job like a crusade, something to which he was specially called by the Almighty. He is the complete philosophic fatalist, waiting for destiny to show him his next move. He's a lonely man, if you like, but he doesn't mind that, for he knows that it is his strength. Every journalist is talking about the 'brotherhood of the trenches'—a silly, rhetorical phrase, but there's something in it—people who went through the same beastliness together did acquire a sort of common feeling. Well, Adam had no chance of that; he was as much outside it as if he had been a conchy. He has missed all the comfort one gets from a sense of companionship, but he has missed, too, the confusion of the mass-mind. He has no delusions and no sentimentalities. He is looking at our new world with clear dispassionate eyes, like a visitor from another planet. But, all the same, when he finds his predestined job it will be like the releasing of a steel spring."

"By Jove, that sounds like trouble for somebody. What is it to be? Russia?"

"It might be. He talks the language, and might put a spoke in the Bolshy wheels. But he hasn't made up his mind—at least he hadn't last week. He has been spending recent months having a general look round."

"Go on. Tell me," said Lyson. "I'm deeply interested."

Stannix laughed. "It was a funny business, and I saw something of it, for I had to chaperon him in most of his investigations. You see, he had lost touch a little with his kind, and he realised that he must find it again if he was to be of any use... The first thing was to meet the people who had been fighting, of whom he knew nothing at all. He saw a fairly representative lot, from the hearty fellows who had found it rather a lark and were half sorry it was over to the damaged

sensitives who had a grievance against humanity. I fancy he did not get much out of any of them, and decided that it would be many a day before we could be certain what effect the war had had on our people... Then he made a tour of the serious folk—the internationalists and the social reformers. He hung about the universities to have a look at the young entry, and went into W.E.A. circles, and put in some time with a Glasgow riveter. Adam was never very communicative, so I don't know what conclusion he came to, but he did not seem to be depressed by his experiences... Oh, and he sat out a good many debates in the House of Commons. He found them a dusty business, and used to come down from the gallery with puzzled eyes. I wanted to get some of the politicians to meet him, but he wouldn't have it—didn't want to hear other people's conclusions—wanted to make his own."

"Can't we get him back into the Service?" Lyson asked. "I know he has sent in his papers, but that could be arranged. There are twenty jobs on hand for which he would be the spot man."

"Not a chance of it. I put that to him, for it seemed to me common sense. I told him that he was a brilliant soldier and should stick to the profession for which he had been trained. No earthly use. You know that look of intelligent obstinacy which is more unshakable than the Pyramids. 'You forget,' he said, 'that in the past four years I've had a training for other things.'"

"A pretty desperate training," Lyson commented.

"Yes," said Stannix, "that is the right word. Remember that Adam is a desperate man. There is nothing in Heaven or earth left for him to fear."

One night later in the summer Stannix dined with Adam Melfort at a restaurant. Thereafter they made a curious progress. First they went to a meeting of a group of serious people who were perturbed about the state of the world, and listened to a paper on the "Economics of Victory." It was held in the drawing-room of a private house and the paper was read by a brilliant young Oxford don who had made a high reputation for his work abroad on behalf of the British Treasury... They did not wait for the discussion, but moved on to a newly-formed club, patronised mainly by ex-cavalry officers, which boasted a super-excellent American bar. There, as they drank cocktails, they listened to the gossip of youth. Stannix knew many of the members, but he did not introduce Adam. The talk was chiefly of money, for most of the young men seemed to have gone into business and precociously acquired the City jargon. They were determined to have a good time and had somehow or other to find the cash for it... Then they went to a ball, given by a celebrated hostess who was making a resolute effort to restore the pre-war gaiety. It was gay enough; dementedly gay, it seemed to Adam, as he recalled the balls where he had once danced with Camilla. The female clothes were odd, the dances were extravagant things, the music was barbarous, and the men and women seemed to be there not for amusement but for an anodyne. Adam and Stannix stood in a corner and looked on.

"Isn't that Meeson?" the former asked, mentioning the name of a Cabinet Minister.

"Yes," said Stannix. "He comes to this sort of thing, for he thinks it smart, and smartness was beyond him in his old days in the suburbs. There's Wendell—that man dancing with the Jewess. He comes because he wants to be thought young—age, you know, is the chief crime to-day. Most of the boys want to make up for the war, and the girls have four dull years to forget. It's all perfectly natural, I suppose, but rather foolish. Half the world is destroyed, so we caper among the ruins. You don't seem as shocked as I expected."

"I'm not in the least shocked," was the answer. "I'm only wondering how long it will last. We must pull up our socks pretty soon, or the rest of the world will go."

Late that night the two sat in Stannix's rooms.

"Well, you've had your look-round," the host said. "I take it that to-night was the last lap. I hope I took you to the right places. What do you make of it all?"

"Nothing very clear." Adam had acquired a trick of speaking very slowly and softly, as if words were precious and had to be respectfully treated—a common thing with men who for a long season have had to forgo their own language. "There must be a time of confusion—another year at least, I should say. Everybody is self-conscious and egotistical. Creevey to-night was not trying to solve an economic problem, but to show how clever he was. The lads at the Pegasus have had too much in the way of duty and want to make pets of themselves. The dancing people were not natural—they were all trying to make-believe and play a part. That is going on for a little while till the ground begins to quake under them. I'm not wanted yet, I think."

"And I'm not ready myself," he went on. "I've been coming to realise that for some time, and now I'm sure. First of all, I'm not fit enough... Oh yes, I'm fitter than you, far fitter than most people, but I'm not in the hard training I should be in. Today I couldn't make my body do what it ought to do. I want some good, tough, physical toil."

"Anything else?" Stannix asked. He smiled as he looked at Adam's lean face, his frame without an ounce of needless flesh, and the alert poise of his head.

"Yes, I want a spell of quiet. You see, I have been living for four years in a circus. It hasn't damaged my nerves in the ordinary sense—they're under pretty good control—but it has made my mind airless and stuffy. I want to get some sort of poise again, and that means being alone. What I need is space and silence—frozen silence."

"How are you going to find it?"

"I'm on the road to it. I've been busy for weeks making arrangements with the Danish Government and with his American relatives. The day after tomorrow I sail for Iceland. I'm going to find Falconet."

On the last day of September Adam sat on a hummock of snow looking east to where, far below Danmarks Fjord, lay a blue gash in the white ice-cap. The cirrus clouds of the afternoon before had been a true augury, and all night a gale had howled round the little tent. But the wind had blown itself out before morning, and now the air was clear and quiet. It was the first peaceful hour he had had for days when he could review his position.

At Shannon Island he had found the schooner which Falconet had instructed to meet him in June. A base had been erected there like a lumber-camp, huts and store-rooms and dog-houses, for money had not been spared, but there was no sign of its master. Falconet had made elaborate plans. A sealing sloop had crawled up the coast as soon as spring opened the shore waters, and its crew had pushed on when navigation became impossible, and had laid down depots and caches of food at points up the coast as far north as Independence Fjord. Such spots had been carefully marked on the latest map, which was Rasmussen's. Falconet himself had set off with two sledges and dog teams in March to cross the inland ice. His objective was a bay on the extreme north shore of Greenland, of which Rasmussen had heard rumours through the Arctic Highlanders of Thule. They called it Gundbjorns Fjord—a curious name, thought Adam, who remembered that to the old Norsemen Gundbjorns Reef had been the legendary edge of the world. Falconet had his own theories about Greenland travel. He had taken but the one companion, his stores were of a scientific compactness, his dogs were the best that money could buy, and he held that by travelling light he could reach his goal in early summer, replenish his supplies from bear and musk-ox (he was a famous shot), and return by the coast depots in time to rejoin his ship at the end of July.

But something had miscarried. Ship's parties had gone up the coast almost as far as Kronprinz Christians Land, and had found no sign of him. He could not be returning by the inland ice, for his food supplies would not permit of that. His American friends had been anxious, and Washington and Copenhagen had laid their heads together, so Adam had found his proposal welcomed. Falconet might be ill, or he might have had an accident; if he did not come south before the winter he would perish; clearly someone must go and look for him. Time was of the essence of the business, so the route must be the inland ice, the road Falconet had himself travelled, for the coast road would mean a detour round two sides of a triangle.

So Adam started from Shannon Island with three sledges and two companions—one a Danish naval officer called Nelles who had been with Koch, and the other a young American, Myburg, who had explored the Beaufort Sea before the war. Their plan was to find Falconet somewhere in the north of Peary Land and bring him down the coast by the chain of depots, before the sun disappeared. If they were delayed they would winter on Shannon Island and go home in the spring. Nine years before Ejnar Mikkelsen had covered most of the ground in a couple of months, and Nelles, who was the local expert, believed that, if Falconet was alive, he could be found and brought back before the close of September. It was arranged that in that month relays of dog-teams should be waiting at points on the coast as far north as Danmarks Fjord.

At first fortune had been with Adam and his party. They climbed on to the ice-cap a little south of Cape Bismarck, and, keeping the nunataks of Dronning Louises Land on their left, travelled for five days on tolerable ice in good weather, with few bergs to surmount and no crevasses to delay them. Then suddenly their luck turned. A wind of 120 miles an hour blew from the east, and the plateau became the playground of gales. They came on ice-fields like mammoth ploughlands, where they scarcely made three miles in the day, and mountainous seracs which would have puzzled an Alpine climber. They found valleys with lakes and rivers of blue ice out of which they had to climb painfully. There was trouble, too, with the dogs. Five of them one night broke into the stores and ate one-half of the total dog-feed. Several died of gashes from the sharp ice, and two more from eating the livers of their dead companions. For nearly a week the party was storm-bound, lying in their tents in the lee of an ice-scarp, while blizzard after blizzard threatened to blow the whole outfit to Baffin's Bay.

The culminating disaster came in the fourth week out, when one of the sledges, driven by the young American Myburg, broke through the crust and disappeared in a bottomless abyss. Adam and Nelles made vain efforts at rescue, and Adam had himself lowered on a cable made up of haul-ropes into the cruel blue depths. There was no sign of life; hundreds of feet down in the bowels of the ice-cap, man and dogs had met their death. The tragedy was followed by a storm which delayed the survivors for three days, and gave Nelles too good a chance to brood. He was a dreamy morose man, and an indifferent companion, and from that day onward Adam found his moods hard to deal with. Death and the madness which is worse than death had cast their shadow over him.

Adam himself had found the weeks pass quickly. He had a straightforward task—to shape a course which he more or less understood, and to complete that course in the shortest possible time. It was only a question of common sense, resolution and physical fitness; the difficulties were known, and had been surmounted by many others since the days of Henry Hudson; if each of them put out his powers to the fullest stretch they would reach Gundbjorns Fjord, barring accidents, and whether or not they found Falconet was in the lap of the gods. Such was his mood at the start, and even the tragic fate of Myburg did not greatly change it. Death was an irrelevant factor in any enterprise, and since one could not ensure against it one must leave it out of reckoning. His fatalism was more than a creed now, and had become an instinct of which he was conscious in every waking hour. Always, above and around him, was this sense of guidance.

He had got the solitude he desired, and the long white distances streaked with blue shadows, the unfeatured universe in which nothing moved but winds and clouds, soothed and comforted him... But it was a kind of comfort which he had not expected. He had wanted to get away from men and their littleness, but he found that the littleness was in nature. All his life he had dreamed of exploring the last undiscovered geographical secrets, and had thought of the world as a field of mystery of which only the edge had been lit up. Now he realised that the globe had suddenly gone small, and that man had put his impress upon the extremest wilds. The forgotten khanates of central Asia were full of communist squabbles. The

holy cities of Arabia had been bases and objectives in the war. Epidemics, germinated in the squalor of Europe, had destroyed whole tribes of savages in Africa. He remembered conversations he had heard that summer in England, when untrodden equatorial forests had been thought of only as reservoirs of wood alcohol, and plans were preparing for making a road by air to every corner of the inaccessible. The world had shrunk, but humanity was extended—that was the moral that he drew from his reflections. Many things had gone, but the spirit of man had enlarged its borders. The problem of the future was the proper ordering of that spirit.

As they moved north from the head of Danmarks Fjord over the snow-cap of Erichsens Land, there was one human spirit that troubled him. Every day Nelles became more difficult. He was a big fellow, and with his heavy clothes and matted hair and beard and red-rimmed eyes he looked like a bear wakened out of its winter sleep. He had always been silent and uncompanionable, though a magnificent worker, but since Myburg's death he had taken to talking—wild incoherent talk in a voice that rose often into a scream.

He wanted to turn back. They had lost time and would for certain be caught by winter. Falconet was dead—must be dead long ago—and what advantage was there in finding a corpse? His passion made him eloquent, and he would draw terrible pictures of an ice-cave at Gundbjorns Fjord, and two dead men with staring eyes awaiting them. "I will not go!" he cried. "I will not meet the dead. For the love of God let us turn now, or we shall be wrapped in the same winding-sheet."

Adam reasoned with him patiently, but the madness grew with every hour. He became slovenly, and one night left the dogs unfed, with the consequence that next day two were sick. He would eat little himself, and his blackening lips showed signs of scurvy. Adam decided that this state of affairs could not go on, and that it would be better to send him home with one sledge. He had no doubt where his own duty lay. Even if Falconet was dead he must reach him and make certain of his fate. He might be alive and crippled or ill; in that case the only hope was to winter with him and nurse him. If provisions ran short he would get him down to the nearest depot on Independence Fjord, the farthest north of those which the schooner parties had established. Adam, with his blistered flaking skin and bleared eyes, would not have seemed to an unskilled observer a man in the best physical condition, but he knew that his body had never been harder, and he believed that he had strength enough and to spare for his purpose.

He gave Nelles one final trial. Down perilous icy shelves they descended to the shore of Independence Fjord, and, travelling half a day to the east, found without trouble the beacon which marked the ultimate food depot. The cache was a large one and in good order, and they strengthened with boulders its defences against inquisitive bears. A fresh snowfall had covered all but the top of the dwarf Arctic willows and the heather, but there was at least a hint of vegetation, the first they had seen for many weeks. They went into camp, and since the place had a reputation for game they went hunting. A seal was killed which gave the dogs fresh food, and, though each of the men had a touch of snow-blindness which made stalking difficult, they managed to get a young musk-ox and a brace and a half of ptarmigan. That night they had a feast of fat things.

But the meal did not change Nelles's purpose, though it seemed to give him a better balance. The sight of something other than snow and ice and the taste of fresh meat had increased his determination to go back. He began by arguing reasonably. This, he said, was the last chance, and there was just time, if God willed, to reach the ship before the winter gales. They would go down the coast and get supplies from the chain of depots. He understood sledging on shore ice better than on the ice-cap, and he had no fear for the journey. Otherwise only death awaited them—death beside a dead man, if indeed they ever found Falconet's corpse. When his arguments did not prevail his voice grew wild and shrill, he gesticulated, implored and wept. Adam came to a decision.

"I am going on," he said, "for I have a charge laid on me. You are different. If I find Falconet you will only be another mouth to feed, and if I fail you will be another victim. I order you to go back. You have a map with the depots marked, and you already know something of the coast route. I put you on your honour to take no more food than you need from the caches, for Falconet and I must depend on them on our way south. If the ship has gone when you reach Shannon Island you can winter comfortably in the huts. If she is still there, you will tell Captain Tønning to come back as soon as the seas are open and to send his sloop to scout up the coast. Tell him I will have Falconet home by next summer."

That night Adam heard Nelles babbling in his sleep. Next morning he set off with four dogs and one of the sledges for Cap Rigsdagen, and did not once look back. He was whistling as far as his cracked lips allowed him.

Beyond Independence Fjord Adam entered a fantastic world. The shadow of the coming night was beginning to droop over it, but it had a queer sunset opalescence, so that often it was hard to believe that there was substance behind the dissolving shapes of cloud and rock and snow. For the first days there was little wind, the four dogs travelled well, and Adam had peace to consider his plans. He had enough food and petroleum to last him till the spring, but not enough for more than one. Falconet and his companion had taken ample stores with them for the time they expected to be absent, but not enough for a winter. There was no chance now of getting back to the ship before it was forced to escape from the grip of the ice; so, if he found Falconet and supplies were short, there would be nothing for it but to make for the nearest depot—Independence Fjord—and work their way from cache to cache down the coast. Even in winter such short journeys would be feasible. He must find Falconet, alive or dead, for he could not have missed him on the road. He had never met him, but he had heard much of his furious energy and resolution. That was not the sort of man to be easily beaten by difficulties. Adam was fairly certain of his course, and had taken observations as regularly as a deep-sea skipper. In four days—a week at the most—he should be across the low ice-cap of Peary Land and looking down on the ultimate Polar Sea.

But suddenly the weather worsened. A gale blew from the north while he was among a chain of nunataks glazed into black ice, where the going was hard. One evening he saw a great white wall moving towards him, which was the snow blown into a solid screen by the wind. He and his dogs were almost smothered; in the teeth of it movement was impossible,

and it was late before the tent could be pitched and the stove got going. For the first time he really felt the Arctic cold, since that night the heat of his body seemed powerless to conquer the chill of his soaked clothes. As he peered through the blizzard he began to share Nelles's forebodings of what might lie beyond it.

The storm died down, and there fell a strange calm; the air was still and not too cold, but even at midday there was a sense of twilight. At last one afternoon he found himself looking down on a long sword-cut which cleft the ice-cap, and beyond it to a wilderness of opal and pearl, and he knew that he had reached his goal. But the gale had blown the sun out of the sky. The whole heavens were a pale gold, and pinnacles of the land ice were tipped and flushed with fire. Even as he gazed a grey shadow seemed to creep slowly from the horizon and one by one put out the fairy lights. Adam realised that he was watching the Polar night emerge from the Polar Sea, and that for a third of the year the world would be sunless.

He guided the dogs without difficulty down a cleft of the ice-cap to the edge of the fjord. There he saw what he expected. On a mound of snow a discoloured American flag hung limply from a post. There was something beside it which startled him—a little cross of wood, with an inscription burned on it—M. P., July 27th, 1919. He remembered that Falconet's companion had been called Magnus Paulsen.

His first thought was that he had arrived too late. Falconet was gone, after burying his dead comrade under his country's flag... Then a little to the left under the lee of a cliff he saw something which was not a hummock of snow. A boulder, riven from the precipice by some winter storm, made a small cave over which a kind of roof had been stretched. Inside there was darkness, and Adam stumbled over something which he recognised as a food box. He struck a light, and saw a rough bed on which lay the figure of a man. He thought he was dead, till his breathing told him that he was asleep.

Adam found a lantern and lit up the interior of the cleft. It made a lop-sided hut, but, except at the mouth, where blocks of snow had been piled to lessen the aperture, the floor was dry. The light woke the sleeper, who started up as if to reach for a weapon, and then dropped feebly back. Adam saw a face as thin and beaky as a crow's, with pallid skin showing between a black, tangled mane of hair.

"Who the devil are you?" The words came out in slow gasps.

"I was sent to find you. Melfort's my name—an Englishman. You're Falconet, aren't you?"

"What is left of him," was the answer. "You can't move me... I think my back is broken... Paulsen is dead—his head was smashed to pulp by an accursed ice-fall. The dogs too—I had to shoot the last to put him out of pain. I'm for it all right... But I'm glad to see you, whoever you are... I'd like company when I peg out."

"You're not going to peg out. Let me have a look at you before I put things straight."

Slowly and painfully layers of filthy clothing were stripped off, till Falconet's body was revealed. His back and shoulders were a mass of bruises and unhealed scars, and his left arm was broken and unset. He was in the last stage of emaciation. Adam had enough medical knowledge to decide that there was no damage to the spine, but that lacerated muscles had induced a partial paralysis of one side. The man was worn to a shadow by pain, malnutrition and poisoned blood.

Bit by bit Falconet's story came out. He and Paulsen had reached Gundbjorns Fjord a month later than they had planned, owing to storms on the ice-cap. They had made camp in the cleft, and, believing that they had still ample time to rejoin the ship by the coast route, had set out to explore the coast to the west. Their dogs had been reduced to six, but, since the coast depots would enable them to travel light, this loss did not trouble them. They had pushed forty miles or so along the shore and had discovered and surveyed a new fjord, living largely off the ptarmigan and duck which they shot. On their return, when they were within a mile of their camp, they passed under a great nose of ice, which had been loosened by a spell of warm weather. It fell on them, killing Paulsen, killing or maiming all the dogs, and leaving Falconet himself unconscious under a corner of the avalanche. He had come to his senses, extricated Paulsen's body, and somehow dragged it and himself back to camp.

All this had happened nine weeks earlier. Since then he had been in constant pain, and had had much ado to get himself the means of life, for every movement had become agony. He was almost too weak to cook meals, and had subsisted largely on chocolate and meat lozenges. But indeed food mattered little to him, for the torture of his body forced him to have recourse to opiates from the medicine box, and thirst vexed him more than hunger. He had made up his mind for death, and had been growing so lightheaded that he was scarcely conscious of his surroundings. Adam's arrival had startled him into sanity, but presently he fancied that it was Paulsen he saw, and his mind wavered miserably between the living and the dead.

Adam boiled water on the stove and washed the foul body. He set the broken arm in splints, and dressed such of the wounds as had become sores. He forced him to drink a bowl of hot soup, found him a change of shirt, and did his best to make him a softer bed. Falconet was asleep before he had finished these ministrations. It was rough nursing, but the best he could give. As he watched the figure in its restless sleep, looking for all the world like some peasant victim of a Russian famine, he could not refrain from smiling, for he remembered that this was Jim Falconet, who had once captained a famous polo team on their visit to England, and was believed to be the third or fourth richest man in the world.

Then he set about making an inventory. There was enough dog-feed to last the winter, and Falconet's stores and his own ought to carry the two of them through. The risk lay in running short of petroleum, which would have to be strictly rationed. Clearly the man could not be moved for weeks. Adam believed that he had suffered no serious mischief, and that with care his strong physique would right itself... He tidied up the hut, which was in a hideous mess, and found quarters for his dogs in an alcove near the entrance. Then out of some broken packing-cases he made a fire, more for the comfort of his mind than of his body, and as he watched its tiny glow struggling with the velvet dark he had a moment of satisfaction. He had carried out the first part of his task.

Very soon Adam found that what had been his fancies on the ice-cap had become grim truth. For the wide Arctic world was narrowed for him to a few stuffy cubic feet in a cranny of rock, and his problem to a strife not with wild nature but with a human soul.

Falconet's body was the least part of the task. The problem was to avoid blood-poisoning, and Adam put all his wits to the job. His own case of medicines was well stocked, but Falconet's was in dire disorder; but out of the two he got enough drugs on which to base a simple regime. Diet was the trouble, for to a sick man the coarse satisfying Arctic food was ill suited. Adam managed, before the last daylight disappeared, to shoot some ptarmigan on the fringes of the ice-cap, and to give the patient a few days of fresh chicken-broth. With careful dressing the sores began to mend, and the swollen and displaced muscles after much bandaging came slowly into order. The arm, too, set well, and presently Falconet was able to move more comfortably. But acute attacks of neuritis followed, and the flow of returning strength into the man's veins seemed to be as painful as the running back of the blood to a frozen limb.

Meantime the daylight ebbed, till at noon there was only a misty grey twilight. There was a spell of fine weather in November, when the stars blazed so bright that they seemed to be set not in two dimensions on a flat plane but hung solidly in receding avenues of utter blackness. The brightest time was night, when there was a moon, and the cliffs and the fjord swam in frosty silver. With December came storms, which howled among the crags and blocked up the entrance to

the hut with forty-foot drifts. The place became as cold as a hyperborean hell, cold and yet airless. There was no means of making fire, and there was little light, for the petroleum, if it was to last the winter, had to be jealously conserved. Already with the constant melting of snow and boiling of water for Falconet's dressings it had run lower than Adam's plans allowed. He would have made an effort to get a further supply from the cache at Independence Fjord if he had dared to leave the sick man alone for a week.

By Christmas Falconet's body had mended, and he was able to walk to the door in a lull of the weather and breathe fresh air. But this return of his physical powers seemed to be accompanied by a disorientation of mind. In his lonely vigil before Adam's arrival he had brought himself to face death with calmness, but, having been plucked from the grave, it appeared that he could not recover his bearings. He was morose and peevish, and liable to uncontrollable rages. The spirit of a grown man had been exchanged for the temper of a suspicious child. He had lost the power of self-restraint, and there was no companionship to be got out of him. He babbled to himself, his voice acquired a high querulous pitch, and he became the prey of childish nightmares. For no apparent cause he would lie shivering and moaning, and when Adam tried to soothe him he screamed like an animal... On Christmas night a little extra feast was prepared, a fire was made of empty boxes, and two cigars were added to the rations. But the festival was a tragic failure, for the cigar made Falconet sick, and, when Adam tried to cheer him with talk about the world they had left, he cursed and wept and went sulking to his sleeping-bag. For the better part of a week his wits seemed to leave him altogether, and Adam had to watch his every movement lest he should cut his throat.

The two men in the hut came to loathe each other. Adam confessed it to himself with shame. His tending of the other's body in all its noisomeness had given him a horror of it. As the cold increased it was necessary for warmth that they should creep close together, and he shrank with a kind of nausea from such contacts. Falconet's growing witlessness added to the repulsion, for the gaunt hairy creature seemed to have shed all that made humanity tolerable. Days and nights were alike dark, for they could afford little light. They rarely spoke to each other, and never conversed. They sat or lay in their sleeping-bags in a dreadful frozen monotony of dislike. Adam's one relaxation was to tend the dogs. He would bury his head in their fur, for the smell of it brought back to him a happier world. To feed them and exercise them seemed his one link with sanity. The dark world out-of-doors was a less savage place than the squalid hut.

He realised that he was facing the severest test of his life, for he had himself to conquer. Here at the back end of creation he was bound to a lunatic, and all the terrors and perils of the Polar night were narrowed to the relation between two human souls. In his loneliness during the war he had had at any rate the free use of his mind, but now under the strain he felt his mind warping. He had to fight down crude and petty things which he thought he had long since put behind him—above all he had to conquer the sane man's horror of the insane, the clean man's repulsion from the foul. This was a fiercer trial than he had envisaged when he set out from England. He had desired space and solitude and he had found them; he had wanted to inure his body to extreme fatigue and he had done it; but he had not reckoned upon this spiritual conflict in a kennel darker than a city slum... But he must go through with the job he had undertaken. Falconet had been a great man and was worth saving, and the task could not be left half-finished.

Adam nerved himself for a supreme effort. Through all his outbreaks and spasms he nursed Falconet with patient tenderness. He soothed him and coaxed him and in the end he quieted him. By the beginning of February Falconet's increased bodily well-being reacted on his mind. Now and then he talked rationally. He began to fuss about Paulsen's grave, which, he feared, might be exposed when summer thinned the snow. Once or twice he stammered a few words of gratitude.

One February day, while Adam was feeding the dogs, he saw in the south a strange glow. For a moment he was puzzled and thought of some new kind of aurora borealis; then an explanation flashed on him, and he called excitedly to Falconet to come out. The two men watched the glow deepen, till their eyes, so long accustomed to darkness, ached at the sight. Then suddenly one of the ice peaks above the fjord flushed into deep rose, and the glow from the south seemed to run across the frozen ocean to meet them. A ray, an authentic ray of sunlight, made a path in it, and over the edge of the world appeared a semicircle of blood-red. The dogs in the hut felt its advent, for they set up a wild barking. The sun had come back to the world.

Adam and Falconet moved down towards the shore, bathed in the cold primeval radiance. For the first time for months they saw their shadows, ghostly indeterminate things running far behind them into the north. Then they heard a croak overhead, and looked up to see a raven. He had been flying west to the icecap, but the sight of the sun made him change his course, and with a steady beat of wings he flew south to welcome it.

Falconet grinned, and his face was that of a sane man.

"We've got to follow that old bird," he said. "It knows what's good for it."

They started for home on the first day of March, when the allowance of daylight was still scanty. The easier road to Independence Fjord was by the shore ice, but it would have been three times as long, so, since the petroleum supply was very low, Adam decided to return as he had come, by the ice-cap. The advent of spring had worked a miracle with Falconet. His great bodily strength came back in waves, the hollows in his cheeks filled out, his voice lost its ugly pitch, and he became at moments almost jolly. Adam shut away the memory of the dark days of hatred, and set himself to rediscover his companion. One thing he realised with alarm. The winter's strain had told on his own health. He looked at food with distaste, and he began to suffer from blinding headaches.

The ice-cap greeted them with violent gales, and once again among the nunataks they had to lie up for days, desperately cold, for they had only a minimum of petroleum to carry them to Independence Fjord. The dogs' pads had become soft during the winter, and every one went lame and left blood in its tracks. After the gales came a clammy fog, through which the sun's rays never penetrated. It was hard travelling for both men, for their reindeer-skin kamiks had been worn into holes, and there was no fresh sedge-grass with which to stuff them. The novel light induced snow-blindness in both, and they had to fumble along with their eyes partially bandaged. Adam felt his strength steadily ebbing. Tasks which on the outward journey he would have made light of were now beyond his power. His gums were swelling, and the skin all over his body was mysteriously peeling off in strips. Worst of all he suffered from distressing fits of light-headedness, during which every ice-fall became an Alpine peak and the nunataks danced like dervishes around him.

When they reached the depot at Independence Fjord and could get warmth and light again, Falconet insisted that they should keep camp for two days to give Adam a chance to recover. The rest cured his snow-blindness, and, since Falconet managed to shoot a bear, he had a diet of beef-tea which put a little vigour into his bones. Also the signs of the returning spring seemed to unlock his past again. There were gulls about—Sabine's gull and the ivory gull—and skuas and king-eiders, and the sight brought back Eilean Bàn. In baking days in Anatolia he had thought most pleasantly of that island as wreathed in mist or scourged by spring hail, but now he pictured it as green and flowery, sleeping in the blue of summer afternoons. In this world of ice and rock he drew warmth from the vision of its graciousness.

The winter rôles were reversed, and Falconet took charge. There was a fierce kindness in the man, and, as they lay at night in the little tent, he talked—talked well, with an obvious purpose of cheering his companion. He asked many questions about Adam's past, and, since two men in such a position have no need of reticence, he heard the full truth.

"I was a soldier," Adam told him. "Then I had to leave the army, for I went to prison."

"So!" Falconet whistled. "I wonder whom you were shielding. Skip that bit, sonny, and get on to the war. What front were you on—the Western, Palestine, Mesopot?"

"None. I wasn't a combatant—except for a few months when I wore German uniform with the Turks. For nearly four years I was behind the enemy lines."

Falconet's eager questions bit by bit drew out the story. Adam told it candidly, for he had no self-consciousness about it—he saw small credit in the course which had been the only one open to a man in his position. But Falconet was loud in his exclamations.

"Say," he asked. "What did your Government give you for your four years in hell?"

"I was restored to my regimental rank."

"Yes. That's the sort of thing you would want... Great God, man, I never heard a yarn like yours. You must have a nerve like a six-inch cable. What's to be done with you? You're not going to throw all that training away?"

"Not if I can help it. I came out here to round it off."

Falconet pondered. "I see the sense in that. You wanted to get away from mankind for a bit... and you struck the most ill-conditioned specimen on the American continent. You saved that specimen's life, too. But for you I should have been a corpse in that bloody hut... Now you're going to drink some soup and get off to sleep again."

They moved on in a flush of fine weather, and crossed the mouth of Danmarks Fjord on snow which was beginning to break up into channels and rivulets. The sun shone and they journeyed in a world of gleaming crystal, out of which would rise towards evening wonderful mirages of hills and cities. Close to the land the ice was smooth and bare, and it was possible to hoist a sail and travel fast. But the first day out Adam realised that the days of rest had not cured his malady. So far he had had no fever, but now his temperature rose high, and he became so weak and giddy that he could not keep up with the sledge, even when holding on to the uprights. There was nothing for it but that he should become a passenger, which was possible, since they travelled light, having the depots to count on for supplies. He wandered off into a mad world, and one day he was so delirious that he had to be tied on to keep him from rolling off in his wild starts. To make things worse they struck a bad patch of shore ice, seamed with water lanes and acres of deep slushy snow.

Of these days Adam had no clear remembrance. He seemed to be perpetually sinking into gulfs and screaming warnings... and then he would know nothing till he saw Falconet's anxious face and felt hot soup being fed to him in spoonfuls. Nelles had carried out his orders, and had taken little from each depot, so there was no lack of petroleum and man's food and dogs' food. Once they made camp on a shore where the spring had begun to melt the snow, and mosses were showing, and willow scrub and greening grass. Here Falconet was lucky enough to shoot a bear, and, following some wild lore of his boyhood, he stripped Adam and wrapped him in the reeking pelt.

The fever may have run its natural course, or the bearskin may have had some therapeutic power, for from that night Adam began to mend. His temperature fell, the giddy world became stable, his limbs moved again according to his will.

Soon he could leave the sledge and stagger beside it, and he could help to set up the tent in the evening. Falconet would have none of his aid till he was satisfied that he was a whole man once more.

"There's one thing you've got to learn," he said fiercely, "and that's to TAKE. So far you've only known how to GIVE. But if a fellow isn't ready to take from a friend when he's in need, then his giving is only a darned insult and an infernal bit of patronage. Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Mister Melfort."

Suddenly something went wrong with the depots. They came to one which looked as if it had been pulled about by wild beasts. The boxes were stove in and their contents scattered and spoiled, and there was not a drop of petroleum in the cans. They put the mischief down to a bear, and, since the stage from the last depot had been over difficult ice, it did not seem worth while to go back and collect the supplies which still remained there. They decided to push on to the next cache.

But the next cache, reached after a desperate toil over shore ice from which the snow was fast melting, proved no better. Nelles seemed to have made a fire and burned up everything, for among the ashes they found only a crumpled petroleum tin and some twisted iron fragments which had once been the hoops of a barrel.

They held a council, for the position was grave. Nelles had broken faith—or he had lost his wits—or someone or something coming after him had rifled the depots. They had with them food at the utmost for seven days and petroleum for a little longer. They could not go back, for though they had left a fair quantity of stores at the first caches there was not enough to enable them to reach Shannon Island. On they must go in the hope that in the next depot, or the next, there would be supplies, or that they might meet a search-party from the ship, which by this time must have reached the Greenland coast. They slept ill that night and next morning reduced their rations to a pound a day. There were no biscuits left—only pemmican, some tinned vegetables and a little tea.

At the next depot they found the same devastation, and they found also the clue to it. Two of Nelles's dogs lay dead with split skulls, their bones picked clean by the ravens. The man had gone mad—berserk mad—and had raged down the coast rioting in destruction. Adam remembered his lowering brows and sullen brooding eyes.

Every day the going became harder. From the icecap above the shore cliffs waterfalls were thundering, and the beaches were chains of little torrents. The snow was melting fast from the sea ice, and soon that ice would begin to break up, and they would be forced to keep to the terrible moraines of the land. They were now on half a pound of food a day and the dogs had become miserable bags of skin and bone. Presently one died, and his companion lost his senses and ran round in circles till they were forced to shoot him. The sledge was light enough, but with only two dogs they made slow going among the slush and the water-logged ice. Once the sledge toppled into a voe, and Falconet's diaries were only rescued by a miracle. Each depot told the same tragic tale of blackened desolation, except that in one they found an undamaged tin of cocoa.

Presently they were forced to kill the remaining two dogs, and relinquish the sledge. This meant that each had to carry a load, and stumble painfully along the boulder-strewn shore. Their one hope now was a search-party from the ship, and that was only a shadow. Dog-flesh is not good for human beings, but it was sufficient to keep life in them, and that and a little tea were all they had. They had petroleum to last for two days more. In grim silence they struggled on, savage with hunger, their feet so heavy that to lift them at all was an effort. They made short days with long rests, and the nights in the open were bitter. They would rise from the tortures of cold and emptiness and take the road without looking at each other, as if each feared what he might see in his companion's eyes.

Once Falconet said: "If we come out of this, we two are going to keep together for the rest of our lives. How do you reckon the chances? A million to one against?"

"Evens," said Adam. "They're never worse than evens if you keep up your heart."

That day Falconet shot a goose and, finding a patch of scrub and heather on the edge of a small fjord, they made a fire and roasted it. The meat carried them on for two days, while they traversed a much-encumbered beach under huge dripping cliffs where there was no hope of game. After that they had half a pound of pemmican and a rib of dog to carry them to the next depot—their tea and petroleum were finished.

Next morning Adam's bleared eyes studied the map.

"We shall make the depot before evening," he said.

"And leave our bones there," said Falconet.

That day their exhaustion reached the outside limit of what man can endure. The sharpness of the hunger-pangs had gone, but both men were half-delirious. They constantly fell, and Falconet twisted his ankle so badly that they could only move at a snail's pace. Neither spoke a word, and Adam had to concentrate all his vanishing faculties to keep in touch with solid earth. Sometimes he thought that he was walking on clouds, till he found himself lying among the stones with blood oozing from his forehead. He took Falconet's pack on his own shoulders, and had to give Falconet a hand over the icy streams. "I will not go mad," he told himself, and he bent his mind to the road, fixing a point ahead, and wagering with himself about the number of steps he would take to reach it. According to the map a depot lay beyond a rocky cape which bounded the long beach over which they were floundering.

They turned the cape in the late afternoon and looked on a little bay with a beacon on a knoll. A wild hope rose in Adam's heart. Surely this place was still intact—the demented Nelles must have broken down before he reached it. Hope put strength into his legs, the more as he found his feet suddenly on soft herbage.

But Nelles had reached it. There was something dark and crumpled lying half-buried by a patch of old snow. He had reached it and died beside it, for the stones had not been moved from the cache's mouth. Adam's feeble hands uncovered

the food box, which was intact. “We have won on the post,” he whispered to Falconet, for his tongue had swollen with starvation. “Lie flat on your back till I get a fire going. We touch nothing but soup to-night, but tomorrow we shall breakfast in style.”

They made a mighty bonfire and slept beside it for twelve hours. Next day Falconet nursed his ankle, and dozed in the sun, and in the evening two men, plucked from the jaws of death, feasted nobly, since the rest of the depots were safe and there was no need to hoard. Falconet had come out of his stupor, and sat staring into the green dusk, which was all the night at that season.

“We’re two mighty small atoms,” he said, “to have beaten old man Odin and his bunch. And the dice weren’t kind to us. My God, I’ve taken some risks in my day, but nothing like this... Do you know, I asked you a week back what the chances were, and you said ‘Evens.’ I expect you were a bit loony at the time—we both were.”

“No, I meant it,” said Adam. “It’s the strength of the human spirit that matters. Man can face up to anything the universe can pit against him if his nerve doesn’t crack. Our trouble was not snow and cold and famine but the human part. Something gave in Nelles’s brain, and he played the deuce with a perfectly sound scheme. The hell of that winter hut of ours was not the cold and the dark but the boredom—the way you and I got across each other... We’re going back to a badly broken world, and the problem is to find the men big enough to mend it. Our business is to discover genius and put quality into humanity.”

“That’s the job you’ve been training for?”

“I think so.”

“Well, you can count me in to my last dime,” said Falconet.

A week later the two men met the party from the ship which had been sent out to find them.

PART 4

CHAPTER 14

At Reykjavik in Iceland Adam and Falconet were met by the latter's yacht. Falconet was, among other things, a newspaper proprietor on a large scale, and he was able to control the curiosity of the press. The message which he sent off from Reykjavik merely announced his safe return, accompanied by his companion Mr Melfort, after wintering in North Greenland, adding that the scientific results of the expedition would in due course be given to the world. This was published copiously in the American press, and to a lesser degree in the English papers, many of which left out the name of Falconet's companion. Not more than half a dozen people realised that Adam was back from the wilds.

The yacht touched at Liverpool, where Falconet turned a flinty face to enquiring journalists. There Adam left it, and, dressed in a suit of Falconet's which did not fit him, returned to the rooms in the Temple which he had taken when he came out of prison, and had retained ever since. His first business was to provide himself with clothes and other necessities. Then he engaged a servant, a man called Crabb, who had once been his footman and had lost his left arm in the war; he had found on his arrival a letter from Crabb asking for employment, and had some difficulty in disinterring him from a Rotherhithe slum. After that he set himself down for two long days to read the weekly papers for the past year. Then, having got his bearings, he rang up Christopher Stannix, who, he gathered from his reading, had become lately a prominent figure in the national life and was now a member of the Government.

Stannix came to the Temple that evening during a slack interval in the House. To Adam's eyes he seemed to have put on flesh, and his face had acquired that slightly frozen composure which is a necessary protection for those who are much in the limelight. What he thought of Adam may be judged by his behaviour. He dragged him to the window and looked at him from all sides, and then dropped into a chair and laughed.

"Man, you have come back ten years younger—more—twenty years. You don't look twenty-five. I've seen Falconet, who told me something. Not much, for he said you didn't want it talked about—but I gather that the two of you went through a rather special hell. It has shaken Falconet, but you seem to have thriven on it... But for God's sake, get a new tailor... What's your next step? Whom do you want to meet? I'm rather tied up just now, but I'm entirely at your service... Oh, Adam, old fellow, I'm glad to see you. You're like somebody recovered from the dead."

"I want to meet Scrope, if he's alive. I told you about him—the old fellow in Northamptonshire that Ritson sent me to see in September '14."

"That's a queer thing, for he wants to meet **you**. I had a letter from him this morning. He knows that you're home, as he knows most things. I'll get in touch with him at once."

Stannix telephoned next morning that Scrope was coming to town, and desired Adam to dine with him three days thence. That afternoon there arrived an emissary from Scrope in the shape of a tall young man with perfect clothes and a pleasant vacant face. He introduced himself as Captain Frederick Shaston, late of the 9th Lancers, and now an idle sojourner in the metropolis.

"Mr Scrope sent me to be kind to you, sir," he said with a very boyish grin. "I gather you've been having a tough time, and he thought you ought to frisk a bit, so I've come to show you round... It's a jolly morning, and I've got my car here. What about a run down to the country? You'd like to see England again at her best."

So Adam spent a day of clear sunshine on the roads of the southern midlands. They climbed the Chilterns, where the beeches were in their young green livery, and ran across the Aylesbury vale among blossoming hawthorns and through woods which were a mist of blue. High up on Cotswold they had the kingdoms of the earth beneath them, and from the Severn scarp looked over to the dim hills of Wales. Shaston would stop at some view-point, and make some enthusiastic comment, but Adam noted that the banality of his speech was at variance with the cool appraising eyes which he turned on him. In the bright afternoon they slipped slowly down the scented valley-roads of Thames. Adam said little, but after a year of barrens and icy seas the ancient habitable land was an intoxication.

That evening Shaston took him to dine at a restaurant with a party of young men, who treated him at first with nervous respect. But, though he was not disposed to talk of himself and had still the slow formal speech of one who had not spoken English much for years, his friendliness presently dispelled their shyness, and the evening ended merrily with a visit to a boxing match and a supper of broiled bones and beer. Next day Shaston took him to Roehampton to watch polo, where he, who had not spoken to a woman for years, was compelled to mingle with a group of laughing girls. They went to a play that night with a party, and Adam did not fall asleep.

"Please don't thank me," said Shaston when they parted. "I've had the time of my life. I can't tell you what a privilege it is to show you round. I hope you'll tell Mr Scrope that I didn't bore you too much."

"How do you come to know Mr Scrope so well?" Adam asked.

"I don't know him well," was the surprising answer. "No one does. But he knows all about me, and about everybody else and everything. He's about the largest size of man we've got, don't you think?"

Adam rubbed his eyes at the sight of Scrope in the little restaurant in Jermyn Street. He had been a few minutes late, and found his host already seated at a table in a quiet corner. When he had last seen him six years before he had thought him very frail and old, a valetudinarian nearer eighty than seventy, shivering under his plaid on a mild autumn day. The man now before him looked a hale fellow not beyond the sixties, and his Mongolian countenance was ruddy instead of ivory-white. Two things only remained unchanged, his voice husky from cigarette-smoking, and his dreamy heavy-lidded

eyes.

Scrope seemed to be no longer a vegetarian, for instead of the mess of eggs and vegetables with which he had once regaled Adam, he had now ordered a well-considered normal meal. He seemed to divine his guest's surprise.

"I have come out into the world again. I thought I had found sanctuary, but it was ordained otherwise; and if I am to be of use in the world I must conform—ever so little. So must you, my friend. You liked Shaston?"

"Yes. You sent him to find out if I had become a fossil. What did he report?"

Scrope laughed.

"Shaston is what you call a flat-catcher. He looks innocent, and sometimes foolish, but he is very, very acute. He reported that you had not lost touch with common life. He described you as 'bonhomous,' which is old-fashioned slang, for he is sometimes old-fashioned. That has laid my fears, but I confess that it has also surprised me. I have acquainted myself with your doings for the past six years, and they have been the kind to drive a man back inside himself, and make him an alien from the ordinary tastes of mankind. By all the rules you should have become a prig, Mr Melfort, and somewhat inhuman. Shaston reports otherwise. He says that you can still feel the elation of a May morning, that you can laugh with simple people at obvious things, and even condescend a little to play the fool. That means that there is something about you that I do not yet know. What is it? You have falsified rules which cannot be falsified. I expected to find you stiff and angular and insensitive, and I thought that it would be my first business to crack your shell. But lo and behold! there is no shell to crack. What has kept you mellow?"

"I will tell you," said Adam. With this man, as with Meyer, the Belgian Jew who had called himself Macandrew, he could have no secrets. He told him the story of Eilean Bàn.

Scrope listened with his eyes downcast, and his fingers playing tunes on the table-cloth. When Adam stopped his face was marvellously wrinkled by a smile, so that he looked like the good mandarin from a willow-pattern plate.

"That is right. You have had a fountain in the desert. That means that you are hard-trained, but not, as I had feared, over-trained. Eilean Bàn! I think I too could be happy with dreams of such a place. Our race must turn its eyes west when it looks for Mecca."

Till the meal was over Scrope talked of what had been going on in the world since Adam went behind the northern ice. He talk brilliantly, with hoarse chuckles and much gesticulation of delicate hands, and again the many-wrinkled smile. But when coffee had been served and he had presented Adam with a cigar from a case like a sarcophagus, he fell suddenly silent. There was a party dining a little way off, with a man in it who seemed to claim his attention.

"You know him?" he asked.

Adam saw a short, squarely-built young man with a big head of dark hair, a sallow face with a lofty brow and high cheek-bones, and a strong, slightly protuberant chin. He was talking volubly, and kept his chin thrust forward so that there was something almost simian in his air. He looked like an immensely intelligent ape, poised and ready to bound upon an enemy. But his face was pleasant, for he had a quick smile, and everything about him from the crouched shoulders to the glowing eyes spoke of an intense vitality.

"No... Wait a moment. I think... Yes, I have seen him before. A year ago I heard him read a paper at a club—I've forgotten its name. Creevey, isn't he? Some kind of university swell?"

"Creevey—Warren Creevey," said Scrope. "A very remarkable man. Take a good look at him, for you will see him again. I've a notion that you will have a deal to do with him before you die."

Adam obeyed.

"I don't like him," he said.

Scrope laughed.

"You have had to learn in the last five years to judge men rapidly and to go mainly by their faces. I don't quarrel with your verdict. You have learned also to judge ability by the same test. How do you place Mr Warren Creevey?"

"I should try to avoid antagonising him. If he were my enemy I should cross to the other side of the road."

"So! Well, you will not meet him just yet, for he swims in a different pool. He is very clever and is making a great deal of money, and he also lives the life of pleasure. But some day..."

Scrope kept his eyes fixed on the party for a second longer, and then swung round and looked Adam in the face.

"I have seen Falconet. Have you found your work yet?"

"I know what the world needs."

"Come, that is something. That's more than the world itself knows. What is it?"

"Quality."

"By which you mean leaders?"

Adam nodded.

"Are you going to take on the job yourself?"

"No. I can never be in the firing-line. I belong to the underworld. But I can help to find the men we want, and perhaps give them confidence."

"I see. A midwife to genius."

There was a big mirror opposite where the two men sat, and, as it chanced, both were gazing at it and saw their faces

reflected. Adam had not much interest in his own looks, but as he gazed and saw Scrope's ruddy Mongolian countenance beside him, and a little way off half the profile of Creevey, he could not but be aware that he looked different from other people in England. Scrope saw the distinction in sharper contrast. He saw a face, irregular and not specially handsome, in which supreme concentration had brought all the parts into unity, and to which cool nerves and peace of spirit had given the bloom of a boy. He laid his hand on Adam's shoulder.

"You accept that? And yet you are also disappointed? Confess that you are disappointed."

"I have no cause to be disappointed."

"Which means that you are. You must be. You have fined down your body till it is like that of a blood-horse—you have every muscle and nerve in proper control—you have taught yourself to endure in silence like a fakir—you have a brain which is a noble machine and which is wholly at your command—and you have forgotten the meaning of fear. Such a man as you was meant to ride beside Raymond into Jerusalem. As it is, you propose to be bottle-holder to something called genius, which you will probably have to dig out of the mud."

"I might have wished for something different," was Adam's reply, "but I must take what is sent me."

The old hand patted his shoulder.

"You are wiser than Naaman the Syrian," said Scrope. "I was afraid that I should have to say to you like Naaman's servant 'My lord, had the prophet commanded thee some great thing'—but I find that you have renounced the great thing."

"Not the great thing. But we cannot expect the spectacular thing, we who work in the shadows."

"I stand corrected." Scrope withdrew his hand from his companion's shoulder, and sat farther back in his chair from where he could see Adam's face clearly in the glow of a neighbouring lamp.

"Yes," he said. "You are a formidable fellow, Melfort. You are the rational fanatic—the practical mystic—the unselfish careerist—any blend of contradictories you please... You should have been a preacher. You might have been a second John Wesley, riding on his old white horse throughout England preparing the day of the Lord."

"I have no gospel to preach. My business is to find the man who has."

"Oh yes, I know. I agree... All the same, you are a leader, though you may pretend only to follow. For before you follow you will have to create your leader."

Scrope flung himself back in his chair, and looked at Adam from under wrinkled brows.

"You say you have no gospel? Man, you have the gospel which the world needs to-day, and that is, how to get comfort. What said old Solomon?—'Behold the tears of such as were oppressed and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter.'... Do not be afraid, my son. I may not live to see it, but every atom of your training will be called into play before you die. You are right to stick to the shadows, but I think that before the end you will be forced out into the sunlight. You may yet enter Jerusalem by the side of Raymond."

The party at the next table were leaving. Mr Warren Creevey was putting a cloak about a pretty woman's shoulders, and his rich voice, thick as if it came through layers of chalk, was elevated in some species of banter.

Without raising his chin from his breast Scrope nodded in his direction.

"But I think that first you will have left that paynim skewered on your lance."

Falconet was raging about London. A year's seclusion from the world seemed to have released a thousand steel springs in his body and mind. He lectured to the Royal Geographical Society on his discoveries in North Greenland, which were of some importance, but he kept to his bargain, and so minimised the hardships of his journey that he had no need to bring in Adam's name. But what filled his days and encroached on his nights was a series of consultations with every type of man—financier, merchant, journalist, politician—on the organisation which he meant to set up in his own country. It was characteristic of Falconet that in an enterprise he began by seeking advice from all and sundry, and ended by following strictly his own notions.

Adam's words at the end of the Greenland journey had sunk deep into his mind. The hope of a broken world was to find men big enough to mend it. Quality, human quality, was the crying need, and just as the war had revealed surprising virtues in unlikely places, so this quality must not be sought for only in the old grooves. He gave a dinner at a flat which he had taken in St James's Street, and to it he summoned Stannix and Adam.

"I've seen your wise man," he told Stannix. "Had two hours with him on Monday and an hour yesterday. He impressed me considerably, but I couldn't quite place him. Say, what's his record? He looks as if he had been a lot about the globe."

"It would be hard to say exactly," Stannix replied, "for Scrope has always been something of a mystery man. He began, I believe, as a famous Oriental scholar and a professor at Cambridge. Then he had a call, and went out to India on his own account as some kind of missionary. He led a queer life, if all tales be true, on the Sikkim frontier, and became our chief authority on Tibet—he accompanied Younghusband's 1903 expedition. After that he disappeared for years, during which he is believed to have been wandering about the world... No, I don't think he has written anything since his Cambridge days. He amasses knowledge, but he gives it out sparingly... When he returned to England he somehow or other got in touch with the Government, and the War Office especially thought the world of him. He was by way of being a sick man and never left his country retreat. Then during the war he picked up amazingly, and now he looks a generation younger. I fancy he can't be more than sixty-eight. He is the most knowledgeable creature alive, for if he doesn't know a thing himself he knows how to find out about it. You press a button and get immediate results. But his wisdom is greater than his knowledge. I don't know anyone whose judgment I'd sooner trust about men or things."

Falconet listened intently.

"I admit all that. Anyone with half an eye-could see it. Where he falls down is that he isn't interested in organisation. He is like an oracle in a cave that gives sound advice but doesn't trouble about seeing it carried out. He agrees with our view, Adam's and mine, but he isn't worrying about what to do next. Now that man Creevey—"

Falconet broke off to expound his own plans. "Organisation is nine-tenths of the fight," he proclaimed, "I'm going to start a great machine for the inquisition of genius." He produced from a pocket of his dinner-jacket a formidable sheaf of papers. "See here," he said as he spread them on the table. "First we have the geographical lay-out. I'm going to have informal committees up and down the land to consider likely cases. No advertising, you understand—all the work must be private and underground—but I shall have on these committees just the people who will make good sleuths. Then here is my system of checking-up on their reports. We can't afford to make mistakes, so I've got this elaborate arrangement for getting cross-bearings—the schools, the universities, the bankers, the business folk, and a lot of shrewd private citizens... So, when we get a likely case, it will be sifted and winnowed, and before we bank on it we'll be certain that it's the best-grade wheat."

Falconet's dark hawk-like face was flushed with enthusiasm.

"Here's the kind of thing I figure on. There's a lad on a farm in Nebraska who has mathematical genius. Well, he won't be allowed to drift into a third-class bank or a second-class job in a school—we'll give him a chance to beat Einstein. Another is a natural-born leader of men. That kind of fellow is apt to become an agitator and end in gaol, but we'll see that he gets a field where his talent won't be cramped and perverted... We'll cast our net wide over all sorts of talent—art and literature and philosophy and science and every kind of practical gift, but it's the last I'm specially thinking about. I want to spot the men who might be leaders—in business, politics, I don't care what—for it's leaders we're sick for the lack of. We've got to see that our Miltons don't remain mute and inglorious, but above all that our Hampdens are not left to rot on a village green."

"Is the real Hampden ever left to rot?" Stannix asked.

"You bet your life he is. It's only one in a hundred that gets his feet out of the clay. And in these days it's only going to be one in a thousand, unless we lend a hand.

"It's a question of organisation," Falconet continued. "We have all the parts of a fine excavating and sifting machine if we can assemble them. That's going to be my business till I cross Jordan—to see that the best man gets his chance."

"It will cost a lot of money."

"I have money to burn. I've been spending nothing for two years, and God knows how my pile has been mounting up. This is a darned lot better way of getting quit of it than founding dud libraries or paying hordes of dingy fellows to cut up frogs... Say, Adam, you'll need some cash. I'm sticking to my own country, but you'll need the same kind of machine here. Remember what I told you. I expect you to draw on me for all you want."

"I don't think I shall want much," said Adam. "I have a little of my own, and it may be enough."

"But that's idiocy," said Falconet fiercely. "You can't do anything without a machine. Take it from me, that's sound, though old man Scrope doesn't understand it. And a good machine costs a hell of a lot."

"But I'm different from you. You're a big man in the public eye, and you can do things on the grand scale. I must keep in the background."

"Well, if that isn't the darnedest nonsense! I'm speaking seriously, Adam. I count myself your best friend—at any rate you are mine—and Stannix here is another. You've got to forget all that's by and gone. The prison business, as all the world knows, was an infernal blunder, and it's been washed out by what happened since. Weren't you restored to your regiment with full honours? You did a hundred men's jobs in the war, and if people had been allowed to know about it you'd have been as famous as Lawrence—the Arabian fellow, I mean. In Greenland you were the largest scale hero, but your infernal modesty wouldn't let me breathe a word about it. What's the sense of it all? You could do the job you're out for a million times better if every man and woman in England had your picture in their album."

Adam shook his head.

"I'm afraid that is impossible. You see, I know best where my usefulness comes in."

"That you don't, and you won't get any sane man to agree with you. Creevey..." Falconet stopped.

"Creevey?" Stannix asked. "Do you mean Warren Creevey?" There was a sharp note in his voice.

"That's the man. About the brightest citizen I've struck on these shores. Mailsetter put me on to him, and he has helped me some. I never met a fellow with such a lightning brain. HE understands organisation, if you like. If you throw out a notion he has a scheme ready for carrying it out before you have finished your sentence. He'd be worth half a million dollars salary to any big concern. They tell me he's a pretty successful business man anyway. Well, Creevey takes my view about Adam."

"But Creevey knows nothing about him—never heard of him— never met him," said Stannix. His face wore an air of mystified apprehension.

"Oh yes, he does. I can't remember how Adam's name came up, and of course I gave nothing away—about Greenland and the other thing. But he seemed to know a lot about him and to be very interested..."

The door bell rang, and Falconet looked a little shy.

"Speak of the Devil! I expect that's our friend. I asked him to come round this evening. You know him, Stannix, don't

you? I want to introduce him to Adam.”

The man who followed Falconet’s servant looked different from the crouching, sparkling figure, set among appreciative women, whom Adam had seen at the restaurant. Creevey wore a dark morning suit, and explained that he had been sitting on a currency committee at the Treasury till eight-thirty. He had snatched a mouthful of dinner at his club, but he accepted a glass of Falconet’s old brandy and a cigar.

It was strange how he seemed to take up space in the room. He in no way asserted himself. The thick chalky voice was low-pitched, the forward thrust of the jaw was rather enquiring than aggressive, and the dark glowing eyes were friendly enough. He talked brilliantly about common things—the last news of the Europe-Australia flight, the obstructiveness of M. Poincaré, Mr Shaw’s latest mammoth drama, and—with a compliment to Stannix—the level of debate in the new Parliament. He seemed to take the measure of his company, and effortlessly to dominate it.

Yet he did not put it at its ease. Stannix was coldly polite, and his haggard face was set hard. Falconet, anxious to be showman to this phoenix and at the same time detecting Stannix’s dislike, was patently unhappy. Only Adam seemed oblivious of the strain. He looked at Creevey’s blunt mobile features, agreeable because of the extreme intelligence that lit them up from behind, and his fathomless eyes, and they seemed to cast him into a trance. His face had the air of one in mazes of curious dreams.

That night Stannix wrote in his diary:

“I have seen in the body two anti-types—Warren Creevey and Adam Melfort. I believe they were conscious of it too, for Creevey has been making enquiries about Adam, and Adam to-night sat fascinated, as if a snake’s eyes were fixed on him. A queer contrast—the one all grossness and genius, the other with his ‘flesh refined to flame.’ I thought of other antitypes in history—Marius and Sulla, Pompey and Cæsar, Lorenzo and Savonarola, Napoleon and Wellington—but none seemed quite to make a parallel: Ormuzd and Ahriman were the nearest...

“Of one thing I am certain. That meeting in Falconet’s flat had fate behind it. To-night two remarkable men for the first time saw each his eternal enemy.”

BOOK II

PART 1

CHAPTER 15

Adam's first sight of Utlaw was on a dry-fly stream on the Warwick and Gloucester borders.

He had been down for a week-end to stay with Kenneth Armine, who had been at school with him, and on the Saturday morning he went out to remove a few grayling from Armine's little river. It was a quiet November day, windless and very mild. Early frosts and the gales of late October had stripped the leafage from the coverts and yellowed the water-side meadows, but the woods had not yet taken on their winter umbers and steel-greys and the only colour was in the patches of fresh-turned plough. It was a moment in the year which Adam loved, when the world seemed to rest for a little before beginning its slow germinal movement towards spring.

To take the soft-mouthed grayling on a dry-fly needs a good eye and a deft hand. Fishing the shallow stickles with a long line, Adam had failed to satisfy himself, and he was in the fisherman's mood of complete absorption when, turning a corner, he was aware of another angler on the water. He waded ashore, intending to begin again at a point some distance upstream. As he passed the other he stopped for a moment to watch him. He was a young man with a shock of untidy fair hair, who had an old-fashioned wicker creel slung on his back. He was fishing earnestly but clumsily the tail of a deep pool—a good place for a trout in June, but not for a grayling in November. He turned and cried out a greeting. "Done anything?" he asked. "A few," said Adam. "Good for you. I can't stir a fin." The voice was attractive and the half-turned face was merry.

An hour later the sun came out and Adam sat himself on a ridge of dry moss to eat his sandwiches. Presently he was joined by the other fisherman, who came whistling up the bank. He was a young man who might be thirty, but no more. He was of the middle size, square-shouldered and thickly made, and his shock head was massive and well-shaped. He wore a tattered trench waterproof and what looked like ancient trench-boots, and his walk revealed a slight limp. He had wide-set friendly grey eyes, which scanned Adam sharply and seemed to approve of him.

"May I lunch beside you?" he asked, and again Adam noted the charm of his voice. The accent was the soft slur of the west midlands.

He peered inside the fishing-bag which lay on the moss.

"Great Scott! You've a dozen beauties, and I've nothing to show for my morning. I raised several, but they wouldn't take hold. Not nippy enough at the striking, I expect. But what does it matter on a day like this? It's enough to be alive." He inhaled a long breath of the soft air, and then fell to work vigorously on a packet of bread and cheese. Clearly he was lame, for when he sat down he stretched out his left leg stiffly. His fishing paraphernalia was not elaborate, for, besides the old wicker basket, he had a cheap rod with an antiquated type of reel.

He had nothing to drink with him, so Adam handed him over the bottle of beer with which Armine's butler had provided him. The young man required some pressing, and only accepted it on the donor's assurance that he never drank at meals and did not want to carry the beastly thing home.

"I say, this is fine," he exclaimed after a long draught. "Bass tastes its best out of doors. This reminds me of my first drink after Bourlon Wood—about the same time of the year as this, and much the same weather. It's funny to think that that was only three years ago. Were you on the Western Front?"

"I didn't fight in the War."

The grey eyes, regarding Adam's lean fitness, had a shadow of surprise in them.

"Lucky for you! I got a bit too much of it, but mercifully the worst was a crocked leg. I can still enjoy life, not like the poor devils who have gas in their lungs or damaged guts. It must be rotten to come out to a place like this and get no good of it because of your vile body. Thank God, that isn't my way of it. I don't often get a day in the country, but when I do it makes me daft. If I hadn't a game leg I could dance a jig... No, I'm not much of a fisherman, though I love it. I get few chances on a stream like this—mostly bait-fishing in the Canal or an odd day after perch on one of the Club reservoirs. You must be a dab at the game. Do you live hereabouts?"

Adam told him that he lived in London, but that his job took him a good deal about the country. He could see that his companion set him down as a commercial traveller.

"I do a bit of moving about too," he said. "But not in places where you can catch fish. I come from Birkpool, and my beat is a score or two grimy villages round about it. I'm not complaining, for I'm after bigger things than fish, but I thank Heaven that there are still places like this in the world. When things get too beastly, I think about a bend of a river with a wooded hill above and a meadow between."

Adam felt oddly attracted to this expansive young man. There was such frank gusto in his enjoyment, and his eyes looked out on the world with so much candour and purpose.

"I'm going to help you to catch a few grayling," he said. "You mustn't go home with an empty creel."

So till the dusk fell the other was given his first lesson in the mysteries of the dry-fly. Adam made him take his own rod and instructed him how to cast the tiny midge on a long line, how to recognise the gentle sucking rises, and how to strike with a firm but delicate hand. The young man proved an apt pupil, for he had excellent eyesight and a quick wrist. By the end of the afternoon he had half a dozen fragrant fish of his own catching.

"I must be off to catch my train back," he said, as he reeled in regretfully. "You're staying the night at the pub? Lucky dog! What does a rod like that cost? I must save up my pennies for one, for this old weaver's beam of mine is no earthly... I

wish you'd tell me your name. Milford? Mine's Utlaw—Joe Utlaw. I'm district organiser for the Associated Metal-workers—not a sinecure these days I can tell you. Look me up the next time your round takes you to Birkpool. Here's my office address, and also my private digs." He tore a leaf from a notebook and scribbled something on it.

"I'm very much obliged to you, Mr Milford. You've given me the afternoon of my life. If I can do anything for you in return..." The care-free boy had gone and the young man became suddenly formal, and rather impressive. But as he disappeared up the farm-road to the station Adam could hear his whistling begin again. The tune was "The Lincolnshire Poacher."

The way back for Adam lay through a wood of tall beeches which lined the northern slopes of the valley. The air was clear and sharpening with a premonition of frost, while behind the trees the sun was setting in a sky of dusky gold. Beyond the wood the ground fell to the hollow in the hills where the Court lay among trim lawns. Adam stopped to admire the old brick which glowed like a jewel in the sunset. From the chimneys spires of amethyst smoke rose into the still evening.

A cocker spaniel fawned at his feet, a wire-haired terrier butted its head against his knees, and the owner of the dogs swung himself over a fence.

"Had one of your idyllic days?" he asked. He looked into the fishing-bag. "Not bad. We'd better leave the fish at old Perley's, for Jackie can't abide grayling."

Kenneth Armine was three years Adam's junior. At school he had been his fag, and their friendship had been sincere ever since, though till lately their converse had been intermittent. He had gone to Oxford and then to an honorary attachéship at an Embassy, after which followed half a dozen years of travel in outlandish places, varied by two unsuccessful contests for Parliament. In the war he had fought his way up from second-lieutenant to the command of a famous line battalion, and he had acquired a considerable reputation as a fire-eater. He was adored by his men, who let their imaginations expand on his doings. But the reputé was unjustified, for he was the least pugnacious of mortals, and had a horror of suffering which he jealously concealed. The truth was that he had one of those short-range imaginations which are a safeguard against common fear, so that under shell-fire he was composed, and in an attack a model of businesslike calm. One young officer who accompanied him in a morning's walk in an unpleasant part of the Ypres Salient reported that at a particularly unwholesome sunken road his commanding officer seemed to be deep in thought. But his mind was not on some high matter of strategy, for when he beckoned the nervous youth to him it was only to observe that this was a place where the partridges would come over well.

Like many others of his type Armine went through the war without a scratch or an ailment. For some months he had a job with the Army on the Rhine, and then he came home and married. His father, the old Marquis of Warmestre, lived secluded with his collection of coins and gems at the main family place in Devonshire, and gave over Armine Court to his son. Armine was a friend of Christopher Stannix, in whose company Adam met him again and picked up the threads of their friendship. He had the slight trim figure of one who has once been a good light-weight boxer. Like all his family he was sallow and dark, with a hint of the Celt in his long nose and quick black eyes. Yet his stock was solid English, descending without admixture from the ancients of Saxondom, and his Scottish Christian name was due to a mother's whim.

His muddy boots fell into step with Adam's brogues, as they descended the slope to a ha-ha which bounded the lawns.

"I've had a heavy agricultural afternoon," Armine said. "Been round the near farms, and must have walked ten miles in mud. I can't get these fellows to see reason. Old Stockley wants to buy his farm—made a bit of money, and would like to feel himself a landowner. I don't mind, for very soon land is going to be a millstone round a man's neck and I'd be glad to lessen the size of mine. But what on earth is old Stockley to do when he has spent his nest-egg on becoming a squire and is pinched for working capital? He is a fine Randolph Caldecott type with a red face and a bird's-eye neckcloth, but his notion of farming is to hunt two days a week and to potter round his fields on a fat cob. How is he going to live when prices drop and there's a glut of production throughout the globe? Labour costs are bound to go up—the labourer has higher wages but is a dashed lot worse off than his father for all that. And when trouble comes Stockley and his kind won't have me to lean on, if they set up for themselves. A good thing for me, you say? Maybe, but we've been too long here for me to take a bagman's view of property. I know it's absurd, and Jenkinson keeps pressing me to take the chance of a good bargain, but I simply can't do it. Too infernally unconscientious. There's another chap called Ward—started ten years ago with a hundred pounds, and now has a pedigree flock of Oxford Downs, and a big milk run in Birkpool, and his wife and three sons and two daughters all work on the farm like blacks. I'd sell him his land to-morrow, but he is far too wise to buy—he likes a squire as a buffer. The trouble is that everybody wants to pinch some little advantage for themselves out of things as they are to-day, and nobody bothers to look ahead."

Armine expanded on the topic. He had large dreams for English agriculture. He wanted more people on the land—smaller farms, more arable, less pasture—but the drift seemed to be towards letting plough slip back to prairie. Stock, he held, was the English staple, for the quality of English stock would always beat the world, so he held that arable should be subsidiary to stock, and that the full richness of English pasturing was untapped. Adam, who knew nothing of midland farming, listened with half an ear.

"I wish to Heaven," his host concluded, "we could get the right kind of leader for our country labourers, somebody who would act as a gadfly and make our jolly old bucolics sit up and think. It's the only chance of salvation for master and man. But the common breed of Labour leader has a head like a door-post."

"There was one on the river to-day," said Adam, "a man called Utlaw from Birkpool."

Armine awoke to a lively interest.

"Utlaw! The chap was in my battalion. Got a commission after Cambrai. Now I come to think of it, he wrote to me about fishing, and I told Jenkinson to give him a day whenever he asked for it. Why the devil doesn't he look me up when he comes here? I've heard about his doings in Birkpool. He's a big swell in his Union, and I'm told as red as they make 'em. They want me to be Mayor of that delectable city, and if I am I daresay I'll run up hard against Mr Utlaw... But I don't know. He was a dashed good battalion officer, and a very decent sort of fellow."

Armine continued to soliloquise.

"I'm glad you mentioned him, for I must keep my eye on him. Horrid the way one forgets about all the good fellows one fought beside. I tell you what—Utlaw is some sort of shape as a leader. He had no luck in the war or he would have had his company. Bit of a sea-lawyer he was, but reasonable too. Now I remember, he put up a good show at Calais in December '18. You remember there was a nasty business with the troops there, for the demobbing was mismanaged and some of the older men were getting a dirty deal from the War Office. So far as my lot was concerned there was no trouble, for Utlaw got hold of them at the start, found out their grievances, made himself their spokesman, and gave me the case I wanted to put up to headquarters. It needed some doing to hold a lot of tired, disgruntled men and talk them into reason... What's he like now? The same tow-headed, cheery, talkative blighter? The next time he comes here I must get hold of him. I want a yarn with him, and he'd amuse Jackie."

Adam descended the broad shining staircase very slowly, for he felt that he was recovering a lost world. He had had a bath and had dressed leisurely before a bright fire, and his senses seemed to have a new keenness and to be the quick conveyers of memories. The scents of the Court—half-sweet, half-acrid—wood smoke, old beeswaxed floors, masses of cut flowers—blended into a delicate comfort, the essence of all that was habitable and secure. He had dwelt so long in tents that he had forgotten it. Now it laid a caressing touch on him, and seemed to clamour to have its spell acknowledged. He found himself shaking his head; he did not want it, and very gently he relaxed the clinging hands. But it was something to preserve—for others, for the world. As he descended he looked at the pictures on the staircase, furniture pictures most of them, with their crudities mellowed by time. There were two tall ivory pagodas at the foot of the stairs, loot from the Summer Palace; in the hall there were skins and horns of beasts, and curio cabinets, and settees whose velvet had withstood the wear of generations, and above the fireplace a family group of seventeenth-century Armines, with the dead infants painted beneath as a row of tiny kneeling cherubs. The common uses of four centuries were assembled here—crude English copies of Flemish tapestry, a Restoration cupboard, Georgian stools, a Coromandel screen, the drums of a Peninsular regiment, a case of Victorian samplers—the oddments left by a dozen generations. This was a house which fitted its possessors as closely as a bearskin fits the bear. To shake loose from such a dwelling would be like the pulling up of mandrakes... Need there be any such shaking loose? Surely a thing so indigenous must be left to England? But at the back of his head he heard the shriek of the uprooted mandrakes.

A young woman was standing on the kerb of the fireplace with her head resting on the ledge of the stone chimney. When she saw him she came forward and gave him both her hands.

"Such a damned disinheriting countenance!" she quoted. "I never saw such a solemn face, Adam dear. Do you disapprove of my new arrangements? You can't pull the Court about much, you know—something comes in the way and the furniture simply refuses to be moved... I only got back an hour ago and I'm stiffer than a poker. Thirty miles in a car driven by myself after a day in those rotten Mivern pastures! Ken will be down in a moment. He has been farming, and I left him getting the mud out of his hair."

Jacqueline Armine had a voice so musical and soothing that whatever she said sounded delicious. She was tall, and the new fashion in clothes intensified her slimness. One could picture her long graceful limbs moving about the great house followed by a retinue of dogs and children. Dogs there were in plenty—two terriers, the cocker that Adam had met that afternoon, and a most ingratiating lurcher, but the children were represented only by a red-haired urchin of one year now asleep upstairs in bed. He drew his colouring from his mother, for Jacqueline's hair was a brilliant thing, a fiery aureole in sunlight, but a golden russet in the shadows. It was arranged so as to show much of the forehead, and the height of the brow and her clear pale colouring gave her the air of a Tudor portrait. She came of solid East Anglian stock, for the Albans had been settled on the brink of the fen-country since the days of Hereward, but a Highland mother had given her a sparkle like light on a river shallow, as well as a voice which should have been attuned to soft Gaelic. Her manner seemed to welcome everyone into a warm intimacy, but it was illusory, for the real Jacqueline lived in her own chamber well retired from the public rooms of life. The usual thing said about her was that she oxygenated the air around her and made everything seem worth doing; consequently she was immensely popular, as those must be who give to the world more than they take from it. Having been brought up largely in the company of grooms and gillies she had a disconcerting frankness about matters commonly kept out of polite conversation. Someone once said that to know her was to understand what Elizabethan girls were like, virgins without prurience or prudery.

At dinner Armine, who had gone without luncheon and tea, was very hungry, and it was his habit when hungry to be talkative. He discoursed on his farming investigations of the afternoon.

"They keep on telling me that the one part of England that isn't shell-shocked is the deep country. Like the county line regiments, they say—honest fellows that did their job and won the war, and never asked questions. It's all bunkum. The old shire-horse of a farmer is just as unsettled as the rest of us, and wants to snaffle a bit for himself out of the pool. There is a lunatic idea about that we won something by the war, and that there's a big pile of loot to be shared out. Whereas of course we won nothing. All we did was to lose a little less than the other chap, and that's what we call a victory. The fellow that said that no war could ever be profitable to anybody was dead right. Yet everybody's after his share in an imaginary loot. Old Stockley wants to become a squire, and Ward's reaching out for another farm over Ambleton way. And Utlaw and his

lot want higher wages and shorter hours. You must meet Utlaw, Jackie. He was in my battalion, and Adam forgathered with him to-day on the river. You've often said you wanted to make a domestic pet of a Labour leader.—And the politicians are promising a new earth, and the parsons a new Heaven, and there's a general scramble each for the booty he fancies. But there's no booty, only an overdraft at the bank."

"That's nonsense," said his wife. "You shouldn't go too much into agricultural circles, Ken. It goes to your head, my dear, and you grouse like an old moss-back. You shall come to London with me at once and get your mind clear. You shall meet my Mr Creevey."

"Now who on earth is your Mr Creevey?"

"He's a friend of Aunt Georgie, and the cleverest thing alive. When I was up shopping last week, Aunt Georgie gave a party, and I sat next to Mr Creevey—rather a hideous young man till you notice his eyes. Somebody was talking just like you, how we had won the war only to lose the peace—that kind of melancholia. Up spake Mr Creevey and made us all cheerful again. I can't repeat his arguments, for he talked like a very good book, but the gist of them was that we had gained what mattered most. He called it a quickened sense of acquisitiveness, and he said that the power to acquire would follow, if we had a little intelligence."

Armine shook his head.

"That's begging the whole question. It's the lack of intelligence I complain of. What's the good of wanting to acquire if you haven't the sense to know how to do it. There's a get-rich-quick mania about—that's my complaint. Everybody wants to take short cuts—those rotten painters who splash about colours before they have learned how to draw, and those rotten writers whose tricks disguise their emptiness, and those rotten politicians who—who—well, I'm hanged if I know what they want to do. I don't say we haven't a chance, for the war has burned up a lot of rubbish, and you can't go through four years of hell without getting something out of it—being keyed up to something pretty big. There's a great game to be played, I don't deny, but nobody is trying to understand the rules. We're all muddled or feverish—all except Adam, who stands aside and smiles."

"I wish I knew what you were doing!" Lady Armine turned on Adam.

"I've cross-examined him, Jackie," said her husband. "He never tells me anything, and I've known him ever since he used to lick me for burning his toast."

Adam had slowly felt his way back into the social atmosphere. He was no longer tongue-tied, and his words were not drawn slowly and painfully as out of a deep well. But he was still the observer, and even the friendliest of company could not make him expand.

"It wouldn't interest you to hear what I've been doing. I've been exploring queer places."

"Among what Utlaw calls the 'workers'?"

"Yes. I've had a look at most of the big industries. From close at hand, too. I've lived among the people."

"And the intellectuals? They're an uneasy lot. Every batch of them has got a different diagnosis and a different cure, and they're all as certain about things as the Almighty."

Adam smiled. "I've sampled most varieties of them—the half-baked, the over-baked, and the cracked in the firing."

"Have you tried the uplift circles?" Jacqueline interposed.

"You mean?"

"Oh, all the fancy creeds. The gentry who minister to minds diseased. The mystics who lift you to a higher plane. The psycho-therapists who dig out horrors from your past. The Christian Scientists with large soft hands and a good bedside manner. The spooky people. Aunt Georgie has them all. The last I saw there was a drooping Hindu who was some kind of god."

"No," said Adam, "I left the toy-shops alone!"

"Well, and what do you make of it?" Armine was fiercely interrogative. "You've had a look round politics. Is there any fellow in that show who can pull things straight? They're playing the old game in which they are experts, but it isn't the game the country requires. I had hopes of Kit Stannix, but I'm afraid the machine is too strong for him. He has become just a cog in it like the rest. And the Church—the Churches? Have you discovered a prophet who can put the fear of God into the tribes of Israel?"

"Do you know my brother?" Jacqueline asked.

Armine raised his head.

"Yes," said Armine. "What about Frank Alban? You haven't run across him? Well, you ought to. Brother Frank is just a little different from anybody else. He takes my view of things, but, being a saint, he is hopeful."

"He's at St Chad's now," said Jacqueline. "There are tremendous crowds at his Wednesday afternoon sermons. They are the strangest things you ever heard—mostly the kind of slangy familiar stuff he used to give the troops, and then suddenly comes a sort of self-communing that you can't forget, and an impassioned appeal that makes you want to howl. Ken, this must be seen to at once. Adam and Frank must meet. They'd do each other good."

"That's the best we can do for you," said Armine. "Frank Alban with only one lung, and plenty of people who think him loony... Another glass of port? Well, let's get round the library fire, for it's going to freeze. 'Pon my soul, things are so dicky that I may have to take a hand myself."

Mrs Gallop, at No 3, Charity Row, in the dingy suburb of Birkpool which went by the incongruous name of Rosedale, had found a tenant for the back room on her upper floor. The houses in the Row were a relic of happier days when Rosedale had been almost country, for they were small two-storeyed things, built originally to accommodate the first overspill of Birkpool residents. To-day their undue lowliness contrasted oddly with the tall tenements which hemmed them round.

Her tenant was a pleasant gentleman who, she understood, was by profession an insurance agent or a commercial traveller. The room was not easy to let, for it was small, and its outlook was on the blank wall of the new block behind Charity Row. She had two good rooms on the ground-floor, which Mr Utlaw occupied; he needed space, for he had many visitors, and what had once been the best parlour, before Mr Gallop's decease compelled his widow to take lodgers, was often full of folk who stayed till all hours—Mrs Gallop was apt to be kept awake by their talk. But Mr Milford, for that was her upstairs tenant's name, was easily satisfied and never complained. He was not often there, so there was little profit from his board, but he kept the room on during his absences. He was a quiet gentleman, very easy and soft-spoken, and he was a friend of Mr Utlaw, so the household at No 3 was a happy family.

Adam's base was his chambers in the Temple. There for perhaps half the year he lived an ordinary London life. He saw his old friends—few in number now, for the war had cut deep swathes in that group—and he made new ones. He forced himself to move in as many circles as possible, and in the lax post-war society this was easy enough. To his satisfaction he found that he was taken as a newcomer, cumbered with no past. No one associated him with the ancient scandal, and his doings in the war were known to only a dozen or two people who held their tongues. He was good to look upon, still young, apparently comfortably off, and something remote and mysterious about him, his modesty and reticence in an expansive world, gave him the charm of strangeness. He might have been a social success if he had allowed himself to be exploited. As it was, he was a Cinderella who departed before the stroke of midnight; no one saw enough of him to place him, but he had the gift of whetting people's appetites for a fuller knowledge. Only with Stannix, Shaston and a few others did he put off his defensive armour and live in any intimacy.

With the help of his servant Crabb he made his Temple rooms a starting-point for a descent into a variety of new worlds. He was very clear that to understand these worlds he must live in them as a veritable inhabitant, and the power of adapting his personality, which he had acquired during four difficult years, stood him in good stead. An odd figure often left the Temple whom only Crabb could have recognised as his master, and after a long interval an odder figure would return, sometimes with its fingers flattened and stained with unfamiliar tasks, once or twice very ragged and the worse for wear. It had been easy for him to slip into the bagman of Mrs Gallop's lodgings—a few Cockney vowels, clothes slightly astray from the conventions of Mayfair, one or two mannerisms unknown to his class; his homeliness and friendliness did the rest.

Utlaw took him for what he professed to be, one of the cogs in the commercial machine, who had a better mind than was usual with his type, and aspired to higher things. Two nights after his first arrival, Adam had been invited to a coffee-drinking in Utlaw's rooms. There was nearly a score of people there, who made the air solid with cigarette smoke, strained the resources of the establishment in the matter of black coffee, and argued till three in the morning. Most of the guests were young, and about half of them were returned soldiers, while the others had been exempted for bodily weakness or munition work, or had had a stormy conscientious career in and out of gaol. By tacit consent the war was never mentioned, and all were very busy in pegging out claims in the new world. It was an atmosphere with which Adam was familiar, the crude, violent, innocent disputation of bewildered youth. One man he found who was busy educating himself in tutorial classes, reading Plato no less, with a dream of a university far ahead. Another preached the pure Marxian gospel, and there was a heated argument between a group who found their spiritual home in Russia and a League of Nations enthusiast who upheld the virtues of law. All were poor, each had a precarious present, but all believed in a better future which with their hands and brains they would wring out of the reluctant lords of society. Adam had heard it all a hundred times, but he was impressed with Utlaw's handling of the talkers. He seemed to treat the whole thing as a relaxation from the business of life, an adventure not to be taken too seriously. He would prick a speculative bubble with a hard fact, and reduce the temperature of debate with his homely humour. Once he interposed with a cold douche.

"How on earth can you get Lenin's workers' paradise in Britain?" he cried. "For that you want a self-supporting country. We're parasites and must live by our exports, and that means capitalism until the day comes when we have halved our population and can be independent of our neighbours. We're as complicated as hell, and for Bolshevism you want simplicity..." "Savagery," someone suggested. "Aye, savagery," he said. "You can't have it both ways. Our job is to make the best of what we've got."

Adam found it hard to see much of Utlaw. The man was furiously busy. There were the weekly lodge meetings and a host of less formal gatherings to be attended. There was the day-to-day work of health insurance, and pensions, and workmen's compensation cases—work equivalent to that of a solicitor in a large practice. There were endless little disputes to be arranged before they became acrimonious, difficulties with arrogant foremen and with slack workmen, and now and then full-dress diplomatic conferences with employers singly and in combination. There was a daily letter-bag like that of the editor of a popular newspaper. But if he heard little of Utlaw's work from Utlaw himself, he heard much of it from other people. At the coffee-party a man called Bill Wrong had been present, an official of another Union, and with him Adam struck up an acquaintance, which presently ramified into many acquaintances in Bill's class. Everywhere he found Utlaw spoken of with a curious respect.

"He's got guts, has Joe," said Wrong. "The best kind, for he'll not only stand up to the enemy, but he'll knock his own

folk about if he thinks they're playing the goat."

He had a dozen stories to tell of how Utlaw had fought with the masters and won, and the fights had left no unpleasantness behind them. "He's got a wonderful gift that way. Learned it in the army, maybe... My varicose veins kept me out of that kind of thing and I often wish to God they hadn't. Joe can hand you out the rough stuff and you only like him the better for it. If I call a man a bloody fool I'm apt to get a bloody nose, but if Joe does it he gets stood a drink."

One Saturday afternoon Adam was bidden to tea in the rooms downstairs. There was another guest, a girl in a biscuit-coloured coat trimmed with some cheap fur, who moved away from Utlaw's side when Adam entered. She was small and slight and pale, with dark hair rather badly shingled. The moulding of her face was fine, and the deep eyes under the curiously arched eyebrows made her nearly beautiful. The impression which Adam received was of ardour and purpose and speed—almost of hurry, for she seemed to have spared little time to attend to her appearance. She was untidy, but she suggested haste rather than slovenliness.

"I want to introduce you to my fiancée," Utlaw said. "Florrie, this is Mr Milford—Miss Florence Covert. Since we're all going to be friends, you'd better get her name right at the start. It's spelt Covert and pronounced Court in the best Norman style. But that's the only oligarchic touch about Florrie. Otherwise she's a good democrat."

Miss Covert, as Adam learned afterwards, was the daughter of a country clergyman of ancient stock. Finding the tedium of vicarage life unbearable, she had broken away to make her own career. The family were very poor, but she had managed to get a scholarship at a women's college where she had taken a good degree, and she was now a welfare-worker in Eaton's, the big biscuit factory. Adam was at first a little nervous, for this girl had sharp eyes and might penetrate his disguise, so he was at some pains to accentuate the idioms of his new rôle. He must have succeeded, for her manner, which was at first suspicious and defensive, presently became easy and natural. She accepted him for what he professed to be—one of Joe's friends of the lesser bourgeoisie, who were to be tolerated but not encouraged, since they could never be of much use to him.

It was easy to place her. She was devouringly ambitious, first for her man and then for herself. There could be no question but that she was deeply in love. Her protective, possessing eyes followed Utlaw with an ardent affection. He had spruced himself up for the tea-party, and wore a neat blue suit, coloured linen, and the tie of his old grammar-school, but his smartness only accentuated his class. He was the child of the people, and the girl, for all her dowdiness, was clearly not.

"I saw our new Mayor yesterday," Utlaw observed, "Viscount Armine—ain't Birkpool going up in the world? I've told you about him, Florrie. He commanded my battalion, and he's given me some fine days fishing on his water at the Court. A good chap, old Sniffy—that was the men's name for him, for when he gave you a telling-off he would look down his nose and sniff as if he had a cold in his head.—Bet he wakens up some of the frozen feet on the Town Council, for he's a pretty good imitation of a Bolshie. Half these young lords are, for the war has stirred 'em up, and being aristocrats and never having had to bother about ways and means, they're of the spending type and quite ready for a new deal."

"It won't last," said the girl scornfully.

"I don't say it will—with most. With some, maybe. When they get down to rock facts, most will be scared and run away. But I daresay one or two will finish the course. You see that class of fellow is accustomed to take risks—loves 'em—the sporting instinct you'd call it, while the middle-classes play for safety. So if you're going to have a big experiment you'll always get one or two of the old gentry to back you. Their fathers were shy of the working man apart from their own folk, for they knew nothing about him, but this generation has lived four years with him in the trenches and is inclined to make a pal of him. No, it isn't patronage. It's a natural affinity, just as a pedigree hound will make friends with a tyke and both combined will maul a respectable collie. If you set Armine down among our boys, in half an hour they'll be calling each other by their Christian names, whereas a man like Tombs will be 'sirred' till the end of time."

"I don't think these public-house affinities count for much," said Miss Covert. "Charles Tombs is a stick, but he has a wonderful mind. What has your Lord Armine to give to the world?"

"Oh, I don't say that Sniffy is much of a thinker, but he's a human being, which is something. The world could do with more like him to-day. He's very friendly to yours truly. He wanted to know all about my work. You haven't to tell him a thing twice, for he's very quick in the uptake. He asked if I was married, so I told him about you, and he said he must meet you—said his wife would like to know you. I've never seen Lady Armine."

"I have. She was pointed out to me the other day in Bertram Street. A lovely lady with Titian hair, who walks as if she knew she was somebody and expected people to make way for her. Don't let's have any nonsense, Joe dear. I'm not going to be taken up by Lady Armine, and I won't let these grandees make a fool of you. There's no more contemptible figure than a Labour leader who allows himself to be made a lap-dog by the enemy. We're a class army and we must stick together till the battle is won."

Utlaw laughed. "Good for you, Florrie. You would have made a fine tricoteuse in the French Revolution."

The girl neither assented nor demurred to any of Utlaw's generalities; what attracted her was the technique of the game. Adam drank his tea and listened in silence to a discussion on Utlaw's prospects, for it appeared that Miss Covert accepted him as a loyal friend of her lover's, though not a friend who could be of much use. At any rate his advice was never asked. There was the question of a seat in Parliament. Not just yet, perhaps. There was no chance of a vacancy in Birkpool, and a constituency in the North, where his Union was powerful, was too rich a prize to be had at the first time of asking. Besides, the present Parliament was hopeless, and to be a member of it would only compromise him... But he must keep himself before the public. He must speak at Mr Twining's big meeting next month, and he must be ready for a great effort at the next Conference. Who were his real friends? Deverick was no use, but Judson, and Gray, and Trant himself were

friendly. Trant had said to someone who had told a friend of hers...

Adam had the impression that Miss Covert was suffering from inverted snobbery. She was contemptuous about the Armines, and would have Utlaw stick to his class, but she was determined that he should be high in that class's hierarchy. She pronounced the names of Labour notables with an almost sacramental reverence. She retailed what she believed to be the gossip of the inner circle as an aspiring hostess exults over the doings of Royalty. Trant, the party leader, Gray with his wizard locks and wild eloquence, Judson with his smashing repartees were all to her creatures of romance, as fascinating as a duke to a novel-reading shopgirl... Well, that was no bad thing. If the woman who adored Utlaw had this minor worldly wisdom, she would keep his feet on the ground. The danger was that he would think too much of ultimate things and forget the gross and immediate facts.

Yet Adam felt that he had not succeeded with Miss Covert. She had held him at arm's length, not because she was suspicious of him, but because she considered him negligible. An incident a few days later did not help matters. In the street he met Jacqueline Armine.

"Carry this puppy for me, Adam," she cried. "My car's parked at the Town Hall and I've mislaid my chauffeur. I had to bring the little brute to the vet, for he has damaged his off hind paw. I won't ask what you're doing here, for Ken says that is what I must never ask. You're very shabby, my dear. Have you come down in the world?"

"The Court!" she exclaimed in answer to his question. "Ken is there, and half a dozen young couples who have planted themselves on us uninvited. What is to be made of the youth of to-day? They're all penniless, and they all want to get married at once. When their parents frown they fly for refuge to me, because I'm believed to have a large heart. I can tell you it's no fun having your house made a rendezvous for amorous paupers. The chaperone business is beyond me, so I don't try. They're scarcely out of the nursery, you know. What is to be done about this craze for child marriage? It's worse than India. Why couldn't we adopt a good Indian custom when we were at it? Suttee, for example. The world is cluttered up with superfluous widows."

Just before they reached the car Miss Covert passed them. Adam lifted his hat with difficulty owing to the puppy, and to Jacqueline's hand, which at the moment was affectionately laid on his arm. He received a curt bow and a surprised glance from the deep eyes.

"Who's that Charlotte Corday?" Jacqueline asked.

"The girl Utlaw is engaged to. You've heard Kenneth speak of him."

"Rather. I want to meet him. Her too. We're going to take our Mayoral duties very seriously. Hullo, there's Simpson. Give him the puppy and thank you so much, Adam dear. Can't you come on to us and see our Abode of Love? Oh, by the way, brother Frank is coming here soon to preach. If you're in Birkpool, go and hear him. It's an experience."

If Miss Covert remained aloof, Adam found that he was moving towards a closer friendship with Utlaw. His silent ways made him a good listener, and presently he became the recipient of the other's confidences. Utlaw was one of those people who discover their own minds to themselves by talking, and often he would ascend to Adam's little room before going to bed and unburden himself of some of his cogitations of the day. The man had an explosive vitality which carried him through the roughest places. His maxim was that you must always be, as he phrased it, "atop of your job." Once let it crush you or tangle you, and you were done. But it was not always easy to keep this pre-eminence, and he had often in Adam's presence to argue himself out of moods which inclined to lethargy or depression. His humour was his salvation, for he had a pleasant gift of laughing at himself. "Life's a perpetual affair of going over the top," he said; "and it doesn't provide a rum ration. You've got to find that for yourself. Mine is a jack-in-the-box elasticity. If I'm suppressed I can't help bobbing up. Also my feeling about the comedy of it all. Once I can see the idiocy of a fellow and laugh at him I know I've got him in my hand."

"Florrie tells me she saw you with Lady Armine," he said one evening. "I didn't know you knew her."

"I don't know her very well. She asked me to carry her lame pup. She's a sister of a parson called Frank Alban who's coming to preach next month in St Mark's."

"Alban! You don't say! I met him in France. I don't trouble Church much, but I shall go to hear him. He used to have fire in his belly."

One morning a strange figure presented itself in Adam's room. It was that of a short elderly man who was nearly as broad as he was long. He must have been over sixty, for his mop of hair was white and his square face was deeply lined. His eyes under bushy eyebrows were a steely grey; his chin and portentous upper lip were clean shaven, but hair like a fur muffler enveloped his cheeks and throat. His name was Andrew Amos, and in the war he had been a pillar of a service so secret that the name of no one of its members and no one of its reports ever appeared on paper. Adam had been sent to him by Scrope and had lodged with him during some illuminating months on the Clyde. Amos was as inflexible in his politics as he had been in his patriotism; he was a Radical of the old rock and no Socialist, but his class loyalty was as vigorous as Miss Covert's. He had a conception of the rights of the wage-earner which he held as stoutly as he held his own creed of militant atheism, and he would never deviate one jot from it as long as he had breath in his body. Eighty years earlier he would have been a Chartist leader.

He accepted a second breakfast—tea and two of Mrs Gallop's indifferent eggs.

"Maister Scrope sent me here," he explained. "He wanted me to get a line on Joe Utlaw, and as I ken a' the Union folk and they ken me, he thocht I would be better at the job than you. I've been here three weeks, and I think I've made a fair diagnosis. He'll dae. Utlaw will dae. Yon yin has the root o' the matter in him."

When his clay pipe was lit Mr Amos expanded.

"There's twae types o' Labour prophets on the road the day. There's them that canna see an inch beyond bigger wages and shorter hours, and there's them that takes the long view. I ca' them the arithmetical and the pheelosophical schools. Utlaw belongs to the second. The warst o't is that most o' his school are inclined to a windy Socialism. He is not, at least not in the ordinary sense, and that's a proof o' an independent mind. The feck o' the workers o' my acquaintance wad spew if they properly understood what the Socialism was that a man like Tombs preaches. They've mair in common wi' an oppressive Tweedside laird than wi' the wersh callants that ca' themselves Marxians. But unless there's folk to guide them richt they'll be stampeded like sheep intil a fauld whaur they dinna belong. Utlaw kens this, and that's why I say he's a man wi' a superior and independent mind.

"He's a queer yin too." Amos removed his pipe and grinned broadly, thereby revealing a dazzling set of new, ill-fitting teeth. "He doesna care muckle what he says. He can be dooms funny when he likes—whiles not altogether decent—like Robert Burns he can give ye a waft o' the kitchen-midden. But his great gift is for rough-tonguing without offence. I've heard straight langwidge in my time, but no often as straight as his. He can misca' an audience till ye'd think they'd want his blood, and yet they only like him the better for't. I've been considerin' the why and wherefore o't and my conclusion is this. He's the common denominator of a' that's English. Not Scotch—he wadna gang down wi' our lads, and he'd get his heid broke afore he was a week on the Clyde. But he's English to the marrow o' his banes, and the folk that listen to him ken that they're listenin' to their ainsels if they had just the power o' expression.

"His danger?" he said in reply to a question of Adam's. "Deed I think that he'll maybe be ower successful. He has an uncommon gift o' the gab, and he's young, and he has imagination, and guid kens this warld's a kittle place for them that has ten talents. I whiles think that there's mair to be gotten out o' the folk that has just the yin talent—or maybe twae. Brains and character are no often in equal proportions, and if they're no, the balance, as Robert Burns says, is wrang adjusted."

Adam attended St Mark's when Frank Alban preached. The church was in the centre of a large slum parish, and had been famous in the past for certain audacities of ritual which had led to episcopal interference. Its vicar had recently died, and at the moment the living was vacant. There was a movement abroad which called itself the Faith and Brotherhood League, and under its auspices special sermons were being preached in the industrial cities. St Mark's had been selected in Birkpool because of its size and its situation.

The place was crowded, for Alban's recent utterances had given him some celebrity in the popular press. The congregation was made up largely of women, most of them well-dressed, but there was a fair proportion of young men. Adam went there expecting little, but eager to see Jacqueline Armine's brother. He had not been greatly impressed by what he had read in the newspapers. The Wednesday services at St Chad's, from the published extracts, had seemed to him clever nonsense, the provocative utterance of paradoxical youth. He expected this, combined with some breezy, man-to-man padre talk, for Alban had made a considerable reputation among the troops in the war.

The first sight of the man confirmed this expectation. Frank Alban had none of his sister's colouring. He had a finely cut pale face like a tragic actor's, dark hair thinning into a natural tonsure, and nondescript deep-sunk eyes. He looked a fragile, almost a sick man... Then came a series of surprises. To begin with there was the voice. It was sweet, not powerful, husky and a little breathless, the voice of a man with weak lungs. But it had a curiously attractive, even compelling, power. One could not choose but listen. The face of the man, too, was transfigured when he spoke, as if a light had been lit behind it. The impression he gave was one of intense, quivering earnestness. He read the New Testament lesson, a chapter of St John's Gospel, and Adam thought that he had never heard the Scriptures more nobly interpreted. It was not that the voice and elocution were pre-eminent, but that the reader seemed to be communicating to his audience exultingly a revelation which had just been granted him.

The next surprise was the sermon. Here was none of the jolly man-and-a-brother business which Adam had anticipated. Alban stood in the pulpit like some mediæval preaching friar, and held his hearers in a sort of apocalyptic trance. He had no topical allusions, no contemporary morals; his theme was the eternal one of the choice which confronts every mortal, the broad path or the narrow path, the mountain-gate which is too narrow for body and soul and sin. It reminded Adam of sermons he had heard from old Calvinistic divines in his youth. The tenor was the same, though it was notably free from the language of conventional piety. In a world, said the preacher, where everyone was clamouring for material benefits, there was a risk of soul-starvation. He pictured the Utopia of the arrivistes and the Utopia of the social reformers, the whole gamut of dreams from the vulgar to the idealistic. But did even the noblest express the full needs of humanity? He repeated in his wistful voice the text which Scrope had once quoted to Adam: "Behold the tears of such as were oppressed and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter."

In the church porch, as the solemnised and rather mystified congregation dispersed, Adam ran across Andrew Amos.

"What did ye think o' him?" asked the old man, who had not forgotten the sermon-tasting habits of his youth in spite of his latter-day scepticism. "Yon's an orator and no mistake. Man, it's queer to reflect that if he strippit his discourse of Biblical jargon, it would be a very fair statement of faact. There's a sound biological basis for the doctrine o' the twa roads. In a' evolution there's a point where a movement must swither between progress and degeneration, and that's just the amount o' free-will I'll admit in the universe."

That night Utlaw came up to Adam's room before going to bed. He too had been to St Mark's.

"That's dangerous stuff," was his comment. "I've heard a lot about Frank Alban, but I never thought he was that class. Oh, wonderful, I allow! If anybody in my job could talk like that he'd be leading the country inside four years. But all the

same it's dangerous stuff. That's the 'otherworldliness' that our Marxians are terrified of. If you take his view, then all we're trying to achieve is futile, and the only thing that matters is for a man to save his soul though he lives his life in hoggish misery. That sort of thing is the anodyne that blankets reform... All the same there's some truth in it, but I can't quite fix it. No soft soap about Frank Alban. He is out to make the world uncomfortable, and, by God, he succeeds. My mind felt all rubbed up the wrong way... By the way, he's staying some days in Birkpool. He's coming to tea with some of us at the Institute on Wednesday. You'd better come along. You know his sister and might like to meet him."

Frank Alban out of church was a most unclerical figure, for he turned up on the Wednesday night in a tweed suit and an Eton Ramblers' tie. He had none of the hearty ways of the traditional army padre, and none of the earnestness of his preaching manner. He looked a retiring delicate man, perhaps a few years over thirty. His voice was low and hoarse, and he was liable to fits of coughing.

But he had the gift of putting people at their ease. There was something about his shy friendliness which bound together in one fraternity the motley group in the upper room of the Institute. The guests were all Utlaw's friends and associates—minor Union officials, the organisers of W.E.A. classes, a Socialist parson who had won a seat on the town council, one or two women, including Florrie Covert. Alban greeted Adam as a stranger, at which Florrie opened her eyes. She had gathered from Utlaw that Adam knew Lady Armine through her brother.

It appeared that Alban had been spending his time looking at housing conditions in Birkpool and going over some of the chief works. He deplored the flimsiness of his London life.

"St Chad's is too fashionable. How can I speak to men's hearts if there is a microphone two feet off broadcasting my sermon as if it were a music-hall turn, and half a dozen reporters looking out for spicy tit-bits? I know it is all well meant, but it kills freedom. The result is that I dare not be unprepared, and must write everything beforehand, and that you know, Mr Utlaw, is the end of sincere speaking. You can't hope to persuade unless you can look into people's eyes... Also there are too many women."

"What ails you at the women?" Florrie asked tartly.

"There are too many of them, and they are there for the wrong purpose. They are either good souls who lead a sheltered life, or girls looking for a new sensation."

"You mean they're in love with you?" said Florrie.

He flushed. "God forbid! I mean that I've nothing to say to them. If I'm any use it's not in confirming believers in their faith or giving the idle a new thrill. My job is to trouble people's minds as my own is troubled. I want to be a gadfly to sting honest lethargy into thought. We're done, you know, if we go on being self-satisfied."

"That's my complaint about you," said a shaggy youth in a red tie. "You want to keep us in a state of blind torpor about the dirty deal we're getting in this world, and satisfy us with celestial husks."

Frank did not answer. Instead he asked questions—questions about the way in which the Birkpool workers lived. He had seen enough for himself to make his interrogations intelligent, and Utlaw, who did most of the answering, took him seriously.

"They've a better life than their fathers had who were in the same job. You can say that if you can say nothing else. Big wages were earned in the war, and there were a good many nest-eggs laid by. At present there's not much poverty and only the average amount of unemployment. That will come, for the whole system is rotten. The firms have been afraid to declare too big dividends, so they've been 'cutting the cake,' as we call it, and distributing bonus shares to their shareholders. What's the result? Every business is over-capitalised and trembling like a pyramid stuck on its point. Once let the draught come—and it's coming all right—and the whole thing will topple over. It's a mug's game, and do you think our fellows don't know it? It's maddening for an intelligent man to see a business on which his livelihood depends at the mercy of stock-jobbing finance and him and his friends powerless to interfere. The human touch has gone to-day. There's a board of big-wigs in London, and a general manager who spends his life in the train and doesn't know a single man by head-mark, and, as like as not, a works manager who knows the men all right but whose job is only to be a slave-driver. Oh, there's plenty of decent fellows among the masters, but the system is bad. Capital gets too much out of the pool, and labour and brains too little. That's the first thing we've got to change."

The parson town-councillor replied to one of Frank's questions about housing. Birkpool, he said, was as bad as any place in the land, except some of the mining villages in the North. There was little comfort and not much decency. The parson was a dreamer, but he was also full of facts.

"The life is hard," he said, "but that by itself wouldn't matter. It's not so hard as a miner's or a deep-sea fisherman's. The trenches were foul enough, but our men learned there the blessings of cleanliness, and they haven't forgotten it. The younger lot don't take well with six days of filth year in and year out and a perfunctory clean-up at the week-ends. The marvel is that they manage somehow to keep their self-respect."

The talk ranged at large, Frank interrupting many times with questions. He never looked at Adam, but he kept his eyes steadily on Utlaw.

"You say we're at the cross-roads?" he asked. "You mean, that the men want more of everything—money, leisure, chances? Their horizon has been enlarged? That's partly the spread of education, I suppose, and partly the war."

"Yes, but we're at the cross-roads in another sense. Unless I'm wildly wrong we're on the brink of devilish bad times. Britain has lost her monopoly in most things, and she has to compete against rivals who can undersell her every day. How are we going to meet that situation? By scaling down our standard of life?"

"By God, no," said the young man with the red tie. "We can't scrap what we have so painfully won. There'll be a revolution first."

"I don't know about that," said Utlaw. "It's no good kicking against the pricks. Our people will stand up to an economic crisis as they stood up to the war, if it's put fairly before them. But they must be prepared for it. You must take them into your confidence. Above all, they must be certain that they are getting a fair deal."

"I want you to tell me something," said Frank. He had been sitting on the table dangling his legs, and he now stood up before the gas fire. "I see generally what you're after—a fairer share of the reward of industry for labour and more say in its management. You want first of all security, and after that better chances, better conditions and more leisure. You want to give the ordinary fellow a better life. But merely tinkering at his material environment won't do that."

"Agreed," said Utlaw. "We've got to go further and think of what you call his soul. Leisure's no use to him unless he is fitted to make something out of it. He must be given access to all the treasures of thought and knowledge which till the other day were the perquisites of the few." Utlaw delivered this oracularly, for it had been the peroration of a speech.

"I know, I know," said Frank. "There's fine work being done in that direction—I've seen something of it in Birkpool this week. But does it go far enough? After all, everyone hasn't a capacity for culture. But everyone has a soul to be saved and perfected."

There was an odd silence in the room, for Frank's voice had lost its easy friendliness and suddenly become hoarse and strained. He was not looking at Utlaw now, but through him to something very distant.

"This is my point," he said, and the words seemed to come with difficulty. "Succeed as much as you please, recast industry on a better pattern, and manual labour will still be the ancient curse of Adam. It has lost the interest of the craftsman, and is for the most part a dismal monotonous grind... Again, you may tidy up your shops and factories, but most of the work will have to be done among dirt—and not honest country muck but the hideous grime of man's devising. Too much of that kind of dirt is bad for the human spirit... Then you say that even the material side is insecure. At any moment, in spite of all you have done, the worker may have to face an economic blizzard, and he has no shelter against it such as his master possesses. But you admit that he must stand up and face it, for there is no other way... What does all that mean? Surely that the one thing which matters is to strengthen the man's soul. Open his eyes, enlarge his interests as much as you please, but make certain above all that he has an inner peace and fortitude of spirit."

"How are you going to do it?"

Frank smiled.

"I apologise for talking shop. My answer is by what theologians call the grace of God. The way to it was laid down nineteen hundred years ago, and it is still open..."

"Christ was a red-hot Socialist," said the young man.

"Not the ordinary kind," said Frank. "He did not call the rich men knaves—he called them fools."

Adam found his arm seized as he made his way home, and to his surprise saw Frank at his side.

"I didn't introduce myself properly," he said, "for I gather that you don't want to have attention called to you. I noticed you never opened your mouth tonight. But I know a good deal about you from Jackie. Lyson, too—you served with him, didn't you? He's an old friend of mine, and once he told me a little—a very little—about your doings. I want to talk to you—not now, but somewhere soon—a long talk. You can help me a lot."

The street was well lit, so he may have seen surprise in Adam's face, for he laughed.

"Oh, I know I'm supposed to be officially helpful, but I'm a broken reed. I'm as much adrift from my moorings as anybody. I'm sick to death of my work in London, and unless I chuck it I shall become a public scandal. I believe in God, but I'm not very clear about anything else. I call myself a Seeker. You remember Cromwell's words—'The best sect next to a Finder, and such an one shall every faithful humble Seeker be at the end.' That's my comfort, and I'm on the look out for others to keep me company... You're one. Kenneth Armine's voice becomes reverential when he mentions you, and he has no great bump of veneration... And I think Utlaw is another. You agree? One man with faith can move mountains, but three might be an Army of the Lord."

A month later Adam noticed that Utlaw's face had begun to wear a curious look of strain and worry. He dated it from Twining's great meeting in the Town Hall, a Labour rally at which Utlaw had proposed the vote of thanks in a speech which completely outclassed the banal rhetoric of the principal orator. Twining was a man who had grown grey in the service of the party, and was very generally respected, but constant speaking out-of-doors had stripped his voice of all tone, and his ideas were those of the last little official handbook. After him Utlaw's living appeal was like champagne after skim milk. It had been a fine performance, but it had been interrupted. He got no such respectful hearing as Twining got. Clearly there were elements in Birkpool hostile to him, and one man in particular had made himself conspicuous by savage interjections.

Ever since then Utlaw's manner had been constrained, as if he were cumbered with difficult private thoughts. He never appeared now in Adam's room before going to bed. He seemed to avoid him, and, though very friendly when they met, showed no wish to meet often. Florrie, too, looked haggard and miserable. Twice Adam saw her leaving Utlaw's room, and he met her occasionally in the street, and each time he was struck by the anxiety in her face. Was it a lovers' quarrel? Or was Utlaw face to face with some serious difficulty in his work?

One evening came Andrew Amos, who enlightened him.

"I've been verifyin' my faacts," said Amos, "and now I've come to put them before you. Utlaw's in bad trouble—ye might say in danger. It's no blame to him, but it's no just that easy to see the way out o' it."

Then Andrew told his tale. There was a man called Marrish, who had once been an official of Utlaw's Union, and had indeed been the runner-up for the post of local organiser. After his rejection he had left his Union job and become a free-lance journalist. He was a small dark man with a touch of the Jew in him, and had been born in the Transvaal and begun life in the Rand mines. For Utlaw he cherished an extreme jealousy, which was not improved by certain public encounters in which he got the worst of it. He was a fanatic of the Left, and Utlaw's moderation seemed to him treason to the cause, so public differences were added to private grievances. The situation was embittered by his lack of success in his new profession. Marrish had a clever pen, but he had not much sense of atmosphere, and he attributed the coldness of the Labour press towards his work to Utlaw's influence. The man had a delicate wife, and was himself threatened by diabetes, and the misery of his existence he set down at Utlaw's door. Utlaw, young, healthy, popular, expansive, seemed to his morose soul to be the enemy to whose sinister power all his misfortunes were due. He was excluded from lodge meetings, but whenever Utlaw appeared on a public platform Marrish was there to make a row, and at Twining's rally he had been especially violent.

Now things had become worse. Marrish had grown half demented. He had not enough to eat and far too much to think about. He had begun to drink, too, which was bad, for he had once been a fanatical teetotaler. Not in his cups only, but in cold blood he was announcing his intention of doing Utlaw in. He had relapsed into the atmosphere of his early days when a revolver was apt to be the final arbitrament.

"It's a nasty business," said Amos. "Ye see the man is no what you might ca' certifiably mad. It wadna be possible to get him locked up. And his threats are no enough to bring him inside the law—he's ower clever for that—just a hint here and a hint there—nothing ye could frame a charge on. Besides, if ye sent him to prison or got him bound over, what good would that do? He would be wilder than ever and the mair determined to wait his chance. I've made it my job to see something o' the body, and, I tell ye, there's murder in his een... Now, sir, what's to be done? Any moment Marrish may put a bullet in Joe's brain. After that they may lock him up or hang him, but the mischief will be done. Till Marrish is settled wi' Utlaw gangs in constant danger o' his life. It's like that auld story about the sword o' Damocles."

There was that in Amos's eye which made Adam ask if he had ever been himself in the same predicament.

"Yince," was the grinning answer, "and I took the offensive. I lay in wait for the man and gie'd him sic a hammerin' that he never wantit to see my face again. But my yin wasna mad—just bad, and that was simple. Daftness is the wanchancy thing that ye canna deal wi'. My mind's clear that something must be done and the thing brocht to a heid, or Joe will get a bullet where he doesna want it, or gang in fear that will make his life a misery."

"Have you anything to suggest?" Adam asked.

"Not preceesely. But he canna go on dodgin' the body and keepin' him at arm's length. He maun get some kind o' settlement."

"And precipitate a tragedy?"

"Maybe. But onything is better than to gang as the Bible says in an awful looking for of judgment."

Adam spent a day in making enquiries, after telephoning to London to one or two obscure acquaintances. He had Marrish pointed out to him in a back room of a public house, and he did not like the look of his dead-white face and hot eyes. Utlaw had an evening meeting, and Adam attended it, and contrived to keep close behind him on his walk home. He entered the house a minute later and walked into the big downstairs room.

Utlaw was shuttering the window. He turned his head and Adam noted the quick hunted look. "I can't talk to you to-night, Milford," he said. "I've a lot of work to do. Sorry, but you must be a good chap and leave me alone."

"I'm afraid I must talk to you. Sit down and have a pipe. I've come to know about Marrish. You and I must have it out. The thing is too serious to let slide."

Utlaw dropped the bar of the shutter, and flung himself into an arm-chair. "Did you lock the front door when you came in?... You're right. It's damnably serious. I've been living in hell for the last week or two. And poor Florrie also. But it's no good. You can't do anything for me. It's my own show which I must go through alone."

"That's true. You must go through it alone. But possibly I can help you."

Utlaw said nothing for a minute. He was staring into the ashes of a dying fire with his brows knitted.

"I could ask for police protection," he said at last. "But that would mean publicity, and it would be no use, for Marrish if he means business would get me in the end. Or I could have my own bodyguard—there are plenty of young fellows who would be ready for the job. But that would be no good either, for there would be bound to come a time when Marrish would have his chance. So I have simply ignored the whole thing and led my ordinary life. My hope, if I have any hope, is that Marrish when he sees how little I care for his threats will think better of them—that my sanity will cure his madness."

"Isn't the other result more likely—that your contempt may increase his madness? Besides, he has only to catch a glimpse of you to see that his threats are taking effect. You're a different man since Twining's meeting. You look ill—sometimes you look as if you were under sentence of death."

"You've realised that? Well, that's exactly how I feel. But what else is there to do? Any action I take will merely postpone the trouble. The only thing for me is to set my teeth and go through with it, trusting to luck. But, my God! it's a stiff test of fortitude. I don't think I'm more of a coward than other folk, but this waiting and waiting and waiting turns my nerve to water. There are moments when I could go down on my knees to Marrish and ask him to shoot and shoot quick."

"You are an uncommonly brave man. But you're trying yourself too high. It would break the nerve of an archangel to go on as you're doing. Now, I'm going to prescribe for you. I'm older than you, and I've seen more of the world. Things must be brought to a head right now... Listen to me and don't interrupt. You and Marrish must meet. Here—in this room—with nobody near. He must be given every chance, so that if he means to murder you he can do it and get away. You mustn't be armed. You must offer him the key and tell him to lock the door and put it in his pocket... He may shoot at once, but it isn't likely. He will feel himself on the top of the situation and be in no hurry. Then you must talk to him—you know how to talk. Tell me, has he any earthly shadow of a grievance against you?"

"Not an earthly. It's all a wretched misunderstanding. I rather liked him and wanted to help him, but he went off at a bend into raving dislike."

"Good. Well, you must dig up all his grievances, and spread them out and explain them. Madmen get things in a tangled clump, and it is half the battle if you can sort out the threads. The clump looks big, but each of the threads looks small and silly... You run a risk, of course, but you have a good chance, and if you don't do something of the kind the risk becomes a black certainty. You've got to end the thing once and for all—that's common sense, for you can't go on the way you're going. Marrish must leave this room satisfied—a sane man again as far as you are concerned—and he must leave it your friend."

Utlaw got to his feet. "Come now, that sounds good sense. It's action anyway, and that's easier for me than waiting."

They talked for an hour till Adam said good night. Utlaw asked a final question.

"Were you ever in deadly danger of your life?"

"Often."

"But I mean, a cold-blooded affair like this?"

"Yes. Worse than this."

"For God's sake tell me about it."

"Not now. Some day, perhaps."

"You're an extraordinary fellow, Milford, and I can't make you out. I thought of going to Lord Armine, for he was my old commanding officer, and I felt that my trouble might be a soldier's affair. But I didn't, for I reflected that Sniffy was a bit too thick in the head to take it in. But you—you order me about like a brigadier and you seem to have the wisdom of the serpent and the dove all in one. If I survive the next week I'm going to know what you were doing before you settled into your bagman's job."

Early next morning Adam saw Amos and despatched him on an errand. An hour later Amos telephoned and his voice was grave.

"I've seen him, Mr Milford. Things is waur than I thought. The man's bleezin' mad. He's a sort of a fisherman, and I said it was a grand mornin' and proposed that him and me should take a day on the Nesh. I saw that his thoughts were far awa' from fishing, but he agreed. He said he wanted to get a look at the countryside, for, says he, this is likely my last day on earth. He has a pistol in his pooch, and I can see that he's ettlin' to kill Joe and syne do awa' wi' himsel'. He has gotten his resolution up to the stickin' point, and means the blackest kind o' business. Joe's been in no danger afore, for the body hadna made up his mind, but now he's for it. What about speeritin' Marrish away for a month or two in the hopes that he will cool down? I could maybe arrange it..."

"No, no," said Adam, "that would only postpone the reckoning. I'll join you at one o'clock at the bend of the Nesh below Applecombe Mill. Then I'll judge for myself. If he's stark mad we'll have him certified, and if there's any rudiments of sense in him we may straighten things out. Keep him off the drink at all costs."

"That'll be easy enough. He hasna tastit for three days. There's ower muckle fire in his heid to want alcohol... Weel, I'll expect ye at yin o'clock. It's no likely I'll have a very cheery mornin'."

Adam reached the river in the high noon of a May day, when the hawthorns were bowed down with blossom, and the waterside meadows were "enamelled," as the poets say, with daisies and buttercups. He was wearing an old suit of rough tweeds, and a broad-brimmed felt hat that gave him something of a colonial air. Amos sat stolidly on the bank watching his

float, a figure as square and restful as a tree-stump. Marrish had given up the pretence of fishing and was walking about bareheaded, sometimes throwing a word to Amos, sometimes talking to himself. He looked ill; his face had the yellow pallor of the diabetic, he had not shaved for days, his thick black hair was unkempt, and his eyes were not good to look on. He started as Adam appeared, and his hand went to his pocket.

Amos slowly raised himself to his feet.

"Hullo, Mr Milford. Are you out like huz for a day's airin'? Man, it's graund weather. But the fish are no takin'; for I've had just the yin bite. Maybe there's thunder in the air. D'ye ken my freend, Mr Marrish? He's out o' South Africa like yoursel'." He consulted an enormous silver watch. "It's about time for our meat. Haud on, and I'll fetch the creel wi' our pieces."

Adam held out his hand.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr Marrish. I've heard a lot of you from a friend, Johnny Sprot."

Marrish stared at him for a moment, and then extended an unwilling hand. Adam noted how hot and dry it was. He seemed to be wrestling with a painful memory.

"Johnny Sprot! That's a thousand years ago. I've forgotten all about that."

"Johnny hasn't forgotten," said Adam cheerfully. "He was in London the other day. He constantly talks about you. Says you were his best friend and a comrade of his boyhood and all that, and longs to see you again. Sit down and let's have a crack while old Amos fetches the lunch."

Marrish sat himself slowly on the grass as if his legs were cramped. Adam was so situated that he looked him full in the face and his kindly domineering manner had its effect. Marrish's hot gaze met his and Adam's steady grey eyes seemed to hold him fascinated. He stopped jerking his shoulders and his lips ceased to mutter.

"I don't want to hear about Johnny Sprot," he said. "That's all dead and buried."

"Nonsense, man. You can't bury your youth, and you can't bury Johnny. He's the alivest thing on earth—the kind of friend that sticks closer than a brother. I'd rather lose twenty thousand pounds than wreck a friendship."

"I'm done with friends. I have only enemies."

"Well, that's better than nothing, for an enemy may be a friend to-morrow."

"By God, no. My enemies are enemies to the other side of Tophet. I stand alone."

"Not you. You've a wife, haven't you?"

"What the hell has that to do with you?"

Adam looked at him steadily.

"Look here, Mr Marrish, you've got to mend your manners. When I ask a civil question, I expect a civil answer. I don't stand for insolence."

"You don't," Marrish almost screamed, and half rose to his feet. "Then, by God, you've got to lump it or clear out of this."

His right hand went to his pocket, but Adam was too quick for him. In a single deft movement he had one arm round the other's shoulders, pinioning Marrish's left arm to his side, while his right had grasped the hand in the pocket. Marrish, under-nourished and sick, had no chance against this exercised strength. The pressure of Adam's fingers on the other's right wrist paralysed it. Adam drew out the pistol.

He ignored Marrish utterly and examined the little weapon.

"A pretty toy. Loaded too. Isn't that unnecessary for an English riverside on a summer day? You're a bit of a marksman, Mr Marrish, aren't you? Johnny had a story of a scrap with some drunken natives at Geduld where you were pretty useful."

Adam turned round and faced him. Marrish was sitting humped up with eyes like a sick dog's.

"Geduld, wasn't it?" he repeated.

"No, it was at the Vlak Reef."

"Well, it was a good show, anyway. Take back your gun and keep it for its proper use."

Marrish did not replace the pistol in his pocket. It lay on the grass between them. There was no sign of Amos with the lunch, for that worthy was obeying orders.

"Johnny said you were the best-natured chap going," Adam went on. "You're a little off-colour this morning, aren't you? You look to me like a sick man. Give me your hands. I know something about doctoring."

Marrish, who seemed in a daze, surrendered both hands, and Adam's strong grasp enclosed his wrists, and his cool eyes held the other's fevered ones in a strict control. "Do you remember this?" he asked. "It's not the English way of diagnosis. It's the trick of the old witch-doctor on the Black Umvelos', that you and Johnny Sprot met when you took a waggon-load of stores to peddle in Zululand. But it's mighty sound medicine... Shall I tell you what I learn from the blood beat in your veins and the pupils of your eyes? You are sick in body, but not deathly sick. There's a whole man behind waiting to be cleansed of its leprosy. You are sick in mind, but not deathly sick, for there's a good fellow behind that ought to be released. But I see in the back of your eyes a small crazy devil. I know that devil well, and out he must come, for he's the source of all the mischief... What a godless fool you were ever to come to Birkpool! You were never meant for a rotten black city like that. It has poisoned your blood and choked your lungs. And you were never meant for the game you've been

trying to play—too good in one way—too stiff in your joints also. England wants a darned lot of understanding, and you hadn't the patience to learn. I'll tell you where you should be."

Still holding Marrish's wrists and mastering his eyes Adam began to talk about the High Veld. He had never been there himself, but he had made it his business from his early days at the Staff College to study the atmospheres of many parts of the globe. Once in the Rhineland he had escaped from a dangerous place by talking to a Bavarian of the Wettersteingebirge with apparently intimate knowledge. He knew enough of Marrish's early career to select the high lights. He spoke of prospecting journeys in Lydenburg and the Zoutspansberg, where the uplands break down in forested cliffs to the bushveld, and a man may look across a hundred miles to the blue peaks in Portuguese territory. He spoke of trading journeys in the Low Country, the red, scarred tracks through the bush, the slow milky rivers, and the camp in the evening with the mules kicking at their peg-ropes, and the wood fires crackling, and the guinea-fowl clucking in the trees. He spoke of hot middays on the High Veld, when the pans of Ermelo become in the mirage a shoreless ocean. Above all he spoke of that delectable climate where a man could go to bed supperless and weary on the cold ground and wake whistling with sheer bodily well-being—and of a world where there was hope and horizon, since everything was still in the making. Into Marrish's glazed eyes there came gleams of reminiscence, and now and then a flicker of assent. Sometimes he corrected Adam. "Not the Olifants," he would say. "It was farther north—the Klein Letaba."

By and by Adam dropped his wrists. He lifted the pistol.

"Johnny said you used to be a fine shot. Let me see you hit the grey knot in that willow stump across the river, three yards below the big elm."

Marrish automatically took the weapon and fired. He was within six inches of the knot.

"Let me try," said Adam. His shot was an inch nearer.

Marrish fired again, almost repeating Adam's shot.

Adam's next attempt was wide, but he fired a second time and just grazed the knot. Marrish almost plucked the pistol from his hand and sent a bullet plumb into the knot's centre.

"By Jove, that's pretty shooting. Johnny was right. Hullo, the gun's empty. Have you any more cartridges?"

Marrish seemed to awake to a maddened recollection. "Curse you!" he cried. "You've done me in. I wanted those bullets... I wanted them to-day for..."

"For what?" Adam asked, and once again he took the other's hands—his hands, not his wrists.

For my enemy—the man who has ruined me... and a last one for myself."

"So?" said Adam. "You're a sicker man than I thought. There's that small crooked devil to be got out of you. Now take your time—very slowly. I want to know all about that little devil."

The hands in Adam's grasp were quivering like a bird that a boy has caged. Marrish was talking rapidly, incoherently, words tripping on each other's heels. His voice had lost its shrillness, and had become low and intense... He told of his coming to Birkpool, his dreams and ambitions, his successes—and then the appearance of the other man who jostled him aside. He did not mention Utlaw by name—he was only "he," as if the figure so dominated the world that even a stranger must recognise the incubus. There followed a long catalogue of injuries evidently carefully tabulated in his mind—many of them childish, but clearly to him a great mountain of wrongs. Little sayings were misconstrued, casual acts perverted, till all his troubles—his journalistic failures, the slights of his party, his poverty, his own ill-health and his wife's—were made to spring from the one tap-root of personal malevolence. Adam let him talk till his confession ebbed away in a moan of misery.

He dropped his hands.

"Poor old chap," he said. "You've made an infernal mess of things."

"Not me..." Marrish began.

"Yes, you. For you've lost your pride. You've forgotten the man you once were. Do you mean to say that when you and Johnny were partners you would have ever admitted that any man could down you? When you took a knock you blamed it on the cussedness of things and not on the other fellow. But now, when you've taken a collection of knocks because you're in the wrong groove and a world you don't understand, you're weak enough to put it all on the other chap. You're a fool, Marrish. And a bit of a coward."

"That's a lie. I've faced up squarely..."

"Not you. You've knuckled under, and consoled yourself by putting it all down to an imaginary enemy, and nursing your hate for him till you can't see daylight. That's the behaviour of a sulky child. If you had faced up to things you'd have seen you were in the wrong place, cut your losses, and shifted yourself to a better... Who, by the way, is the man you blame?"

Marrish muttered a word, and it was spoken not defiantly but shamefacedly. Adam had planned out beforehand every move in the game, and the slight change of tone told him that he was winning.

"Utlaw!" he cried, and then laughed. "Utlaw! Man, you've been barking up the wrong tree. Utlaw never had a hard thought about you. If he had, he would have scored heavily, for he has made you hate him, and that's the worst affliction you can put on a man. Have you ever had a happy moment since you started this grouch? No. It has come between you and food and sleep, and it's made the whole earth black for you. Utlaw would have scored, if he had wanted to—only he's not that kind of fellow."

"What do you know about him?" Marrish asked fiercely, as if he claimed a proprietary right in his enemy.

"I knew him in the war, where one learned a good deal about other people. Utlaw never in all his days cherished a grudge against anybody. He hasn't time for it—his head is too full of his maggots. He's a good chap, but he's a fool—like you, Marrish—the same kind of fool."

The other lifted his weary eyes.

"I'm a fool all right—Utlaw's a scoundrel," he said.

"No, he's a fool. He's like you—he's in a game where he can't win and he'll eat out his heart in trying. He wants to build things up, and has all kinds of fine notions—just as you had once. But he is working with tools that will break in his hand. He is slaving for people who in the end will turn him down. That's the curse of this rotten political game. In two years or five years he will be sitting with a broken heart in the dust among the ruins of his dreams. That is why I call him a fool. But he won't be such an utter fool as you, for he won't have invented an imaginary enemy and be torturing himself with hating. He has too much guts and sense for that... You thought of putting a bullet into him? Well, if he deserved it he would still have scored off you. He would have made your life a hell with your hate, and you would be putting him out of the world before he had lost his illusions. Not a bad way of dying, you know—only of course he doesn't deserve it. If you killed him it would be like murdering a child."

Marrish had his eyes on the ground. Adam's steady gaze exercised some mysterious compulsion, for slowly he lifted them and looked him in the face. The heat of purpose had gone out of him, and what remained was bewilderment, almost fear.

"You meant your last bullet for yourself? Well, you'd probably make a mess of it. Then you would spend some weeks in a prison hospital till they patched you up. After that would come the trial. If you were well defended, they might find you mad, and put you away during His Majesty's pleasure. A nice kind of life for you! For of course you are not mad. You're as sane as I am. If you were lucky the judge would put on a black cap and presently you'd swing. You're a man of imagination—you started life with hopes and ideals—do you realise what the bitterness of those last days would be when you knew that they were all to end with a six-foot drop?"

"I wouldn't mind," the other muttered.

"Don't be too sure. God never meant you for a murderer—you're not a cool hand—when you saw Utlaw's brains on the floor you'd be sick and scared and as like as not would blow away a bit of your jaw. It often happens that way. But assume that your shot went true. You'd be done with your troubles, you say. Maybe, but you'd also be done with life. You're still a young man. You've been living in a bad dream, but you know that there are still jolly things in the world. This countryside, for instance. You came out to-day to have a last look at it? Am I right? That shows that you have not lost the capacity for pleasure. When I was talking about the Houtbosch I saw a spark come into your eyes. You're not the shrivelled husk you think yourself. There's still blood in your veins. Are you going to end all that—for a babyish whim?"

"And there's another thing," Adam went on. "You've always been a proud fellow. You've been proud of yourself, and your friends have been proud of you. How are those friends going to feel when they hear that David Marrish has died shamefully—either by his own hand or by the hangman's?... And what about your wife? You thank God that you have no children, though there was a time when you didn't feel like that. But you're going to leave a wife behind who trusts in you. You've been a good husband to her, but now you're going to inflict on her the uttermost wrong... A murderer's widow... Without a hope or a penny in the world... You've been kind to her, and nursed her tenderly and stinted yourself that she might have food and medicine. And now you're going to be savagely, brutally, hellishly cruel to a poor woman who gave you all she had."

For a moment it looked as if Marrish would attack him. The man got to his feet and stood with a contorted face and uplifted arm. Then he seemed to collapse into a heap. He was weeping, bitterly, convulsively, and his meagre body was shaken with sobs.

Adam flung an arm round his shoulders.

"Poor old chap," he said gently. "That's right. Let the tears come. When you've wept enough, you'll be yourself again."

For some time the two men sat there as the afternoon lengthened. Adam's arm seemed to comfort Marrish, and he lay back into the curve of it. Presently the sobbing ceased, and there was a long silence.

"I'm going to take charge of you," Adam said. "Never mind who I am. Say that I'm a healer of sick souls, and that I intend to make a proper job of you. This country's no place for you, and you're going back to the place where your roots are. You've plenty of good work in you, and I'll see that you get it out. Johnny Sprot wants you to join him. He has a tidy handful of propositions up in Rhodesia, and he wants a partner. Among other things, there's a newspaper for you to run. You're a good organiser, and there's a field with Johnny for your talents... Are you hungry? For I am, ravenously, and Amos seems to have gone over the sky-line with the lunch. I've got a little two-seater car and I'm going to take you back to Birkpool. Then I'll tell you what you must do. Get shaved and tidied up, and you and Mrs Marrish will come and feed with me. I'm at the King's Head. There we'll talk about plans, and to-morrow I'll take you up to London to see some friends. I'm in charge of this outfit, remember, and you must obey orders."

Marrish turned on him a white tear-stained face. His eyes were quiet now and a little dim.

"I don't know..." he began.

"You don't, but never mind that now—you will in time. One thing you do know, that you're the old David Marrish again... Oh, by the way, you've another job before you to-night. You were going to see Utlaw—you had fixed that up, hadn't

you? Well, you must keep the appointment just the same. He knows that you've been talking loose about him. Tell him you have come to apologise and make up the quarrel. Say that you have been all kinds of a fool. That's the amends that an honest man makes for an occasional folly... If you like, you can tell him that he's a fool also—that he has got into the wrong game the same as you, and will find it out some day."

Adam took up the pistol from the grass.

"There! You'd better take that," he said.

Marrish looked at it with a shudder.

"Take it," Adam repeated. "You can't leave it lying here. It's your property."

Marrish took the thing gingerly as if it had been a hot iron. But he did not replace it in his pocket. Holding it by the muzzle he hurled it from him high into the air. It fell in the middle of the stream, and he watched till the last ripple made by it had died away. He had the face of one performing an act of reparation.

That night Utlaw came up and sat on Adam's bed. He looked like a man dog-tired but very happy.

"It's all over," he said. "I've seen Marrish. He asked for an appointment to-night and I gave it him. I did all you advised me—nobody about, the key lying on the table ready to hand him, nothing to defend myself with—but I felt like a criminal going to the gallows. I opened the door to him myself, and I can tell you my knees were knocking together... Then a miracle happened. I didn't offer him the key—I saw at the first glance there was no need. He looked quiet and sober and—and—kindly. Yes, kindly. He said he had come to apologise for playing the goat. Apparently he is leaving Birkpool at once... We sat down and smoked a pipe together and had a long friendly talk. I blame myself for not having had it all out with him before—it's a lesson to me I shall never forget. It was all a hideous misunderstanding. The man's a thundering good fellow—a better fellow than me by a long sight. He has brains, too. He knows the difficult job I've got and talked acutely about it—told me I was a bit of a fool myself for trying to do the impossible. We parted like long-lost brothers, and he's going to keep me posted about his doings... Then I went round to see Florrie and took her out and gave her supper, for neither of us has been able to eat a bite to-day. We both felt as if we had got a reprieve. She's fallen for you completely, Milford, and by God, so have I. You're the kind of friend to go to in a fix... As I say, I've learned my lesson. Never funk trouble. It's Mount Everest when you fight shy of it, but when you face up to it it's a molehill... Whew! I'm weary. I'm going to bed to sleep a round of the clock."

Adam did not go to bed. He sat and smoked long into the night. He thought of Utlaw; now that he had faced death in cold blood Utlaw would be twice the man he had been. But chiefly he thought of himself.

This was the kind of thing that he could do, for which his long training fitted him. But the other job—the main job? He believed that he had found the quality that he sought in three men, but it was still only potential, it had still to be shaped to leadership. At any moment one or the other, or all three, might crack in his hands. In his hands! That was the trouble. Had he the power, the brain, the mastery, to shape the career of a fellow-mortal? For a black moment of disillusion he felt that such a purpose was sheer arrogance. It was a task which should be left to God, and who was he to thrust himself in as God's viceroy?

PART 2

CHAPTER 18

As Adam dressed for dinner in his little Temple bedroom, which looked out on the top of a dusty plane tree and a flat-chested building of old brick, he had one of his rare moments of introspection when he tried to orientate himself with the world.

He was living a normal life again in close contact with his fellows. To that he had schooled himself—not without difficulty after his six years of solitude. He had a task before him which absorbed all his energies of mind and body, but he had early realised that he must fail if he regarded people as only figures in a mathematical problem. So he laboured to cultivate the common sympathies. But he knew that his success was limited. He understood them and could use them, but they did not deeply move him. Marrish was a case in point. He had saved the man from disaster, and Marrish's letters now were full of a doglike worshipping affection. But for Marrish himself he had no strong feeling; he had been only an incident in Utlaw's life. Utlaw was the vital matter. Yet how much did he care for Utlaw apart from Utlaw's political career?... Adam laid down his brushes and regarded his face in the mirror. All his emotions were now tenuous things with a utilitarian purpose. Might not this lack of an ultimate human warmth be fatal in some critical hour?

It was the same, he reflected, with other things. He nominally shared in the ordinary tastes and pursuits of his kind, but how much did they mean to him? He was a brilliant fisherman, but he fished only to get solitude for his thoughts. Books he read only to extend his knowledge, the conversation of his fellows he welcomed only for the light it cast upon the talkers. The beauty of nature and of art scarcely affected him. He had no weaknesses of the flesh, no foibles of the mind. Had he any friends for whom he felt the true unself-regarding passion of friendship? Stannix, perhaps. Lyson, maybe? Kenneth Armine? He was not certain. He realised suddenly that he was living in a world where all things, except the one, were dim and subfusc and shadowy.

But was this wholly true? What of that steady exhilaration of his which was like a recovered youth? He had no need for stoicism. In his dingy Birkpool room, in the monotonous life to which for months he would condemn himself, he had never a moment of ennui. There seemed to be an inner fount of cheerfulness always flowing. His cause was an anchor to keep him steady, but it could not give this perpetual afflatus of spirit like a May morning.

He had no need to ask himself the reason. There was a secret world waiting for him across whose border he could step at will. It was only in moments of reflection like this that he understood how large a part Eilean Bàn played in his life. Half his time was spent among its cool winds and shining spaces. For him it was all that art and literature could give. How could he be rapt by the sight of a lush English meadow or a flowery woodland when his heart was given to his own place—the spire of Sgurr Bàn, the thymy downlands, the singing tides of the western sea?... And Nigel who trotted by his side and talked the wise talk of childhood. He had retained humanity because Nigel and Eilean Bàn were the passion of his innermost heart. His secret world was no lotus-eating paradise where a man squandered his strength in dreams. It was rather a vantage-ground which gave him a Pisgah view of the things of common life and a half-contemptuous empire over them.

He laughed as he finished dressing, for he thought how inviolable was his secret. He went a great deal about in London and had been at some pains to keep up a pretence of the commonplace. A few people, his old friends, knew something of him, but they respected his desire to be inconspicuous. The others, the men and women he casually met, regarded him as an agreeable, well-mannered rentier who filled a place at a dinner-party, took a gun at a shoot, and joined in a rubber of bridge at the club. He was aware that he was popular, since he trod on no toes and stood in no one's light... Women rather liked him, but women interested him not at all. Jacqueline Armine perhaps was an exception. With her he had advanced to a certain intimacy, for there was something about her which reminded him of Nigel. One or two had shown a desire for friendship, or at least flirtation, but his reserve had warned them off. He could when he chose become as wooden as a fence-post.

As he filled his cigarette case he remembered that there were two people who had seemed to detect more in him than he wished to reveal. The first was Warren Creevey, who was becoming a very notable figure in the public eye. On one side he was a professional sophist, a master of brilliant dialectic, who delighted in maintaining paradoxes of his own and still more in shattering the platitudes of other men. But he was also a great figure in the City, a bold speculator in the wavering exchanges of the globe, and at the same time an acute economist who was frequently taken into the conclaves which discussed international settlements. Creevey had shown some wish for his acquaintance. They rarely met without Creevey trying to probe him with his delicate scalpel.

The other was Mrs Pomfrey. Of her he had no fear, for she made no advances, but he had a lively curiosity about her. He was aware of her as a quiet figure with intelligent eyes, content to wait in the background, but wielding enormous power in her apparent detachment. She had succeeded in imposing her personality on contemporary life without obviously exerting herself. She had of course the advantage of great wealth. Her husband had been a shipowner whose fortune had become colossal during the war, and at his death just before the Armistice all of it had been left to her. The Pomfreys had come to London from the North in 1912, and, though they professed to be plain folk without social ambition, their house in Charles Street had very soon become a meeting-place for important people of diverse types. The attraction was the wife, for Pomfrey was a silent man, concerned with the cares of many businesses. Lilah Pomfrey had no beauty to help her, and only a sketchy education. She had been her husband's secretary in far-off days, and came out of a middle-class Northumbrian home; her one affectation was that she was disposed to exaggerate the humility of her origin, and to speak of herself as a "daughter of the people." She was short and powerfully built—had she been a man her physical strength would have been

remarkable. Her face was broad, with strong cheek-bones and a wide kindly mouth; her colouring was a little dusky, and with her coal-black hair and dark eyes it suggested some trace of gipsy blood.

Most people when they talked of her set down her attraction to her gift of sympathy and her staunch fidelity. She never betrayed a confidence and was the most loyal of friends; she had proved on more than one occasion that she could also be an unforgiving enemy. She had succeeded where her rivals had failed. Lady Bland ruthlessly pursued every notable, and by dint of much asking swept a motley crowd of celebrities into her drawing-room, but she remained a comic figure and the target for malicious gibes. Mrs Macrimmon collected bored royalties, most of them foreign, but her fame was confined to the picture-papers. Mrs Diamond from Chicago made a speciality of youth, and was consequently a frequent character in the novels of youth, and now and then the subject of odes in vers libres by young poets. These all had an ambition to be queens of salons to which intellect would gather and which would be a power-house of many movements; but their much-paraphrased entertainments were like circuses which were forgotten utterly when the last performer had made his bow.

Mrs Pomfrey was different. She did not seek, she was sought; her invitations were to most people like royal commands. She spoke little, but what she said in her deep voice with its pleasant north-country burr was remembered. She dispensed not entertainment but friendship. Men of every type, leaders in finance and politics, were believed to seek her advice, but, since she was not vain, she never talked about it... Adam was nervous when he caught her deep, appraising eyes fixed on him. Twice she had asked him to dinner, and both times he had found an excuse for declining.

To-night he was dining with Lady Flambard in Berkeley Square. Sally Flambard was Mrs Pomfrey's exact opposite, like her only in the absence of vanity. She was slight, fair, and volatile as a bird, living, as a French admirer once said, perpetually *sur la branche*. All that was new intoxicated her, but the waves of novelty passed through her life and left no mark. The basis of her character was her eager interest in things and her human warmth. She was prepared to do battle to the death for her friends, and never refused a challenge, but her affection was not yoked with prudence, and those who liked her best had to be most on their guard. She was popular because of her power of aerating the atmosphere, but she was a dynamo, not an anchor. Those who went to Mrs Pomfrey for counsel sought Lady Flambard's company for stimulus.

There were five people in the long, low drawing-room, which was dim with summer twilight. Sir Evelyn Flambard had gone down to the country to look at his young horses, so there was no host. Creevey, wearing knee-breeches and decorations, for he was going on to a ceremonial ball, was talking to Jacqueline Armine. The latter rose at Adam's entrance and came forward.

"Bless you, Adam," she said, "where have you been hiding yourself? Ken is dying to see you. He's Mayor of Birkpool, you know, and he's down in that filthy city to-day talking sense to town councillors. No, we're at the Court—we've no town house this summer—economy, I say— self-indulgence, Ken says, for he hates London. Have you heard the news about Frank? He has taken St Mark's—the living is in the gift of the Corporation, and they were lucky to get him... Hullo, here he is. Not dressed, too, like a sordid Member of Parliament. That's an affectation, for he can't be as busy as all that..."

Lady Flambard took Adam's arm.

"You take in Mrs Pomfrey. You know her, don't you?"

He bowed to a lady in the dusk behind Jacqueline. Mrs Pomfrey was going on to the same ball as Creevey and wore a wonderful gown of black and red. Her jewels were emeralds. Adam realised anew the air of substance she carried with her—not material only, but a certain tough solidity of spirit. She seemed like one who could command all the apparatus of life, moving in a sphere in which she was securely at home. Beside her Jacqueline Armine and Sally Flambard looked like gossamer visitants from a more rarefied planet. Frank Alban, too, with his lean plain face and shabby clothes, suggested failure, disquiet, the uncomfortable struggles of a lower order of things. But Creevey paired well with her, and it seemed appropriate that they should both be in gala dress. They were both assured and successful children of their world.

At the little round dinner-table Adam sat between Mrs Pomfrey and Jacqueline. Sally Flambard and Frank Alban at the start did most of the talking. His hostess had much to say of Frank's flight from London.

"Don't tell me it's the call of duty. You're afraid, Frank, black afraid of the worshipping ladies in trouble about their souls."

"Not their souls," said Jacqueline. "Their emotions, my dear. It's the idle young women in search of a new sensation who scare Frank. Well, he won't have any in Birkpool. We've not a feminised society down there. Ken has forbidden me to powder my nose in public."

"Frank's afraid of women," said Sally firmly. "That's the drawback of British youth. In my country we bring up boys and girls together so that they mix naturally, but here you still hanker after the convent and the monastery till they reach what you call years of discretion. But discretion has to be learned and you expect it to come in a single dose. In America we break in our young bit by bit."

"It works well with your adorable ladies," said Creevey. "But what about the men?"

"They're well enough. A little apt to be run by their womenkind, but that's a fault on the right side. If I have any doubt it's about the girls. They don't transplant well. Our bright brittle young things should marry into their own kind. I know I'm giving away my case to Lilah, who hates Englishmen marrying Americans. But take me—I'm a warning. I love every inch of England, but I shall never belong here. If I hadn't Evelyn to anchor me, I should be the most *déraciné* thing alive."

"What has an angel to do with roots?" Creevey asked.

"You should have been an American, Mr Creevey," Sally replied. "That's just the kind of heavy compliment our menfolk are always paying. I mean what I say. When I look at the way you Englishwomen have your feet in your native

mud, I could howl with envy. I know my cottagers at Flambard and all their troubles, and I doctor their babies, and look after the district nurse, and run a Women's Institute, and get up every sort of show, and yet I no more belong there than my pekinese."

"No, no, my dear," said Jacqueline. "You're a model. I wish I did my duty by Armine Court as you do yours by Flambard. All of us to-day are hopping about on the twigs. Ken gave me a talking-to yesterday—said I was of a composition to which water would add stability! He got that out of some book, and was very pleased with it."

She turned to Creevey, who was her neighbour on the left.

"We're becoming a new type—physically, I mean. There's very little need for slimming now. I agree with Julius Cæsar—I prefer people about me that are fat and comfortable, and I can't find them. Look at us here. Sally and I are wraiths, and Frank is a mere anatomy. I often feel as wispy as a leaf in the wind. I want to be substantial. Lilah and Mr Creevey are better, but of course they're not plump, and Adam looks like a prize-fighter in hard training. What has become of the nice, easy-going, well-padded people with soft voices and wide smiles? We don't breed 'em nowadays."

"What about Jimmy Raven?" someone asked.

"Oh, Jimmy! He used to be a beautiful young man, and now he is fat and waddles—but that's because he has taken up with some slushy religion, and believes that there is no such thing as pain or wickedness, and that we're all in a Pullman express bound for the Golden Shore. Charles Lamancha says it's biology—that atrophy of mind is usually attended by hypertrophy of body. Have I got the words right?"

"We're lean," said Creevey, and his voice belied his words, for its chalky richness seemed to argue a eupeptic body—"because we're dissatisfied, and that is not a bad thing to be. We're all seekers."

Adam glanced across the table at Frank and saw a whimsical look on his face. These were the very words he had used during that walk home through the Birkpool streets.

"Seekers after what?" Frank asked. "A City of God? Or only some new thing?"

Creevey raised his massive head, and his eyes had an ironic seriousness.

"You can give it any fine name you like. Geraldine says it is a land fit for heroes, and President Wilson says it is a world fit for democracy, and the little poets call it a new renaissance. But we are not so much the slave of words to-day, and these pretty things are only meant for perorations. The motive at the base of everything is money. Call it economic stability if it pleases you, but that only means money. Everyone wants more out of the pool—workman, master, professional man, rentier, statesman, people. What's behind the League of Nations? Not the horror of war, not humanity, except in the case of a few old ladies and imaginative youths. It's disgust at having to waste good money in blowing things to bits."

"But Ken says that there is no pool to grab things out of," put in Jacqueline.

"My dear lady, there will always be a pool, and clever people will always have their hands in it."

"But what is to happen," Frank asked, "even if the pool turns out to be large enough and a great multitude can have a share in it? What are they going to do with their share? Is the new millennium to be like a Brighton hotel, all upholstery and rich cooking and a jazz band?"

"Why should it? Comfort need not be gross, it may have all the refinements. You can't have civilisation without money behind it. The great day of Athens was when she was cock of the Aegean and levied tribute from her dependencies. I'm no materialist, but I thank my stars I live in an age when people have an eye for facts. A little sound biology is what is needed. You've got to have a quantitative basis, as the wiseacres say, for qualitative progress."

"But how if quality is choked by quantity?" Frank asked.

"It needn't be. That's one of the arbitrary antitheses that your profession is always inventing—God or Mammon, the Church or the World, the Narrow Road or the Broad Road, and so forth. Quality may be choked by quantity, but it will most certainly be starved by scarcity."

Adam, who had been talking to Mrs Pomfrey, addressed Creevey for the first time.

"Perhaps you're right that the money motive is predominant with everybody. But assume that the confusion of the globe is only beginning, and that in a year or two the whole economic fabric will be cracking. Assume too that the only hope of saving it will be by a great effort of discipline and sacrifice. Will you get that effort merely for the money motive? Mustn't you bring in an altogether different kind of appeal?"

Creevey shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think there need be any cracking if people show common sense. If there is, you won't mend it by any of the old-fashioned appeals. The world is out of the mood for them. It doesn't understand the language."

He broke off to answer a question from his hostess. Mrs Pomfrey was speaking in her low-pitched husky voice, and Adam had to incline his head to catch her words.

"I think Mr Creevey is wrong," she said. "Our troubles are only beginning, and we need a change of heart if we are to meet them. I want to see a new Crusade and I want Mr Alban to be its Peter the Hermit."

Frank Alban opposite seemed to be trying to catch her words, and Adam repeated them. The young man laughed, but there was no mirth in his laugh.

"I wish I had Peter the Hermit's job. It was a simple affair to persuade men who believed in God to set out to reclaim God's holy city from the infidel—and to go with them. To go with them, to share all their hardships and dangers. I have to persuade people that there is a God at all, and to make them believe that evil is a more awful thing than pain, and that a

starved soul is worse than a starved body. I can't tell them to pack up and follow me across the globe—that would be straightforward enough. I can only tell them to go on as they are and grub along in their deadly monotonous lives. And the infernal thing is that I can't join them. I can't make my life like theirs. If I tried it would only be a pose and they would see through it. People like me need never fear an empty belly or the loss of a roof over our heads. A preacher should be a little bit above his hearers, and I feel most of the time below mine. When I see a woman with a thin face and hands worn to the bone with toil, or a middle-aged workman struggling to keep his job against the handicap of failing strength—then I feel that my job is an infernal imposture. I wish that I were a penniless Franciscan in the fifteenth century, because then we should all be on a level. Only you can't put back the hands of your accursed clock. I'm suffering from the nightmare of other people's poverty... and I sometimes think that the nightmare is worse than the fact."

Mrs Pomfrey nodded. "I think I know what you mean. But may not your suffering give you power? It will sharpen your sympathy."

She turned to Adam. "Don't you agree with me?"

"Melfort doesn't know what we mean," Frank said. "He's the real Franciscan if you like. He has been through so many kinds of naked hell that a consumptive tramp on a winter day expects more from the world than he does. He is the man who should be at my job—only if my perch is too low his is too high, and he could never drag an ordinary fellow within sight of it."

Adam shook his head.

"Nonsense, Alban," he said, "I can't lead men. The best I can do is to help those who can."

Mrs Pomfrey turned to him.

"I wish you could tell me something about yourself," she said. "I have only heard rumours. But I am afraid you won't. You seem to me the only modest person left in an advertising world." She looked on him with her friendly eyes, and then turned them on Frank, and Adam seemed to see in the way in which she regarded the other something more than friendliness, something possessive and affectionate.

Jacqueline had caught a word.

"Modest!" she exclaimed. "You're utterly wrong, Lilah. Adam is the most immodest creature alive. We are wistful waifs compared to him. He knows where he is, and knows it so clearly that he never troubles to explain. Mr Creevey says that we are all seekers to-day. I don't think Adam is one. He has found something—only he won't tell."

Creevey lifted his head, which as usual had sunk between his broad drooping shoulders. He looked at Adam with his inscrutable, challenging smile.

"That is my notion of success," he said—"to have found what you want and to be able to keep it to yourself. Only there is no standing still in life. What one man has found may conflict with what others are seeking, and he may have to fight to retain it."

He lifted his glass of port.

"I drink," he said, "to the success of the best man. That the best should win is all that matters."

Afterwards in the drawing-room Adam talked to Jacqueline Armine.

"I can't make Ken out," she said. "I seem to have entirely lost the hang of him. He came back from the war declaring that he meant to enjoy himself for the rest of his natural life. He was crazy about the Court and started putting it to rights—got the coverts tidied up and began to rear pheasants in the old way. He spent a lot of money on the farms, far more than he'll ever get back. He wouldn't take the hounds, but he hunted regularly twice a week. Then you know how keen he is about horses—he has every kind of theory about how to breed up to an ideal—and he talked about a racing stable. Well, he seems to have forgotten all that. He's had a fall and has gone dotty about the public service, and I find it very wearing to keep pace with him."

"No, it's not Birkpool only," she said in reply to a question of Adam's. "It was quite natural that he should be Mayor—that's a family tradition. It's everything else. He naturally wishes he was in the House—not the Lords, but the Commons—he has so much he wants to say. You've seen from the papers that he has taken to making speeches? He has heaps of queer friends up and down the country and they arrange meetings for him. Pretty strong meat he gives them too. The seventh Marquis has been sending anxious wires, and small wonder, if Ken said half the things he's reputed to have said! He's a mixture of high Tory and rampant Bolshie—says he doesn't care a hoot for democracy and all the old Victorian idols, but that we have got to preserve the stamina of England, and that it can only be done by facing facts and having a fresh deal. He has big meetings and plenty of oppositions, for he slangs all sides impartially, but it looks as if he were getting a following, and where it's to end I'm blessed if I know. The idyllic existence I had hoped for is all in smithereens."

"What about Birkpool?" Adam asked.

"Birkpool!" she exclaimed. "That's going to be a tough proposition. Instead of being content with a few functions—Lady Armine's Charity Ball, the Mayor's dinners—that sort of thing, after the peaceful fashion of his forbears, he must needs stick his nose into all the unsavoury corners and shout his criticisms from the roof-tops. He has quarrelled with half the councillors because he told them they were silly old men who didn't understand their silly old jobs. He is on to housing at present—says it's a howling scandal, and that he'll show up the grafters if he has to spend the rest of his days fighting libel actions. He has managed to hang up the new Town Hall—says that Birkpool must wash its face first before it thinks about a bib and tucker."

"Popular?" she went on. "Ken will always be popular with his own kind. Most of the respectables hate him and

blackguard him in private, but they are too great snobs to attack him openly. The press crabs him respectfully and regretfully. The man in the street is ready to cheer him on as he would back a dog in a fight. I do my best to keep the peace by making love to the womenkind of the magnates. I stuff the Court with week-end parties that need the tact of an archangel, and my face is perpetually contorted in an uneasy smile... Adam, I verily believe you had something to do with all this. Ken is constantly quoting you. If you have, you have done an ill turn to a woman that always wished you well."

"I think you rather like it," said Adam.

"I don't dislike it—yet, for I love a row. But I'm worried about where it is going to lead. I'm a wife and a mother and I want peace. Birkpool is rapidly becoming a powder magazine. There's Ken, and there's the Labour man Utlaw. Of course you know him. And you know his sweetheart, too. There's a clever girl if you want 'em clever. I've made great friends with Miss Florence Covert, pronounced Court. I like Utlaw, and Ken swears by him, but the association of the two bodes trouble. Ken, if you please, is President of the Conservative Association, and spends most of his time with the Labour leaders, so honest Tories feel as if they were standing on their heads. Utlaw's salvation will be his wife—they are to be married next month, you know. You thought her very rabid and class-conscious. So she is, but I'm not quite sure which class. It may not be her husband's... And last of all there's Frank, and he's the worst. It's hard luck for Birkpool that all the high explosives should be concentrated there. God knows what will happen when Frank gets into his stride, and adds the thunder of Sinai to the very considerable noise which Ken and Utlaw are making. Lilah may get her Peter the Hermit after all accompanying the crusade to Westminster."

She looked across the room to where Creevey and Mrs Pomfrey were talking in a corner. The two heads seen in the shadowed light had a certain resemblance in their suggestions of massiveness and restrained power.

"What, by the way, do you make of Lilah?" she asked. "No, I forgot, you never attempt hasty summaries of people. You've only just got to know her? Well, I'll give you the benefit of my larger knowledge. Lilah fascinates me—she is so good, so unscrupulously good. There is no trouble she won't take to help a friend, and there's none I believe she wouldn't take to down an enemy, if she had one. She is always quite convinced that she is on the side of the angels. How blessed that must be! I wish I had half her conviction."

"She has an odd face," said Adam. "What do you read in it? A woman is the best judge of a woman."

"I read heart—genuine goodness of heart. I read brains. There's no doubt about that. I haven't any myself, but I can recognise them and admire them from afar. Ask Kit Stannix, and he will tell you that she knows more and can reason better than most men... I read also complete lack of imagination. She has sympathy, but it is of the obvious kind, without insight—and she has no wings. She is devoted to brother Frank, and very good for him. She may be his salvation, just as Florence Covert may be the salvation of Utlaw. Oh no, I don't mean that they're in love or will ever marry. Frank is not the marrying kind, and Lilah has had all the matrimony she wants. But she will keep his feet on the ground, and prevent him becoming an ineffectual angel... You don't look as if you liked the prospect. I believe you have a morbid weakness for angels."

After his marriage Utlaw moved to a little raw house in the Portsdown Road, and Adam occupied his former rooms on the ground-floor in Charity Row. This was convenient in many ways, for it enabled him to put up Amos in his old room, when that worthy descended upon Birkpool from the North. Also he could leave the house inconspicuously at odd hours without distracting Mrs Gallop.

In these days he had gone back to his former habits. The bagman remained only for the benefit of his landlady and the Utlaws. Marrish before he left England had put him in touch with the disgruntled section of Birkpool Labour, and with Amos's help he had penetrated to circles which even the Utlaws scarcely touched. He was now a Scot, back from South Africa, who had been much about on the Continent and had the name of an extremist. He talked little, but he looked the part of a maker of revolutions, and hints from Amos skilfully established that repute. So bit by bit he got the confidence of the wilder elements without scaring the moderates. One conclusion he soon reached. He felt under his hand the throbbing of a great unrest which must sooner or later be dangerous. There was no confidence in the masters, and less in the Government; so soon as the economic strain began—and that was daily drawing nearer—there would be a perilous stirring of overwrought nerves and puzzled brains.

But there was confidence in Utlaw—that was plain. Even the fiercest was not prepared to do more than respectfully criticise. The man had some dæmonic power which gave him an unquestioned mastery. Perhaps the main reason was that which Amos had once given, that he was Englishness incarnate, and therefore a natural leader of Englishmen. His familiar kindness endeared him even to those who suffered from the rough edge of his tongue. He was credited with illimitable "guts." His joyous ribaldries were affectionately quoted. They were proud of him too—he had placed their Union on the national map in a way that old Deverick had never done—he was a "coming man," and when he arrived his followers would not be forgotten. Deverick was due for retirement soon, and Utlaw must be his successor. There was talk of Parliament too. Birkpool chuckled to think how Joe would batter the hard faces there, and set the frozen feet jigging.

One afternoon Adam went to call on Mrs Utlaw. Jacqueline Armine had warned him of a change in that young woman.

"We had the Utlaws at the Court for the weekend before last," she told him. "It was rather a wonderful menagerie even for me. We had three couples of Birkpool grandees: Sir Thomas and Lady, Sir Josiah and Lady—war knights, you know—and the Clutterbucks, who have just bought the Ribstones' place and are setting up as gentry. Rather nice couples they were, very genteel, very mindful of their manners, and the womenkind had the latest Paris models. Their fine feathers made me feel a crone. Then we had the Lamanchas by way of pleasing Birkpool, and I must say Mildred played up nobly. But the real yeast in the loaf was the Utlaws. Do you know, Adam, that's an extraordinary fellow? He can lay himself alongside any type of man or woman and get on with them. He had been having all kinds of rows with the grandees and been calling them outrageous names and making game of them, which is what they like least, but he hadn't been an hour in their company before they would have fed out of his hand. I think it's his gift of liking people and showing that he likes them. He had them roaring at his jokes, and I believe they actually came to regard him as a sort of ally, for I heard old Clutterbuck confiding to him some of his grievances against Ken. Charles Lamancha, too. You know how he behaves—elaborately civil to anybody he regards as an inferior, but shockingly impolite to his equals. Well, Charles was very polite to the grandees, but he wasn't polite to Utlaw, and that's the greatest compliment he could have paid him. It was 'Sir Thomas' and 'Sir Josiah' and 'Mr Clutterbuck,' but it was 'Utlaw' and 'Don't be a damned fool'—Charles's best barrack-room form. I believe he asked him to stay with him when he could take a holiday—I know he liked him—you could see it in Charles's crooked smile. How does Utlaw manage it? I suppose it was his regimental training which has made him at home with Charles's type. He would have made a great diplomat if he had been caught young."

"And the bride?" Adam asked.

"That was the greatest marvel of all. Florrie—oh, we're on Christian terms now—was the perfect little lady. She cast back to her great-grandmother, who I believe was a Risingham. You would have thought she had spent all her life in the soft lazy days of an old country house. She had the air, you know, of helping Mildred and me to put the Birkpool people at their ease. No effort, no show, very quiet and modest, but perfectly secure. She's beginning to learn how to dress herself, too. All the men fell in love with her, and Mildred took her to her bosom, and you know that our dear Mildred is not forthcoming. But I could see that the grandee ladies hated her. Not that she patronised them, but they could feel that she was of a different type and they weren't prepared for it. That young person is going to raise antagonisms which her husband won't find it easy to settle."

The Utlaws' house was the ordinary suburban bungalow, but its mistress had made the interior delightful. It was furnished with economy and taste, the little drawing-room was full of flowers and books, and Adam was given tea out of very pretty china. Jacqueline was right. Florrie Utlaw had begun to take pains with her appearance. Her hair was better waved, her face was less thin, and a new air of well-being revealed its charming contours, while her deep eyes, though hungry as ever, were also happy.

She greeted Adam with a quiet friendliness. He was on her man's side and therefore she was on his. She had given up her job at Eaton's she told him—Joe had insisted—and now she reigned in a little enclave of their own which was going to enlarge itself some day into a great domain.

There was none of the uneasy inverted snobbery in her manner which he had formerly noted. She talked briskly of affairs and personages in the world in which Utlaw was making his mark, but with a cool businesslike air. She condescended a little to Adam, for he was not of that world; he was not a person to be cultivated for any use he might be—only to be welcomed for his loyalty... Of Judson, him of the smashing repartees, once to her a demigod, she was frankly

critical. "He's so rough that people believe him to be a diamond," she said. "That's not mine, it's Joe's. I think the men are growing a little tired of him—the perpetual steam-hammer business is getting to be a bore." Gray was still a hero, for he had magnetism and poetry. About Trant, the party leader, she was enthusiastic. Joe had been seeing a lot of him lately, and was being brought into private consultation. "He is a great gentleman," she said, "for he has no vanity. Joe always says that the man without vanity can do anything he pleases." Friendliness to Joe was of course a sufficient passport to her favour, but Adam remembered also that Sir Derrick Trant belonged to a family that had fought at Cr cy.

He asked how the new Mayor was doing. Her eyes sparkled.

"You remember what I said when we first met, Mr Milford? I was utterly wrong. Lord Armine is a real man. He is on the wrong side of course, but he has courage and big ideas, many of them quite sound. It's great luck that Joe and he were in the same battalion, for they meet on a proper basis. They are like two schoolboys when they get together—it's 'Mr Utlaw' and 'Lord Armine' at the start, and at the end it's 'Joe' and 'Sniffy.' I love Lady Armine, too, and think her perfectly beautiful. You know her a little, don't you? She told me she remembered meeting you."

There was no mention of the Utlaws' visit to the Court. If there was any snobbishness in Florrie, she was too clever to show it.

Chiefly she talked of Joe's career. There was a chance of an early seat in Parliament, for Robson was dying and the East division of Flackington was in the pocket of the Union. She was anxious for him to get at once into the House. "He needs a proper sounding-board," she said, "to make his voice carry. Meetings up and down the country are all very well, but the papers only report the big men. In the House Joe would be a national figure within six months. He is a deadly debater, not a tub-thumper like Judson. Trant says he would give anything to have him at his back when the Factory Bill comes on."

But the urgent matter was the national secretaryship of the Union when Deverick resigned next month. Mrs Utlaw's new matronly calm slipped from her and she became the eternal female fighting for her mate's rights.

"It's a test case," she declared. "Joe is far the biggest man in the show, and if it goes by merit nobody else can have a look in. If they pass him over, then there's no gratitude in the movement, and no decency."

She let herself go, and Adam was introduced to a long roll of grievances. It was a thankless job serving the people—plenty of kicks, no ha'pence, and only once in a blue moon a thank you. Florrie twined her fingers, her eyes glowed, and her words were like a torrent long dammed. Adam understood that this was her way of seeking relief; she could do it with him, for he was obscure and safe. He was very certain that to most of the complaints Utlaw himself would never have given a second thought; he had mentioned them in her presence in his expansive way, and she had docketed them and stored them up in her heart. He realised two other things. Florrie—perhaps Utlaw too—was getting a little out of sympathy with the whole Trade Union machine and the political party of which it was the centre. And there was a reasonable chance that Utlaw would not succeed Deverick.

Lord Lamancha, a member of the Cabinet, gave a dinner with a small party to follow, and, since a royal personage was to be present, Adam had to wear his miniature medals. They made a formidable string, for a number of foreign orders had been thrown upon him unsought, dispensed from the pool which his superiors had had at their discretion. He hated displaying them, but it was less conspicuous to fall in with the conventional etiquette than to disregard it. He had accepted the invitation, because a German statesman was to be there whom he wanted to meet.

It was a man's dinner, and his seat was on the right hand of the German guest, whose name was Hermann Loeffler, with on his other side Christopher Stannix. Loeffler was a small spare man who carried himself so well that he seemed to be of the ordinary height. He looked fifty, but was probably younger, for his thick black hair was prematurely grizzled. It grew low on a broad forehead, beneath which the face narrowed till it terminated in a short beard. This beard obscured the lower part, but Adam had a notion that, if the man were clean-shaved, his mouth and jaw would be seen to be firmly and delicately modelled.

Loeffler was in the uneasy German Cabinet—Minister of Commerce, Adam thought—and like most of his colleagues, his career had been variegated. He had begun life as a scholar, and long ago had published a learned work on St Augustine. Then for a short period he had been a journalist on a famous Rhineland paper, where he had become a friend of Walter Rathenau, who had detected in him a special financial talent and had brought him into the banking business. He had served during the four years of war in a Westphalian regiment, and after the Armistice, again under the  gis of Rathenau, had entered politics. He was sprung from the lower bourgeoisie, and was the kind of man who would never have risen under the old regime, but who might have a career in a middle-class republic. Stannix had praised him—said he was honest and courageous and reasonable, the sort of fellow one could work with.

But it was not Loeffler's political prospects that interested Adam. Once early in 1918 a certain middle-aged Danish business man called Randers, who had a neat blond moustache and wore big horn-rimmed spectacles like an American, had found himself in a difficult position in a Rhineland town. Circumstances had arisen which caused the military authorities to have their suspicions about this well-credentialed Dane. In particular there had been a Major Loeffler, who had been badly wounded at Cambrai and had been given a base job for six months. Of all his war experiences Adam looked back upon his examination by Loeffler as his severest trial. He had liked him, he remembered, liked his honest eyes and his good manners, and he had profoundly respected his acumen. This was one of the men whom he had hoped to meet again, and the first mention of him in the press had set him following his career.

Loeffler spoke English slowly and badly, though he understood it fairly well, so after he had been engaged in an embarrassed conversation with Lamancha for a quarter of an hour he was relieved when his other neighbour addressed

him in German. Excellent German, too, spoken with the idiom, and almost with the accent, of his own district. Adam pushed his name card towards him, and Loeffler read it with eye-glasses poised on the tip of his blunt nose.

"You speak our language to admiration," he said. "Ah, you learned it as a staff officer long ago? You English are better linguists than us Germans—your tongues are more adaptable. Maybe your minds also." He smiled in his friendly, peering way.

They slipped into an intimate conversation, for Loeffler found it easy to be frank with one to whom understanding seemed to come readily and who had an air of good-will. He spoke of the sufferings of his country—the middle-classes for the most part ruined, with all their careful standards of life crumbling about them—world-famous scholars earning their bread by typing and copying—little businesses that had been so secure and comfortable gone in a night. "They are bearing it well," he said. "My people have much stoicism in their bones, and they can endure without crying out." He spoke of evil elements, the financiers who flourished in any débâcle, the hordes of the restless and disinherited, the poison of Communism filtering through from Russia. "Yet there is hope. We have a stalwart youth growing up which, if it is well guided, may build our land again. The peril is that even honest men may be tempted to seek short cuts, and the good God does not permit of short cuts in this life of ours. If they are shown a little light, even though it is at the end of a long tunnel, they will endure. But if not—if they have no hope—they may break loose, and that will mean a world-confusion.

"There must be no more war," he said. "Now is the time, when all men have seen its folly, to purge mankind of that ancient auto-intoxication. But you will not do this only by erecting a supra-national machine for peace. I am a supporter of the League of Nations—beyond doubt, but it is not enough. You cannot have a League without the nations, and these nations must first of all be re-made. Only then can you have a new world-mind. Chiefly Germany and Britain, for these are the key-points. France is a great people unlike all others, but France will never stand out. She will fall in—after protestations—with the general sense of humanity, and presently make herself its high priest and interpreter. That is her métier—she gives form to what others originate. America! She is a world to herself, and will walk alone and listen to no one's advice till she learns the folly of it by harsh experience. Like our practical people she will practise the mistakes of her predecessors till she finds them out. But Germany must set her house in order without delay, for delay means disaster. Britain, too, for you are still the pivot of the world, and if you fall no one can stand. I am not very happy about your Britain. You will pardon a stranger for his arrogance, but I do not think you are yet awake. We Germans are awake—to a far more difficult task than yours, and wakefulness, however unpleasant, is better than sleep."

He broke off to answer a question of Lamancha's, which had to be repeated twice before he grasped its purport. Adam turned to Stannix.

"Lord, I wish I had your gift of tongues, Adam," the latter said. "I am not much of a judge, but you seem to speak rather better German than Loeffler... You asked me about Utlaw before dinner, and I hadn't the chance to reply. I heard this afternoon that he had missed the Union secretaryship. They have taken Potter. A bad mistake, I think, in their own interest, but that's not any concern of mine. What worries me is its effect on Utlaw. He is bound to be pretty sick about it. I only hope it won't make him run out."

"How do you mean?"

"Forswear his class. Utlaw's strength is that he is class-conscious in the only reasonable way. He knows his people through and through, and, while he is just a little above them so as to give him the vantage for leadership, he is bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh. He is loyal to them and they know it, but he's too loyal to them to tell them lies and mislead them, and they know that too. But he's devouringly ambitious, and a man of his brains won't stand being elbowed aside by nonentities. We mustn't forget the cut-throat competition among the Labour people. There are too many running for the same stakes, and if a man stumbles he's trampled down. It's a far crueller business than in our own jog-trot party. Besides, they are eaten up with vanity."

"Utlaw has no vanity."

Stannix pursed his lips.

"Perhaps not. But all his competitors have it abundantly, and that means that merit isn't given a chance. How can it be if everybody thinks himself God Almighty... I am not so sure that Utlaw has none, either. He wouldn't be human if he hadn't. He has been up here at the Economy Commission, as you know, and has done amazingly well. I've rarely seen a better performance. Made his points clearly and neatly—always ready to meet a sound argument and genially contemptuous of a bad one—prepared to give way with a good grace when necessary—accepted gratefully half a loaf and adroitly swapped it for a whole one—he has a real genius for affairs. Compliments were flying about, Trant made a pet of him, and Geraldine laid himself out to be gracious. The man couldn't help being flattered. Now what I ask is, with all this reputation behind him, how he is going to take being turned down by his own people."

"I don't think he'll play the fool," said Adam firmly.

"I hope not, but the temptation will be great, and I think too well of him to want him on our side. His strength is to stay where Providence has put him... Happily I don't suppose he could afford to cut the painter. He hasn't a bob, I'm told."

After dinner Adam saw no more of Loeffler, who had a short talk with the royal personage, and then seemed to be engaged in conference with various members of the Cabinet. The Lamanchas' house was well adapted for entertaining, and the big rooms were not inconveniently crowded. Adam found a corner by the balustrade at the head of the main staircase, where he could see the guests arriving in the hall below and the procession upwards to where they were received by the host and hostess. It amused him to watch this particular ritual on the few occasions when he went to parties—the free-and-easy ascent, the sudden moment of self-consciousness as they made their bow, the drifting off into absorbed little coteries.

Most people had a party guise, something different in their faces as well as in their clothes, a relapse to the common denominator of the herd. But some retained a rugged individuality and so were out of the picture. Thirlstone, for instance, who looked a backwoodsman however he was dressed, and Manton, the steeplechase rider, whose trousers always suggested breeches.

One man he noted on the staircase who was different from the others. He was taking nothing for granted, for his eager, curious eyes darted about with evident enjoyment, as if he were a child out for a treat. Adam saw that it was Utlaw, rather smart, with a flower in his buttonhole, and a new dress-suit, which had certainly not been made in Birkpool. He saw too that the uplifted face had recognised him, recognised him with surprise. So he did not move from his place, for the time had come to drop the bagman.

Utlaw made his way to him.

“Good Lord, Milford,” he said, “what are you doing here?”

“I dined here,” said Adam. “The Lamanchas are old friends of mine.”

Utlaw’s eyes were on his medal ribbons.

“The D.S.O. and a bar. I thought you told me you weren’t in the war. You didn’t get that for staying at home.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t in the war. I said I wasn’t fighting.”

“Your service must have been pretty active, anyway, or you wouldn’t have got that. Look here, Milford, what sort of a game have you been playing with me? What about the bagman in Mrs Gallop’s upstairs room?”

Adam laughed.

“You invented that for yourself, you know. I only didn’t undeceive you. I went to Birkpool to make friends with you and I hope I have succeeded?”

Utlaw’s face, which for a moment had clouded, broke into a grin.

“You jolly well have, old chap. And I can tell you I want all the friends I’ve got. Have you heard that they’ve turned me down for the Union secretaryship? Dirty work at the cross-roads! My lads in Birkpool will have something to say about that...”

He broke off and advanced to greet a lady who had just arrived and who seemed to welcome the meeting. Adam saw that it was Mrs Pomfrey.

For some months Adam was little absent from Birkpool.

His relations with Utlaw were on a new basis. He was still to most people the commercial gentleman who lodged with Mrs Gallop, but Utlaw was aware that he played other parts into which he forbore to enquire, though he showed his awareness by often asking his opinion about this man and that and his views on popular feeling. But he treated him now not only as a friend but as a counsellor, the repository of much knowledge which he did not himself possess.

Clearly Utlaw was going through a difficult time. Robson, though given up by the doctors, obstinately refused to die, and the East Flackington seat, which might have been a consolation for the loss of the Union secretaryship, had not yet come his way. He had lost something of his easy mastery of his job—was no longer “on the top of it,” to use his own phrase; he was self-conscious and inclined to be irritable, and Florrie in the background was no peacemaker. He must have told her something of Adam’s real position, for she showed a new desire for his society, and would pour out her grievances to him. Her politics now were her husband’s career, nothing else. She was inclined to be impatient with any who raised difficulties for him in his daily work, and she was beginning to be contemptuous about the leaders of his party. “There’s only one relic of feudalism left in Britain,” she used to declare, “the super-fatted, hermetically-sealed, feudal aristocracy of the trade unions. People like Judson and Potter are the real oligarchs. Compared to them Lord Armine is a Jacobin.” Adam recognised the sentence from a recent anonymous article in the press, of whose authorship he was now made aware. Florrie was trying to supplement their income by journalism, and succeeding.

It was his business to keep Utlaw to his job in spite of his wife, and he found it increasingly difficult. Utlaw had lost some of his old mastery over his people; he was still a leader, but a leader without any clear purpose. He had lost his single-heartedness, and appeared not to regret it. He invited Creevey to Birkpool to talk to a big debating society which he had founded, and though Creevey’s brilliant opportunism may have been unintelligible to most of his audience, it seemed to be acceptable to Utlaw, and it helped to confuse the minds of some of his chief lieutenants. The man’s opinions were in a flux. More serious, he seemed to be slipping away from his class. He was less a worker in a wide movement than the chief of a private army of condottieri which he might swing over to any side.

Frank Alban was also difficult. His first months at St Mark’s had been the biggest sensation Birkpool had ever known. The church was crowded, and Frank’s sermons to his disgust were reported in the popular London press. That soon passed, but he remained a potent influence, and the Albanites became a force in the city. So long as he dealt with faith there was no opposition, but when he turned to works he encountered ugly obstacles. He had a remarkable way of handling boys, and his first big enterprise was a chain of boys’ clubs in which he enlisted as fellow-workers an assortment of Birkpool youth. But presently he came hard up against social evils in the employment of boy labour and the eternal housing tangle, and he broke his shins against many educational and industrial stone walls. Birkpool did not know what to make of this turbulent priest who was not content to stick to his own calling, and Frank had moments of bitter hopelessness.

Adam was his chief consultant, and in his case as in Utlaw’s the difficulty was to keep him to his job. He had much of Newman’s gallant intransigence, but that inability to compromise, which gave him his power as a preacher, made his path thorny in practical affairs. The temptation was to retire inside his own soul, the old temptation of the saint. His high-strung spirituality was in perpetual danger of being introverted, and the crusader of retiring to his cell.

In dealing with him Adam had an ally in Kenneth Armine. The Mayor was not a saint, but he was notably a crusader. His father died about this time, and the new Marquis of Warmestre had now the House of Lords as a platform. On several occasions he uplifted his voice there to the amazement of his friends and the embarrassment of his party, and he could draw large audiences in most parts of the land. His creed was a hotch-potch, much of it crude and boyish, but it was preached with amazing gusto, and one or two dogmas stood out like rocks in a yeasty ocean. One was the gravity of the times, since Britain and the world stood at the cross-roads. Another was the need for a great effort of intelligence, sacrifice, and discipline if the people were to pull through. When his critics pointed out that much of his stuff was not remarkable for its intelligence, he joyfully agreed. That was not his business, he said; he was no thinker, his job was to stir up the thinkers; but he knew the one thing needful, which might be hid from the wise but was revealed to plain fellows like himself.

“Send brother Frank to me,” he would say; “I’ll cure him of his megrims. Hang it all, does the man expect to find his job easy? Mine is as stiff as Hades, and it’s by a long chalk simpler than his. I’ll keep him up to the mark... No, I’m enjoying myself. Jackie hates it, and I’m sorry about that, but I’m bound to go through with it. We’ve got a chance here, what with Frank and Utlaw to help me, and I’m going to see that we don’t miss it. It’s the only way, you know. You can’t fire the country as a whole—too big and too damp. You must take it bit by bit. If we kindle Birkpool the blaze will spread, and presently we’ll have a glorious bonfire of rubbish.”

One day Adam visited Scrope at the same house in the Northamptonshire village where he had first met him. He had had a letter from Freddy Shaston telling him that the old man was failing rapidly and could not last long. “He wants to see you and you must go. Take the chance, for a lot of wisdom will leave the world with him.” Adam had come to know Shaston well. A partner in a firm of stockbrokers, his real business in life was to be Scrope’s chela, to be his eyes and ears for a world in which he could no longer mingle. He had no desire to do anything, only to find out about things; as he said, his job was Intelligence not Operations, but it was a task in which he had few equals.

It was a bleak day in December, and there was no sitting out, as on the first visit, in a garden heavy with autumn blossom. The garden was now sprinkled with snow. Adam found Scrope propped up with pillows in an arm-chair beside a blazing fire, and the first glance showed him that he had not many weeks to live. The vigour which he had recovered in the

war had ebbed, the face had fallen in and the cheekbones stood out white and shining, the voice had lost its crispness and came out slow and flat and languid. But there was still humour and interest in the old eyes.

"I have gone back to sanctuary," he said, "my last sanctuary. I am very near that happy island of which you told me. What, by the way, was its name? Eilean Bàn?"

He looked for a little into the fire and smiled.

"You still frequent it? Not in the body, of course. You cannot go back to it yet awhile. But it is more to you than a pleasant fancy, I think. It is a Paradise to which you will some day return. But you must earn the right to it. Is it not so?... You see I understand you, for all my life I too have lived with dreams."

For some time he seemed to be sunk in a feebleness from which he could not rouse himself. He asked questions and did not wait for their answer. Then some wave of life flowed back into his body, and he sat more upright among his pillows. "Give me a cigarette, please," he said, "one of the little black ones in the Chinese box. I allow myself six in the day. Now I think we can talk... Have you found your Messiah?"

"No," said Adam. "I do not think there will be any one Messiah."

Scrope nodded.

"I think likewise. The day has gone when one man could swing the world into a new orbit. It is too large, this world, and people speak with too many tongues. But you have found something? Shall I guess? You have found one who may be a John the Baptist, and you have found an apostle or two? Am I right? You see, I have been trying to follow your doings a little. I have learned much of Birkpool."

"I can have no secrets from you," Adam said. "I have found a man who preaches the fear of God. I have found a man who can lead. And I have found a man who has a fire in his belly and fears nothing."

Scrope mused.

"And your hope is that these may be the grain of mustard seed which will grow into a great tree—an Yggdrasil with its roots in the sea and its shadow over all the land? Something that will bind together the loose soil of the country? Well, I agree with you in one thing. Our malady to-day is disintegration. We are in danger of splitting into nebulae of whirling atoms. There is no cohesion in any of our beliefs and institutions, and what is worse, we have lost the desire for cohesion. It is a pleasant world for some people. Mr Warren Creevey, for instance. He loves dilapidation, for it gives scope to his swift flashing mind. Also he makes much money by it. He would keep the world disintegrated if he could, for he has no interest in things that endure. He is a good Heraclitean, and worships the flux... A pleasant world for such as he, but a dangerous world. Do you see much of Mr Creevey?"

Adam replied that he met him occasionally, but did not know him well.

"No! Then my prophecy is not yet fulfilled that your lines of life would cross. But I stick to it. Somewhen, somewhere, somehow you will do battle with him... And now for the apostles you have discovered."

"Do you know them?" Adam asked.

Scrope smiled.

"I can guess them. Yes, I know a good deal about them. I do not think your discernment has been at fault. But—but!! I would prepare you for disappointments. No one of them is quite of your own totem, and they may fail you. Your John the Baptist may grow weary of the Scribes and Pharisees and flee to his hermitage—or, worse still, to a papal throne. Your leader may lead his people into the desert and lose them there. Your fearless man may become muscle-bound and the fire die out of him. One and all may get soft or sour. That is the trouble of working through other people. Are you prepared for that? You are? Well, what then?"

"I shall find others."

"Doubtless. But they also may fail you. And meanwhile time is passing and any day crisis may be upon us... You wish to be a king-maker, but what if there are no kings? The king-maker may be forced in spite of himself to be royal."

Adam shook his head.

"Not this one. He knows his limitations. I have no power except in the shadows."

"I think you may be deceiving yourself. Power is one and indivisible. It is only an accident whether it works behind the scenes or on the stage... Listen to me, my friend. You have a divine patience and have been content to work at that for which you are least fitted—imponderable, monotonous things—a touch here and an adjustment there. You have succeeded—perhaps. But what of those other gifts, your real gifts? You say you have found the man who is fearless. But you yourself fear nothing but God. You have found a leader. But leadership is only courage and wisdom and a great carelessness of self. Do you lack these things? Will you not be forced some day into the light?"

Once again, as at Birkpool after the Marrish business, doubt descended upon Adam's mind. Scrope's confidence in him seemed to be a searchlight which revealed his own incapacity. He was not a leader, and yet he was essaying the task of a leader—to shape men's souls. Was he succeeding? Could he succeed? Were they not slipping away from him? He had trained himself for one purpose, and that was sacrifice, but in this work the utmost sacrifice of himself would avail nothing. He was attempting a creative task, but had God destined him for any such high purpose? Was not the clay exalting itself above the potter?

A nurse entered to give Scrope his medicine, and to warn Adam that the time permitted by the doctor was up. When she had gone, and Adam was on his feet to depart, the old man held his hand.

"This is good-bye. The troublesome accident we call death will come between us for a little. Presently I return to the anima mundi for a new birth. Let us put it in that way, for one metaphor is as good as another when we speak of mysteries. But I believe that I shall still be aware of this little world of time, and from somewhere in the stars I shall watch the antics of mankind. I think I shall see one thing. You will ride beside Raymond into Jerusalem... or if you cannot find your Raymond you will enter alone..."

"I shall find my Raymond," said Adam, "but I shall not ride beside him..."

Scrope was not listening.

"Or," he continued, his voice ebbing away into feebleness, "you will leave your body outside the gate."

Falconet had been a regular if not very voluminous correspondent, but he had stuck to his own country. Early in the spring, however, he visited England and occupied his old flat in St James's Street. He had changed little; he was still lean and dark and hawklike and impetuous, but his full lower lip projected more than ever as if he had encountered a good deal of opposition and had had some trouble with his temper.

"I'm mighty glad to see you," he told Adam. "I've a whale of a lot to tell you and to hear from you. Which will begin? Me? Right. Well, I've got my lay-out pretty satisfactory and it's starting to work. Dandiest bit of organisation you ever saw. Cross-bearings come in a flood whenever I press the button. Any fellow we fancy is passed on by those that don't make mistakes. Result is, we've gotten some high-grade ore and pretty soon we shall have the precious metal."

"Then you are satisfied?"

Falconet twisted his face.

"I'm satisfied that I'm going to add twenty per cent, or maybe twenty-five per cent, to the net competence of the American people. I'm on the way to grading up its quality. I'm saving for it a lot of fine stuff that would otherwise be stifled in its native mud... That's something, anyway."

"But you don't think it enough?"

Falconet laughed.

"Say, Adam, do you take me for a man that's easy contented? I don't think it enough—not by the length and breadth of hell. I've got some lads that will make good—one of them is going to be the biggest chemist on earth, they tell me—another will make big business sit up in a year or two. Fine work, you say. Yes, but it doesn't come within a million miles of touching the spot. They're going to make their names and their piles, but they're not going to help America one little bit in the thing she needs. They're not considering the real things, and if they were they wouldn't be any manner of good. They're not the type that can swing opinion."

"We're in a mighty bad way," he continued, getting to his feet and, after his fashion, picking up the sofa cushions, pummeling them, and flinging them down again. "Oh, I know we're richer than Croesus—fat as Jeshurun, and consequently kicking. We have drawn in our skirts from poor old Europe in case we are defiled, and we are looking to go on prospering in God's country and letting the world go hang. It won't be God's country long at that rate. Our pikers don't see that in the end they can't keep out of the world any more than they kept out of the war. We're as smug as a mayor of a one-horse township that imagines his burg the centre of creation. How in hell can you get quality into a nation that don't believe in quality—that just sits back and counts its dollars and thanks God that it isn't as other men? What we need is a change of view—not heart, for our heart's sound enough—the trouble is with our eyes. But as I say, there's nobody that can swing opinion. I've done my best, and I've been giving a good deal of attention to my newspapers. You know I bought the Beacon. I've got a crackerjack of an editor, and day in and day out we keep on preaching common sense. But we're only read by the converted, and don't cut any ice with the masses. That's the cursed thing about a democracy. In the old days, when you had converted the King and the Prime Minister you had done your job, but now you have got to convert about a hundred million folks that don't know the first thing about the question. Cut out a strip of the East and we're the most ignorant nation on earth about fundamentals. We have built up a wonderful, high-powered machine that don't allow us to think."

"There's the same trouble everywhere," said Adam. "We're too clever to be wise."

"And that's God's truth. I'm weary to death of clever men. That's what's muddying the waters. And I've gotten to be very weary of your man Creevey. At first I thought him the brightest thing I had ever struck. Well, he is too infernally bright. He has crossed to our side of the water pretty often—three months ago he was over about the French loan, and I can tell you that your Mr Creevey hasn't been doing any good. He has a great reputation in Wall Street and our newspapers have fallen for him, for he takes some pains to cultivate them and knows just the sort of dope to hand out. He can make a thing more clear than the Almighty ever meant it to be, and the ordinary citizen, finding his prejudices made to look scientific, cheers loudly and thinks himself a finer guy than ever. He has been doing his best to confirm us in our self-sufficiency. If money was his object, I would say that he was a bear of American securities and was out to engineer a smash. That's partly why I came over here—to get a close-up of the doings of Mr Warren Creevey."

Adam asked about Falconet's visit to the Continent.

"I had three weeks in Paris. There Creevey is their own white-haired boy. They told me there that he was the only Englishman with an international mind... Then I went to Germany. That's a difficult proposition, and I haven't rightly got the hang of it. I'm going back next week. But I've got the hang of one German. A little dusty fellow. One of their leading politicians. Loeffler they call him. Heard of him?"

Adam nodded.

“Write his name down in your pocket book and remember my words. Loeffler is going to matter a lot. He hasn’t any cleverness, but he has a whole heap of horse sense and all the sand on earth. That little man goes in as much danger of his life as a Chicago gangster, and he don’t scare worth a damn. I’m going back to Loeffler... And now let’s hear what you’ve been doing.”

When Adam had reported Falconet scratched his head.

“You’ve got to put me wise about this island,” he said. “It’s a big disappointment that old man Scrope has died on me. I was sort of counting on a talk with him... Maybe you have been wiser than me. I’ve been looking too much for brains, and you’ve gone for magnetism. You must let me in on your game, for I’d like to see your notion of quality... I’ve heard of your man Utlaw. Say, do you know Mrs Pomfrey?”

“A little. Have you been meeting her?”

“Yes. I got a note from her when I landed—with a line of introduction from Creevey, no less. I took luncheon with her yesterday. That’s a fine lady. I’d like to check up with you on what she told me about England—I reckon she’s likely to be right, though, for they tell me she’s close to your Government. She has never been in America, but she seemed to have a pretty cute notion of how things were with us. She didn’t mention you, but she had quite a lot to say about Mr Utlaw. Said that in a year or two he would be the only one of the Labour men that counted. Do you pass that? On our side they don’t signify—not yet. Our work-folk are too busy buying automobiles and radio sets to trouble about politics. Here I know it is different. But tell me, Adam. Is it healthy for a Labour man to be made a pet of by society dames?”

“I’m not afraid of Mrs Pomfrey for Utlaw,” said Adam. “I’m more afraid of Creevey.”

Falconet looked thoughtful.

“Yep. I can see Creevey making mischief there... Well, it’s a darned interesting world, though mighty confusing. As my old father used to say when he was running a merger and had all the yellow dogs howling at his heels, it’s a great game if you don’t weaken.”

PART 3

CHAPTER 21

In the late summer things began to go ill in Birkpool. The big works had few contracts, and the extension which the war had brought about, and which had rarely been accompanied by any serious reorganisation or replacement of antiquated machinery, was beginning to prove so much adipose tissue. Men were turned away daily, and the programme of forward orders was so lean that the city anticipated a grim winter. One or two small expert businesses were still flourishing, but Birkpool had its eggs in few baskets, and the weight of taxation and the competition of foreign countries were playing havoc with its heavy industries. The minds of those who live by the work of their hands are not elastic or easily adjusted to a new outlook. The ordinary wage-earner was puzzled, angry, apprehensive, and deeply suspicious.

The weather did not improve matters. August is the Birkpool holiday month, and all August a wet wind had blown from Wales. September was little better, and in October gales from the North Sea and the fenlands brought scurries of cold rain. Lowering skies and swimming streets added to the depression which was settling upon Birkpool as thick as its customary coronal of smoke.

On one such day Adam was passing down a side street, where dingy tram-cars screamed on the metals, and foul torrents roared in the gutters, and the lash of the rain washed the grease from the cobbles. There was a shabby post-office, for in that quarter of Birkpool even the banks and post-offices looked shabby, from the swing-doors of which men and women were emerging. They had been drawing their old-age pensions, the women were clutching their purses in their lean, blue-veined hands, and all had that look of desperate anxiety which the poor wear when they carry with them the money that alone stands between them and want. A miserable tramp on the kerb was singing "Annie Laurie" in a cracked voice, and from a neighbouring alley, which led to a factory, there poured a crowd of grimy workmen released at the dinner-hour, turning up the collars of their thin jackets against the sleet. The place smelt of straw, filth, stale food and damp—damp above everything.

Outside the post-office Adam found Frank Alban. He carried an umbrella which he had not opened, and the rain had soaked his ancient flannel suit. He was watching the old-age pensioners, some of whom recognised him; an old woman bobbed a curtsy, and a man or two touched his cap. But Frank did not return the greetings. He seemed wrapped up in some painful dream.

He gripped Adam's arm fiercely.

"I wanted to see you," he said. "Where are you going? I'll walk with you. Never mind the rain—I like it—a wetting's neither here nor there. I can't talk holding up an umbrella."

"I'm going to my rooms," Adam said. "I can give you luncheon—bread and cheese and beer. And a dry coat... You're a fool to allow yourself to get wet," he added, as Frank coughed.

"I'm a fool—yes. But a risk of pneumonia is not the worst kind of folly."

He said nothing more, but held Adam's arm in a vice till they reached Charity Row, and Adam had insisted on his changing his socks and had sent his coat to be dried in Mrs Gallop's kitchen.

"Now, what's your trouble?" Adam asked.

"The old one. I'm a misfit. A humbug. I have no business to be here. I'm not tough enough. You won't understand me, Adam, for you're tough in the right way. Most people are only tough because they are callous, but that's not your case. You're tough because there's very few hells you haven't been through yourself and come out on the other side. I'm not like that. I have to tell people to keep a high head and endure what I've never endured myself—what I couldn't stick out for a week. That's why I say that I'm a humbug."

"What has happened? You have done a power of good here."

"Have I?" Frank asked bitterly. "Well, I haven't it in me to do any more. Man, don't you see what is happening? The shadow of misery is closing down upon this place. It's so thick that you can almost touch it. I see the eyes of men and women getting fear into them—fear like a captured bird's. They see all the little comforts they have created beginning to slip away and themselves drifting back to the kennels. They are the finest stock on earth—there's nothing soft or rotten in them, and that's the tragedy. What in God's name can I do for them?"

He checked Adam's interruption with a lifted hand.

"Oh, I know what you are going to say. That my job is to give them a celestial hope to make up for their terrestrial beastliness. I believe in that hope—I believe in it as passionately as ever—but I can't hand it on to them. Why? Because I'm not worthy. I feel the most abject inferiority in my bones. I blush and get cold shivers in my spine when I try it. I ought to be one of them, sharing in all their miseries. I ought to be doing a day's work beside them in the shops, and then preaching to them as to brothers in misfortune. They would respect me then, and I should respect myself... The day of the fatted parson is past. He should be a preaching friar as in the Middle Ages, or a fakir with nothing to him but a begging-bowl and the message of God."

"You wouldn't last long at that job," said Adam.

"I wouldn't. I wouldn't last a month—I'm not man enough. But it's the honest way. Only I can't do it, I've come out of the wrong kind of stable. That's why I say I'm a wretched misfit. It's killing me. That wouldn't matter if I were to go down in a good cause, but as it is I should only be perishing for my folly. I can't think with my head now—only with my heart."

"Or your nerves," said Adam.

"Call it anything you like. I'm beneath my job instead of being above it. I've been trying to puzzle the thing out, and unless I'm going to crash I must get back to thinking with my mind."

"We have often had this out before, haven't we?"

"Yes, and you've always cheered me up. A stalwart fellow like you heartens a waif like me. But not for ever. Things have come to a pass when even you can do nothing for me. I'm in the wrong crowd and must get out of it!"

"What do you propose?"

Frank lifted a miserable face.

"I must get back to my cell—to some kind of cell. I must get my balance again. Perhaps there is still work for me to do... Someone said that the great battles of the world were all won first in the mind."

"Who said that?" Adam asked sharply.

"I'm not sure. I think it was that man Creevey. You met him at Lady Flambard's, you remember."

"You've been meeting him?"

"Yes. He's a friend of Mrs Pomfrey's..."

There was a knock at the door, and Mrs Gallop appeared, a breathless and flushed Mrs Gallop. She saw Frank, recognised him, for she was a great churchgoer, and bobbed a curtsy, a reminiscence of her village school-days.

"Beg pardon, sir, but her ladyship is 'ere. The Marchioness—"

She ushered in Jacqueline, a picturesque figure in a white hunting waterproof, the collar of which framed a face all aglow with the sting of the rain.

"Hurrah, Adam!" she cried, "what fun to find you at home! This is the first time I've raided your lair... And brother Frank no less! You oughtn't to be out in this weather, you know. I'm glad to see that Adam's looking after you. And food! May I have some luncheon, please? I love bread and cheese above all things—and beer—have you any more beer? I'm in Birkpool on my usual errand—the vet. Gabriel, my Irish setter, has got what looks like canker in the ear. I've just deposited him with Branker, and I thought I'd look you up. My car will be round in half an hour. I'm at the Court, a grass widow. Ken is off on one of his provincial ramps."

Frank looked at his watch, got up, and announced that he must keep an appointment. He nodded to his sister, who had flung off her waterproof and laid a small dripping green hat on the fender.

"You're an unfeeling brute, Frank," she said. "You never ask after my health, though you see I'm as lame as a duck. Cubbing the day before yesterday. I'm going to ride straddle, and have no more to do with those infernal side-saddles. They're all right when you fall clear in a big toss, but in a little one they hurt you horribly. No bones broken, thank you—only a strained muscle. Good-bye, Frank dear. Go and buy yourself a mackintosh. An umbrella in Birkpool is no more use than a sick headache."

When he had gone Jacqueline looked quizzically at Adam.

"Frank is a little shy with me at present," she said. "He knows I don't approve of the company he keeps."

As she munched her bread and cheese, her small delicate face took on a sudden shrewdness. The airy Artemis became for a moment the reflecting Athene.

"This is telling tales out of school, but he sees too much of Lilah Pomfrey. I don't mean that there's any philandering, and I've nothing against Lilah, but she's not the best company for Frank in his present frame of mind. She rather worships him and that brings out his weak points. He takes after my mother's side of the house—Highland sensitiveness and self-consciousness—and instead of laughing at his moods she encourages them. She is making a sentimentalist out of an idealist. And the next step, you know, is a cynic."

Jacqueline poured herself out a glass of beer with a most professional head on it.

"Didn't somebody say that the world was divided into the hard-hearted kind and the soft-hearted cruel? Ken is always quoting that... More by token I want to talk to you about Ken. I can't stay now, but some day soon we must have it out. You've made him a perfectly impossible husband, Adam dear."

"I?"

"Yes, you," she went on. "You know very well that you're behind all Ken's daftness. He takes everything you say for gospel. But for you he would have been a most respectable Mayor of Birkpool, and at the end of his term of office would have been presented with a service of plate subscribed for by all good citizens. As it is, good citizens spit when his name is mentioned. He has made everybody uncomfortable, and has got nothing out of it except the affection of the rag-tag and bob-tail... And look at his processing up and down the country. He is never off the stump, and he talks the wildest stuff. Oh, I know some people admire it. Charles Lamanha says that if you know Ken you understand the kind of fellows the Cavaliers were who rode with Rupert. But that is not much of a certificate, for as far as I can understand history Rupert muddled all his battles. He is getting a black name with his party, too. Mr Stannix told me that he would have been safe for the vacant under-secretary-ship last spring if he hadn't blotted his copy-book. As it was, they were compelled to give it to Jimmy Raven, who is a congenital idiot."

Jacqueline glanced through the rain-dimmed window and saw that her car had arrived. She rescued her partially dried hat from the fender, and with Adam's help struggled into her waterproof.

"I'm going to have all this out with you some day soon," she said. "I'm not thinking of Ken's career—I'm thinking of his happiness—and mine and young Jeremy's. And the country's good, too. Ken's digging up dangerous things out of

people's minds—and dangerous things out of his own. The Armines are a queer race, you know, and I don't want any return to prehistoric freaks. Atavism is a kittle thing to play with. He says that he is getting back to Old England, but Old England had its unpleasant side. We learned that last June with our Women's Institute. Did I tell you about it? Well, we have an enlightened vicar who is keen on teaching the people history by ocular demonstration, and so he got them to act the founding of Arcote priory, and the flight after Naseby, and Lady Armine sheltering Charles—all with the proper clothes and correct detail. Then this summer he thought he would go a bit farther back and have the dancing on Midsummer Eve round the standing stones on Armine Hill. It was a fine moonlight night, but everybody was rather shy at first, and I thought it was going to be a fiasco. And then it began to go well—a little too well. You will scarcely believe it, but our village started to revert to type. You never saw such a pandemonium. The Sunday-school teachers became mænads, and those that weren't shingled let their hair down, and Pobjoy the earth-stopper behaved like a dancing dervish, and Gosling the verger thought he was a high-priest and tried to brain the vicar. It seems that the chief feature of those revels had been the sacrifice of a virgin, and they dashed nearly succeeded—Jenny Dart it was—one of our laundrymaids. I can tell you we had the deuce's own job whipping them off."

A fortnight later Adam dined with Christopher Stannix in a private room at the House of Commons. The only other guest was Falconet, who was on the eve of returning to America.

Stannix held a curious position in the Government. He was reported to be a most competent administrator and his actual department was little criticised. In the House he confined himself in his speeches to sober and incontrovertible arguments on facts. But he was also credited with a singularly receptive mind, and had become the acknowledged unofficial intelligence officer of the Cabinet. What his views on policy were the world was left to guess. He was believed to be often at variance with some of his colleagues, notably with Geraldine the Prime Minister, and his friendship with members of the Opposition, particularly with Trant, was a scandal to the more precise. Yet no one questioned his party loyalty, and the many who at the time professed themselves sick of politics and politicians were accustomed to except Stannix, and to wish him a cleaner job.

Adam and Falconet had been waiting for ten minutes before he joined them and dinner could begin.

"Well, we're in for it," he announced, when the waiter had left the room after serving the soup. "I ran across Judson in the Lobby just now, and he was positively menacing. You know how he slings the 'bloodys' in his talk. To-night he was so excited that his conversation was mostly expletives and not very easy to follow. The big strike apparently is pretty well certain. The employers want a cut in wages in the new agreement and an extension of hours—they are on their uppers they say, and a lot of shops will have to close down if they don't get what they ask. They've been at the Ministry of Labour to-day presenting their case, and I gather from Leveson that he is so convinced by it that he won't have the Government intervene."

"Have you seen their case?" Adam asked.

"Not yet. But I can imagine what it is like. A perfectly conclusive argument on facts and figures on the present basis of the industry. The only answer to it would be to question the basis. That is probably pretty rotten—all top-heavy from ill-considered war development and financial hokey-pokey."

"What do the men say?"

"Adamant, so far. Stuck their toes in. Won't budge and won't argue. The usual thing. They're certain they are getting a dirty deal, but they can't put it into reasonable English. Our people won't stand out for logic, but they'll fight like devils for an instinct. It's going to be an ugly business if it comes off, for God knows we can't afford a big stoppage. Our finances are running briskly downhill. I saw Creevey to-day—I don't much care for him as you know, but whenever he talks on finance I'm impressed. He was pointing out that we had established a standard of living for our people which was not warranted by the saleable value of our products—which means that we are not paying our way. He is not prepared to go back on our social services—says it can't be done. Perhaps he is right, for all parties go on sluicing out, or promising to sluice out, new benefits from the public funds—our own people are just as bad as any other. Creevey doesn't seem to mind that—he has no politics, he says, but I often think that he is the biggest Socialist of them all—he has the kind of quick autocratic mind that always wants to boss and regiment people. But he is clear that sooner or later we must face a scaling down of wages—money wages. As a matter of fact, it is quite true that we have enormously raised the standard of real wages in our trades as compared with before the war."

"That's because you have taught people to want a better kind of life."

"No doubt. And that is a good thing if we could afford it. But it looks as if we couldn't. A strike won't help matters. The poor devils will be beaten in the end, and the national income will have dropped by thirty or forty millions, and nobody, master or man, will be a penny the better off... Leveson says there is only one hope. If the metal-workers stand out the strike will probably never begin."

"Is there any chance of that?"

"I gather there is a fair chance. Potter, their new leader, is the ordinary thick-headed bellicose type, but there is Utlaw to be reckoned with. That means Birkpool. If Birkpool is against a strike it won't come off—at least so they tell me. You know more about that than I do, Adam. Could Utlaw swing his men the way he wanted?"

"Probably—any way he wanted. But what is to be his way?"

"Creevey seems to think that he is sound."

"What do you call sound?"

"On the side of common sense. He knows that it is folly to quarrel about the share from the pool, when the pool is shrinking."

"But aren't you all behaving as if the pool were bottomless with your policy of increased social services? Creevey and the rest of you?"

Stannix laughed. "That's a fair riposte. But it's easier to be provident in the finance of one industry, where you can get the facts into a reasonable compass, than in the finances of a nation, when you can get few of the facts agreed... But tell us about Utlaw, for you know him better than I. By the way, I see that Robson is dead at last. That means a vacancy in East Flackington, and Utlaw will have a bye-election to add to his other cares. We shall oppose him of course—bound to—but not very whole-heartedly, and I fancy he'll get a lot of our people's votes. But about the strike—which way will he go?"

"I don't know," Adam replied. "But I know which way he ought to go."

"And that is?"

"Bring every man out and keep them out till they win."

"But—hang it, man, what do you mean?"

"Look at it this way. Utlaw is nothing of your ordinary Socialist. He's an English brand that looks at facts rather than Marxian whimsies. He knows his people and loves them—yes, loves them—that's half the secret of his power. He sees that they have painfully and slowly climbed a little way up the hill and he wants to keep them there. He doesn't believe in a society where wage-earners are only a set of figures in a state register; he thinks of them as individuals, each of whom is entitled to some kind of free individual life. He won't have the moral fibre of his people weakened. Therefore he stands for high wages. Wages, he says, are the key to everything. It's the old question of property. A reasonable amount of property is necessary for liberty. Therefore any attack on wages is to be fought tooth and nail. If the masters produce figures to show that they can't pay, he says he is entitled to ask whether the masters are not muddling their businesses. That's what the ordinary workman is asking. You don't find much belief in the plenary inspiration of employers to-day. Utlaw would go farther. If the extravagance of the State is crippling the employers he would have that checked in the interests of the worker. He has no notion of expensive pauperization. Wages are his Ark of the Covenant, for he regards them as the price of individuality... One thing more. He admits that matters may get worse with us, and that if we are to go on we may have to ask for a great effort of sacrifice and discipline from everybody. But that must be equal all round. He won't have the chance of that appeal spoiled by compulsory, one-sided, premature sacrifice."

"Good God, Adam," said Stannix, "that's the longest speech you ever made in your life. Is that your confession of faith?"

Adam laughed.

"I'm sorry to be so verbose. No, it isn't my creed. I should put it quite differently, and nobody would agree with me. But I know that it is what Utlaw believes."

"Then it looks as if Creevey and Leveson were backing the wrong horse. Will he stick to that?"

"I don't know. If he doesn't he ceases to be a leader. I should be sorry, for we want all the leaders we can get against the evil days that are coming."

"Hullo!" said Stannix as the door opened. "Here's another rebel. Come in, Ken, and join us. Here, waiter, lay another place for Lord Warmestre. You'll soon catch us up. Do you know Mr Falconet? Adam has been talking the wildest heresies, and they came out so pat that he must have been bottling them up for months. Where have you been? Putting spokes in their Lordships' wheels?"

"I've been listening to the dullest debate you ever heard in your days. I think I went to sleep. I heard that Adam was dining here, so I tracked you to this underground den. I never know whether I'm still on speaking terms with you fellows."

"I don't mind you," said Stannix. "I rather like your way of behaving. But Geraldine is looking for you with a tomahawk. To crown all your other offences, you've stolen his thunder. It appears that he has been incubating an emigration scheme on the same lines as yours, and now the thing has gone off at half-cock. He can't touch it now that you've given it the flavour of heterodoxy."

"He can't—and he never would," said Kenneth grimly. "None of your crowd wants to get things done. They're content if they get a nice little formula for their perorations. I don't mean you, Kit. You're not so bad, but you're a lone wolf in the pack."

Kenneth in his new mood was contemptuous of social customs. He was so full of his cause that he overflowed with it on all occasions. Now, long before coffee was served and cigars were lit, he was expounding his emigration ideas.

"Ken is the new Rhodes," said Stannix. "Can't you see him leading out a colony in the ancient Greek fashion? What will you call it? Warmestria? No, Arminia would be better. Did you see Creevey in The Times on your figures?"

"I can answer that blighter. You'll see me in the paper to-morrow. And Linaker says his talk about inflation is all moonshine. He is going to write a letter to the press on the subject. No, my trouble is not Creevey or any of his kind. It's the black, blank apathy of your Government crowd, Kit. I can't get a move on with them. They'll neither bless nor ban, only shilly and shally... I've sweated hard for a year and what's the result? I've stirred up Birkpool, but whether or not it settles down again into a mud-hole depends upon one man."

"You mean Utlaw, and the strike," Stannix put in.

"What strike? I haven't heard of it. I mean Utlaw." And he looked across the table at Adam.

"Then there's this emigration racket. That depends upon the dozen fatted calves who call themselves a Cabinet. Well, I've had my try. If they won't play then I chuck the game. Back to the land I go and breed 'chasers."

"Not you," said Adam.

"Why not me?" But his truculent voice and the firm set of his jaw did not suggest an easy surrender.

Falconet accompanied Adam a little way on his homeward walk along the Embankment.

"I like your Marquis," he said. "He's a fighting man all right. He's got the eye of an old-time marshal in the Bad Lands. But I wouldn't put it past him to fling in his hand. Seems as if he were up against too many pikers."

Andrew Amos one morning found Adam at breakfast in Charity Row. It was dark February weather, with a swirling east wind that stirred up the dust of Birkpool and made the streets a torment. Andrew had a cold, and a red-spotted handkerchief was constantly at his snuffy nose.

"I've come to report," he said. "I was at the meeting last night. Joe Utlaw is in bigger danger the day from himself than he ever was from Davie Marrish. He has come out against the strike."

Amos fixed Adam with a fierce and rheumy eye.

"Aye, and he'll get awa' wi' it. That's my judgment. Seventy per cent of the men will vote his way. Joe will be the biggest strike-breaker in history. For, mind you, if Birkpool stands out the metal-workers will stand out, and the strike is broke afore it's begun."

"It was a most re-markable occasion," he went on. "Ye might ca' it a triumph o' personality. Joe was arguin' against a' the instincts o' his folk, and what's more, he was goin' back on a' he had been preachin' for five years. And yet, ma God! he kept the upper hand. He had four mortal hours o' it, and the questions cam like machine-gun fire, some o' them gey nesty yins. Man, he never turned a hair. He had a grand grip on his temper, too, for the mair impident a question was the mair ceevil his answer."

Adam asked what line he had taken.

"The cleverest. He wasna arguin' the employers' case. If he had, he wad hae been doomed from the start. He put it to them that they were up against the granite o' economic facts. If they chose to kick against the pricks, says he, the pricks wad be ower muckle for them. They couldna win, says he, and at the end o' three months or six months they wad be where they were—only their belts wad be drawn tighter and their wives and weans wad be thinner, and the country wad have gotten anither shog doun the brae... Man, it was an extraordinary performance, and though ye kent that every man in his audience was girnin' in his soul, he got the majority on his side. In my judgment he has done the job. There'll be nae strike."

"What about himself?" Adam asked.

"Oh, he's done. Joe is done. He has won this ae time, but he'll never win again. A' the purchase he has gotten will be exhausted by this effort. Besides, he has defied his Union, and there will be nae mercy for sic a blackleg. I'm inclined to think—"

Amos stopped abruptly, for Utlaw himself had entered the room. He crossed and stood by the fire behind Adam's chair.

"I heard your last words, Amos," he said. "You think I have done wrong?"

Andrew was on his feet.

"I think ye've done black wrong, though maybe your conscience is clear and ye think it is right. I'm no here to judge ye—I leave that to whatever Power sums up in the hinder end. Ye're a Union man and ye've gone back on the ae thing on which the Unions have never weakened. Ye've betrayed the men's wages. No doubt ye have put up a great argument—I heard ye last nicht—but ye havena convinced me, for to my mind there's a thing ayont logic, and that's a man's freedom, and if ye take that from him ye'd better far wind up the concern. Ye've relapsed on the fousy Socialism that a' parties dabble in the day, Tory and Labour alike. Ye'll be for makin' it up to a worker wi' mair education and widows' pensions and a bigger dole, as if anything on God's earth could make up to a man for the loss of the right to guide his life in his ain way!... But I'm no gaun to argue wi' ye. I've ower bad a cauld. I just cam here to report to Mr Milford. Guid day to ye." Amos departed in a tornado of sneezing.

Utlaw sat himself in a vacant chair.

"Do you agree with Amos?" he asked Adam.

"I haven't heard your case. I gather you can carry the men with you."

"I think so. The big majority... My case? It's simply common sense. When we have wasting assets, it's folly to waste them farther. In a crisis we must sink legitimate interests and—revise principles." He looked at Adam a little shyly.

"I've been going pretty deep into the facts," he went on. "Creevey— you know him?—Warren Creevey—has been helping me. Half our troubles are due to ignorance. Well, I've been sweating at the facts of the case. Our whole industrial fabric needs remaking—on that I agree—but meantime the storm is coming and we can't start rebuilding in the thick of it. Also we have to take precautions against the storm, and one of them may be shoring up the walls which we intend later to pull down. That's how I have come to look at it. It is pretty nearly the case of all the intelligence of the country arrayed against the obstinacy of the Unions."

"Your power has been in the Unions?"

"I know. And all my loyalty has been with them. That's what has made this step a bitter one for me. It would have been far easier to go on thumping the tub with Potter and Judson. It takes some nerve to break with old associations."

"Did I ever deny your courage?"

Utlaw, who had been speaking to the tablecloth, looked up sharply.

"But you think I am wrong? You agree with old Amos?"

"It doesn't matter what I think. The question is, what at the bottom of your heart do you believe yourself?"

"I don't know what I believe. My creed is a collection of layers, and I don't know which is deepest. You think I may find that I have been mistaken. I don't know. God, life is an awful muddle! But if I disregard one truth for the moment it is only because there are other and more urgent truths which have to be attended to. I haven't forgotten what I stand for, and I'll return to it."

"But can you? You have lost your hold on the men's instincts, and that is not compensated for by a temporary grip on their minds."

Into Utlaw's eyes came an expression of sheer misery.

"That's maybe true. I've given up a good deal. The Union will spew me out. You think I have wrecked my career?"

"I think you are going to be a very successful man. You'll be in the Cabinet in a year or two, if you want that. Only the poor devils who believed in you will have to find another leader... I'm sorry... They won't find it too easy, and a man to lead them is the most important thing in life."

The Birkpool metal-workers broke the strike and Utlaw became a figure of public importance. What was said about him in Labour circles did not reach print except in a bowdlerised form, but to nine out of ten newspapers he was a national hero. He had had the grit to defy his class, his Union and his party, and he had won; a hundred leading articles descanted on the scarcity and the potency of such courage. Speculations about his future were for a time the favourite pursuit of the gossip-writers. The East Flackington election was treated as a chance of testifying to a rare virtue. He was not yet disowned by his party, but at the last moment an Independent Labour candidate had appeared, so the fight was triangular.

Presently the rumour spread that things were not going smoothly there. One afternoon at Euston Adam met Florrie Utlaw, just returned from the North and looking rather weary and battered. She would not admit the possibility of defeat, but her confident words seemed to lack conviction. It was a horrible election, she said, of personalities and mud-slinging. The Tory candidate was behaving like a gentleman, and seemed to wish Joe to win, but Latta, the Independent, was a scurrilous savage. Joe was marvellous, but he had to fight against organised interruptions, and Judson and Porter and even Gray were up there doing mischief. "He will have his revenge on them," she said, with a tightening of her determined little mouth. "He will show up Judson for the noisy fool he is."

Three days later Kenneth Warmestre found Adam in the vestibule of the club and drew him towards the tape. "East Flackington is coming out," he said, and edged his way to the front of the little crowd. He returned with a grin on his face.

"Utlaw is bottom of the poll," he said. "Serve him dam' well right. He should have stuck to his crowd, even if they had the wrong end of this particular stick, if he believed them right on the main point. I don't like fellows that run out. I see he has resigned his Union job. He'll have to get his friend Creevey to find him something else."

On an afternoon in May, when the London streets were bright with the baskets of flower-girls, and the smell of petrol and wood-paving could not altogether drown the vagrant scents of summer, Adam went to see Mrs Pomfrey at her great house in Curzon Street. He went by appointment. He had been summoned that morning by an urgent telephone message from Mrs Pomfrey herself. "I want to see you so badly," she had said, "and we have much to talk over. Things have become extraordinarily interesting, haven't they?"

Adam had a conviction as to whom he should meet in the big sunny drawing-room. Mrs Pomfrey was making tea, seated in a straight-backed chair with something of the look of a wise Buddha, and beside her was Frank Alban. Frank had abandoned his shapeless grey flannels and wore the ordinary garb of his profession. The clothes accentuated his leanness, but somehow they also gave him an air of greater solidity. He was no longer the lone wolf, but a member of a pack—perhaps of a hierarchy.

His eyes met Adam's with some embarrassment, for that morning he had had a curious talk about him with his brother-in-law. He had found himself slipping into criticism, and that had roused Kenneth to a vigorous defence. He had called Adam self-centred, and had been roughly contradicted.

"You don't understand what I mean, Ken," he had said. "Not selfish. There isn't a scrap of selfishness in him. But he has this mission of his, and it narrows him. He is like a wind forced through a funnel, terrific in its force, but limited in its area of impact, and that funnel is himself, remember. He couldn't, if he tried, get outside himself."

"Rot," said Kenneth. "Adam's power is just that he wants to be only a funnel. How can you call a man self-centred if he looks on himself as a tool to be used and then scrapped. He has the self-forgetfulness of a saint."

"I don't agree," Frank had argued. "A saint is not only a servant of God, but a son. Adam is a bondman. He obeys, but without fellowship. He lacks what I call religion."

"Your kind, anyhow," Kenneth had answered rudely.

"We wanted you to be the first to hear our news," said Mrs. Pomfrey. "Dr Colledge has got his deanery at last—it will be in the papers in the morning, and Frank is coming back to St Chad's to take his place. Isn't it wonderful? Now he will have a platform from which his voice can really carry. Mr Geraldine says he will very soon be the most important figure in the Church."

"Of course it is a terrible wrench for him," she went on. "He hates leaving Birkpool and all the poor people who have come to love him. But it was his duty, don't you think? He has to do the work he can do best. It would not have been right for him to bury his talent in a napkin, and Birkpool was a napkin. One oughtn't to use a razor to peel potatoes."

Frank spoke.

"No, Lilah, that's not what I feel. My trouble is that I have only the one talent, and it is no use for peeling potatoes. If it were I'd be happy to peel them for the rest of my days, for I should be doing honest work... But all I have got is a brittle thing and I must use it for the only job it is fit for."

"Nonsense, my dear," said Mrs Pomfrey. "You have ten talents and you must use them all for the good of the world. It would be sinful waste if you didn't. Do you call vision a small thing? Or the gift of awakening people. Or poetry? Or the power of thought? What we need is a new revelation and you can give it us. All the battles of the world, you know, are first won in the mind."

Frank looked a little shyly at Adam.

"Don't believe her. She rates me far higher than I rate myself. I want something very humble. I'm the preaching friar going back to his cell. I told you, you know, that I was coming to feel that it was my only course— to find a cell."

"Or a papal throne." Adam remembered Scrope's words.

A flicker which may have been pain shot across Frank's eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Only that your kind of cell may easily become a papal throne."

Mrs Pomfrey clapped her hands.

"He is right. That is the way to put it. A papal throne. A new and better Vatican. The Power of the Keys to unlock men's hearts..."

At that moment Lord Warmestre was announced. At the sight of Adam he seemed for a moment put out. "Hullo! I didn't expect to find you... I'm looking for Jackie, and thought I might run her to earth here. She must have gone back to the flat. Yes, please, I'd like some tea. I'm going to Warmestre to-night. You heard that we are going to live there and let the Court if we can. We are pretty well pinched by the death duties."

"Surely you are not crying poverty," said Mrs Pomfrey.

"No. We'll be right enough presently. But Warmestre wants a deal of looking after. My father was old, and the agent was old, and things were allowed to slide. It's wonderful farming land, and I'm going to try out some notions of mine."

"And your 'chasers?"

Kenneth glanced at Adam.

"Perhaps. It's the right place for a training stable. Perfect downland without a stone in it. But that's for the future. Meantime Jackie and I will have our work cut out getting the house habitable. It's an immense barrack, and we shall have

to begin by camping in a corner.”

The conversation passed to other topics. Mrs Pomfrey discoursed of Utlaw.

“He has come over to us. Oh yes, complete allegiance. Ours is the only party for him, for with us a man is given liberty to use his brains. He has behaved magnificently and has been abominably treated. Mr Creevey has found him a post in Addison’s—he is to look after the labour side of the business, and he is on the board of the new evening paper. He ought to be quite well off soon. A seat in the House? Yes, of course we want him there as soon as possible. There may be a vacancy in Birmingham, if Mr Platt gets a peerage in the Birthday Honours. Why do you smile like that, Kenneth?”

“I don’t like it. I wish Utlaw had gone the other way, for I fancied the chap. A man should stick to a half-truth, if it is his own, rather than swallow the truths of other people... Not that I have any right to judge him.” And again he looked at Adam.

The two walked away from the house together. There seemed to be some constraint in Kenneth’s mind, for his manner lacked its customary exuberance.

“The may-fly will be on in another week,” he said. “You’ll be coming down to the Court. What about Friday week? I won’t be there, for I must stay on at Warmestre, but you’ll find Jackie when you go in for tea. Oh, by the way, I had a message to you from her. She specially wants to see you. Told me to tell you if I saw you that she had to have it out with you. Have you been getting into her black books?”

In Berkeley Square they met Florrie Utlaw, a very different being from the drab little woman whom Adam had first known. She had a new gown, a new hat, and what seemed to be a new complexion. Also she had acquired a new manner, vivacious, confident, pleasantly and audaciously youthful.

“I can’t stop,” she said, “for I’m late already. Yes, we’ve got a flat in Westminster. You must come and have tea with us. I saw Lady Warmestre last night at Jean Rimington’s dance. Were you there? Jos is very well, thank you.” (She had dropped “Joe” as too painfully reminiscent.) “He is desperately busy, but very happy. You see, he is working with white men now. But he has so much to do that I don’t know how he will manage the House. You’ve heard about that? Yes, it is practically certain.”

She cried them a gay good-bye, and tripped off in the direction of Mount Street.

The meeting unloosed Kenneth’s tongue.

“Ye gods, it’s a crazy world!” he said. “Utlaw in Creevey’s pocket and destined to be a Tory silver-tongue!... His wife Jean Rimington’s latest find!... Brother Frank returned from the styes to the fatted calf and soon to be a fashionable Pope!... It is a nice thing, Adam, to see virtue rewarded. All the same, they have left a lot of poor disappointed devils behind them.”

They stopped at the corner of Berkeley Street and Piccadilly. Kenneth looked round him at the motley throng on the pavement and the congested stream of traffic, and up to the blue May sky.

“It’s a crazy world,” he said, “but it’s a busy one. An amusing one, too. I’m going back to my corner of it. Yes, I’m chucking my work, for it wasn’t mine. I’m not man enough to knock the heads of a thousand idiots together and teach them sense, and for all I’m concerned they can go on with their jabbering. What’s the thing in the Bible? ‘Ephraim is joined to his idols—let him alone.’ I’ve had my run and I’ve failed, and I’m going back to my paddock.”

He put his hand on Adam’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry for you, old man. Sorry—and rather ashamed. You have backed three bad ‘uns, and two have gone soft and one has gone sour.”

PART 4

CHAPTER 25

Adam had in his bag the three brace of trout which were the recognised limit of the water, the rise was over, and now he was amusing himself with idle casting, dropping his fly by the edge of a water-lily or a snag at the far side of the stream. It had been a day of gentle sunshine and light western breezes, the day of an angler's dream. The hay in the meadows was already high, and the wind tossed it into eddies of grey and green, but by the riverside the turf was short and starry with flowers.

His fishing had had many interludes. He stopped to watch a kingfisher dart from a bole, and a young brood of moorhens scuttling under the shadow of the bank, and a diving dabchick. He sniffed the rich rooty scents of the water's edge, moist and sweet, the fragrance of the summer midlands—and wondered why it seemed to change to something salt and fresh, as the terrestrial scene faded from his eyes and he looked inward at a very different landscape.

Disappointment had not troubled him. He had no sense of failure. These things were ordained and it was not for him to question the ordering. The long monotonous grind behind him, the struggle with imponderables, the effort to keep his grip on what in his hands became slippery and evasive, the anxious thoughts and the baffled plans—the memory of these did not oppress him. That had been his task and it was finished; he was waiting for fresh marching orders. He was only a subaltern obeying a command: the setting of the battle was with the general-in-chief. He was in a mood of passivity which was almost peace. He had aimed too high; now he waited for a humbler task.

As always in such moods his fancy ranged, and he was back in his secret world. As the vigour of midday declined to the mellowness of afternoon, his rod fell idle. He was not looking at the deep midland pastures or the green waters fringed with white ranunculus. He was on the western side of Sgurr Bàn, on the thymy downlands with their hollows full of wild-wood, their shallow glens and their singing streams. Nigel was with him, babbling happily, his small firm hand clutching one of his fingers, except when it was loosed to permit him to dart aside after a nest or a flower. This was their favourite afternoon ramble, when they could watch the sun moving down to the horizon and bask in its magic. The horizon should have been the sea, but Adam knew that it was not yet permitted to come within sight of it. He was aware of it—somewhere just a little ahead beyond the ridges of down and the hazel coverts—they could even hear the beat of the green waves on the white sands. Nigel was full of it, always asking questions about the wonderful pink and pearl-grey shells, and the strange nuts carried by the tides from remote lands, and the skerries where the grey seals lived, and far out the little isle called the Island of Sheep where had dwelt the last saint of the Great Ages. But Nigel was not impatient. They were going there of a surety, but perhaps not that afternoon. Meantime there were the blue rock-doves and the merlins and the furry rabbits in their burrows and an occasional loping hare—and his father's hand which he sometimes pressed against his cool cheek...

About five o'clock Adam woke from his absorption, and remembered his engagement at the Court. He crossed the stream by a plank bridge and turned up through a fir-wood over the intervening ridge of hill. He had regard and loyalty for his friends, but he was aware that it was not the fierce rapturous thing which it had been in the old days. For him the world had now sharper and harder lines and dimmer colours. But Jacqueline was a little different. She reminded him somehow of Nigel, and he felt for her just a little of the same wondering affection. Besides, she understood him best. When he was with her he had the comfortable feeling of being with one who comprehended him without the need of explanation—comprehended him, sympathised with him, humoured him a little, perhaps, as she humoured her small Jeremy. Those bright eyes of hers saw very far.

He reached the Court on the garden side and entered the house by the open window of the library. There was no one in the room, so he passed through the big drawing-room out on to the terrace. He found a tea-table set where a great magnolia made a forest in the angle of the east wing. Below was the Dutch garden, and the view was to the west through a glade in the park to far-away blue hills.

Jacqueline appeared on the terrace steps. She had been gardening among the lily ponds, and wore Newmarket boots a little splashed and stained. Her long limbs, her slimness, and her retinue of dogs gave her more than ever the air of the huntress.

The kettle was boiling, so she at once made tea. Then she flung herself into a chair, took off her gauntlets, and tossed them into another.

"Had a good day?" she asked. "You must have, for you're late. When Ken has no luck he is back clamouring for tea by four o'clock. I hope you're as hungry as I am." She was busy cutting slices from a wheaten loaf and buttering them.

To Adam she seemed a little nervous. She talked fast and busied herself about giving him tea, all with a certain air of preoccupation. She had much to say about Jeremy, and she was not in the habit of talking about her son. Also of Warmestre—regret at leaving the Court, complaints of the magnitude of the task that awaited them in Devonshire. Adam listened with half an ear. Jacqueline's presence always gave him a sense of well-being and ease, but now she was notably restless.

"Kenneth told me that you specially wanted to see me," he said.

"Yes, of course." She did not look at him, and was busy taking shots at a thrush on the terrace with bits of crust. "I always want to see you. I wanted to talk over our friends with you."

"Which ones?"

She laughed. "Well, let's begin with Mr Creevey."

"Why Creevey?"

"Isn't he the rock on which you have shipwrecked, Adam dear?"

"You think I have shipwrecked?"

"Haven't you? I'm desperately sorry for you. But of course I don't pity you. I would as soon think of pitying God."

She sat upright and for the first time looked straight at him.

"You and I are too close friends to have secrets. What do you make of Mr Creevey?"

"I don't know him well."

"You don't. No one does. But you can feel him... Shall I tell you what I think about him? First of all, I don't like him. His manners to women are atrocious. Not to Lilah Pomfrey, who is too old, or to Sally Flambard, who is too ethereal. But with anyone like myself whom he thinks good-looking he has a horrid streak of the common philanderer. But let that pass. We all know that he takes his pleasures rather in the farm-yard way... Apart from that there's nothing much against him. He has made a lot of money, but no one ever suggested that he was a crook. I took the trouble to ask a lot of questions about that. He is not supposed to go back on his friends. Lastly, he is amazingly, superhumanly clever. Everyone admits that. It's the chief thing about him, and his chief passion. He lives for the exercise of his splendid brain and cares for nothing much else. Kit Stannix says that he is the perfect sophist, and I think I know what he means. Life is for him a very difficult and absorbing game of chess.

"Well, you have come hard up against him," she continued. "The apostle against the sophist! And the sophist has won the first round. If you had any human failings, Adam, you ought to hate him. For he hates you."

"He scarcely knows me."

"But he *feels* you and you feel him. And he hates you like sin. Trust a woman's instinct. Perhaps he fears you a little too. You don't fear him? No, you wouldn't, because you're scarcely human... Don't you realise what he has done?"

"He has taken Utlaw away from me."

"Yes. Utlaw was clay in his hands, and Mr Creevey succeeded just because he was mostly clay, not gold. I like the shaggy Jos—Jos, remember, for the future, not Joe. I prophesy that he will be a prodigious success—the one honest working man, the darling of the gentlemen of England. I like little Florrie too. In a year she will be so smart she will scarcely be able to see out of her eyes. She will drop me as too dowdy. Jean Rimington is a fool, but she always backs the right mare for those particular stakes. But the Utlaws were easy fruit. Mr Creevey made a bigger coup than that."

"Your brother?"

She nodded.

"Brother Frank. Make no mistake about it—Frank is a saint. You're not. You're an apostle, which is something very different. Frank has a wonderful soul, which he is going to cosset and polish and perfect. You don't care a rush about your soul. You'd sacrifice it to-morrow if you thought the cause was big enough... How was it done? Through Lilah Pomfrey of course. Lilah was born to be a nursing mother to saints. She is full of all kinds of wonderful emotions and ideals, and she has the supreme worldliness which can make them all fit in nicely with each other. No, no. She won't marry him. Frank is incapable of marrying, and she knows very well that Frank's wife would never be more than a morganatic one. She'll be his mother and his confidante and his good genius and—his impresario. I adore my Frank and want him to have a pleasant life. He'll get it, I think. He will be a tremendous figure before he is done. He will be the greatest preacher in England, and there will be scores of little birthday-books with his comforting sayings, and little manuals about his teaching. He'll do a lot of good too. All kinds of dingy beings will warm themselves at the fires he lights. And he'll die in the odour of sanctity, and people will say that a prophet has fallen in Israel, and it will be quite true. Only—you see Frank is not a fool, and at the end I think that he may have some rather bad thoughts about it all."

Jacqueline got up.

"Let's walk," she said. "A cigarette? Not for me, thank you. I give up smoking in summer because it spoils my nose for the flowers."

They crossed the terrace, and descended into the Dutch garden, which with lupins and the first delphiniums was all a mist of blue. Jacqueline linked her arm in Adam's, for she had the habits of a friendly boy.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked. "I'm anxious about you, Adam dear. You've been slaving—oh, I've watched you—slaving at what was no job for a man like you. You have been a bottle-holder to champions that won't fight. What next?"

"I shall find champions who will."

She withdrew her arm.

"Why will you be so absurdly modest? You say you are trying to find leaders. But you have more grit than anybody. Why won't you do the leading yourself?"

Adam shook his head.

"You don't understand. I could never make you understand. I am only a servant—a bottle-holder if you like. I can never lead. It isn't the task I have been given."

"Stuff and nonsense!" she said. "I have prophesied about Mr Utlaw and brother Frank, and now I'll prophesy about you. You'll be forced to come into the open and take charge. If you don't you'll go on being beaten. By people like Mr Creevey and Lilah Pomfrey... And by me."

Jacqueline moved away from him and stood with one foot on a low parapet—a defiant huntress.

“I have a confession to make, Adam,” she said. “It was I that took Ken away from you. He is far the best of them—far more grit and fire. He has the makings of an apostle. He would have followed you in sandals and a hair shirt. It was I that stopped him.”

She stood up, very slim and golden in the light of the westering sun, and if there was defiance in her pose there was also a sudden shyness.

“You couldn’t compete with me, you know. I often felt rather a cad about it, but I had a right to fight for my own... How shall I explain? Four years ago I married Ken. I wasn’t madly in love with him—perhaps I wasn’t in love with him at all. But I greatly admired and liked him. There was no glamour about him, but he was the best man I knew, the most really good and reliable. A woman, you know, generally marries for safety. She may fall in love for all kinds of reasons, but when she marries she takes the long view. Ken stood for something in England which I wanted to see continue, and as his wife I could help to keep it going. Marrying him gave me a career. I knew that if I had a son he would have a career also—he would be born to all kinds of fine sturdy obligations—with a niche ready from the start. So I married Ken partly for himself—quite a lot for himself—and partly for the great system behind him. Do you understand me?”

Adam nodded. He remembered his feelings the first night when he had descended the broad oaken staircase at the Court.

“Well, since our marriage I have come to like him enormously—the solid affection into which people grow when they live together. And there’s Jeremy, too. Jeremy is Ken and Ken is Jeremy... And I have found out things I never guessed before. When I married I thought that if Ken had a fault it was that he was commonplace, the ordinary banal Christian gentleman. I was a blind little fool. There are queer things in the Armine blood. I’m half Highland and therefore half daft, but my daftness is like summer wild-fire, and Ken’s might be a steady devouring flame. He has it in him to fling everything to the winds and tramp the world... And I did not marry to be a beggar-wife.”

Jacqueline’s singing voice sunk to a whisper.

“I hadn’t the courage. I wasn’t good enough. Besides, it was all against reason. I saw his restlessness and at first I encouraged him, for I didn’t want him to sink into a rustic clod. That’s another side of the Armines. If they don’t happen to go crusading they will relapse into the perfect chaw-bacon. I encouraged him to become Mayor of Birkpool because that was a family job. But his doings there opened my eyes—and frightened me. And then I saw the power you had over him and that frightened me more. I realised that I had to fight for my rights. Not my rights only—it wasn’t altogether selfish. I was fighting for Jeremy and for all the old things—for the Court here and for Warmestre, and for the people who lie carved in stone in the chapel, and for all the kind, peaceful life that depended on him. I was fighting for Ken, too—for his peace of mind, for if he had gone crusading there would have been no more peace for him. He’s not a saint, you see, and he is only part of an apostle—the other strain in him would have been pulling hard and a good deal of his life would have been hell... Do you blame me?”

“I don’t blame you.”

She sighed.

“It was a stiff fight and I only won on the post. I had all the chances, of course. I had Jeremy and I had Ken’s affection for us both to help me. I knew him much better than he knew himself and I could play on all kinds of secret strings. His love of country life and horses. His laziness—he has plenty of it. His sentiment—he is a mass of it. His feeling for the past and for his family—he is no respecter of persons, but he has a big bump of veneration. But I could not have won, I think, if Mr Utlaw had not run out—and brother Frank. That gave Ken a kind of nausea about the whole concern, and I worked on that... So I have got him back to me and to Jeremy and to all the Armines that ever were. But sometimes I feel as if I had sinned against the Holy Ghost, the sin my old nurse used to frighten me with. I’m not sure that I mind that—I’ll face up to the Holy Ghost when my time comes—but I mind horribly having fought against YOU. I have beaten you, and I hate myself for it.”

She looked at him timidly, as if much hung on his words. He did not speak, and she continued, her voice low and rapid, as of one making a difficult confession.

“You see—you see I could have been madly in love with someone—you, perhaps—someone like you. I think you are the only one in the world who could have made me feel like that, and then I would have flung everything behind me. My grandmother used to say that the women of her family would either sell their shift for a man, or make a packman’s bargain with him. Nobody wanted my shift, so I have made my bargain. Do you blame me for fighting for my share in it?... I would like you to say that you forgive me.”

Jacqueline’s eyes had become solemn, like a wise child’s.

“There is nothing to forgive,” Adam said. “I think you did right—entirely right.”

She came towards him and put her hands on his shoulders. Her lips were trembling.

“I believe you mean that,” she said. “God bless you for it... If I were a man I should wring your hand and wish you well. But I am going to kiss you...”

Adam was scarcely conscious of her kiss. But there was something novel in his heart, which he recognised as tenderness. As he walked across the park the light touch of her lips seemed in the recollection like the clutch of Nigel’s hand.

A week later he had a letter from Jacqueline, who was in London.

“Last night,” she wrote, “I went to a wonderful little party at Lilah Pomfrey’s. Ken was asked but wouldn’t go—said he was sick of monkey-tricks. The Utlaws were there, and Mr Creevey was in great form, and Frank of course, and one or two young men and several yearning women. Lilah has a regular group now and this was their second meeting. The invitation card may amuse you.”

The card she enclosed had Mrs Pomfrey’s name in the centre, and neatly printed in the left-hand top corner The Seekers.

BOOK III

PART 1

CHAPTER 26

The little low-roofed café in the Rue des Célestins in which Falconet sat on a certain October afternoon was flooded with the hazy golden light which is the glory of Paris in a fine autumn. The patron was busy in a corner with his own avocations; a party of four stout citizens were drinking bocks and disputing vivaciously; but otherwise the place was empty, for it was the slack period when déjeuner is over and the hour of apéritifs has not arrived. Falconet was waiting for Adam, and as he smoked a delayed after-luncheon cigar he let his mind run over the events of the past week, since he had landed in England.

In the retrospect the chief was a talk with Christopher Stannix, for whom he had acquired a puzzled respect. Falconet loved politics and their practitioners no more than the rest of his countrymen, but Stannix was unlike any politician he had ever met. He seemed to stand aside, intervening now and then to put his weight into the scales to adjust the balance. He was a noted pricker of bladders, and had deflated some of Falconet's pet ones, but he was as much in earnest as Falconet himself. He called himself a "trimmer," and had justified the name from a period of English history with which Falconet was not familiar. But above all he was Adam's friend.

For Adam Falconet had come to entertain one of the passionate friendships which were as much a feature in his character as his passionate dislikes. At first Adam's ways had seemed to him inertia and his fastidiousness mere pedantry. But his disillusionment with his own bustling methods across the Atlantic had made him revise his views. The breakdown of Adam's plans the summer before had been to him less of a disappointment than a relief. His friend was free to start again, and to start again with him as an ally. For Falconet was at heart an artist, and could never be content with the second-rate. His own complex organisation in America he regarded without pride, as a useful nursery of talent. But it would not produce genius, the rare quality which was needed to heal the world's ills. Now as ever he was a pioneer in quest of the major secrets.

Adam was a hard man to know, and Falconet, in spite of their months of close companionship in the Arctic ice, felt that he had only penetrated the outer fringe. His explorer's instinct was aroused, and he sought enlightenment from Stannix; and Stannix, detecting an honest affection, opened his heart to him.

"Melfort," he had told Falconet, "is a religious genius. I don't know how to define that, for it is a thing which you can feel better than you can explain. I don't know what his religion is—never talked to him about it—it's sure to be very different from any orthodox brand. But whatever it is it is a living fire in him... Yes, I have known him since he was a boy. As a young man he was, I think, the most remarkable fellow I knew—'remarkable' is the word—you couldn't help noticing him, for he was unlike anybody else. We used to put him in a class by himself, not for what he had done but for what he was. He had an odd spiritual distinction, and an extraordinary fineness—fine as a slim, tempered sword. Then the crash came and he went under. After that I can only guess, but some time eight or nine years ago—yes, in prison—he had a great visionary experience. Like Dante's, and much about the same age as Dante. He has never breathed a word to me about it, but the results are there for anyone to see. Everything about him is devoted—dedicated—consecrated—whatever you choose to call it."

Falconet had nodded. That much he had long been aware of. He asked further questions.

Stannix puckered his brow.

"Oh yes, there are flaws in him. One is that he is—just a little—inhuman, and he used to be the jolliest of mortals. I wonder if I can make you understand me, for it is not ordinary inhumanity. My old tutor, I remember, used to define Platonism as the love of the unseen and the eternal cherished by those who rejoice in the seen and the temporal. Adam rather lacks the second part. He thinks about God a great deal more than he thinks about the things and the creatures He has made. He is a little too much aloof from the world, and that weakens his power. If he could only be in love with a woman again!—but of course that's all past and done with. I wonder how much he really cares about his friends. Not a great deal for them in themselves, only as instruments in his purpose. He might have made a better job of Utlaw and Frank Alban if he had got really close to them. There must have been something a little chilly about those friendships. Kenneth Warmestre was different perhaps—I believe there was a sort of affection there—but, then, Warmestre was hopeless from the start."

Falconet had dissented. "I know what you mean, but I don't think I agree. My grouch with Adam is that he is too infernally modest. He rates himself too low and the other fellows too high."

"You haven't got it quite right," Stannix had replied. "He doesn't rate other people too high. He rates them too low—he's bound to do that considering the sort of standard he has—and they are bound subconsciously to recognise it, and perhaps resent it. That is one bar to the proper sort of friendship. But you are right on one thing—he is too modest about himself. He's always contrasting himself with perfection and feeling a worm. He has made up his mind that his business is only to serve—not to serve God only, but to serve other men who are the agents of God's purpose, and the trouble is that there is nobody big enough for him to serve. He wants to untie our shoe-latchets, and none of us is worthy of it. He has the opposite of folie des grandeurs—the folly of humility, I suppose you might call it. But he hasn't found the Moses whose hands he can hold up, and I don't think he ever will."

Falconet had agreed, but with a cheerful air. For he believed that he was on the track of a Moses.

Falconet's table and spoke of the weather, politics and the manners of travelling Americans, thereby showing that he took Falconet for an Englishman. Then a great peace fell on the empty place, and a white cat, who had been sunning herself outside on the pavement beyond the green awning, came in and slept on the top of the patron's little desk.

A man entered, a typical French bourgeois, wearing a bowler hat, a tightly buttoned grey coat, a stiff white collar and a flamboyant tie. He ordered a vermouth, and after a glance at the empty table came towards Falconet. He took off his hat with a flourish, revealing a head of close-clipped fair hair—the familiar Normandy type.

"I await a friend, Monsieur," said Falconet. "But pray take the seat till my friend arrives."

The stranger sat down and sipped his vermouth. He summoned the patron, and commented on the quality of the beverage, a friendly comment with much advice as to how to secure the best brands.

"Monsieur is a connoisseur," said the patron. "He travels much?"

"I go up and down the land," was the answer, "and I find out things, and I share my knowledge with my friends." He spoke a rapid guttural French, with a curious flatness in his voice.

"You come from the East," said the patron. "Lille, I should say at a guess."

"But no. I am out of Lorraine. As are you, my friend."

He proved to be right, and for a few minutes there was a quick exchange of questions and recollections. Then the patron was called away and the stranger turned to Falconet.

"It delights me to detect the origins of those whom I meet by chance. You, Monsieur, I take to be American. Your eyes are quicker and hungrier than the English, and your mouth is shaped to the smoking of thin cigars. Is it not so?"

"You've got it in one," said Falconet. "Now, I'll guess about you. You're a Lorrainer, but you live in Paris. You're in some kind of trade—high-class commis-voyageur, I presume. What exactly do you sell?"

"I do not sell. I am looking for something to buy, but what I want is not easily bought."

"Meaning?"

"A man," was the surprising answer given in English. "But I think I have found one."

Falconet stared. Then he burst out laughing, and leaned forward with outstretched hand.

"You fooled me properly, Adam. I'm mighty glad to see you, but how in thunder did you get into the skin of a French bourgeois? You're the dead spit of one, and even now I've got to rub my eyes to recognise you. You've a face one doesn't forget in a hurry, but you've managed to camouflage it out of creation. I've been sitting opposite you for five minutes, and, though I was expecting you, I wasn't within a thousand miles of spotting you. How d'you do it?"

"I had four years' practice," was the answer. "Well, I have got alongside your great man. Tell me, what was there about him that first took your fancy?"

Falconet considered. "I think it was his old-fashioned face. That was a phrase of my grandmother's, and it means just what it says. Loeffler looks like the good old tough New England stock I remember as a boy. A plain face with nothing showy about it, but all the horse-sense and sand in the world. Like Abraham Lincoln—only not so darned ugly. Then I had some talk with him and I liked him better still. He wasn't like my friend Creevey, who between drinks will sketch out a dozen plans of salvation for everything and everybody. Loeffler don't talk much, but what he says counts a hell of a lot. He sees the next job and sits down to it—stays still and saws wood, as Lincoln said. I've gotten to be suspicious of all showy fellows, for what glitters isn't often gold. It's the plain people that are going to pull us out of the mess. That little Cosgrave man in Ireland is one, and I'll bet my last dollar that Hermann Loeffler is another. What do you say?"

Adam nodded.

"Well, let's hear what you make of him. You started from London twenty-seven days ago. How often have you seen him?"

"Only three times. But they were pretty useful occasions. First, I started in at the top. I got the right kind of introductions from the Foreign Office and the City, and I sat down at the Adler as an enquiring cosmopolitan with a liking for Germany. I had my pedigree arranged—aunt married in Würtemberg, school-days in Heidelberg, a year in Munich under Luigi Brentano—all the proper credentials."

"Did my man Blakiston help you?" Falconet asked.

"Tremendously. I could have done nothing without him. He had your millions behind him, and I shared in their reflected glory... It's a long story and it falls into three parts. First, there was the week in Berlin. Then the scene changes to the Black Forest. Last I spent three days in the Rhineland, and had a little trouble in getting away. Yesterday I wasn't sure that I would be able to meet you here. It looked as if I mightn't be alive many hours longer."

Falconet lit a fresh cigar. "Go on. I'm listening. You start off at the Adler all nicely dressed up."

Adam told his story slowly and drily. He seemed more interested in his evidence than in the way he had collected it.

His introductions had given him ready access to Loeffler, now for two months the German Chancellor. The meeting at Lamancha's dinner-table had been recalled, and Loeffler, who forgot nothing, was intrigued at the transformation of the former British staff-officer into the amateur publicist, with Blakiston and the American millions in the background. Adam played his part carefully, his rôle being that of an honest enquirer, and something in his face or his manner must have attracted Loeffler, for he talked freely. The little man was drabber and leaner than ever, for he was engaged in the thankless job of demonetising the old mark, and getting his country's finances straight by a colossal act of sacrifice. He talked finance to Adam, but, when the latter disclaimed expert knowledge, he turned to the things behind finance—the national temper,

the attitude of other Powers, the forces in the world which made for stability or chaos.

"He doesn't deceive himself," said Adam. "He knows what he is up against down to the last decimal. When he has stated the odds against him, he has a trick of smiling ruefully, just like a plucky child who has to face up to something he hates. I wanted to pat him on the back—like a good dog."

That was the first meeting in Loeffler's flat, late one night, over several tankards of beer. The second was a grander occasion. It was at a private dinner given by a great banker, a dinner at which the guests sat on into the small hours and at which momentous things were spoken of. Loeffler was there and two of his colleagues in the Government; several bankers and financiers, one of them a noted figure in Paris; a general who had had to face the supply question of the armies in the last year of war, and who was now grappling with difficult questions of public order; a Swedish economist, Blakiston and Creevey.

"That yellow dog!" Falconet exclaimed at the mention of the last.

"He behaved well enough," said Adam. "You see, his intellectual interest was aroused and he tackled the thing like a problem in mathematics. He's honest in one thing, you know—he'll never be false to his mind."

The atmosphere had been tense, since destiny hung on that talk. It had been tense in another way, for the guests were shepherded in and out of the house as if they had been visitors to a gun factory. Everywhere there were solid, quiet-faced watchers.

At this point Adam became more expansive. Loeffler, he said, had dominated the talk, a solemn, pale little man in a badly-cut dinner jacket among people starched, trim and resplendent. They had talked of the London Conference fixed for the beginning of November, and of the burden of war debts and reparations which was to be the staple of the discussion there. The General was inclined to be explosive and melodramatic, and the German bankers to make a poor mouth about it, but Loeffler was as steadfast as a rock. He was a loyal nationalist, but he was also a citizen of the world, and to him Germany's interests and world interests could not be separated. Again and again he brought the debate down to the test of the practicable, but his conception of the practicable was generous. Clearly he was speaking against the prepossessions of his colleagues, but they could not gainsay his stubborn good sense. It was, said Adam, like a masterful chairman at a company meeting comforting and soothing recalcitrant shareholders, and sometimes like a wise old sheep-farmer pricking the bubbles of agricultural theorists.

But it was on the question of Germany's internal finance that he rose to the heights.

"He put the grim facts before them and what seemed to him the only road out. Here he had the others with him—all but the General, who hadn't much to say. You could see that Loeffler hated the job—hated those glossy people who did not need to look beyond the figures. There was one of them, a fellow with a big fat face and small eyes—I needn't tell you his name—who talked as if he controlled the flow of money in the world. I daresay he did. He was almost insolent with his air of cold dictation. They were all insolent, even Creevey, though he was better than some. It was the dictation of masters who were thinking only of their bank balances to a poor devil who was responsible for millions of suffering human beings. Yet Loeffler was on their side. He took their view, because he thought it was right, though his instinct was to beat them about the head. That wanted grit, you know, and he never betrayed his feelings except that he half closed his eyes, and sank his voice to a flatter level. There was another side to it, too. He knew that in the interests of his country he was sacrificing his own class—the professional people with their small savings, the tradesman with his scanty reserves—all the decent humble folk who are the best stuff in Germany. They had trusted him, they had put him in power, and now he was sacrificing them. He was in hell, but he went through with it and never winced. I don't think I have often respected a man so much."

Falconet nodded. "I see you've gotten my notion of Loeffler. I'm glad about that. What next?"

"Next I took a holiday because he took one. He was pretty nearly all out, as anyone could see, and I discovered that he was going off for a few days to the country. I had a hint about what he meant to do. He was determined to give his bodyguard the slip, and be alone for a bit. I decided to follow him, for you can get a good line on a man when he is on holiday."

"Did you find him?"

"It took some doing. Blakiston was useful, for he has a graft with the police, and the police of course had to keep an eye more or less on his whereabouts, though I fancy he must have gone several times clean out of their ken. Anyhow, I was lucky. I got into tramping kit and I came up with him at a little inn in the Black Forest at a place called Andersbach. He had come north from Freiburg way, following the course of a stream that makes a long glen in the pine-woods. He was tired and dusty, wearing an old suit of loden and carrying an ancient rucksack, and he was alone.

"The inn as it happened was packed—it was a small place with cellars on the ground-floor and a dining-hall up wooden steps which was pure Middle Ages. The place was like a bee-hive with trampers—the Wandervögel, you know—boys and girls holidaying on twopence a day. A queer crowd, but a merry one—shorts and open shirts—determined to enjoy life though the ground was cracking under them. They overflowed into the meadows round the stream and into the clearings among the pines, and slept anywhere, and ate sausage and rye bread and made coffee round little bivouacs. Innocent jolly folk, ready to talk the hind-leg off a donkey. I was swallowed up in them at once, for my rig was much the same as theirs, and they were not inquisitive. Loeffler, too. That was what he wanted. None of them had a guess who he was—probably took him for a small provincial professor. But he and I were the elders of the party, so we naturally came together. That was when I had my real talk with him."

"Didn't he spot you?" Falconet asked. "He had been seeing you a few days before."

"No. You see I was a different man—a chemist from Freiburg talking with a Breisgau accent. I learned long ago that

disguise doesn't consist in changing your face and sticking on a beard, but in having a different personality. There was nothing about me to link me up with the Englishman who had been Blakiston's protégé and had been greeted as an acquaintance by Creevey. We were in a different world of mind and body."

"What did he pretend to be?"

"Nobody in particular. I think that he meant to let me imagine he was of the professor class. He is a bit of a scholar, you know, and we talked a lot about books. It was that that made him take to me, when he found that I had read Augustine and could recognise a tag from Plato. Loeffler's an extraordinary being to have the job he has. He has to work twelve hours a day at stony facts and figures, and yet all the time he is thinking of a little house in the Jura where he can look across at the Alps and botanise and read his books. He is uncommonly well read—even in English, though he talks it badly. You won't guess who his favourite authors are—Landor and Sir Thomas Browne! He was meant for the contemplative life, but he won't get it in this world. An exile from the cloister."

Falconet grinned. "Same as you, maybe. Did he talk politics?"

"Yes—the abstract kind—as if he were looking down at Germany from a great height. He seemed to enjoy that, for I fancy he doesn't get many chances of letting his mind run free. He was very illuminating. I suppose you would call him a common-sense Nationalist. One thing he said that struck me, that Communism and Capitalism were growths from the same root, both involving a servile state. He hates both as the spawn of hell, and he thinks that Germany is near the edge of the first and can only be saved by curbing the second. He would go a long way in that direction, by limiting rates of interest and striking at the sanctity of free contract. You see, he doesn't mind going back a step or two to get a run for his leap. But it's freedom that he cares about—he has the sound bourgeois clutch on the individual. One felt all the time that this fellow might have dreams but had no liking for theories. Always the practical man stuck out, but the kind of practical man who is ready for anything that will take him one step forward. That's how he struck me, since I knew who he was, and could read between the lines. To a stranger he might have seemed a windy provincial who talked boldly about things he was never likely to have much to do with."

"What did the Wandervögel make of him?"

"Only a friendly elderly chap who wasn't accustomed to being in the sun and had got all the skin peeled off his nose. He had a lot of trouble with that nose of his, and was always doctoring it with lanoline... He talked to the hobbledehoy and joined in their games—he's a useful man still on a hill walk—and we all shouted songs after supper. They chaffed him and romped with him and called him uncle."

"Did they call you uncle?"

Adam laughed. "No. I don't know why, but they didn't. I'm not as good a mixer as Loeffler. We were there three days, for it was a kind of base-camp for the trampers, and it did Loeffler a world of good. He got hill air into his lungs, and the sun comforted him, and the sight of youth cheered him. I had a walk with him one night after a blistering day, up on a ridge of the forest, where we could look down upon the meadows with their twinkling fires, and the noise of speech and singing came up to us in a queer disembodied way as if it were a sound of wild nature. There was a moon and I could see his face clearly, and for the first time he looked happy. I remember he linked his arm in mine and his voice had a thrill in it, as if he were repeating poetry. 'See, mein Herr,' he said, 'yonder is the hope of the world. These children have fallen heir to a heritage of troubles, but they have the spirit that makes light of them. They are very poor, and sweat all the year in dismal places for a pittance, but their youth will not be denied. Comfort is the foe of enthusiasm—and enthusiasm is everything, if only we can keep it from becoming madness. That is our good German folk. They have the patience of God, but their slow blood can kindle to noble things.' Then he gripped my shoulder and almost cried, 'What does it matter about the old men—you and me and our like? We have the stain of blood and folly, but these young ones are innocent. Can we ask for anything better than to be the manure for the fields from which will spring a better grain?' He went off next morning before I was awake, without saying good-bye. Four days later I read in the papers that he was in Berlin."

"Where did you go next?"

"I thought I had better look into the question of Loeffler's becoming manure too soon. That can't be allowed to happen. I knew that he was in constant danger. Blakiston told me as much, and that frozen-faced bodyguard of his was proof of it. So I went back to Berlin, and after certain preparations descended into the shadows. I knew the road, you see, for I had spent three years among those particular shadows. I had confirmation of my fears. Loeffler's life is not a thing an insurance company would look at if it knew a quarter of the facts."

The café was filling up as the hour of apéritifs approached. "This isn't quite the place for the rest of my story," Adam said. "We'll adjourn till after dinner."

That night in the hotel Adam resumed.

"The danger lay in two directions—the Iron Hands and the Communists, the two groups that hanker after short cuts. The second was the easier job, for in the war I had laid down my lines there. But the first promised to be difficult, and I had to get the help of a queer fellow. His name was La Cecilia, an Italian by descent, but through his mother the owner of a little estate in Pomerania. He had English relations, and his parents died young, so he was sent to school in England. One of the smaller schools—I can't remember which. He was an under-sized, dirty, ill-conditioned boy, but the most daring young devil I ever knew. I met him several times in the holidays when he was staying in the same neighbourhood, and we rather made friends. You see, I was the elder and he took it into his head to believe in me.

"I lost sight of him till after I joined the regiment. Then we met at a deer-forest in Scotland. He had been asked there because he was a wonderful shot with a rifle, but he didn't mix well with the other guests. He was in the German Army by

that time and had more than the average conceit of the old-fashioned Prussian officer. His manners were good enough, but they had lapses. He and I got on fairly well, for he hadn't quite forgotten his boyish respect for me... There was a regrettable incident during the visit. He lost his temper with one of the stalkers and struck him, and the stalker knocked him down and, since he looked nasty, confiscated his rifle. Cecilia went raving mad about it and made a scene at the lodge, and—well, public opinion was pretty hot against him. I helped to smooth things over, and got him quietly off the place. He handed me a good deal of abuse, but I suppose, when he came to think it over, he was grateful.

"Anyhow, the next time I ran across him he was friendly. It was at a little mountain inn in the Vosges, where I had turned up on a push-bike in one of my private explorations. I was then at the Staff College. Cecilia was on the same errand, I think—for the other side. He was using a different name, and was got up like a clerk on holiday. We both knew what the other was doing, and we didn't refer to it. But we had a great evening's talk about things in general. At first he was cold to me—you see, I had been a witness of his humiliation at Glenfargie, and the man was as proud as Lucifer. But he thawed in the end, and gave me about a quarter of his confidence. He had grown into a tough, lean, shallow little fellow, with a quiet manner hiding the embanked fires. A real volcano, for he was the complete dare-devil, with a passion for all that was desperate and spectacular and incalculable, and at the same time as cunning as a monkey, and with shrewdness behind his grandiose imagination. A sort of d'Annunzio. I remember thinking that, if war came, he would be killed in the first month.

"But he wasn't. I had a letter from him in 1920. He did not know what I had been after in the war, but somehow or other he had heard that I had done something, so he assumed that I must be a fire-eater like himself. It was a long, crazy epistle. He complained that the world was no longer fit for a gentleman, but that there was still hope if the gentlemen would only get together. National hatreds, he said, were over, the battle was now between the gentlemen and the rabble, and it was for all men of breeding and courage to work together. I gathered that he was in the inner circle of the Iron Hands, and he wanted to connect up with those who were fighting the same battle elsewhere, for, as he saw it, it was a world conflict... I took some pains in replying to his nonsense. I didn't choke him off, but told him that just at present I was out of action and lying low. I was interested in the Iron Hand business and wanted to keep in touch with Cecilia.

"Well, I succeeded in doing that, and I found out a good deal. The Iron Hand movement was on the face of it just an organisation of ex-soldiers, like the American Legion, partly benevolent and partly nationalist. There were thousands of members who only joined to keep up the fellowship of the trenches. But there was an inner circle to it which was playing a big part in politics, and an innermost circle which meant real mischief. This last cherished the old idea of iron discipline and class supremacy, and meant to win or perish. Peace in the world was the last thing they sought, for their only hope lay in a new and bigger ferment. They were violent German nationalists, but they were cosmopolitan too in their outlook—they wanted to brigade all the elements in every land that would help to restore the old world. They were true storm-troops, ready for any forlorn hope and prepared to use any means however devilish, and Cecilia was one of their brains.

"As soon as I left the Black Forest I went to Cecilia—I had been keeping track of him, you see. I didn't say much, but he believed that I was ready for the field again. Anyhow, he welcomed me. He sat and stared at me for a minute or two, and seemed to be satisfied."

Falconet laughed.

"I judge he was," he said. "If I was looking for a confederate in a desperate job, your face would be enough for me. Go on, Adam."

"He told me that if he took me among his friends there would be no going back, and he fixed me with his solemn mad eyes. I said that I perfectly understood that. Then my doings became like a crude detective yarn, and I needn't trouble you with the details. He gave me passports to the inner circle, but I had to find my way there alone—that was part of the ritual. I had to pass through layers and layers of vedettes—all kinds of people you wouldn't suspect—bagmen, and small officials, and tradesmen, and peasants, each doing his appointed job in the dark. In the end I landed in the upper room of a squalid little eating-house in—never mind where. And there I became an honorary member of a fairly mischievous brotherhood.

"Cecilia was there, but he wasn't the most important member. There was a small plump man with the thick rings on his hands that people wear for rheumatism, and a face all puckered into grey bags. He only spoke in grunts, but he seemed to be the final court of appeal. They called him Gratias—Dr Gratias. And there was one wonderful fellow, with a neck like the busts of Julius Cæsar and atop of it a small round head. He looked the pure human animal, one-idea'd, with the force and fury of a bull. He was a noble of sorts—the Baron von Hilderling. There were others too... No, there was no melodrama. No signature in blood, no swearing of oaths—those gentry are beyond the inhibitions of oaths. They treated me with immense civility, but rather as if I was a criminal whose dossier was wanted by the police. They most politely took down every detail about my appearance, every measurement—even my finger-prints. You see, they were determined never to lose sight of me again, and if I turned traitor to make certain of a reckoning."

Falconet looked grave. "That's bad. They've gotten a tight cinch on you."

"It was the only way. I had to put myself in their hands. It adds to the odds in the game, but only a little... After that was done they were perfectly frank with me, and Cecilia was almost affectionate. They took it for granted that I was heart and soul on their side, but they didn't ask me to do anything—not yet. I was only a friendly foreign associate. But I learned a good deal about their plans."

"Loeffler?" Falconet asked sharply.

"Yes, he is the enemy. Partly because he is Chancellor, and therefore the prop of a system which they detest. Partly because he is Loeffler. They are black afraid of him, for they are clever men, and recognise that he is the greatest force today making for peace. They have the wits to see that he is utterly honest and utterly courageous, and therefore they fear

him more than anyone else... But they are not yet quite sure, and that is the hope. He has always been a Nationalist, remember—he had a first-class war record—he's not a Jew—and he's not a Socialist. They are waiting and watching him. As soon as he declares himself the thumbs go down."

"How do you mean?"

"They may let him attend the London Conference if his policy is still in doubt. But if in order to prepare the ground he thinks it necessary to make some preliminary declaration—some gesture to France or to America—then they will do their best to see that he doesn't cross the Channel."

Falconet whistled.

"But he means to say something. I heard that from Blakiston."

"Yes, he means to. I gathered that in Berlin... Well, so much for the Iron Hands. The Communists were an easier proposition. I dropped back into the underworld in which I moved in '17 and '18, and I had no trouble in picking up the threads. With the Iron Hands I was Melfort, formerly a lieutenant-colonel in the British Army, but among the anarchs I was somebody very different—a shabby Munich journalist called Brasser—Hannus Brasser. Some of them remembered me—one of them had actually hidden me for twelve hours in his wood-cellar.

"I met the Iron Hands in a room in a slum public-house, but the other lot were gathered in a castle! It was a great empty, shuttered schloss in a park of a thousand acres, and it belonged to one of them who bore a name more famous in history than Hohenzollern. What a mad turn-up the world is—gutter-blood out to restore aristocracy and blue blood eager to blast it!... It was a funny party, but not as impressive as the Iron Hands. You see, the Iron Hands are a new thing, idiomatically national, with a single definite purpose, while the others are only cogs in an international machine. Active cogs, of course. The last word in cold deadly fanaticism. They accepted me in my old rôle of fellow-worker, and didn't trouble to ask what I had been doing since we met in cellars in '17. I noticed changes in them—they were wilder, less confident, a little more desperate. There was a woman among them called Probus—Netta Probus—who struck me as nearly the evillest thing I had ever set eyes on."

"How do they look at Loeffler?" Falconet asked.

"With respect—and utter hatred. He is the triumphant bourgeois who may just pull Germany out of the mire, which is the last thing they want. They don't underrate his abilities—if anything they overrate them. They are as afraid as the Iron Hands of the London Conference, and will do their best to keep him away from it. Oh yes, murder is their usual card, and no doubt they will have a try at it—they are an unimaginative lot with a monotonous preference for the crude. But they are less to be feared than the Iron Hands, for they have been trying that game for years, and the police have a line on most of them. I had some difficulty in getting away from that cheerful party, for it broke up in confusion. Yes, a police raid. It was piquant to be hunted by Loeffler's own watch dogs, when I was trying my hand at the same game."

Falconet demanded the full story, but he got little of it, for Adam seemed to regard it as a thing of minor importance.

"Two, I think, were caught. The woman Probus got away unfortunately. I had a bit of a cross-country run, with several automatics behind me to improve my speed. A good thing that I was in pretty hard condition! Lucky for me too that I had kept my communications open. I had rather a difficult twelve hours till I reached one of my hide-holes. After that it was easy, and I emerged the spruce Parisian commis-voyageur you saw this afternoon. Flew into France with a water-tight passport and a valise full of samples."

Adam yawned. "I'm for bed. To-night I am a Christian gentleman, but Heaven knows what I shall be to-morrow. You and I must part for a week or two, for I'm going to be rather busy. My job is to see Loeffler safe in England. There we can leave him to the best police in the world."

"And after that?" Falconet asked.

"One stage at a time. The London Conference is the thing that matters most to the world at this moment. After it I stand back. I leave Loeffler to have it out with Creevey and his friends. By the way, Creevey has a bigger international reputation than I thought. The Iron Hands know all about him, and don't approve of him. Same with the Communist lot. He's their pet mystery man, and they have built a wonderful bogey out of him, something which they can fear and hate to their heart's content. He may find some day that his life isn't as healthy as he would like."

Adam stretched his arms like a tired boy. For one of his years his movements were curiously young. Falconet dragged his long limbs from his arm-chair and complained of stiffness.

"I'm growing old," he said. "I get rheumatism if I sit long in the same position. How in thunder do you manage to keep so spry, Adam? You look happy, too."

The other laughed.

"I have an active job to look forward to. And I haven't had much of that since you and I left the Polar ice... Also, I now know where I am. I have been flying too high and my pinions won't carry me. I have been trying to work on the stage, when my proper job is in the wings. Loeffler has the right word for it. I'm content to be the manure to make the corn spring."

PART 2

CHAPTER 27

I

On the 23rd of October the Chancellor spent a busy day in the important city of Rottenburg. He arrived in the morning by special train from Berlin, and drove to the apartments taken for him at the Kaiserhof, which stands near the middle of the Koenigplatz, the famous street which divides the new industrial and residential city from the older quarter of Altdorf. In the forenoon, attended by the burgomaster and councillors, he opened the new Handelshochschule, one of the extravagant public buildings which Germany had indulged in since the war, and made a speech on his country's industrial future. After luncheon he fulfilled many engagements, including visits to the new technical museum and to several schools, at each of which he had something pleasant to say, for the Chancellor had a gift for apposite occasional speeches. Thereafter he had long interviews with certain steel magnates, and then retired to deal with his papers. It was understood that he proposed to himself dinner in his rooms with his secretaries and a quiet evening, leaving early next morning for Cologne.

But this programme was only for the public. The Chancellor did not dine at the Kaiserhof, and the dinner ordered for him was eaten by his secretaries alone. As the October dusk fell he descended, wrapped up in a heavy ulster with a white muffler round his neck, and, emerging from a side door in a narrow street which ran at right angles from the Koenigplatz, entered a waiting motor-car. Outside the town he stopped the car, and took his seat beside the driver, for the evening was fine and he was a glutton for fresh air.

Twenty miles from Rottenburg is the important railway junction of Neumarkt, on the main line between Paris and eastern Europe. It is the junction from which travellers branch off to Switzerland and the south. The main day express from Paris arrives there at seven o'clock, but the night express which crosses the Alps does not leave till nine-thirty, having to wait for the connection with the Rhineland and the north. Passengers for the south have consequently two hours and a half at their disposal, which they usually spend in dining at the excellent table of the Hôtel Splendide, adjacent to the railway station.

A certain French Minister of State left Paris that morning, his destination, as the press announced, being a well-known holiday resort on the Italian lakes, where he proposed to take a week's rest before the toil of the London Conference. But the Minister did not dine at the Hôtel Splendide. He left his secretary to see to his baggage, and hurried into the street, where a car awaited him by arrangement. After that he was driven rapidly through the pleasant woodland country to the north of Neumarkt to a village called Neustadt, where a little inn stood apart in a rose garden. There he found a modest dinner awaiting him, and he ate it in the company of a small man with a peaked beard to whom he had much to say. At a quarter to nine he left the inn, rejoined his car, which was waiting in a retired place, duly caught the south-bound express, and next morning was among the pines and vineyards of the Italian foothills.

A quarter of an hour later his companion paid the bill, and ordered his car. Night had fallen, but it was the luminous dark of a fine autumn. As on the outward journey he sat beside the driver, partly for fresh air, and partly for another reason. He wore a white scarf round his neck, a dark ulster, and a soft black hat.

A mile from Neustadt the road was under repair for several hundred yards, and there was passage only for a single car at a time. Traffic had to wait at each end at the dictation of a man with a red lamp, who blocked ingress till the other end was clear. At the Rottenburg end several men with motor bicycles might have been seen, lounging and smoking. They were men with unsmiling faces and broad shoulders that had once been drilled, and, though in ordinary civilian dress, they had the air of being on duty. They had inconspicuously accompanied the Chancellor from the Kaiserhof as his bodyguard, and now awaited his return, for their orders had been to stop short of Neustadt.

A car came out of the alley-way which they recognised. It was a big Mercedes, and beside the driver sat a small man in a dark coat with a white muffler. That white muffler was their cue. They mounted their bicycles, and two preceded the car, and two followed it. They attended it till it stopped in the side street running up from the Koenigplatz, and they saw the passenger descend and enter the hotel, after which they dispersed for supper. But one of them had stopped for a moment and rubbed his eyes. "His Excellency has dined well," he said. "He trips like a young 'un."

Five minutes or so after the cyclists had started, another car passed the road-mending operations. It was exactly the same as its predecessor—a Mercedes limousine, and beside the driver sat a small man in a dark greatcoat and a white scarf. There were no cyclists to accompany this car, which made its best speed along the fine broad highway towards Rottenburg.

Presently the speed slackened, and the driver stopped to examine his engine.

"She pulls badly, mein Herr," he said. "I do not know why, for she was overhauled but yesterday."

The journey continued, but it was a limping business, scarcely ten miles an hour. Loeffler looked at his watch, and compared it with the far-off chiming of the half-hour from the Rottenburg clocks. He was in no hurry, for he had nothing more to do that night, and he was enjoying the mild autumn weather.

But when the Rottenburg lights were near and lamp-posts had begun to dot the country road, the car came to a dead stop. The chauffeur descended, and, after examination, shook his head.

"As I thought. It is the big end which has had some mischief done to it. Somehow it has not been getting its oil. We cannot continue. I must wait here in the hope of a tow, and you, I fear, must go on on foot. We are almost in Rottenburg. That is Altdorf before you, and in half an hour you will be in the Koenigplatz."

Loeffler was not unwilling. He had had too little exercise of late, and he was glad to stretch his legs. He took off his ulster and bade the driver leave it at his hotel when he reached the city. But he retained his white neckerchief, for his throat was weak, and he had a good deal of public speaking before him in the near future.

"You will continue till you meet the tram-lines," said the driver. "See, there is their terminus just ahead. But stop, there is a better road, I think." He removed his cap and scratched his head. "I am a newcomer to this place, but it sticks in my mind that the tram-lines fetch a circuit. Here, friend," he cried to a man who stood on the side-path. "What's the nearest way to the Kaiserhof hotel?"

The man, who looked like a workman, took his pipe from his mouth and came forward.

"The Kaiserhof?" he said. "Through Altdorf undoubtedly. It will save the gentleman a mile at least. By the Ganzstrasse which enters the Koenigplatz almost at the hotel door. See, mein Herr. After the tramway terminus you take the second street on your left and continue. That is the Ganzstrasse. You cannot miss it."

Loeffler thanked him, gave some final orders to his driver, and stepped out briskly. He had many things to think about and was glad of this chance, for he thought best when he was alone and using his legs. He looked back once and saw his driver sitting on the kerb, lighting his pipe. He did not notice the workman, who had crossed the road and was following him.

The Chancellor had had for many months to submit to the perpetual surveillance of a bodyguard from the secret police. He submitted, for he knew that it was wise, since his life was not his own, but he did not like it, and he welcomed a chance to escape from tutelage. He felt happier mixing freely with his own people than set on a guarded pinnacle. He liked, too, the spectacle of the evening life of the streets—it was not yet ten o'clock and they would be thronged—and he enjoyed the soft dry air into which was creeping the first chill of the coming winter. He strode vigorously along, and had soon reached the entrance to the Ganzstrasse.

This was a narrower street with no tram-lines. At the beginning it ran through a new workman's quarter of small houses interspersed with timber-yards. Here it was open and well-lit, and there were few people about. But presently it entered the old quarter of Altdorf, for it had been the principal street when Altdorf was a fortified town, whose inhabitants kept geese on the wide adjoining pasturelands. A good many new tenements had been erected, but between these rookeries were the bowed fronts of old buildings, and there were many narrow lanes running into mazes of slums. Loeffler remembered that Altdorf did not bear the best of reputations. There had been bread riots and other disorders in recent years, and he had a vague recollection of reports in which certain notorious suspects were said to have harboured here. The street certainly did not look too respectable. The broken pavement was crowded with people, sauntering youths and shop-girls, workmen, seedy-looking flotsam and jetsam, and the cafés seemed of a low type. He glanced in at a window now and then, and saw ugly heads bent over beer-mugs. But the crowd was orderly enough, and he noticed a policeman here and there. Somewhere, too, must be the watchful figures of his bodyguard. He had to abate his pace, and keep close to the wall to avoid being uncomfortably jostled. Several loutish-looking fellows had pushed against him, and one or two had peered suspiciously into his face. The height of the houses made the lighting bad. Between the lamps there were patches which were almost dark.

In one of these dark patches he found himself suddenly addressed. It was by a man in rough clothes, who had a cap with a broken peak and a knitted scarf knotted about his throat. The fellow rubbed shoulders with him and spoke low in his ear, and the voice and speech were not those of a workman.

"Excellency," he said, "do not look at me, but listen. You are in danger—grave danger. You must do as I tell you if you would save your life."

Loeffler in the war and ever since had lived in crises and had been forced to take swift decisions. Now he did not look at the speaker. In a level voice he asked: "What are your credentials? Why should I trust you?"

The man sidled away from him as they passed a lamp-post, and drew near again as the street darkened.

"I am the man Buerger who walked with you in the woods at Andersbach a month ago. We talked of St Augustine."

"Good," said Loeffler. "I remember. Tell me, what must I do?"

"Your bodyguard have been decoyed away," was the answer. "There are men close to you who seek your life. In three and a half minutes, when you have passed the third lamp-post from here, shooting will begin farther up the street, and the police whistles will be blown, and the few people here will hurry to the sound. But the shooting will be a blind, for it is you — here—that matters. Your enemies will seize you. They may kill you now, if they are hustled, but anyhow they will kill you soon."

"So!" Loeffler's voice was unchanged. The news only made him slow down his pace a little. "And you propose?"

"When the shots are fired we shall be abreast a little slit of a passage. It is called the Ganzallee, and is very ancient. It turns south from this street and then runs parallel to it and debouches just where it meets the Koenigplatz. It is narrow, so that two men can scarcely walk abreast. You must turn down it and run—run for your life. If you reach the Koenigplatz you are safe, and within fifty yards of your hotel."

"But they may catch me. I am not a young man."

"Your Excellency is not slow with your legs, for I have seen you. But I will lead the pursuit—and shepherd it. The others will not be allowed to pass me, and the place is so dark and narrow that they cannot shoot ahead... Are you ready, Excellency? We are almost there."

"I am ready," said Loeffler. Under the last lamp-post he had glanced at the dirty, white face of his companion, and seen

there that which he had recognised—something he believed he could trust.

The man slowed down a little, and Loeffler fell into step. It seemed to him that figures were crowding in on him on the pavement, all keeping pace with him. But he did not turn his head, though his eyes shifted to the left to look out for the crack in the masonry which was the Ganzallee.

Then suddenly a hundred yards up the street shots rang out, and at the same moment his companion hustled him. "There!" he whispered. "Run for your life and do not look back. Straight on. There is no turning."

Loeffler cannoned against an iron post in the entrance of the alley, bruising his thigh. Then he charged into a slit of darkness, while behind him he heard a sudden babble like a baying of hounds.

Things moved fast in that minute. The shots up the street were followed by a tumult of shouting, out of which rang shrilly the whistles of the police. The crowd at the mouth of the Ganzallee thinned, for some fled back down the street, and others ran towards the tumult. One or two policemen with drawn batons passed at the double. But half a dozen figures remained and drew quickly towards the man who had warned Loeffler.

This man behaved oddly. He whistled on his fingers, and waved his hand. Then he shouted something which may have been a password. Then he turned down the Ganzallee with the half-dozen at his heels. Each man of them had a pistol drawn.

The place was as dark as a tunnel, but now and then it was pricked with light from some window far up in the ravine of old masonry. The men behind saw nothing of the fugitive, but it was quiet in there, away from the noise of the street, and they could hear him slipping and stumbling ahead. The ground was cobbled and uneven, but the soft-soled shoes of the pursuit did not slip, while those of the quarry were clearly giving him trouble. The contest looked to be unequal in another way, for the seven men ran confidently in the dark as if the ground was familiar to them, while the man they sought could not put forth his best speed, in case of colliding with the wall at the many windings.

The chase was mute, except for laboured breathing. The man who led the pack may not have been the slowest, but he was far the clumsiest. Unlike the rest he wore nailed boots, which scrawled on the cobbles and made him often stumble. Yet none of the others succeeded in passing him, for he had the trick—learned long ago on an English football field—of edging off a competitor.

Once they were nearly up to the fugitive—he could not have been more than five yards ahead—but at that moment the leader tripped and staggered, causing the next two men to cannon into him and thereby delaying the chase for at least ten seconds. A second time success seemed to be within their grasp, at a point where the alley turned to the right and sloped steeply towards the Koenigplatz. They could see the glow of an arc lamp dimly reflected, and in it the figure of the man they sought, twisting like a hare, as his nails slipped on the greasy stones.

Undoubtedly the pursuit would have caught him, for he was making bad time, had it not been for the mishap to its leader. For his feet seemed suddenly to go from under him, and he came down with a crash, blocking the narrow road. The next three men cascaded over him on to their heads, and the last three sat down violently in their attempt to pull up. For a minute there was a struggling heap of humanity in the alley, and when it had sorted itself out the fugitive was in the bright light of the alley's debouchment.

"Our bird has escaped us," said one of them after a mouthful of oaths. "God's curse on you, Hannus, for a clumsy fool."

The leader, whom they called Hannus, sat on the ground nursing a bruised shoulder.

"God's curse on the cobbler that nailed my boots," he groaned. "Who was to guess that he would turn in to this rabbit-run! Had I known I would have come barefoot!"

Loeffler had some anxious moments when he almost felt the breath of his pursuers on his neck. Even at the sound of the final cataclysm he dared not turn his head, and he did not slacken pace till he emerged, breathless and very warm, in the Koenigplatz, with the lights of the Kaiserhof just across the street. He had a glimpse of the upper end of the Ganzstrasse, where the row seemed to be over. He went straight to his rooms, and informed his secretaries that he was ready for bed.

"And by the way, Karl," he said, "you might have up the police escort that Goertz insists on, and give them a wiggling. They lost me to-night for the better part of an hour. Bad staff-work somewhere."

II

The packet boat had scarcely passed the end of the breakwater which outlined the river channel when it encountered the heavy swell of the Channel, tormented by a north-easter. The tourist season was over, and it no longer ferried backwards and forwards crowds of cheerful trippers. Very few passengers had come on board, and those few were composing themselves in the cabins or in corners of the lower deck for several hours of misery.

But the steamer carried a good deal of cargo, and in the loading of it had fallen behind her scheduled time of starting. There were several touring-cars the owners of which had crossed by the quicker route, and left their cars to follow by the cheaper. There was also a certain amount of perishable fruit from the Normandy orchards. So the French harbour had witnessed a busy scene before the boat's departure. On the quay there had been none of the usual sellers of picture-postcards and chocolates and cherries, but there had been more than the usual complement of stevedores and dock-labourers to assist with the cargo.

There had indeed been a bustle opposite the after-part of the steamer which contrasted with the meagre traffic at the passengers' entry. The gangways to the hold had been crowded, and when the whistle blew for departure there was a

scurrying ashore of blue-breeched dockers. One man, who had been fussing about the position of a motor-car and giving instructions in excellent French, did not leave with the rest, though he did not seem to be a passenger. He remained inconspicuously on the side farthest from the quay where a ladder led to the middle deck, and, when the ship was leaving the river and the bustle in the hold had subsided, he ascended the ladder, and found a seat in a place which the spindrift did not reach. He was dressed in a worn trench-waterproof, and he wore a soft green hat well pulled down over his brows.

Loeffler had come aboard early and had sat himself in a corner of the smoking-room with a novel. After much thought he had chosen this route across the Channel. It was of extreme importance that he should be in England before the other delegates to the London Conference, for he had many preliminary matters to discuss. Had he crossed from Calais or Ostend his journey would have been conspicuous, and would have been broadcast throughout the world, thereby raising suspicion when suspicion must at all costs be avoided.

There was another reason. In a speech at Bonn three days earlier he had said things which had been nicely calculated to prepare the atmosphere for the Conference, but which, as he well knew, meant a declaration of war against certain potent forces in his own country. He had repeated them in a statement to an international news agency. He was perfectly aware of the danger he ran, and understood that these words of his would make certain people determined that he should not sit at the London council-board. He was dealing, he knew, with enemies to whom human life meant little. His colleagues would have had him travel by some way where he could be securely guarded. An aeroplane had been suggested, but by air he could not preserve his incognito, since it was the most public of all methods of conveyance, and his arrival would immediately be known. The same argument applied against the ordinary routes. There, indeed, he could have been well guarded, but it meant publicity and that must be shunned.

So he had chosen the long sea-route from a western French port at a season when few people were travelling. It fitted in with his plans, for he had to have certain conversations in Paris which could not be missed. Instead of an escort he had decided to trust in the protection of obscurity. He had reached Paris inconspicuously, and there had been no official greetings at the station. He had met the man to whom he wished to talk in an obscure café on the Rive Gauche. His hotel had been humble, and he had driven to the coast in an ordinary hired car. His passport did not bear his own name. On the English side all had been arranged. There he would be met by his host and driven to a country house. Once in England he believed that any risk would be past, for he would have the guardianship of the famous English police till the Conference was over. Beyond that he did not look, for it was his habit, so far as he himself was concerned, to live for the day. If the Conference succeeded much of his task was done, and the rest was in the lap of the gods.

Loeffler was a good sailor, and did not mind the violent pitching of the vessel. His novel did not interest him, and he relapsed into those complex reflections from which he was never for long free. Much of his power lay in the fact that he really thought. He gave less time to official papers than do most men, for he had the gift of plucking the heart swiftly from them, but he gave many hours to thought.

There was only one other man in the smoking-room, a plump gentleman in knickerbockers who was trying to write at a table, and finding it difficult. He was smoking a rank cigar and was bespattering himself with ash and ink. Loeffler lit his pipe to counteract the cigar, and half shut his eyes. But he found the place ill suited for his meditations. It was stuffy and smelly; each minute it seemed to hurl itself into the air and settle back with a disquieting wriggle, while the spray lashed at the closed windows. He took off his short overcoat, and laid it beside his big white waterproof. Then he changed his mind, put on his waterproof and went out.

He sought the upper deck, from which a bridge led across the hold to the after-part of the ship. All morning he had sped along the French roads amid scurries of rain, but now the skies had cleared and a cold blue heaven looked down upon the tormented seas. But from stem to stern the vessel was swept with salt water—stinging spray, and on the starboard side great grey-green surges. Loeffler had always loved wild weather, and his spirits rose as he inhaled the keen air and felt the drive of spindrift on his cheek. He put his thoughts back under lock and key and prepared to enjoy an hour or two of sanctuary.

Sanctuary—yes, that was the right word. He was enclosed between sea and sky in a little cosmos of his own. There was no sign of human life about, sailor or passenger; the vessel seemed to be impelled by no human power, like the ship in the strange English poem which he admired. Loeffler had been a mountaineer from his youth, because of his love of deep solitude. He was far from that nowadays, in a life which was all heat and sound and movement, but the gods had sent him a taste of it this afternoon. He strode the deck, his mackintosh collar buttoned round his throat. The seas were breaking heavily over the after-deck. He would like to go there and get wet, as he had often done when a boy.

There was another figure on the deck, and he saw that it was the knickerbockered gentleman of the smoking-room. He had finished his cigar, and had put on oilskins. A hat with the brim turned down almost met the oilskin collar, so that only a nose and eyes were visible. Loeffler realised that he had been wrong in thinking the man plump, for as he moved he gave the impression of immense strength. Those shoulders were overlaid not with fat but with muscle.

The man seemed to be in the same mood as Loeffler. He cried out in French about the weather, not in malediction but in praise.

“Here is the wind to blow away megrims! Like me, I see, you are fond of a buffeting.”

He fell into step and paced the deck beside him, laughing loudly when a wave more insolent than the rest topped the bulwarks and sent its wash swirling round their feet.

They covered the length of the deck twice, and then came to a halt above the hold, where there was some little shelter from the wind. The capstan and anchors in the stern were almost continually awash, and waves seemed to strike the place

obliquely and half submerge the staff from which the red ensign fluttered.

"We are well defended both of us," the man cried in a jolly voice. "Let us adventure there. We can dodge the bigger waves. My God, that is the spectacle!"

Loeffler followed him across the bridge, bending to the buffets of the gale. A man in a trench-waterproof, ensconced in a corner of the deck below, watched the two and smiled. He had been getting uneasy about Loeffler's sojourn in the cabin. He knew that if he did not leave it he would die there, since those who sought his life were determined to have it at all costs, but that they preferred another plan, with which Loeffler had now obligingly fallen in.

The starboard side of the after-deck was running like a river, but on the port side there was a thin strip which the waves did not reach. There were no bulwarks here, only a low rail; in quiet summer passages travellers would sun themselves here in deck-chairs and watch the track behind them outlined in white foam amid the green. There had been some carelessness, for several of the stanchions of the starboard railing had been removed and not replaced. For a yard or two there was no defence between the planking and the sea.

"What a spectacle!" repeated the large man in knickerbockers. "It is a parable of life, Monsieur. A line, a hair, a sheet of glass alone separates man at all times from death." He was looking at the sea, but now and then he glanced forward over the empty ship ploughing steadily through the waste. Not a soul was visible. He did not see the man in the trench-waterproof, who had scrambled half-way up the iron ladder from the hold, and was now flattening himself under the edge of the after-deck. Nor could the man see him, though he could hear his voice.

Loeffler, awed by the majesty of the scene, and thinking his own thoughts, found his arm taken by the other.

"See, that big surge is past. Now we may look over the other side and be back before the next one."

Obediently he took three steps amid the back-wash of the last wave, and looked into a trough of green darkness over which the little vessel was slightly heeling.

Then suddenly he found himself grasped in arms like a bear's, grasped so firmly that the breath went from him. The big man was bracing himself for some effort against which he was powerless to struggle. He felt his feet leave the deck...

The grip slackened. A sharp voice had cried out behind them. It cried a single word, but that word was enough to check Loeffler's assailant.

Then it spoke in fierce German.

"You fool, Kurbin. You have got the wrong man."

The giant let his arms relax, and Loeffler found himself switched from his grasp by a man in a trench-waterproof. The ship was heeling again to port, and a shove sent him reeling against the port rails.

"Back," a voice shouted. "Run, man, run for your life."

Loeffler had heard that voice before. When the next surge broke over the stern he was already halfway across the bridge over the hold. He glanced back once and saw the after-part of the ship blotted out in a shroud of spray.

Loeffler's going seemed to rouse the knickerbockered man to a berserk fury. He flung himself upon the other, and the two swung against the port rails. But the man in the trench-waterproof was equal to the occasion. The giant was wearing rubber-soled shoes which had a poor purchase on the swimming deck. He slipped, and the other wriggled out of his clutch and managed to clasp him round the middle from behind. Then, while his balance had gone, he swung him in his arms against the low rail which defended the place from the hold. The rail gave under the weight and the big man pitched down among the motor-cars. His head hit the bonnet of one, and he rolled over and lay quiet.

The man in the trench-waterproof glanced forward and saw that no one was in sight. He slipped down into the hold and had a look at his adversary. The man was bleeding from a gash on the head, and was doubtless concussed, but his neck was unbroken.

Then he went forward and found a sailor. "There has been an accident," he said. "A gentleman has fallen into the hold from the after-deck. He is unconscious, but not, I think, badly hurt. Get him moved to a cabin. Meantime I will see the captain."

He showed the captain certain papers, and told him a story which caused that honest seaman to rub his eyes.

"There need be no fuss," he said. "There must be no fuss, since no harm has been done. You know Lord Lamancha by sight? He will meet the small gentleman in the white mackintosh and take charge of him. Never mind who the gentleman is. He travels incognito, but he is a person of some importance. As for the other, the doctor had better attend to him. He has no baggage, but he has plenty of money—he will probably wish to return to France with you to-morrow. Only, till we reach England, his cabin door must be kept locked."

III

As Lamancha drove Loeffler through the dusk from the coast, by way of a broad river valley into wooded uplands, he did not talk politics.

"You'll have five days of peace here," he told him, "peace very slightly interrupted by discussion. Geraldine is coming down, and Stannix, and that is the party. It is a jolly place and the weather looks to be mending. Don't you call this time the 'Old Wives' Summer' in Germany? You don't shoot, I know, but I will take you for some long rides on the Moor. One doesn't often get the chance of entertaining a man like you in our simple country way. The last European celebrity who came here had three secretaries with him and Scotland Yard sent down a couple of men."

Loeffler observed that it was a pleasure to get away from the surveillance of detectives, and Lamancha laughed.

"Well, as it happens, you won't quite escape that. The fact is, we had a burglary two night ago. Oh no, nothing serious. It was very much the usual business—my wife's room while we were at dinner, open windows, a ladder from the garden. The burglars were scared away by the return of her maid, and had no time to pinch anything. But the police have chosen to take it seriously, and there are London men in the village making enquiries. It has nothing to do with you, of course, for nobody knows that you are here. But I thought I'd let you know about it, in case you are surprised by the sight of sharp-faced fellows looking on at our doings."

The weather mellowed, as Lamancha had hoped, into a St Luke's summer, and for five days Loeffler enjoyed a leisure the existence of which he had almost forgotten. The old house, set among meadows of hill turf and flanked by russet woods, seemed a sanctuary remote from a fevered world. The hostess was the only woman in the party, and Mildred Lamancha's slow, sweet, drawling voice gave the appropriate key of peace. Geraldine, the Prime Minister, shot all day with Stannix, while Lamancha and his guest, mounted on hill ponies, quartered the uplands, and Loeffler's face took on a wholesome colour from wind and sun. At night they talked, and their talk ranged far. In such company Loeffler felt at his ease, and threw off much of his habit of caution. Through his dogged matter-of-factness there came glimpses of enthusiasms and dreams. Geraldine, who of the three ministers knew him least well, was moved to confide to his host that he had got a new notion of the little man.

On the evening before they were due to leave for London there was a small party. "Old Jocelyn is coming to dine," Lamancha told Loeffler; "asked himself and I didn't like to refuse. He used to be our Ambassador at Vienna, and he speaks good German—not the limping affair of the rest of us. You'll like the old fellow. He's uncommonly knowledgeable, and he'll be thrilled to meet you. There's no more need for secrecy, for to-morrow evening the papers will announce your arrival. I hope you have had a pleasant time here. It has been a very educative time for all of us, especially for the P.M. I don't mind telling you that I have been rather anxious about him. He sees a little too much of Creevey and his lot."

"I have learned much," Loeffler replied with his slow smile, "and I have seen many beautiful things. Also my English has improved, is it not so?"

To his wife later in the day Lamancha brought a message.

"Jocelyn wants to know if he can bring a friend to dinner to-night. He has a man staying with him, an American doctor. Upcott's the name. Trust Jocelyn to have an assortment of odd friends. He collects them up and down the world like rare postage stamps. I suppose it's all right, for Jocelyn thinks it's only a country dinner-party. Anyhow, it's too late to matter. Things have gone well so far, I think."

"I have loved it," said Lady Lamancha. "I have completely lost my heart to the Chancellor. He is like one of the old wise collie dogs at Leriot. I don't suppose he realised he was being so closely looked after. He has been, you know. Kit spoke to me about it. He asked what dark secret we were hiding. The police have been simply squatting round the place. You didn't notice it perhaps, for you were out most of the day, but there's always been somebody hanging about each of the gates. And then there's the absurd old Scotsman that Adam Melfort insisted on our having in the house. I believe he is the life and soul of the housekeeper's room, but he is an odd figure for a servant. I am sure that he is wearing his best Sunday blacks."

Lamancha laughed.

"Amos is a wonderful graven image, but you couldn't get a better watch-dog. There's a new ghost haunting the west corridor, the wraith of an elder of the kirk... By the way, you remember that Adam himself is coming to-night. He'll arrive late, and will have dined already."

Sir Francis Jocelyn was a stately old gentleman verging upon eighty whose gout made him lean heavily upon two sticks. He was a little surprised at finding himself in what looked like a committee of the Cabinet, and his eyes opened wide when he was presented to Loeffler. Retirement from the world had not dimmed his interest in the world's affairs. Mr Upcott, the American doctor, proved to be a youngish man with a cheerful clean-shaven face and a mop of fair hair brushed back from his forehead. He spoke almost with an English intonation, for it seemed that he was a Bostonian, though now a professor at Baltimore. Jocelyn introduced him with a short sketch of his attainments, and he gravely informed each member of the party that he was pleased to meet them.

On a side table in the hall stood the materials for making cocktails.

"I told Upcott that he would find here what he was accustomed to," said Jocelyn. "Better let him mix the drinks. He has already turned my butler into an artist."

Mr Upcott announced his willingness, and set to work at the side table with a professional air. Lamancha, who detested cocktails, drank sherry, but the others accepted an agreeable mixture which appeared to be known as a "Maryland side-car." Loeffler raised his glass to the health of the compounder.

It was a pleasant meal. Jocelyn was too skilled a talker to steer near the shoals of current politics. His memory dallied with old days in pre-war Vienna, and Geraldine, who had many continental friendships, kept up the ball of reminiscence. It was a world which Loeffler knew only by hearsay, but he was eager in his questions, and the Maryland side-car seemed to have thawed his gentle taciturnity. But the success of the dinner was Mr Upcott, who showed that medical science had not monopolised his interests. He seemed to know everybody and to have been everywhere in the civilised world. He was enlightening in his comments on his own land, and he had the lovable solemnity on public questions which characterises one type of young American. But he had also a wealth of idiomatic slang and curious metaphors which introduced an agreeable spice of comedy. He had often to be explained to Loeffler, generally by Jocelyn, who professed to specialise in American idioms, and the explanations produced that rare thing in the Chancellor, hearty laughter.

After dinner Jocelyn, Lamancha, Stannix and Geraldine made a four at bridge. Loeffler and Mr Upcott did not play, and sat with Lady Lamancha round the library hearth, for the autumn frosts had begun. Their talk was desultory, for the Chancellor had relapsed into his customary silence, and sat with his eyes on the fire, as if he were seeing pictures in the flames. Mr Upcott was as sparkling as before, and entertained his hostess with an account of the last St Cecilia's ball at Charleston which he had attended, and which he said was the ultimate outpost of the well-born South against a vulgar world. He was very amusing, and the third in the group was forgotten.

Suddenly Loeffler raised himself from his chair.

"I think if you will permit me, gracious lady," he said, "I will go to bed. I am feeling weary, and I have much to do to-morrow."

He spoke in a small, strained voice, and his face was very white. Lady Lamancha was full of kindly anxiety.

"No. I am quite well," he said. "Only tired. Pray do not disturb yourself. I will have a long sleep."

He swayed a little as he passed the bridge-table.

"What! Off already!" Lamancha cried. "Well, perhaps it's wise."

Loeffler shook hands ceremoniously with Jocelyn and left the room. Lamancha rose and came over to the fire.

"Anything wrong, Mildred? Can his food have upset him? He had the complexion of a deerstalker when he came down to dinner. Perhaps it was your cocktail, Mr Upcott!"

The young American looked grave.

"He certainly doesn't look good. Say, Lord Lamancha, hadn't I better go up to him? It's my job, after all. We oughtn't to take chances with so big a man."

"That's a good idea. It would ease my mind. I'll show you his room."

He said something to the bridge-players, and led the young doctor up the main staircase to where the west corridor turned off from the upper hall. In the dim light at the end of it stood the rock-like figure of Andrew Amos. Lamancha knocked at the door of Loeffler's bedroom, and opened it for Mr Upcott to enter. "You'll find your way down again all right," he said. As he turned away he noticed that Amos was no longer in the corridor.

Loeffler had taken off his coat and waistcoat and was lying on his bed. He opened his eyes languidly as the young doctor entered, and made an effort to sit up.

"You stay still, Excellency," said Mr Upcott. "Lord Lamancha thought I might as well have a look at you, for I'm a doctor by profession. Just keep as you are."

He felt his patient's pulse, looked at his tongue, and listened to the beating of his heart.

"Nothing much the matter, Excellency," he said. "But I'm going to fix you so that you'll have a good night and wake in the morning as jolly as a bird. We doctors don't work with coarse medicines now. Just a prick of a needle and a spot of the right kind of dope. Give me your arm."

Mr Upcott took from the pocket of his dinner jacket a small flat leather case, from which he selected a tiny syringe. He did not fill it, so it appeared that it had been already prepared. He was about to take Loeffler's arm, when suddenly his right hand was seized from behind and the syringe was forced from his grasp.

Mr Upcott turned to find that two men had entered from the adjacent sitting-room. One was the grotesque figure in black that he had noticed in the corridor. The other was a tallish man in tweeds.

"No," said the latter. "You do nothing more, Mr Upcott."

He balanced the syringe in his palm, and then picked up the leather case from the bed.

"You have made your preparations well," he said. "One touch of this and your job would have been done. It's the new stuff, hamaline, isn't it? Doesn't kill, but atrophies the mind and drugs the body for a week or two. I congratulate you on your ingenuity."

Mr Upcott had been transformed from the bland doctor into something alert and formidable. He looked as if he were going to strike, but there was that in the air of the two men that made him think better of it.

The man who had spoken handed him back his case.

"I take it there's nothing much wrong with Herr Loeffler," he said. "Something in your cocktail, perhaps. They tell me you are very adroit at that game... You will go quietly downstairs and tell Lord Lamancha that everything is well. Then you will go home with Sir Francis Jocelyn. You had better leave England to-morrow or there may be trouble. Do you understand me?"

Mr Upcott lifted the bedside lamp and looked at the other's face. Then he put it down and shrugged his shoulders. He laughed and his laugh was not pleasant.

"I've got you now," he said. "Colonel Melfort, isn't it? One of us too, by God! Well, we shan't forget this evening."

Adam appeared in the library about eleven o'clock after Jocelyn and his friend had departed.

"Just arrived," he explained. He glanced at the array of glasses around the siphons and decanters. "Hullo, have you had a party?" he said. "Where is the great man?"

"Gone to bed," said Lamancha. "He wasn't feeling his best, but a man that old Jocelyn brought to dinner, a young American doctor, had a look at him and reported him all right. Amusing chap, that doctor. Mildred went upstairs whooping at some jape of his on the doorstep. I must get her to tell it me in the morning."

After breakfast next day Adam sat in Loeffler's sitting-room. The Chancellor had breakfasted in bed, but had sent word to his host that he was wholly recovered. Lamancha had interviewed him, and then Adam had been sent for.

"I have to thank you, Colonel Melfort, for a great service," Loeffler said in his shy, deprecating voice. "How great a service I do not know, but I can guess. That man last night—he would have drugged me? Would the drug have killed?"

Adam shook his head.

"I do not think so—from what I know of hamaline. But it would have made you useless in the Conference. The Iron Hands are artists, and do not take stronger measures than the case requires."

"What do you know of the Iron Hands?"

"A good deal. I am by way of being one of their inner brotherhood—the extremists who stick at nothing. You cannot defeat such people unless you are of them. For three weeks, Excellency, you have been leading a dangerous life, but now for a little you are safe. Since you are now officially in England you are in the keeping of the English police. As a matter of fact, you have been in their charge for the last five days, but your anonymity made it difficult to take full precautions."

Loeffler had been staring at him, and suddenly recognition awoke in his eyes.

"You were the man on the boat," he said, "the man who saved me from being flung into the sea? Am I right?"

"I was the man. Do not blame the Iron Hands for that. That was the work of another branch of your enemies who are clumsier and more desperate."

Loeffler's puzzled face broke into a smile.

"It is a world of marvels," he said. "I did not think when we sat at dinner in August in Berlin that at our next meeting you would save my life. You have been my good angel."

"We met in between," said Adam. "Consider, Excellency, search your memory. What of the Freiburg chemist at Andersbach and the Wandervögel?"

Loeffler sprang to his feet.

"Then you were the man at Rottenburg that plucked me out of the Ganzstrasse business? Him I recognised. God in Heaven, who and what are you? Can you change your person like a wizard? You are miraculous—beyond belief. I can observe and my memory is good, but you have vanquished me utterly."

"I served a long apprenticeship to the job," said Adam. "You think we first met at dinner with Lord Lamancha in London eighteen months ago. But you are wrong. We met before that."

"It cannot be."

"It is true. Do you remember a day in February '18 at Bodenheim? You were then Major Loeffler, a convalescent recovering from wounds. You had before you for examination a neutral commercial agent, a Dane called Randers, with whose doings you were not altogether satisfied. You and your colleagues—you especially—gave Randers a pretty hot time. More than once you nearly broke through his defences. Had you succeeded Randers would have died, and I think that you yourself would not be alive this morning."

Loeffler passed his hand over his eyes.

"It comes back to me. A middle-aged man with a high colour and a blond moustache. Rather a vulgar fellow? I suspected him, but I had not enough to act upon. But I was right, you say?"

"You were right. I was a British officer, and for three years of the war I was behind your front. Thank God I was able to do your country a fair amount of harm."

"And now you would atone for it by doing my country much good. No, not atone. There was no need of atonement, for you were doing your rightful duty. But you are chivalrous, and now you would do an old enemy a kindness."

"May I put it differently? I want to help to build up the world. You are at the moment the chief builder, so my services are at your disposal. I cannot direct—I cannot even carry a hod—but I may be able to keep wreckers away."

"I thank you." Loeffler spoke gravely and held out his hand. He seemed to be under the influence either of some emotion or some sudden thought, for he walked to the window and stood there in silence looking out at the morning landscape.

"Come here," he said, and Adam took his place beside him.

The view was over the terraced garden to the park, which rose to a low wooded ridge. The early hours had been clear and sparkling with frost, but now banks of vapour were drifting athwart the landscape. The garden was plain in every detail, with its urns and parapets and statues, its rose-beds and grass-plots drenched in dew. But the park was dim, and the trees were wreathed in mist, and the ridge was only a shadow. But, far beyond, some trick of light revealed a distant swell of moorland, dark as a sapphire against the pale sky.

"Look!" said Loeffler. "That is how I see the world. The foreground is plain—and the horizon—but the middle distance is veiled. So it is with me. I see the next stage very clear, but all beyond that is hidden from me. But I see also the horizon to which I would move... Let us sit down, Colonel Melfort, and talk a little. I can lay open my heart to my preserver. You are a friend of Germany, but still more you are a friend of the world. I, likewise—for Germany cannot be safe until the world is safe. Nor, I would add, can the world be safe until Germany is at peace. These things are a circle, which the pessimist will

call vicious and the optimist virtuous."

He held his head low, and dropped his clasped hands between his knees, looking, thought Adam, much as Ulysses Grant might have looked at some difficult hour of the Wilderness Campaign.

"This Conference," he said, "I now think that it will succeed. But its success will only carry us a little way. We shall have a breathing space, no more—not yet a place to rest. After it there will come for Germany the slow business of waiting and toiling and suffering. She will face it, I think, and she will go through with it, but she must have some streak of light on her horizon. If that light is denied, she will despair and sink into the slough of anarchy, from which it will be hard to raise her. Then she will suffer most, but all the world will suffer much, and all our dreams of peace will have gone. We shall be back in the old cruel world—crueller than before, because there will be deeper poverty and no hope. Do you understand me, Colonel Melfort?"

Adam nodded. "You look to the Conference to give you the streak of light?"

"Assuredly. Your country will not deny it us. Nor will America, I think. Nor France, if she is wisely handled. Such a promise of an ultimate dawn will be much. After that my task, if God permits me, is to keep my people steady. That will not be easy, for there are many who are impatient and would cut the knot. Some of them—your friends of the past week—think that my life is the barrier to prosperity, and that with me out of the way the road will be clear. They are foolish, for I matter little. I am only the housemaid sweeping the floor and opening the windows. If I were gone the dust would be thicker, for I do not make dust. But most of my opponents are not violent or criminal, but they are obstinate and short-sighted. They cannot endure to wait. Therefore they will try other ways, and unless they are held there will be disaster."

Adam looked at Loeffler as he sat with his head poked forward, his voice grave and level, and his eyes abstracted as if in an inward vision.

"I think you can hold your people," he said.

"I think I can," was the answer. "But on one condition only—that the streak of light is not allowed to die out of their sky."

He got to his feet and stood in front of the fire.

"I will be wholly candid with you, Colonel Melfort. It is your right, since you have made yourself my friend... That streak of light does not depend upon Germany, but upon the world outside. It does not altogether depend upon the Governments. They may be difficult at times, but I think they will be reasonable, for after all they understand their own interest. As for the press it does not greatly matter, since the press is not an independent power. But there is a great and potent world which the Governments do not control. That is the world of finance, the men who guide the ebb and flow of money. With them rests the decision whether they will make that river a beneficent flood to quicken life, or a dead glacier which freezes wherever it moves, or a torrent of burning lava to submerge and destroy. The men who control that river have the ultimate word. Now most of them mean well, but they do not see far, and they are not very clever; therefore they are at the bidding of any man who is long-sighted and a master of strategy. Such a man has the future of the world—the immediate future—in his hands."

"Is there such a man?" Adam asked.

"I am coming to believe that there is. And I think you know him. He can command money, and he can dictate its use, for he is clever—no, not clever—he has genius, a persuasive genius. If he wished, he could move—what? Not the State treasuries, which are difficult things. Those responsible for them have to give strict account and carry with them in their policy millions of uninstructed voters. No, he could move the private hoards of which the world is full, and apply them wisely to sowing here and irrigating there in the certainty of a rich harvest. The Rothschilds, you remember, made their great fortunes by helping a bankrupt Europe through the Napoleonic wars, by moving money to the point where it was needed. Such a man as I speak of could do more to-day, for he could move money not to pay bills for war material and war damages but to nurse throughout the globe the new life which is waiting to break forth. The world is richer to-day than it has ever been, but the communications are choked, so that one half of it is water-logged and the other half a parched desert."

"The man you speak of is not doing what you want?"

Loeffler shook his head.

"He is moving money but capriciously, without any wise purpose. I do not think that he cares greatly for wealth, but he is scornfully amassing it—nothing more. He has persuaded finance to trust him—in America, in France, to some extent in Britain—and the trust is not misplaced, for he will earn for it big dividends. He provides loans for many lands but at too high a price, for he exacts in return a control over certain things which in no land should be under foreign control. He has his pound of flesh, and the flesh is taken from vital parts of the body. Therefore his loans do not benefit. They tide over a momentary difficulty, but in the end they cripple recovery—and they may kill it."

"That is not all," he went on. "They foster a bitter nationalism which I would fain see die. A people is not grateful when it sees its choicest possessions go in payment for this foreign help. Such a man may create violent antagonisms—dangerous for himself, more dangerous for the world."

"Let's get down to names," said Adam. "There would be more hope for things if Creevey were out of the way?"

"Yes," said Loeffler. "And also No. You open your eyes, but I will tell you what I mean. Mr Creevey has genius beyond question, but it is a misdirected genius. Misdirected, not in its essence malevolent. As I read him he is still immature. You may laugh, but I am very serious. He has immense abilities, but he uses them like a clever child. His fault is an arrogance of

intellect. He is so wrapped up in the use of a superb intelligence that he does not permit himself to look to ultimate things. He is, if you please, not awakened. Now there is so little genius in the world that I cannot wish for its disappearance, even if it stands in my way. Mr Creevey is no common man; he is no mere money-spinner. He is no doubt very rich, but I do not think that he pays much heed to his private bank account. He seeks nobler game—the satisfaction to be won from the use of a great mind. But it is not the noblest, and in its results it may be disastrous. He is at present a dark angel in the world, but could his power be orientated otherwise he might be an angel of light.”

“Why do you tell me this?” Adam asked. “I cannot help you.”

Loeffler smiled.

“I tell it you because you are my friend, and I want my friend to understand me.”

There was a knock at the door and Lamancha entered.

“The cars will be ready in half an hour,” he said. “You’re coming with us, Adam, aren’t you?”

“If I may. I’m by way of dining with Falconet to-night.”

v

Adam and Falconet dined in the latter’s rooms in St James’s Street. Another man joined them after dinner, whose name was Blakiston, an Englishman who had been for thirty years in New York and was Falconet’s partner in many enterprises. He was small, grizzled and clean-shaven, and when he spoke he had the habit of dangling tortoiseshell eyeglasses at the end of a black ribbon. He looked the conventional banker, and he had a note-book which was seldom out of his hand.

He gave a list of businesses which sounded like an extract from the speech of the chairman of an investment company.

“Which of them are going to raise questions in the next few months?” Falconet asked.

Blakiston considered. There was a group of wood-pulp propositions in East Prussia which might be difficult—an attempt to combine several had been blocked by the local boards. An Italian artificial silk concern was at loggerheads with the Government over certain labour questions. Then there were the michelite mines in Rhodesia—something had to be done there in the way of a working agreement with the Swedish and American interests. The financial arrangements, too, with Leigh and O’Malley of New York were due for revision, for some of that group were kicking about the German municipalities loan. Blakiston had a list of other activities—a coffee combine in Brazil, the vast estates of a Westphalian syndicate in the Argentine, the proposed match monopoly in Turkey, and a new harbour on the Adriatic.

“All of them boiling up to be nasty, you think?” Falconet asked. “And with a little trouble you reckon you could make them boil faster?”

Blakiston did not consult his note-book.

“Sure,” he said, smiling. “Up to a point, that is. Our interests are so widely scattered that we can bring some kind of pressure to bear in most parts of the globe.”

“Enough to make it necessary for Mr Creevey to give the business his personal attention? I mean, go out and look at things for himself?”

Blakiston considered.

“Yes, I think so. He won’t go to Rhodesia—couldn’t be spared that long from England. But we could so fix it that he would have to visit New York.”

“Mr Melfort wants the chance of a long private talk with him, and that can’t be got in London. What do you recommend?”

“Why not an Atlantic crossing? We could arrange that they had adjacent cabins.”

Adam shook his head. “I’m afraid that wouldn’t do. I want rather more than Mr Creevey’s company. We must set the stage a little.”

Presently Blakiston had to leave for an appointment, and the two others sat on till Big Ben tolled midnight.

“I don’t quite get you,” said Falconet. “You want Creevey to yourself for a bit. What do you hope to do with him? Convert him?”

“No,” said Adam. “I couldn’t live with him in argument for ten minutes. I don’t talk his language. If Kit Stannix can do nothing with him it’s not likely that I should succeed.”

“Agreed. Then, what do you mean to do?”

“Put myself alongside him—and keep there.”

“In the hope that fate will shuffle the cards for you?”

“In the certainty,” said Adam simply. “My job is sharpened to a point now, and that point is Creevey. He is the grit in the machine, and the grit has to be removed.”

Falconet whistled.

“Pity we don’t live in simpler times. Or that you were something of a ruffian. It would be so easy to knock him on the head... I don’t say you’re not right. There are other kinds of appeals than argument, and you’re an impressive fellow when you get alongside a man. You say you want to set the stage? How d’you mean?”

"I want to isolate him—get him out of his padded life into a rougher one. I want to put him outside all the fortifications he has built and make him feel naked. The Arctic ice would be the place—or the desert—but, since these are impossible, I must find a substitute."

Falconet grunted.

"I see. You want to reason with him as man to man—not as the amateur and the big professional."

"I want to make facts reason with him."

"And you believe that they will? It's a great thing to have your grip on predestination. Well, I daresay something could be managed. Blakiston will have to get busy. Our job is to shepherd Mister Creevey out of board-rooms and special trains and big hotels into the wilderness. It might be done, for, though we are darned civilised, the wilderness is still only across the road. Count me in. I'm going to get a lot of quiet amusement out of this stunt. But it's a large-size job. You're right to look solemn."

As Adam walked home along the Embankment, he stopped to lean over the parapet and watch the river bubbling with the up-running tide. He had shown a grave face to Falconet, and gravity was the key of his mood, a grave expectancy. His mind ran back to the first sight of Creevey, when he had dined with Scrope at the restaurant and Scrope had spoken significant words about the man with the big forward-thrusting head and the ardent eyes. He remembered his first meeting with him in Falconet's room, and his own puzzled antagonism. Later meetings were telescoped into one clear impression—of something formidable, infinitely formidable, perverse and dangerous. He had no personal feeling in the matter; he neither liked nor disliked him, but regarded him as he would have regarded a thunderstorm or a cyclone, a perilous natural force against which the world must be protected.

And yet—was this man only an angel of destruction? In the talk in Berlin in August he had detected in him a fiery honesty; to one thing he would never be false, the power of reason with which he had been so nobly endowed. Loeffler, too, believed that if fortune were kind this capricious disintegrating force might be harnessed for the world's salvation... Adam had one of those moments of revelation in which he saw life narrowed to a single road moving resolutely to a goal. His mission had been to find quality, and he had found it. His task was now to release that quality for the service of mankind—or to clip its wings and render it impotent for ever.

He had a passing moment of nervousness. His opponent was now not the perversity of the world, but a single man, and that man a genius. He mistrusted his powers, till he remembered that he was only a servant of great allies. A servant—the humblest of servants. He was not architect or builder, not even a labourer with a hod, but something lowlier still, and in his lowliness was strength. As he let himself into his rooms on the quiet Temple staircase, he was in the same mood which had sent him to his knees years before in his prison cell. The sign he had asked for had been given him.

BOOK IV

PART 1

CHAPTER 28

Mr Warren Creevey took his seat in the reserved compartment of the boat-train, and, as the whistle sounded, unfolded his Times and settled down to a slightly cynical study of the foreign page. It was his custom to travel in a modest state, with the best reservations; his private secretary was in an adjoining carriage, and somewhere in the train his assiduous valet; he travelled so much that he was respectfully greeted by the railway company's servants, and could count on the way being made smooth for him. The weather was sharp, so he wore a heavy fur coat, which he removed in the warm compartment. As he regarded the luxurious garment he smiled, for it reminded him of a thought which had crossed his mind as the train was starting.

A secretary and two clerks had seen him off, bringing him papers to sign and receiving his final instructions. This hasty visit to Italy was a nuisance. What had caused the Brieg-Suffati people to get suddenly at loggerheads with the authorities, when hitherto they had pulled so well together? He had a great deal of work on his hands in London and resented this interruption, even if it were only for a few days... Yet, as he waved a farewell to his secretary and tipped the guard, he realised that he was not altogether displeased. Mr Creevey was not a vain man—the lack of vanity was part of his strength—but he could not but be conscious that he mattered a good deal in the world. The sable-lined coat on the seat beside him was an emblem of the place he had won.

Old General Ansell, who sat on one of his boards, had a metaphor which he was never tired of using. It was drawn from the Western Front in the war. He said it had been like a great pyramid with its point directed to the enemy. Behind the lines was a vast activity—factories like Birmingham, a network of railway lines like Crewe, camps, aviation grounds, square miles of dumps, hospitals, research laboratories, headquarters full of anxious staff officers. But as one went forward, the busy area narrowed, and the resources of civilisation grew more slender. And then at the apex of the pyramid you were back in barbarism, a few weary human beings struggling in mire and blood to assert the physical superiority which had been the pride of the cave-dweller.

The General had usually applied his parable in a far-fetched way, for he was a little sceptical of the plenary power of science and harped on human quality. But Mr Creevey gave it a different application. He, so to speak, inverted the pyramid. All great human activities expanded from a single point. Their ultimate front might be as wide as the globe, but it drew its power from the brain at the apex. His was such a brain, and it amused him to reflect how much depended on him. He was not the soldier in the trenches, but the directing mind in the impressive hinterland, from which both hinterland and trenches drew their life... While the train flashed past deserted hop-fields and pastures dim under a November sky, Mr Creevey smiled as he lit a cigar. How far was old Ansell's world of mud and blood from the guarded ritual of his life!

In Paris he drove to the Meurice, dined in a private room, and then, having no work on hand, decided to pay his respects to an old friend, the Duchesse de Rochambeau, in her flat near the Champs Elysées. The day was Tuesday, and it was her custom to receive on Tuesday. Mr Creevey had a vast acquaintance, which he carefully tended, for he was a student of humanity. He had a weakness for a certain type of aristocratic relic-worshipper, especially in France; their sentimentality did not appeal to him, but they cherished wit, a rarity in these days, and he liked the free play of their minds. Their illusions were kept apart in a modish shrine, and did not, like the illusions of democracy, taint and muddy the springs of thought. It pleased him to share in the delicate sword-play of a world without seriousness or passion... But the Duchesse had a cold in her head, and her salon that evening was dull. There was a contentious old gentleman who buttonholed him and discoursed of Loeffler with the dismal platitudes of the Nationalist press. Mr Creevey left early and retired to bed.

The long journey next day bored him. He was fond of a day journey, for it enabled him to make up arrears of reading, and this one he had marked out for the study of a new Swedish work on currency. But he found the arguments of Professor Broester so ill-coordinated, that he turned to a couple of sensational romances which he had brought from England. These did not please him more—indeed, they exasperated him with their pictures of a world where strange things happened at every street-corner. Heavy-footed nonsense, he reflected; strange things happened, but not in this mode of childish melodrama. Life was conducted nowadays by great standardised machines, as exact and ruthless as the processes of nature, and no casual accident could deflect them. Adventure lay in designing, altering, regulating this cosmic mechanism, and not in inserting a foolish spoke in the wheels. The spoke would be as futile as a child's beating of the dome of St Paul's to annoy the Dean.

The train was very empty. In the restaurant car that night at dinner he sat opposite a lachrymose German who harped on the sins of France, much as the old gentleman at the Duchesse de Rochambeau's had harped on the misdeeds of Loeffler. He was a youngish man with fair hair who chose to talk English. Mr Creevey, always impatient of amateur politics, did not linger over his meal. He felt irritated, almost—a rare thing for him—depressed, so he summoned his private secretary and bent his mind to business. His spirits did not recover till next morning when they ran into sunlight in the Lombard plain.

In Rome he had two days of warm blue weather which was almost oppressive in his over-heated hotel. He had never greatly cared for the Italian capital, and, for a man of his multitudinous acquaintance, knew comparatively few of its citizens. He had luncheon with a few business associates, at which the affairs of the Brieg-Suffati company were discussed, and a long afternoon with various departments of State. He was received with the civility to which he was accustomed, and realised that the difficulties which had arisen would not be hard to settle. But he found that his necessary interview with the head of the Government must be postponed till the morrow, and he had the prospect of some hours of idleness,

unpleasing to a man who chess-boarded his life between strenuous work and strenuous play. He called at the British Embassy, and was promptly bidden that evening to dinner.

Before dressing he sat for a little in the hall of his hotel, watching the guests. Many were foreigners on their way home, but there was a considerable sprinkling of Roman residents, for the hotel had a reputation for its apéritifs. It was rare for Mr Creevey to be in a place where he did not know by sight many of the people. Here he saw only two faces that he recognised. One was the lachrymose German whom he had met in the train; he sat by himself in a corner, and seemed to be waiting for someone, for his pale eyes scanned with expectation every newcomer. Mr Creevey was thankful that he escaped his eye, for he had no wish for more international politics. The other was Falconet, who entered, cast about for a seat, thought better of it, and went out. Falconet, of course, was to be looked for anywhere and at any time; he was the most notorious globe-trotter of the day.

But if Mr Creevey saw few acquaintances, he was conscious that several people looked at him, as if they recognised him. He was not vain, and did not set this down to his celebrity, for he was not the kind of man whose portraits filled the press. Nor was there anything sensational in his appearance; he dressed quietly, and looked the ordinary travelling Englishman. But he was aware that he was being covertly studied by several men and one woman, who hastened to avert their eyes when he looked in their direction. He was a little puzzled, for this habit seemed to have been growing in the last few months. Wherever he went he was aware that somebody in his neighbourhood was acutely interested in him. He considered the matter for a minute or two and then dismissed it from his mind. He had no time to spare for the minor inexplicables of life.

The dinner at the Embassy passed the evening pleasantly. Falconet was the only other guest at the meal, and Falconet was in an urbane mood and on his best behaviour. Mr Creevey rarely asked himself whether or not he liked a man; his criterion was whether he respected him, and he was not disposed to underrate the American. At their first meeting he had thought that he had discovered one with whom he could work, and, detecting Falconet's imaginative side, had set himself to cultivate it. But presently he had found him intractable, the type of American whose mind had two compartments, realistic business and schwärmerisch dreams, and who let the one spill into the other. But Falconet was formidable, for he had immense wealth, and, when roused, could return to the predatory brilliance of the grandfather who had made the fortune. So he had tried to avoid antagonising him, and, though they had differed often, they had never quarrelled.

To-night he found him polite and unassertive. Falconet gave no information about his own doings, and was incurious about Creevey's. He was full of Rome, of which he talked with the enthusiasm of a school-marm on her first visit. He asked the ordinary questions about Mussolini, and showed himself grossly ignorant of the machinery of the Catholic Church. Indeed, there was a pleasant touch of the schoolboy about him.

Mr Creevey, whose father and the Ambassador had been at school together, did most of the talking, and did it very well. For example, he gave an amusing account of his talk with the lachrymose German in the train, to point an argument about the confusion in the popular mind of Europe. He quoted several of his phrases, and one of them seemed to impress Falconet—an odd and rather forcible metaphor. Falconet asked to have the speaker described and Mr Creevey did his best. "I saw him in my hotel this evening," he said, and Falconet for some reason knitted his heavy dark brows. Mr Creevey observed this, as he observed most things.

Falconet was anxious to know his plans for the return journey. "I'd like to join you," he said. "Leaving to-morrow night? Not stopping off anywhere?"

Mr Creevey answered that he was going straight through to London, having wasted enough time already.

He was just about to take his leave when, to his surprise, Jacqueline Warmestre appeared. He had a great admiration for Lady Warmestre, the greater because she was one of the few women with whom he made no progress. She had never made any secret of her dislike of him, and in his eyes her frankness increased her charm. Her beauty was of the kind which fascinated him most, and to-night she seemed especially lovely, for she had been dining with some Roman friends, and her long white-furred cloak contrasted exquisitely with her delicate colouring and her brilliant hair. Mr Creevey felt a patriotic thrill; after all English women had a poise and a freshness which no other nation could match. She had been in Italy for the vintage, staying at the country house of some Italian connections, and was spending a night at the Embassy on her way home. She seemed to have something to say to Falconet, and carried him off downstairs to the Ambassador's library.

Next day Mr Creevey duly had his interview with the head of the State, and found it satisfactory. What he did not find so satisfactory was a telegram which awaited him at his hotel on his return. It was from the general manager of the Brieg-Suffati, announcing that the local board desired a meeting with Mr Creevey, and suggesting an hour the following day. Mr Creevey almost wired consigning the local board to the devil. But he reflected that he could not afford to antagonise them, for they had it in their power to make infinite mischief. He remembered the trouble he was having over his wood-pulp concern in East Prussia because the local people had got out of hand. So he replied consenting. It would mean leaving the main line at Arsignano, and motoring to the works, which were situated in a little town which bore the odd name of Grandezza. That would involve a couple of days' delay. Why could the fools not have fixed the meeting in Milan or Turin? It was too late to arrange that now, so he must make the best of the stupid business.

Mr Creevey left Rome that night in a bad temper and, since he was of an equable humour, this departure from his normal condition lessened his self-respect. He felt himself needlessly irritable, and the sport of petty annoyances. He saw the lachrymose German in the train, and for some reason the sight displeased him—he had come to dislike the man. Also the Italian railway people were less careful of his comforts than usual. His secretary was many coaches off, and his valet had difficulties with his baggage. Twice he found strangers entering his reserved compartment— withdrawing, to be sure, with apologies, but looking at him with inquisitive eyes. Was he being subjected to some ridiculous espionage? The notion

was so ludicrous that it amused him, and almost restored his good humour. It reminded him of his power. That very morning a great man had quite humbly asked him to do certain things as a kindness to Italy.

Falconet was on the train. He came out on the platform at Arsignano, and wanted to hear the reason of the change in Mr Creevey's plans. "Too bad!" he exclaimed. "I was looking forward to having a talk with you on the road. I've got some notions I'd like to put up to you, but I'll be in London for a week, and I'll call you up when you get back."

The board meeting at Grandezza proved, as Mr Creevey half expected, a farce. There was nothing before the directors which could not have been settled by correspondence. The whole affair was fussiness. But there must be some reason for his colleagues' disquiet, and he ascertained that, besides the labour troubles, there had been a certain pressure from unexpected quarters and rumours of more coming. He allayed their fears, for he was an adept at conciliation, but he was not quite easy in his own mind. Some hostile influence was at work which he must seek out and crush, for he was not accustomed to sit down under threats—at any rate not till he had uncovered them and assessed their importance.

Then a telegram was handed to him. He had kept London informed of his movements, and this was from his London office, from his most confidential manager. It urged his return at once without an hour's delay, for certain difficulties with New York had come to a head, and O'Malley himself had arrived on his way to Berlin, and must be seen at once.

This was a matter of real urgency, and he cursed the fate which had brought him on a false errand to Grandezza. Mr Creevey was instant in an emergency. He liked his comfort, but he was aware that the game must be played according to its rigour. The board meeting was summarily wound up, and he had some private talk with the general manager, in whose competence he believed. His secretary and his servant could travel to England by train, but he himself must fly part of the way home, and that at once. He ought to be in Paris that evening, and in London by ten o'clock the following morning. Could it be done?

The manager thought that it could. An aeroplane could be obtained from Arsignano—he himself had flown several times to Paris, and the service was to be trusted. Mr Creevey disliked travel by air, for he was generally sick, and especially he disliked long-distance travel. He remembered with disgust a flight from London to Vienna the year before. But he bowed to the inevitable, and bade his servant put a few necessities in a small suit-case, while the manager telephoned to the Air Company at Arsignano. The reply was that a good machine was available and an experienced pilot. Two hours later Mr Creevey was clambering into the aeroplane, which had landed in the sports ground of the factory.

He settled himself down to some hours of boredom or discomfort. Chiefly the latter, he thought, for he did not like the look of the weather. It had become colder, and a wind from the north-east was moving up masses of cloud over the Grandezza foothills. The wind would be behind him at the start, for they would make a wide circuit towards the coast so as to turn the butt-end of the Alps and follow the Rhône valley. The first stage would probably be the worst, he reflected, as he buttoned the collar of his fur coat round his ears. He was not interested in the champaign spread far beneath him, and by a conscious effort of will he switched his thoughts to certain startling theories of Professor Broester's, expounded in the book which had bored him in the train.

The movement was so smooth that he must have dozed, for he woke to find that they were among clouds and that it had become much colder. He looked at his watch. By this time the sea should have been crawling beneath them, but, when there came a gap in the brume, he saw what seemed to be wooded hills. Then came a spell of bumping which stirred his nausea, and then a swift flurry of snow. This was getting very unpleasant, but things might improve when they turned into the Rhône valley. He drank a little sherry from his flask and ate two biscuits. He spoke to the pilot, who could not be made to hear. Then he scribbled him a note in his indifferent Italian, and the man glanced at it, nodded and grinned.

After that they came into more snow, with a wind behind it which made the machine tilt and rock. Mr Creevey became very sick, so sick that he was no longer interested in his whereabouts, or the journey, or anything but his miserable qualms. In a stupor of discomfort the time dragged on. The pilot was no doubt steering a compass-course, for nothing was visible beneath them but a surging plain of cloud.

Then it seemed that they were dropping. Mr Creevey felt the wind abate as if it were cut off by some cover on his right hand. No doubt the flank of the mountains above Nice. Lower still they went, till they were out of the clouds and saw the ground. The pilot exclaimed, and examined the big compass. He said something which Mr Creevey could not understand. Had the fellow missed the road? He seemed to be uncertain, for he cast his eyes round him as if looking for a landmark. What Mr Creevey saw was a valley bottom in which a stream tumbled among rocks and trees, and on each side what looked like the rise of steep hills.

At the same moment the machine began to behave oddly, as if it were not answering to the helm. Mr Creevey found himself pitched from side to side, and there were strange noises coming from the engine. Then the bumping ceased and they began to glide down at a long angle. The pilot was about to make a landing. There was a grassy meadow making a kind of mantelpiece in the valley and this was his objective. Mr Creevey held his breath, for he had no experience of forced landings, and he was relieved when the aeroplane made gentle contact with the earth, taxi-ed for fifty yards, and came to a standstill.

The pilot climbed out of his machine and, turning a deaf ear to his passenger's excited questions, began an elaborate inspection of his engine. Mr Creevey also got out and stretched his cramped legs, on which his nausea had made him a little shaky.

The pilot finished his researches, straightened himself and saluted. He spoke excellent English.

"I am very sorry, sir. We have come out of our course, for something has gone wrong with the compass."

"Where the devil are we?" Mr Creevey shouted.

"I cannot tell. We have come too far north and are in a valley of the mountains. We were in luck to strike this valley, for it was very thick. We must retrace our course. But meantime my engine must be seen to." And he added some technical details which Mr Creevey did not understand.

Mr Creevey was very angry.

"What an infernal muddle!" he cried. "How long will you take to get it right? I should be in London to-morrow and now I'll be lucky if I'm in Paris."

"An hour," said the man. "Not more, I think. Perhaps less. See, there is an hotel above us. Perhaps your Excellency would prefer to wait there. It will be warmer, and no doubt there will be food." He was a youngish man, and the removal of his cap revealed fair hair brushed back from his forehead. He had an impassive, rather sullen face.

"Then for God's sake hurry up," said Mr Creevey. He was choking with irritation, but he put a check on his utterance, for the situation was beyond words. A little, pink, square hotel was perched on the hillside a few hundred yards above him, and he started out towards it. It had become very cold and the powdery snow was beginning again.

In his thin shoes, and cumbered with his massive coat, he plodded up through the coarse grass and scrub, till he reached a road. It was an indifferent road, but it was just possible for wheeled traffic. There he halted, for he heard a sound below him.

The aeroplane was rising. It left the ground, climbed steadily, and curved round till it headed the way it had come. Then it flew steadily down the valley.

Mr Creevey's voice died in his throat from sheer amazement. He stood staring at the departing machine and saw the pilot turn his head and wave his hand... The thing was beyond him, but his predominant feeling was anger, and anger with him always meant action. He gathered up the skirts of his fur coat and ran towards the hotel door.

He pushed it open and entered. He shouted for the landlord, but there was no answer. The place was fairly warm, and ashes were still red in the stove. But the hotel was empty.

In the library of the Embassy Jacqueline Warmestre had much to say to Falconet. He knew this imperious lady as one of Adam Melfort's friends—a closer friend, he thought, than any other; but he had met her only a few times, and had never had more than a few words with her. He was a little surprised therefore at her cross-examination, but it fell in with his own mood. She was anxious about Adam, and so was he—acutely.

"I want the latest news," she said. "You can give it me, I think. Where is Adam? In the summer we had—well, a difference of opinion—but we did not quarrel. We are good friends and we write to each other. I will tell you all I know. He has been acting as a kind of bodyguard for the German Chancellor. I got that from Mildred Lamancha. But now?... I am afraid for him. You see, he failed in what he was working at—other people let him down—but he will never give up. He is trying some other way, and it is sure to be very difficult and desperate. Can you help me, Mr Falconet? We both love him?"

Falconet was shy with beautiful women, but as he looked at Jacqueline's face he saw something behind the beauty. There was a fierce loyalty in her eyes, and gallantry in the tilt of her small chin. This was an ally about whom he need have no fear.

"I will tell you all I know," he said. "Adam is stalking Creevey."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. He was shadowing Loeffler in the early fall, and by all accounts had a tough job of it. He put it through and got the Chancellor safe to the London Conference. But of course that couldn't be the end. Loeffler put him wise about the real trouble. To pull out he has got to have certain forces on his side that just at present are fighting against him. The biggest of them is Creevey. Well, you know Adam. When he sees where the mischief is he makes straight for it, though it's as big as a mountain and as tough as hell. He is out to immobilise Creevey."

"But how?" Jacqueline's eyes were wide and perplexed.

"God knows. The old way, and maybe the right way, would have been to knock him on the head. But that isn't allowed to-day, and Adam's a gentle fellow, so he is trying another line. He wants to get alongside him, and have him to himself, and he thinks that the Almighty will do the rest. That's his philosophy, I reckon. The Almighty is on his side, and all he has got to do is to give the Almighty a fair chance."

"But it's lunacy. He can't argue Mr Creevey round—no one can, they say—he is the cleverest man alive."

"Adam has allowed for that. He's not trusting to his own power of argument. He is looking to what he calls facts, by which he means the Almighty. He wants to get Mr Creevey and himself away out of his familiar world, and he believes that something may happen then. It isn't sense, I know, Lady Warmestre. But it's Adam's way, and I'm not going to say it isn't the right way. He's like an old-time prophet and has inspirations."

"But how can he get him to himself? Mr Creevey is the busiest man going and he is surrounded by hordes of secretaries."

Falconet grinned.

"There are ways—and means, and that's where I can help a bit. We're shepherding Creevey out of the flock into our own little fold. We brought him to Rome when he didn't want to come, and, please God, before he gets back to England we're going to shepherd him to other places where he doesn't want to go. I would have you know that I'm not in big business for nothing, and I've got a considerable graft up and down Europe."

Jacqueline put a hand on his arm.

"I want to know everything, Mr Falconet. Please tell me."

"I don't mind giving you the lay-out. First of all, way up in the north there is a valley in the mountains called the Val d'Arras."

Jacqueline nodded. "I know. My father was a great mountaineer, and preferred the Italian side of the Alps, and he used to take me with him when I was a girl. The Val d'Arras runs up from Colavella. At the top is the Saluzzana pass leading to the Staubthal. An easy pass, except in bad weather."

"Right. Way up the Val d'Arras is a little summer hotel where there's nobody at this time of year. Well, Adam's notion is to get Creevey there. That has all been arranged, and it ought to work to plan."

"But after that?"

"After that I don't know. Adam may have his own notion, or he may be leaving it to the Almighty. I guess he means to get him over the Saluzzana, for my orders are to be waiting at Grunewald in the Staubthal. If Adam has gotten Creevey into the right frame of mind I might be able to put in my word."

Jacqueline wrinkled her brows. "It sounds the wildest nonsense. That sort of thing isn't done nowadays. Mr Creevey will either have the law of Adam for kidnapping, or he will get pneumonia and die. Perhaps you want the second."

"No. Adam doesn't and Loeffler doesn't. They think Creevey is too valuable to the world to lose, if only his head could be turned in another direction. Still, that may be the solution the Almighty fancies."

"Then Adam is in Italy?"

"Yep. And that is where my own private worry comes in. You see, Lady Warmestre, Adam has just lately been wading in deepish waters. To look after Loeffler he had to go way down into the underworld, and as a consequence I've an idea that some of those gentry are out gunning for him. I've seen one of them to-day, and I've heard of another. It don't look good to me that they should be in Italy when Adam is here, and, besides, it shows that they have a pretty correct line on his movements. Now, if Adam is stalking Creevey, it will cramp his style if other fellows are stalking him. I'm going right back to my hotel to call up my man Blakiston in Milan, and put him wise to it."

Jacqueline leaned forward with her chin in her hand and looked her companion in the face.

"I'm coming into this show, Mr Falconet," she said. "I did Adam a great disservice, and yet all the time I was on his side, and now I'm going to atone for it. I think his scheme is raving madness, but he is the only great man I have ever known, and I want to help. I believe I could be of some use with Mr Creevey. When do you plant him in the Val d'Arras?"

"According to schedule about the evening of the day after to-morrow."

"Well, I'm going to the little pink hotel. I needn't hurry home. I have my car here and I meant to go back by easy stages. I'll start out to-morrow morning and with any luck I'll be in time. It's a Lancia and can face the mountain roads. I'll bring a friend with me—Andrew Amos."

Falconet exclaimed. "The old Scotsman with the chin whiskers! He's a crackerjack."

"He is Adam's watch-dog. Ken—my husband—adores him. I found out that the dream of his life was to see Italy, so I brought him with me as my courier. He doesn't know a word of any language but his own, but you can't defeat him. He can drive a car too."

Falconet protested.

"It's no place for a lady."

"I'm not a lady. I'm a woman."

"But Adam wants to be alone with Creevey."

"We won't interfere with their privacy... If Adam is in danger, as you think he is, I'm going to plant Amos beside him, and if the good God is going to work a miracle a woman and an old Scotsman won't be in the way."

Jacqueline spent the night regretting her rashness. As she lay awake in the small hours she seemed to herself only a foolish child who had forced itself into a game where it was not wanted. She half-resolved to ring up Falconet in the morning and cry off. Falconet would be relieved, for he had not welcomed her intervention. In the end she fell asleep without having come to any decision, and when she woke she discovered that her mood had changed.

As she dressed she found it difficult to disentangle her thoughts, but one thing was clear. She was wholly resolved on this adventure. At the worst she could do no harm, and if Adam did not want her she could go back. A clear recollection of the Val d'Arras came back to her. The road was bad after Colavella, but it was possible for a car as far as the little pink inn which she remembered well; after that there was only the mule track across the Saluzzana. She would leave her maid and chauffeur at Chiavagno, and Amos would drive the car; he was a first-rate mechanic and a cautious, resourceful driver. No one would know of the escapade but Amos and Falconet, and her hosts at the Embassy would believe that she was starting decorously on her journey home.

By and by her thoughts arranged themselves and she realised the subconscious purpose which was moving her... She had made her choice with open eyes and did not regret it. She had done the right thing for Ken and her child and all the long-descended world built up around them. She had played for peace and had won it for them. Ken was settling down into the life where he would be useful and happy. But for herself? She had had a glimpse of greater things and had turned her back on them, but they had left a void in her heart. She had chosen the second-rate—for others and for herself, but she was paying for her choice in an aching wistfulness... She was not in love with Adam, for love did not belong to that austere world of his, but he had come to represent for her all the dreams and longings which made up her religion. She felt like

some fisherman of Galilee who had heard the divine call and turned instead to his boats and nets.

Yet the cause from which she had held back others she might embrace herself—for a little only—for one small moment of restitution. Jacqueline had fatalism in her blood, and Falconet's talk had given her an eerie sense of some strange foreordering. She had come to Italy on a sudden impulse, for she had felt restless at Warmestre before the hunting began. In coming here she had thought that she was leaving behind the world which had perplexed her, and lo and behold! it had moved itself across the sea to meet her. This was destiny which could not be shirked. She had always guided her life with a high hand, for no man or woman or beast had so far made her afraid, and she had welcomed risks as the natural spice of living. But this was different. This was no light-hearted extravagance of youth and health, but an inexorable summons to some mysterious duty. Jacqueline felt strangely keyed up, but also at peace.

The mood lasted during the day while the car sped up the Tuscan coast and through the Apennines into the Lombard plain. It was still, bright weather, and as mild as an English June. But when Jacqueline and Amos left Chiavagno the following morning the skies had clouded and a sharp wind was blowing from the mountains. They stopped for lunch at Colavella, at the mouth of the Val d'Arras, and the little town set amid its steep woody hills bore the aspect of winter. The hotels were mostly shuttered, the vine trellises leafless, and the Arcio, foaming under the Roman bridge, looked like molten snow. Snow-covered peaks showed through gaps in the hills; these were not the high mountains, so there must have been a recent snowfall.

Their troubles began when they left Colavella. The first part of the road, which wound among pines, had been vilely rutted by wood-cutters' waggons. When they climbed to the higher and barer stages of the valley, the going became worse. It was a lonely place, where few came except mountaineers seeking an easy road to the west face of the Pomagognon, or occasional botanists and walkers bound for the Staubthal. Now it seemed utterly deserted, for there were no farms on its shaly slopes. Moreover, the road was far worse than Jacqueline remembered it. There were places where landslips had almost obliterated it and Amos had much ado to pass. Jacqueline was puzzled. This might have been expected in the spring after a bad winter; but it must have been set right in the summer, and since then there had been no weather to account for the damage. It almost looked as if it had been wrecked by the hand of man.

They made slow progress, and presently ran into snow-showers which blotted out the environs. In one of these Amos violently put on his brakes. Ahead of them was what had once been a wooden bridge over the deep-cut gorge of a winter torrent. It had been destroyed, and the road came to an end at a brink of raw red earth and a forty-foot drop.

Amos hove himself out of the car and examined the broken timbers of the bridge.

"Queer!" he observed. "This brig has been cut down wi' an aixe, and that no mony hours back."

The sense of fatality had been weighing all day upon Jacqueline, intensified by the lowering sky, the cold, and the frowning hills. She had been like a child feeling its way into a dark corridor where fearsome things might lurk. But the sight of the broken bridge comforted her. Adam had staged the business well.

"Back the car into the trees," she told Amos. "We can't be far off. We must walk the rest of the road."

Amos, laden with baggage, including some provisions which Jacqueline in a moment of forethought had added to the equipment, led the way down the side of the ravine, across a trickle of water, and up the farther bank to where the road began again. As they reached it, the snow ceased, and there came a long rift in the mist. It revealed a small square hotel about a mile ahead. In half an hour the dark would have fallen.

Shortly after noon on that same day Adam Melfort sat in a little restaurant near the aerodrome at Arsignano. He must snatch a meal, for he had much to do that afternoon. So far all had gone according to plan. The aeroplane which Creevey had ordered by telephone had just started for Grandezza. It had been a delicate business, depending on many minute arrangements, but, with the help of Blakiston's organisation and his own network of queer contacts, it seemed to have so far succeeded. There was only one plane at the moment in the aerodrome suitable for a long-distance journey, and one pilot who could be selected—it had taken some doing to arrange that. This pilot, a veteran of the Alpini, had had dealings with Adam before, and had been brought into the conspiracy. His fidelity was beyond question, and his part was simple. He was to have a breakdown in the Val d'Arras and leave Creevey at the inn, while he flew back for certain repairs; he would lie low for such time as was necessary to complete the journey to England and back, and then present himself at the aerodrome in the usual course of business. Creevey had paid the fare before leaving. That afternoon Adam proposed to go by car to the Val Saluzzana, and cross the intervening ridge to the Val d'Arras by a col which he knew of. Creevey would be at the little inn in the care of a friendly innkeeper, an old acquaintance of his, and some time in the late evening Adam would join him, arriving casually as if on a walking tour. There would be a moon that night, though it might be obscured by the weather, but he knew the col well and had no fears for his journey. Then he would have Creevey to himself. The man would be in a fever to get home, and, when no aeroplane appeared, and the alternative was to tramp the long road back down the valley, Adam would persuade him to cross the Saluzzana with him to the Staubthal, from which return to England would be simple. Somewhere and at some time, at the inn or during the crossing of the pass, he hoped to bring him to another mind. He did not attempt to forecast the method of conversion—in that task he felt himself like a boy with a sling before a fortress—but he believed that behind him destiny might range great artillery.

The restaurant was a dim little place and at that hour almost deserted. Two waiters and an elderly man of the shopkeeper type were the only occupants when Adam sat down. His meal had been brought him, and he ate it greedily, for he had had no food that day save a cup of coffee...

Suddenly, as he lifted his eyes from his plate, he saw that two men had taken their seats at the other end of the room. They still wore their ulsters, and seemed to have entered merely for a glass of wine. The one with his back to him had thick

dark hair, and something in the shape of his head seemed familiar. About the one who faced him there could be no mistake. He saw a big man with a small bullet head on a strong neck, and a flat face as hard as hammered steel. He knew him for that von Hilderling whom he had last seen in the upper room of a shabby eating-house in a Rhineland slum.

The two men were talking low to each other and did not look his way. Then the one with his back to him rose and came towards him. He recognised the trim figure, the fine oval face, and the deep mad eyes of La Cecilia.

Cecilia smiled and took a chair beside him, and his smile was not pleasant.

"Well met, Colonel Melfort," he said. "May I have the honour of a word with you?" The Baron von Hilderling had poured himself out a glass of wine, and seemed to be absorbed in the contents of a small note-book.

"It would appear that we are on the same errand," Cecilia said. "You have something to say to Mr Warren Creevey, I understand. So also have we. My instructions are to order you to drop out. We will deal with the rest of the business ourselves."

"I wonder what you are talking about," said Adam.

"Oh no, you don't. You know very well. You have a grudge against Mr Creevey, for which we commend you, for we share it. You have been stalking him for some days and are very ingeniously manoeuvring him into a position where you can have him to yourself. I won't ask what you propose to do with him, but I can guess. We know what we propose. We have been following his trail—and yours—for it is easy to stalk a stalker, and we have taken over your arrangements, of which we approve. This evening Mr Creevey will find himself in an empty inn in a remote Alpine valley. There will be no one in the inn—that we have seen to. The inn-keeper has gone to see a sick father in Turin, and will not return for a while, and the two servants have been dismissed on holiday. The plane which takes Mr Creevey there will proceed by the ordinary route to Paris, but will have an unfortunate accident on the coast, in which the world will regret to learn that Mr Creevey has perished. Meantime, up in the Val d'Arras we shall deal with him at our discretion. The pilot is not the man you selected, but one of ourselves—that is the only serious change we have made in your otherwise admirable arrangements."

Adam had learned to wear an impassive face in any crisis, but his brain was working busily. "I see," he said. "Will you have a drink? I would like to hear more of your plans."

"I'm afraid I have no time," said Cecilia. "I came only to bring you the thanks of our brotherhood for what you have done... Also to say one little thing. In this matter you have unconsciously been working with us, and we approve. But there was a certain incident some weeks ago in an English country house when you opposed us, and frustrated an important policy. That we do not forget—or forgive. You may have had reasons to justify you—that we do not yet know. But I bring you this message from Gratiar. According to our laws you will be judged for that act—and if necessary you will be punished. You are one of us, and cannot escape us, though you took the wings of a bird and flew into the uttermost parts of the earth."

Adam smiled. "I don't quite follow you, but you have the same old rhetorical tricks, my dear Cecilia. Well, you know where to find me."

The full mad eyes regarded him unwinkingly.

"We shall always know where to find you. Meantime you will please to go home—at once. There is a train this evening. You understand. Auf wiedersehen, my friend."

Cecilia went back to his companion, and a minute later the two left the restaurant.

Adam finished his meal and drank a cup of coffee, while he made certain calculations on the back of an envelope. His plans still held, but now there had entered into them an element of desperate haste. He felt curiously at ease. The game was out of his hands, for destiny had taken hold of it.

PART 2

CHAPTER 29

Mr Creevey looked at the dying ashes in the stove, and, though he was warm with walking and the weight of his fur coat, he shivered. He opened the door of the *salle-à-manger*, and saw that the table was bare and the chairs stacked in a corner. Several times he shouted, and his voice echoed eerily in an empty house.

The thing was utterly beyond his comprehension. The breakdown of an aeroplane he could understand, but how in Heaven's name could the pilot have blundered so far out of his course? And why without a word had he righted his machine and flown away? He was accustomed to an orderly world where all things were explicable, but this folly was beyond explanation. Unreason always exasperated him, and for a little his anger blanketed all other thoughts. Some fool would be made to pay heavily for this. It was a blunder—it could only be a blunder—he refused to admit that there could be any purpose behind it. To whose interest could it be to play so infantile a trick on him?

But the chill of the place and the silence cooled his temper. He began to sum up his situation. He was marooned in an empty inn in a remote valley, and he had not the dimmest notion of his whereabouts. He had no food except the remains of a little packet of biscuits and half a flask of sherry. There was no fire, and probably no bed—the place was empty as a shell. But it was less the immediate prospect that perplexed him than the next step. How was he to get out of this hole? The aeroplane might return for him; or he might make his way down the valley to some place where he could hire a conveyance; he remembered a little town many miles back of which he had had a glimpse through the fog. But he was not dressed for walking, with his modish clothes and his thin shoes, and anyhow he had never been much of a pedestrian. With a feeling which was almost panic he realised that he had been pitchforked out of civilisation into a barbaric world, and that he was ill-adapted to cope with barbarism. With all his power and brains the commonest day-labourer was better fitted for this situation than he.

He forced himself to be calm, for he had a great gift of self-command. But he was desperately uneasy, for the mystery tormented him... Clearly he must spend the night here, for nothing could be done till the morning. The aeroplane might return—must return—that was his best hope. He liked the comforts of life, but he was man enough to forgo them if needs be; the prospect of a miserable night dismayed him less than the intolerable inexplicableness of the whole situation... And something more weighed on him. He was not a nervous or a hypersensitive man, but there was that in this accursed place which sent a chill to his heart. Its loneliness weighed on him like a pall, for it was not the solitude of wild nature, but of a deserted human habitation. Deserted, and why? Could there be some malignant purpose somewhere?

He had left the door open, and he noticed that the twilight had begun. He went out and looked at the dismal scene. The valley was perhaps a mile wide, filled with coarse grass and big boulders, and with the narrow gorge of a stream in the centre. He could hear the water churning among its pot-holes, but for the rest there was deep silence. There was a sprinkling of snow on the ground, but the snow-scurries had ceased, as had the wind. Across the valley he saw the steep rise of the mountains—raw scars of winter torrents, cliffs of shale with stunted pines perched insecurely on their face. There was a little square mantelpiece of gravel before the door, and a number of green wooden seats from which summer visitors no doubt admired the prospect, and little iron tables where they had their meals. This sight seemed to put the last edge on his sense of desolation. He looked down the valley where the road, rough as a river channel, was presently lost in mist.

Then suddenly out of the mist came two figures. In a moment his mood changed. This infernal desert had after all its inhabitants. He hastened towards them, and saw that one was a short, square man heavily laden with baggage, and the other a woman. Peasants no doubt; perhaps the people of the inn returning.

He halted and stared. The man was an odd figure in a heavy chauffeur's coat. But the woman he had seen before. She was wearing a tweed ulster with a collar of fur, and her light walk was not that of a peasant.

A minute later he had recognised her as Jacqueline Warmestre. He forgot all his dismal vaticinations, for he had now made contact with his old world.

She was the first to speak.

"Mr Creevey! I didn't expect to meet you again so soon. Where have you come from, and what are you doing here?"

He felt at ease, indeed, he was pleasurably excited. The appearance of Jacqueline had taken all the unpleasantness out of the situation. It was less of a mischance now than an adventure.

"A ridiculous accident," he explained, and briskly and humorously he described his recent doings. "The half-wit of a pilot left me—God knows whether he means to return—and here am I stuck like Robinson Crusoe." He felt obliged to speak lightly, for he knew that Jacqueline was not apt to make much of the rubs of life.

"What atrocious bad luck!" she cried. "Well, we are companions in misfortune. I was motoring home and took a fancy to spend a night in this place. I used to come here with my father ten years ago. But my Lancia broke down some way back, and we've had to hump our swag and foot it. My ankles are aching from this terrible road."

"A car!" He remembered his urgent business in London. "Can't we get it going? I was flying back because of cables from home."

"To-morrow morning we'll have a look at it and see what can be done. Meantime I want food and fire. I'm rather cold and perfectly ravenous."

"But the hotel is empty—deserted."

Jacqueline stopped short. "Is there nobody staying there?" she asked. She had expected to hear of Adam.

"No guests, no innkeeper, no servants. Silent as the grave!"

She was puzzled. This was not quite the scene she had gathered from Falconet that Adam meant to stage.

"That's odd. It used to be the snuggest little place. Antonio Menardi the landlord was a great friend of mine, and his wife made the most wonderful omelets. Do you mean to say that there's not a soul there? Is it shut up? It used to be open all winter, for people came for the bouquetin shooting?"

"It isn't shut up, for the door is open. But it is empty, though it can't have been empty long. Here we are, so you can see for yourself."

Amos dropped his packs on the floor of the little hall, while Jacqueline sat herself on a stool and proceeded to remove gravel from her shoes. "Go and forage, Andrew," she said. "You must find a lamp. It will be dark in half an hour."

Amos's heavy step could be heard pounding through the rooms and penetrating to the back regions. Presently he returned to report, carrying a lit paraffin lamp.

"There's lamps," he said, "and plenty o' wud, so we can hae a fire. There's bedding in some of the rooms, but no muckle. Otherwise it's like the bit in the auld sang, 'Neither man's meat, nor dowgs' meat, nor a place to sit down.'"

Jacqueline laughed merrily. Her spirits were beginning to rise. No doubt Adam had a plan of his own, and he must soon arrive.

"Then thank Heaven we brought some food," she said. "Andrew, get the stove going, please, and prepare some kind of supper. We are orphans of the storm, Mr Creevey, and must camp here and make the best of it. I hope you are grateful, for if I hadn't turned up you would have starved."

Soon a roaring stove and three lamps gave an air of comfort to the bleak little hall. Amos fetched a table from the *salle-à-manger*, and set out on it a variety of cold food.

"Wait on," he said, "and I'll boil ye eggs. I've fund some in a press in the back-kitchen. I'm nae hand at coffee, but I'll get ye a cup o' tea."

Mr Creevey made his toilet in icy water, and borrowed a comb from Amos's pack. At supper he was a brisk companion, for he was beginning to see merit in this adventure. Somehow, by plane or by car, he would get off next morning, and, though the delay was a nuisance, it was not disastrous. His position was too solidly established for petty set-backs. Meantime he had the luck to have as companion one of the most beautiful women in England, one who had always piqued him by her undisguised aversion. He was not accustomed to such treatment from women, and it did his reputation no good, for Lady Warmestre, though she concerned herself little with the ordinary social game, had a supreme distinction of her own and a host of admirers. To-night she had been very gracious to him and had treated him like a playfellow and an ally. Mr Creevey felt a slight quickening of the blood. This was a real adventure.

So at supper he exerted himself to be both discreet and agreeable. He spoke of common friends, of the humours of certain negotiations in which he had been recently engaged, of politics high and low. He spoke of Lord Warmestre. "Cincinnatus, they tell me, has gone back to the plough," he said. "I am rather glad of it. Publicists and politicians are as common as blackberries, but we have too few capable landowners. You approved, I think?"

"Yes, I approved," Jacqueline answered. She had lost her vivacity and her attention wandered. She had an odd air of expectancy, too, and seemed to be listening for something.

After supper Mr Creevey lit a cigar. The meal had been satisfying, and Amos's strong tea had not poisoned but fortified him. Jacqueline was rather silent, but he was exhilarated by her presence. He had never seen her look lovelier, for Mr Creevey, while paying due homage to the voluptuous charms of Aphrodite, had a secret respect for Artemis. Her figure, now—there was no woman or girl in London who could compete with her there—every movement was a thing of precision and grace. She was wearing just the right shade of blue to go with her hair. Then her voice. That of course was famous for its caressing beauty. He wished that she would talk more and he laboured to draw her out. But she remained rather silent and distraite.

Twice she sent Amos out to look at the weather. The first time he reported that it was "black dark, gey cauld, but nae wund." The second time he announced that the moon was up, a moon nearly full. "It'll freeze the nicht, but there's cluds bankin' up north and there'll be mair snaw or morn."

"Is there no one about?" she asked. "On the road?"

"Not a mortal soul."

"I thought that the inn people might be coming back," she explained. "I simply can't imagine why this place is empty."

Mr Creevey had a sudden idea. It was not the weather or the return of the inn people that she had sent out Amos to investigate. She must be expecting someone. Had she chosen this lonely place for an assignation? He searched his memory for gossip about Lady Warmestre and could find none. She had always been a pillar of decorum, devoted to husband, child and home; free-spoken of course, and sometimes startling in her frankness, but that was only proof of her innocence. No one had ever credited her with a lover. The thing was unthinkable. And yet—

Mr Creevey made it his business to chatter freely, and to bring in the names of her friends. He did not want his suspicion to be confirmed—Jacqueline was too rare a being to have the foibles of many women of his acquaintance—but something puck-like in him made him itch to discover secrets. He had no luck. Her face did not change from its brooding expectancy.

Still he gossiped on. It was partly good manners, for long silences would be awkward, partly a desire to stand well in her eyes. He must appear to take misfortune airily, as she did... Then he said something that roused her interest. He was describing his visit to Berlin in August, and giving, after his fashion, admirably clean-cut sketches of his associates. He mentioned Adam Melfort.

"You know Colonel Melfort?" she asked. "How well?"

"I know him as other people know him. The surface only, but I guess at what is behind. I believe him to be that uncomfortable thing which Lilah Pomfrey calls an apostle, and to understand an apostle you must be a disciple."

She awoke to attention. Her eyes had a sudden light in them.

"That is true," she said; "but even if you refuse his evangel you can recognise the apostle."

"I remember now. Of course you and Lord Warmestre are friends of his. You admire him?"

"I believe in him," she said.

There was a movement as if someone were coming from the back quarters, and he looked up, expecting to see Amos. Instead he saw a tall man in soiled tweeds, whom he recognised. Jacqueline had sprung to her feet.

Mr Creevey smiled, but a little ruefully. He was sorry that his guess about an assignation had proved right.

Adam finished his coffee in the restaurant and then walked leisurely to his hotel. It was important that he should be observed, for it was certain that Cecilia and his friends would be on the watch. At his hotel he gave instructions for his things to be packed in readiness for the evening train. Then he telephoned to the garage where his car had been ordered, and directed that it should meet him at a point on the east side of the town. He left the hotel by a back entrance, wearing an old waterproof coat and a tweed cap, and made his way by unfrequented streets to the place where the car awaited him. By ten minutes past one he was on the road, driving in a heavy drizzle of rain due east from Arsignano.

He was in no wise excited or perturbed. This was the way that fate had chosen to arrange the cards, and he must shape his game accordingly. His plan had always been to strike in on the Val d'Arras by the col from the Val Saluzzana, which would give him the appearance of arriving accidentally from a tramp in the hills. To have flown to the Val d'Arras, even had an aeroplane been obtainable, would have aroused Creevey's suspicions, and the way thither by road was rough and roundabout... Now everything was changed. Creevey was at the pink hotel—or would be there before the evening—and his enemies were drawing in upon him. He would be left alone for a little— but how long? Some time that evening or during the early night Cecilia and his gang would be upon him. How would they travel? Not, he thought, by air. They had already used the air so far as it was needed, and soon the plane in which Creevey had started would crash in its appointed place, and the passenger would officially pass out of the world. They would probably travel by road. All the more reason why he should avoid the direct route to the Val d'Arras.

His immediate business was to be in time. As to what he should do when he arrived at the inn he had no plans, and did not attempt to make one. If the enemies were there, his task would be rescue; if they had not arrived, the task would be escape. For ways and means he had no care—these he knew would be provided when the moment came. Somehow or other he and Creevey would be enclosed in a lonely world of their own, and his mission would be accomplished. It might be that Creevey would die; that was one solution; but it must come only after he had done his utmost to keep him in life, for he felt himself in a strict sense this man's keeper. If Creevey lived he was assured that he would live to a different purpose... One precaution only he had taken. Years ago he had made himself a fine marksman, but he had never in all his life fired a shot at a man in offence or defence. Now he had brought a pistol with him. It was in the right-hand pocket of his coat, pressing comfortably against his side as he drove.

He was forced to make a wide circuit, for he dare not risk meeting Cecilia on the road, so it was half-past three before he had threaded the foothills and climbed to the skirts of the great mountains and entered the Val Saluzzana. The road had been almost deserted, for the weather, as he ascended, had changed from rain to sleet and from sleet to a powder of snow. But the surface was magnificent, for it was one of the great through-roads of the Alps. As every traveller knows, it ascends the Val Saluzzana to the hamlet of Santa Chiara, and then turns up a subsidiary vale and crosses the Staub pass to the Staubthal and Switzerland. The main stream descends from a trackless glen, at the head of which is the famous Colle delle Rondini, a route attempted only by expert mountaineers. The Saluzzana pass, threaded by a mule track and not by a highway, is not in the vale of that name, but in the parallel Val d'Arras, and why the name should have been transferred no geographer has yet explained. A little north of Santa Chiara the containing ridge is indented by a saddle, which is reached from the Val Saluzzana by a long tortuous cleft, and offers towards the Val d'Arras a descent by a series of steep but practicable shelves. There is a track over the col once used by smugglers in wintertime, and long ago, when Adam had been on manoeuvres with the Alpini, he had played the war-game, and this col had been the key of his plan. By it he had led a force concealed in the Val d'Arras to attack in flank the invaders coming over the Staub. He remembered the details as if it had been yesterday. Twice he had himself made the crossing, and he had no doubt about his ability to do it again in any weather. He could do it in darkness, he thought, and anyhow there would be a moon. But time was the problem. He dared not delay one unnecessary minute, for fate was busy beyond the hills.

Never in his life had he driven a car at such breakneck speed. Twice he was held up by wood-cutters' waggons, and once in a village he had to back out and make a round to avoid a wedding procession. But when he reached the great Saluzzana road there was good going, and he was at Santa Chiara by a little after four. The inn was shuttered, but he drove the car into a farm shed, and gave the farmer money to keep an eye on it till his return. In two miles he was at the mouth of the gorge which led to the col, and turned up the track by the stream side. Twilight had fallen, and he looked up the cleft into a pit of dark vapour, out of which loomed menacingly a black sentinel crag.

A great peace was on his spirit, peace which was more than the absence of care, and was almost happiness. He felt as if a burden had fallen from his shoulders. For one thing he was drawing again upon the strength of that body which for years he had so scrupulously tended. Not since the Arctic ice had he used his muscles to the full, and they responded like a young horse at the first feel of turf. Also he felt as if he were in some sense in sight of his goal. His duty had narrowed to a strait road which he could not miss, and the very fact that he could have no prospect but must wait for light increased his certainty. He was being led, and he rejoiced to follow. But indeed there was no room for self-examination, for his first purpose must be speed. He went up the steep track among the boulders and pine-boles like a hunter running to cut off a deer.

Above a waterfall the gorge flattened out into an upland glen strewn with the debris of old rock-falls. This made slow travelling, for the bigger rocks had to be circumvented, the track had disappeared, and sometimes there was scarcely room for passage between the cliffs and the gorge of the torrent. Beyond that the ravine bent to the right, and a long steep had to be scaled, down which the stream fell in a chain of cascades. It was dark now, though the white water was still plain, and bits of old snowdrifts. There was one point where the only passage was between the gorge of the stream and a rock which seemed perilously poised. He felt it shake as he passed, and he realised that at any minute it might fall and block the road, since there was no possibility of a circuit on either hand among the sheer crags. He passed in safety and then had the main slope to breast. The rocks were glazed by the recent snowstorms, and even his nailed boots bit on them with difficulty. This was the most arduous part of the road, but he did not slacken his pace. Often he slipped and fell, and there were parts where it took all his skill and strength to surmount some icy boiler-plates. When he reached the top his watch told him that it was nearly seven. He was not yet half-way across.

After that for a little it was easier going. The slope was less violent and the road was mostly across shaly screes and patches of snow. He was far above the pines now, above even the coarsest herbage. The wind which had been drifting intermittent snow-showers had dropped, and the air seemed to be sharpening to frost. He still strode furiously, but the lack of the need for the severer kind of exertion left him leisure for his thoughts...

He was back in Eilean Bàn, and the time was afternoon. Just of late it had always been afternoon; still, golden weather, when the ardours of day were beginning to melt into the peace of evening. He was on the west side of Sgurr Bàn, his favourite place, a long way to the west, for he was conscious that he was very near the sea. Hitherto the sea had always eluded him, however far he rambled, though he was never out of sound of its murmuring. But now two strange things had happened. One was that he knew—though how he knew it he could not tell—that never before in all his dreams had he been so close to the sea. Surely a very few steps more must take him to the white sands, where the tides were never silent. The other was that Nigel had escaped him. It was a long time since Nigel had gone off to play by himself; usually he stuck very close to his side, clutching his hand, and babbling like a brook. He could still hear him only a little distance away shouting among the hazels. But he wondered what fancy had taken Nigel off by himself...

The pale bright skies of the isle disappeared, and he was looking at a narrow saddle between rocks. It was light now, for the moon was rising. He was at the col, and a freer air blew in his face.

Far below him the Val d'Arras lay in a deep olive gloom. The hotel was out of his sight, blocked by a shoulder of hill, but there was enough light to see the valley narrowing northward towards the pass. He felt quickened and braced and utterly tireless. He had made good time, and unless he were hung up on the descent he must reach the inn before the others. Eilean Bàn vanished from his thoughts, and he addressed himself to the precipitous screes that led to the first shelf.

It was a wild descent, now in the darkness of a cleft, now in open moonshine when he was forced on to the face. He did not trouble to look for the track, for in his head he had a general picture of the route. Often he would slip for yards, and once on a patch of snow he had a furious glissade which ended miraculously at a rock above an ugly drop. A little stream began, and at one time he had to take to its channel and got soaked to the skin. The first flat shelf was a slower business, for the way had to be picked among ankle-twisting boulders. With the second shelf the trees began, gnarled old relics, with ugly pitfalls in the shape of rotting trunks. But the moist smell of vegetation cheered him, for it told him that he was nearing the valley. At one corner he caught a glimpse of the hotel. There was a light in a window. Who were assembled behind that light?

Almost before he knew it, he had reached the valley floor. He straightened himself, and wrung out the wet from his sopping trousers. He looked at his watch, and had a moment of pride. In five hours he had finished a course to which most mountaineers would have allotted ten, and he was as fresh as when he had started. He forded the stream at a shallow, and ran towards the light which twinkled a mile down the valley.

He must move carefully, for he was now on enemy's ground. He left the track, and approached the hotel from behind, where the hill rose steeply. He vaulted the wall of the little garden and tip-toed stealthily towards the back-door.

As he approached it it opened, and a man emerged and looked up, yawning, at the sky as if to prospect the weather. He was an oldish man, very square and stocky, and he had in his hand a frying-pan. He dropped it as the stranger came out of the earth and stood before him.

"Great God, Amos," Adam cried, "what are you doing here?"

The old man peered and blinked.

"Losh, it's the Colonel," he whispered. "I cam here wi' her leddyship—the Marchioness, ye ken. We've been ryngin' about Italy."

"Who are here?"

"Just Mr Creevey and her leddyship and masel'."

Adam pushed past him through the kitchen and into the little hall, where before a cheerful stove sat a man and a woman beside the remains of supper. He had not grasped Amos's information, for the sight of Jacqueline made him stand and gasp. He had no eye for Creevey's surprised face or his outstretched hand.

"Are you mad?" he asked her. "Do you know that you have come into a place of death?"

PART 3

CHAPTER 30

The three made a strange group around the glowing ashes of the stove—Creevey and Jacqueline as neat as if they had been denizens of a common summer hotel, and Adam wet and dishevelled and about him the tang of wild weather.

Jacqueline, under the spell of his demanding eyes, felt her wits wandering. What had happened? What was his purpose? Why did he talk fiercely of death? She had to make some kind of answer.

"I came by accident," she stammered. "I have been motoring in Italy... I used to come to this inn long ago... I wanted to see the place again."

"And I," said Creevey, "am here by misfortune. I have been left stranded by an infernal aeroplane which should have taken me to Paris." He spoke cheerfully, for indeed he was relieved in mind. There had been no assignation, for Melfort's surprise at the sight of the lady was too real to be assumed. At the meaning of his words he could make no guess, but apostles must be permitted a little melodrama.

Adam strode to the door. It was a heavy thing, which could be fastened by a thick bar let down from the adjacent wall. He dropped the bar and called for Amos.

"Go out," he said, "and look down the valley. There's a moon. See if anyone is coming up the road. By car or on foot."

"They'll hae to be on foot," said Amos, "for somebody has broke doun the brig a mile back."

"So much the better. If anyone appears in that last mile, come back and warn us at once. It is now half-past ten. If they don't come by midnight we may assume we are safe for the night."

He cut himself a wedge of cold pie.

"Forgive me," he said, "but I've had no food since midday. I have come over the col from the Val Saluzzana, and I didn't take it easy. Thank God I'm in time."

"Time for what?" Creevey asked a little sharply. He disliked mysteries, and Adam's peremptoriness offended him.

"Time to warn you. And, I hope, to save your life."

He seemed to be about to explain further when Amos appeared again from the back part of the house.

"There's no muckle prospect doun the road," he announced. "The mune's ahint the hill noo and the clouds are comin' up. It looks as if they were bankin' for mair snaw. There's naebody to be seen."

A light broke in on Adam.

"Of course. Fool that I am! They are not coming up the valley. That would leave too obvious traces. They are crossing the mountains by the Marjolana pass and are coming in here from the north. From the Staubthal. They can't arrive till morning. They have isolated this place on the south, and to-morrow they will complete the cordon. Well, that gives us some hours' grace."

He flung wood on the stove, and sat himself in a wicker chair. He took from his knapsack a pair of stout nailed boots and thick socks. "I brought these for you," he said to Creevey. "I think you may need them."

"For God's sake have done with mystifications, Melfort," Creevey cried. "What is all this fuss about? For the last ten hours I seem to have been in a lunatic world!"

Adam smiled.

"You have been in a lunatic world much longer than that, and perhaps you are a little responsible for its lunacy. That is what the fuss is about."

"You are in danger, Adam," Jacqueline put in. "Mr Falconet told me."

"I? Oh, no doubt. But I am not the one that matters. I will tell you what I know, but half of it is guess-work."

He turned to Creevey.

"You remember Berlin in August? You saw how Loeffler was guarded and you thought it natural, for he was head of a nation and therefore the chief mark for the discontented. He was in greater danger than you thought, and he ran some heavy risks before he got to the London Conference. But have you never considered that others may be in the same position? Not such conspicuous public figures as Loeffler, but men who have aroused as deep antagonisms. Remember that the desperate to-day have good information and look below the surface of things. They have organised themselves like an army."

"Do you mean me?" Creevey asked.

"Why not you? Everyone who knows anything is aware that you have more power to-day than most Governments. You use it, shall we say, in a certain way. To you that way is natural and reasonable, but to other people it may seem an infamous way, the way of the wrecker. Madness, you think? Yes, but an effective kind of madness. A disintegrated world lets loose strange forces which do not bother about the conventions."

Creevey did not answer, for he recalled some curious things that had been happening lately, words casually dropped, cryptic warnings, inexplicable little hindrances. He had set them down to a perverse chance, but he remembered that the notion had flitted over his mind that there might be purpose behind them.

"Do you know a man called La Cecilia?" Adam asked.

Creevey shook his head.

"Or a Baron von Kilderling?"

The name seemed familiar to Creevey, but he could not place it.

"Or a Dr Gratias?"

This stirred his memory. He had met Gratias, who had been the head of a big German industrial combine which crashed in the inflation period. The man had once had a great reputation, not without its sinister element, and he had marked him down as one to be watched. Lately he had disappeared from view, and he had sometimes wondered a little uneasily what had become of him. Not a month ago he had instructed his people to try to get news of Dr Gratias.

Adam saw that he had moved him. He told in detail what he knew of the inner circle of the Iron Hands, of the meeting at the Rhineland eating-house, of what happened during Loeffler's visit to Lamancha. Then he told of his sight of Cecilia and von Kilderling that very day in Arsignano, and his talk with the former. He said nothing of his own plan to get Creevey to himself; that had failed and might be forgotten.

At first Creevey did not speak. He sat with his big head sunk on his chest and his eyes half closed. That which he had believed impossible had come to pass. The world of reason, on which he had so firm a hold, had dissolved into a chaos of crude passions. His alert intelligence told him that this hideous transformation had always been a possibility. As for Adam's tale he must credit every word, for he had too strong a respect for Adam's acumen to think that he could be mistaken. He was a brave man, but this sudden crumbling of foundations sent a chill to his heart.

"What do they want with me?" he asked hoarsely.

"I do not think that you will live long in their hands," was Adam's reply. "Some time to-night the aeroplane in which you are supposed to be travelling will be wrecked and your death will appear in the evening papers to-morrow. That report will not be contradicted if our friends can help it."

"You are in danger, too? You risk your life in coming to warn me? Why do you do it? We have never been friends. I was under the impression that my doings were not so fortunate as to have your approval."

Again Adam smiled, and there was that in his smile, in his fine-drawn face, and the steady friendliness of his eyes, which stirred in Creevey a feeling which no human being had ever evoked before. So novel it was that he scarcely listened to Adam's words.

"I didn't approve of you. But I have always admired you, and thought that some day you would awake. I have a notion that this may be the awakening. For you are going to escape—make no mistake about that. You will escape, though we have to climb the Pomagognon."

"But how?" Jacqueline had been roused out of her first stupefaction, and was struggling to grasp a situation which she had never forecast. Her first thought had been that her mad escapade had added to Adam's burden. Then she remembered her car, the only means of transport at their disposal. If danger was coming from the north, might they not escape by the south?"

"My car is all right," she said. "I lied about it to you, Mr Creevey. It is in perfect order, backed in among the trees beyond the broken bridge. Let us go off by it at once. It's the only way."

Adam shook his head.

"Not a ghost of a chance. If our friends are coming up the valley they will meet us. If they are coming down the valley, as I am certain they are, the route to the south will be picketed. Those gentry leave nothing to luck. They have already made the road difficult and broken the bridge. Amos says it had been hewn down with axes and that the cuts were fresh. I am afraid there is no hope in that direction."

"Then we are caught. We cannot get into Switzerland."

"We must get into Switzerland. Once there we are safe. Falconet is at Grunewald—and more than Falconet. Once in the Staubthal we are out of their net."

"Can't we get away from the inn and hide in the mountains?"

"How long could we keep hidden? It is going to be wild weather and we should starve. Besides, the men we have to deal with are old hands at the game. They won't be plump sedentary folk like Gratias, but the real Iron Hands, like Cecilia and Kilderling, men who will take any risk and can endure any fatigue. They have the best mountaineers in Europe at their command. It would be a lost game to play hide-and-seek among the hills with the people who will come over the pass to-morrow."

Jacqueline dropped her hands on her knees with a gesture of despair. But the sight of Adam's face gave her hope.

"Our chance," he said, "lies in our start. I know the Marjolana route and I know the Saluzzana, and I do not believe that they can be here before eight o'clock to-morrow. If the roads forward and backward are shut to us we must take to the flank. We must try the col by which I crossed to-night from the Val Saluzzana. At Santa Chiara you strike the main road over the Staub."

"Then let's start at once." Jacqueline's anxiety had made her eager for instant movement.

"Impossible. The moon is down, and the road is not easy. If I were alone I might do it in the darkness, but I could not take another with me. We must have daylight—and a little sleep first. Remember that we are dealing with athletes and trained mountaineers."

Creevey had gone white, but by an obvious effort he kept his composure.

"Won't they have men on the col?" he asked.

"They may—in which case we are done. But I don't think so. Few people know it and fewer use it. It was my own discovery, and was shared with about half a dozen Italian officers, most of whom are now dead... But we may be followed, and must allow for that. They will have men with them who are experts at winter hunting and can follow spoor. That means that we shall be in rather a hurry."

Creevey got himself out of his chair, and stood up, an incongruous figure in his neat blue suit, his coloured linen, and his dark tie with its pearl pin. He stretched out his arms as if to assess his bodily strength, and he shivered as if he felt it to be small at the best. Certainly as compared with Adam's lean virility he looked heavy and feeble.

"Do you think I can do it?" he asked. "I never climbed a mountain in all my days. I am not in good training—I never am—I live too well and too much indoors."

"I think you can do it," said Adam gently. "You must do it. You see, the stake is your life. Much more than that, I think, but first and foremost your life."

"What about Lady Warmestre? Hadn't she and her servant better get off at once, if her car is in order? She, anyhow, won't be stopped by whoever is on the watch down the valley."

"Nonsense," said Jacqueline, "I'm coming with you. I'm as active as a cat—I've climbed the Pomagognon by the west ridge. My father said—"

She stopped, for Adam's eyes were on her, and she read in them a knowledge of all the things that she had left unsaid. He knew for what purpose she had come here—her mention of Falconet had enlightened him. He knew that she had come to make restitution, to settle an account between two souls predestined to a strange community. He knew, and the knowledge had awakened in him something which she had not seen before in his face. He was looking at her in a passion of tenderness.

"I am going to ask more from Lady Warmestre than that," he said. "She is our chief hope. I am going to ask her to stay here and receive our guests from over the mountains. If she can delay them for an hour she may save your life."

Then Creevey did that which surprised at least one of the other two, and may have surprised himself. The pallor left his face, and his voice came out clear and masterful.

"I won't have it," he cried. "Damn you, Melfort, do you think I'm so little of a man as to take shelter behind a woman? God knows what those devils might not do to her! It's the most infamous proposal I ever heard in my life."

"She will be in no danger," said Adam. "Our enemies are no doubt devils, but in their own eyes they are gentlemen, rather punctilious gentlemen. They won't harm her—"

"I refuse to allow it. Lady Warmestre must start off at once in her car and by to-morrow morning she will be out of danger. I'm in the hell of a fix, but if I can help it it won't be anybody's funeral but my own. Except yours, of course, and you asked for it—"

He said no more, for Jacqueline's face silenced him. It had a new strange beauty, the like of which he had never seen before. He felt suddenly that here was a woman in relation to whom it was merely foolish to talk of danger or fear.

"Thank you, Mr Creevey," she said. "You are very kind and I am very grateful. But I wouldn't miss doing what Adam wants for anything in the world. It will be the greatest thing in my life. I'm not in the least afraid—except of not succeeding. I'm... but I'm going to do more than delay the enemy. Have you thought of the next step, Adam?"

It was her turn to rise. She had put her travelling cloak about her shoulders and now dropped it and stood up to her full height, a head taller than Creevey, almost tall enough to look from the level into Adam's eyes.

"They are bound to let me go," she went on. "I think they will try to speed my going. Very well. Somehow or other I will get the car round to the Val Saluzzana—to Santa Chiara—and meet you there. It's a long road over the Staub... and you will be very tired... and you may be pursued. I will be there to pick you up and we will finish the run together. Do you understand, both of you? That is my final decision, and nothing will shake me."

Her face was flushed and gay, her voice had a ringing gallantry. To Creevey in his confused dejection it was like a sudden irradiation of the sun. But Adam did not lift his eyes.

"It's about time we found somewhere to sleep," she said, and she called to Amos.

That worthy presently brought candles. "I've been outbye again," he announced, "and it's snawing hard. The auld wife is pluckin' her geese for Christmas."

Creevey slept little, for his will could not subdue his insurgent thoughts. He had moments almost of panic, which he struggled to repress, but his chief preoccupation was to adjust his mind to a world of new values. Oddly enough, in all his confusion the dominant feeling was surprise mingled with something that was almost pride. This man Melfort was ready to risk his life for him. He had been a leader of men, but what disciples had he ever made who would have been prepared for such a sacrifice? And Melfort was no follower, but a stark antagonist. He had hated him and been hated in turn. Something very novel crept into his mind—a boyish shame. He could not allow himself to be outdone in this contest of generosity.

Adam and Jacqueline slept like children, for the one was physically weary, and both had suffered a new and profound emotion.

Amos woke the party an hour before dawn. It was very cold and the storm of the night had covered the ground with two inches of snow. He gave them hot chocolate in the little hall, where he had lit the stove. Creevey looked pinched and haggard in the candlelight. He had put on the nailed boots which Adam had given him, and tucked the bottoms of his

trousers into the heavy socks. He drank his chocolate but could eat no food.

But Jacqueline was a radiant figure. From the baggage which Amos had brought she had extricated a thick jumper and a short jacket of russet leather, and the lack of a maid had imparted a gracious disorder to her hair. Even so she had often appeared to Adam's eyes on winter mornings at Armine Court, a little late after a big day's hunting.

Adam gave his last instructions. He was still yawning like a sleepy child. They went out of doors, where the skies were beginning to lighten over the Val Saluzzana peaks, and a small wind, which would probably grow to a gale, was whimpering down the valley.

"Confound the snow," Adam said. "It won't melt before midday, and it shows footsteps. Amos, you follow us and blur our tracks. We'll get off the road a hundred yards down, for on that long spit of rock we'll be harder to trace. There's a shallow place in the gorge where we can cross. We must be inside the big ravine before daybreak."

He took Jacqueline's hand, as she stood in the snow at the doorstep. There was no word spoken, and the manner of each was cheerful, almost casual—au revoir, not good-bye. But in the candlelight which escaped from the hall Creevey saw her face, and it was a sight which he was never to forget. For her eyes were the lit eyes of the bride.

Amos was busy indoors removing all signs of occupation, other than that of himself and Jacqueline. The relics of breakfast for two remained in the hall, and only two beds upstairs showed signs of use. He repacked the hold-all, which had carried Jacqueline's baggage, and the provisions. As he worked, he repeated to himself the instructions he had been given by Adam and his mistress, and his gnarled face wore a contented smile. "It's like auld times," he muttered. "Man, Andrew, this is the proper job for you. Ye're ower young to sit back on your hunkers. But it beats me how the Colonel is to get yon Creevey ower thae fearsome hills."

Jacqueline put on her hat and her fur-lined coat, and stood in front of the inn watching the shadows break up in the valley. The dawn-wind blew sharper, but she did not feel cold, for her whole being was aglow. Adam had trusted her, and had asked of her a great thing—asked it as an equal. She fired with pride, and pride drove out all fear. She did not attempt to forecast what would happen at the inn in the next few hours, for her thoughts were with the two men now entering the long ravine which led by difficult shelves to the col. They would succeed—they must succeed—and in the evening she herself would carry them to sanctuary. It was the hour of miracles—she had witnessed them. She had seen a man emerge from Creevey's husk, a man who with white lips was prepared to forget his own interests and sacrifice himself for a whim of honour. She did not forget his stubbornness about her own safety. Could he ever return to his old world? Had not a new man been born, the leader of Adam's dream? And there was still before him a long day of trial and revelation. Of Adam she did not allow herself to think; she had fallen in with his code, and kept her thoughts firm on that purpose which was his life.

The eastern slopes of the valley were still dark, but the inn and its environs were flooded now with a cold pure light. She looked up at the sky, and saw that the growing wind was drifting clouds from the north, clouds contoured and coloured like ice-floes in a Polar sea. Snow would fall again before midday. She occupied herself in recalling the road to the Val Saluzzana—down the Val d'Arras to Colavella, and then east in a detour among the foothills to the great Staub highway. She remembered it vividly; it would be open even in rough weather, and the Staub pass was low and rarely blocked by snow-falls. What about their stock of petrol? She turned to look for Amos, and saw him in the doorway...

He was held by two men, and was spluttering in well-simulated wrath. She was aware of other men... One was advancing to her from the north side of the inn. He was a slim youngish man, rather below the middle height, dressed like a mountaineer in breeches and puttees, with a waterproof cape about his shoulders. He had been in deep snow, for he seemed to be wet to the middle.

Jacqueline cried out to Amos.

"What is wrong, Andrew? What do these men want?"

"I dinna ken. They grippit me when I was tyn' up the poke. I don't understand what they're sayin'." Then to his warders: "I'll be obliged if ye'll let me get at my pipe. I havena had my mornin's smoke." He spat philosophically.

The young man addressed her. He had a finely cut face, dark level brows and sombre eyes.

"We want to know who you are, madam, and what you are doing here?" His tone was civil, but peremptory.

"What business have you with me? This is an inn."

"It was. But for a little it has been the private dwelling-house of myself and my friends. By what right have you entered it?"

Jacqueline laughed merrily. "Have I made a gaffe? It is like the story of the Three Bears. I'm so sorry. Have I been trespassing? You see, I had a fancy to come here again—I've been motoring in Italy—and I thought I would like to have a look at the place for auld lang syne. Antonio Menardi used to be a friend of mine, and I came here often with my father. He was a famous mountaineer. Hubert Alban. Perhaps you have heard of him?"

There were now four men on the snow by the inn door, besides the two who still held Amos in custody. One was tall, with massive bull shoulders and a curiously small head. All six looked preternaturally alert and vigorous, just such as she remembered among the Alpine heroes of her youth. But in their faces there was a sullen secrecy which she did not remember, and in their eyes a mad concentration.

One spoke, not to her, but to the others. "I have heard of Herr Alban. Yes, I have seen him. He did many famous courses in the mountains."

Her first inquisitor spoke again.

"Will you tell us your name, please?"

"I am married. My husband is Lord Warmestre."

Recognition stirred in the big man.

"I did not think I could be mistaken," he said. "She is the Marchioness of Warmestre, a very famous lady in England. I have seen her at the Court balls, and elsewhere."

"Will you tell us how you came here?" the young man asked. He seemed to be bridling a deep impatience, though his voice was still polite.

"I motored here. The road was bad, and a little way down the valley a bridge was broken. But I was determined not to be beaten, so my servant and I left the car and walked the rest of the way."

"And you found here?"

"An empty house. No Antonio, no servants. No food, but thank goodness I had the sense to bring some of my own... Oh, and I found something else. Another unfortunate guest. A man I have met occasionally in London. A Mr Creevey."

They were masters at their game, for no flicker of interest moved their faces.

"Will you tell us about this other guest?"

"Oh, he was a dreadful little cross-patch. He was so angry that he could not explain properly, but I gathered that he had had a mishap in an aeroplane, though I can't for the life of me see how he got here. He was in a desperate hurry to be gone, and after my servant had given him a cup of tea he started off down the valley. He must have had a rotten night of it."

The faces were still impassive.

"You did not offer to take him away in your car?"

Jacqueline laughed. "No. I didn't tell him about the car—or rather, I said it had broken down hopelessly. You see, I am not very fond of Mr Creevey. I didn't see why I should help him out of his troubles when he was as uncivil as a bear, and I certainly didn't want his company. I was very glad when he decided to go away."

"And now—you propose?"

"To go home. We camped the night here, but I can't say it was very comfortable. I was just about to start when you turned up. My maid and my luggage are in the hotel at Chiavagno."

The young man bowed. "Will you please to go indoors, Lady Warmestre? My friends and I must talk together."

Jacqueline sat down in the inn hall, where Amos's fire had almost burned itself out. Amos a little way off puffed stolidly at his pipe.

So far she had managed well, she decided. Her tone had been right, the natural tone of a crazy Englishwoman, and by a great stroke of luck her father's name had been known to them and she herself had been recognised. Now they were trying to verify her story. She could hear the tramping of heavy boots upstairs, and twice a weather-beaten face looked in from the back parts. The others would be outside ranging the environs.

Presently the young man entered.

"When did Mr Creevey depart last night?" he asked.

Jacqueline considered. "Just when it was growing dark and I got my servant to light a lamp. I think it would be about five o'clock."

"There are footprints in the new snow."

"Aye," said Amos, "they're mine. I gaed out for a daunder afore it was licht to prospect the weather."

When he had gone Jacqueline had a sudden disquieting reflection. She had thought it very clever to bring in Creevey, but had it not been the wildest folly? Could they let her go? Had she not fatally compromised their plans? Creevey was supposed to have perished in an aeroplane accident the night before somewhere on the coast, and here was she, a witness to his presence in a remote Alpine valley no earlier than five o'clock. For the first time she knew acute fear. If she was permitted to go away, permitted even to live, their story was exploded and their schemes brought to naught. They had failed to manoeuvre their victim out of the ken of the world. Even if they found his trail and caught him on the col, she and Amos would share his fate. Those mad eyes were capable of the last barbarity.

She told herself that it was impossible. They could not cumber themselves with her as a prisoner. They would not dare to silence her in the old crude way. An English great lady—it would be too dangerous. They were cunning people and would somehow adapt their policy to the changed circumstances. She must carry off things with a high air... And meantime, thank God, she was holding them up. Every minute that she sat shivering in that wretched inn was bringing Adam and Creevey nearer to their goal.

At last the door opened and the young man appeared.

"You can take up your baggage," he told Amos. Then to Jacqueline: "Are you ready, Lady Warmestre? We have inspected your car, and it is in good order. We wish you to leave—now."

Outside she found four men waiting like terriers about an earth.

"You will take one of us with you as a guide," said the young man.

"To Chiavagno?" Jacqueline asked, with a new fear in her heart.

"To Chiavagno—perhaps. At any rate he will guide you. I will accompany you to your car."

The others bowed ceremoniously as the three set off down the road. The clouds were no longer flocks, but pack-ice almost covering the sky, and a dull leaden light filtered through them, while the wind volleyed in bitter gusts. Jacqueline did not turn her head towards the eastern wall, lest it might wake suspicion, but she wondered if from any vantage-ground on the lip of the ravine Adam could see the party. He had, she knew, his field-glasses... One thing she did not like. Two of the men were busy looking for prints beside the road, and they were dangerously near the long rib of rock down which Adam had gone. Would the enemy after all hit the trail?

They scrambled across the gully of the broken bridge, and Amos with a good deal of trouble started the engine and ran the car into the road.

"I will drive, please," said Jacqueline. "I am more used to difficult roads than my servant. Will your friend sit beside me?" The rudiments of a wild plan were forming in her brain.

"My friend will sit behind you. Get in, Franz." The young man said something in German to the other which Jacqueline

did not catch, but his face interpreted his words. The sullen figure behind was there as a guard— she saw the bulge made by the pistol in his coat pocket. What were his orders, she wondered dismally. Was it Chiavagno, or some darker goal?

“Bon voyage,” said the young man. “Remember my instructions, Franz,” and he turned to re-cross the ravine.

On a rough piece of road a mile farther on the car gave so much trouble that no one heard a whistle blown behind them. Had he heard it, Franz might have insisted on turning back. That whistle meant portentous things. For the trackers by the roadside had found the spoor on the rib of rock, spoor leading down to the stream, and five minutes later the pack were following it.

Jacqueline was surprised at her own coolness. She was certain in her mind what orders had been given to Franz—that their goal was not Chiavagno. And even if they went to Chiavagno her plan would fail, for then she could not pick up Adam and Creevey at Santa Chiara, and she had a premonition that if she failed them they were doomed. But not a shadow of personal fear lurked in her heart. Her whole being was keyed up to the highest pitch of active purpose.

Sometimes she turned round and nodded friendlily to the man behind. He sat rigid and expectant, his sullen eyes watchful, and one hand in his coat pocket.

It was a great thing to have Amos beside her. She talked to him in a loud voice about the road and the weather, so that Franz might hear, but interpolated in her remarks some words in a lower tone. Amos responded. He modulated his great voice to a whisper and that whisper was in the broadest Scots.

“We maun find the richt kind o’ place,” he crooned, “and then I’ll pretend to be no weel. I’ll gie ye the word when I see a likely bit. You leave the rest to me, mem... Dinna you stop the engine... This cawr is a fine starter, and it accelerates brawly... Watch me and play up till me, and God be kind to His ain.” When Amos, a bigoted unbeliever, dropped into the speech of piety, there was trouble awaiting somebody.

Before they were out of the Val d’Arras the wind dropped and the snow began, a steady resolute fall. There were people on the vile road—one or two men who might have been wood-cutters, and Jacqueline observed that they stared not at her but at Franz, and that some signal seemed to be exchanged. Once a fellow who looked like a gamekeeper dropped from the hillside, and the car was halted while he whispered to Franz over the back of it. Jacqueline preserved an air of aloof inattention, as if such a meeting were the most natural thing in the world.

After Colavella Franz proposed to drive. “Please let me go on,” Jacqueline protested. “I’m not in the least tired, and we shall be on better roads now. It is only driving that keeps me warm.” Franz consented with an ill grace, but he shifted his station so that he sat directly behind her.

Half an hour after leaving Colavella they came to a fork where the road to Chiavagno branched to the left.

“Straight on,” Franz commanded.

“But we are going to Chiavagno.”

“We are going where I direct. Do as I bid you, or I will take the wheel.”

The snow was thickening, and already it lay an inch or two on the highway. “We’ll have to do something soon,” Jacqueline whispered to Amos.

“Aye,” came grimly through closed teeth.

Soon after that he began to groan. He huddled himself into the left-hand corner and sat with shut eyes, so that Franz could see his profile. He had the appearance of a man in extreme distress.

Presently they turned down the side of a mountain torrent flowing in a deep-cut wooded ravine. Only a low wall protected the road from the gorge, and in parts the wall had crumbled into stone heaps.

Suddenly Amos cried out. He pawed feebly at Jacqueline’s arm. “Stop,” he groaned. “I’ve an awfu’ pain. Let me oot—let me oot.”

Jacqueline brought the car to a standstill. “What is it?” she asked anxiously.

Amos’s voice came small and weak between his gasps.

“Colic,” he answered. “It’s the cauld. Let me straughten mysel’ on the roadside. Oh, mem, for God’s sake!”

Franz was standing up, and demanding angrily the reason of the delay.

“My servant has been taken ill. He says he must be laid flat. Will you help him, please?”

Franz leaped from the car, and hauled out the groaning Amos, who staggered a step or two to the edge of the gorge and then fell flat among the snow. It was at a point where there was a gap in the protecting wall.

He bent over the prostrate figure and his face was wrathful.

“A nip o’ brandy,” Amos whined. “There’s a flask at the bottom o’ the big green poke.”

Franz addressed Jacqueline fiercely. “There is no time for doctoring. The fellow must lie here till he recovers. People will pass... he will be seen to... Give me the wheel, madam. I now will drive...”

His back was to the stricken man, and he was about to re-enter the car, when a strange thing happened. Amos drew his legs up with astonishing agility, and in a second was crouching like a broody fowl. Then he flung his enormous arms round Franz’s knees. To Jacqueline it seemed as if the body of the latter suddenly rose from the ground and described a curve backward in the air over Amos’s shoulder. It disappeared into the ravine, and could be heard crashing among the snow-laden undergrowth.

In an instant Amos was beside her, and the car was in motion. Amos dusted the snow from his disreputable breeks.

“That’s settled him,” he said complacently. “A dodge I learnt lang syne at the fit-ba’.”

After that there was no delay. Jacqueline swung to the left, cut across the road to Chiavagno and, after being at fault once or twice among the valleys of the foothills and consulting her map, struck the main road which led to the Val Saluzzana. There the snow lightened, but much had fallen, and the pine-woods were white like the mountain tops. But on the broad highway it was little hindrance to speed, and by four o’clock they had passed Santa Chiara. The temporary clearness of the air enabled her without difficulty to follow Adam’s directions, and presently she had drawn up at the mouth of the gorge which led to the col and to the Val d’Arras. She could see the faint outline of the track which followed the stream.

Amos descended, stamped his feet, and swung his arms. “I’ll gang a wee bit up the burn to meet them,” he said. “Losh, it’s a fearsome-lookin’ glen! Yon puir Creevey will hae an ill journey.”

Jacqueline watched his gnome-like figure stumping up the track till it disappeared among the draggled pines... The place was hushed and solitary. She saw the highway bearing to the right for the Staub pass, the road that was to carry them to safety. In front was the sword-cut of the upper Val Saluzzana, and she could make out dimly the gap which was the Colle delle Rondini and the famous ice-ridge of the Pomagognon... But her eyes were chiefly on the cleft which led to the col. The twilight was falling, and above the pines and the fitful gleams of white water she saw nothing but a pit of shade across which blew thin streamers of mist. That was the way of salvation. Out of that darkness would presently come two men on whom the fate of the world depended. They must come—they could not fail—not if there was hope on earth or mercy in heaven. But as she peered up into that savage wilderness she shivered.

Suddenly she caught sight of Amos. He was far up on a jut of crag and he was looking towards her. He was waving his hand. He had seen them.

Relief made her choke and filled her eyes with happy tears. She started the engine.

Scarcely a word was spoken between Adam and Creevey for the first half-hour. With difficulty they crossed the torrent at a place where the gorge flattened out and the water ran wide and shallow before plunging into a new abyss. After that the way lay along the east slope of the valley in a chaos of fallen rocks and straggling pines. Creevey, like all novices, forced the pace, but Adam made him fall back into a slow, steady stride. "We have a long road before us," he said. "You must keep your breath for the hills."

Under the lee of the slope it was still very dark, and Adam had to take the other's arm at many points to help him over clefts hidden by scrub. He was straining his ears for sounds from the other side of the stream, from the track that led to the pass, something that would tell him that their enemies had crossed the mountains. That route was easy even in the darkness for hardened mountaineers. But the noise of furious water and the sighing of the dawn wind blanketed all other sounds. The light in the inn was soon hidden from them, and they moved in a shell of loneliness.

Adam was in such a mood as he had not known before. He was supremely confident. He felt that his task was nearing fulfilment, like a runner who has entered the straight with the tape clear before him. He had no fear of failure, so that he did not attempt to forecast the next difficult stages. These would be surmounted—somehow or other Creevey that night would be beyond the reach of danger. A new Creevey, too, for the gods would not leave their work half done... But to this assurance happiness had been added, and in recent years he had known peace, but not happiness. Now something jubilant and ecstatic seemed to have been re-born in him, and he was aware of the reason. He had discovered tenderness, for Jacqueline had taught him. She had thawed his chilly, dutiful soul. He was no longer content to pity humanity, for he had come to love it. Creevey, stumbling along at his side, was not merely a pawn in the game to be guarded, but a friend and a fellow. The aching affection which had once been confined to Nigel was now given to Jacqueline, and through her to all mankind. "I am a full man and a free man again," he told himself. "I have come out of the shadows."

The slopes on which they moved bent inward, and down the cleft in the mountains there came the first grey light of dawn. "Thank God," said Adam. "We are now in cover. We must take it quietly, for we have four thousand feet to climb to the col."

Adam led at a slow even pace up a track which was only a deeper shadow among the shadowy fern. Here the wind was cut off, and the snow, warded off by the pines, lay thinly on the ground, but it was damply cold, as if the trees still held the chill of midnight. It was steep going, but not difficult, though Creevey's heavy breathing soon proved the poverty of his training. It was Adam's business to keep him cheerful, for he knew the potent effect of the mind on the body.

"You are doing famously," he told him. "After the trees we have the first shelf where the slope eases off. Then there comes a bit of a scramble, and then a second shelf. After that we must hug the stream till it stops, and the last bit is slabs and screes. The snow should be lying there fairly deep and that will help us. Then we are at the col and there's no more climbing. The descent into the Val Saluzzana is longer, but far less stiff. In two hours from the col we should be in the valley."

"You think that Lady Warmestre will be there?"

"I am certain of it."

"You're a queer fellow," said Creevey. "You go a good deal by instinct... Perhaps you are right... I'm not built that way."

They came out of the trees to the lip of the first shelf. There the track, to avoid an out-jutting crag, bent to the right, and reached a vantage point from which the valley beneath could be seen. It was here that the night before Adam had first caught the lights of the inn. He made Creevey keep low in cover, and wriggled forward to where he could rake the trough of the Val d'Arras.

There was no one on the road which led to the pass, nor on the road below the inn, as far as he could see it. Outside the inn itself stood a solitary figure. The glass told him that it was neither Jacqueline nor Amos. It was a tall man, and he had the air of being on guard. As Adam watched him, he shaded his eyes and seemed to be watching something to the east in the valley bottom.

The enemy had come. More, some of them were now down by the stream. They might be only casting about for the fugitives; on the other hand, they might have found the spoor down the rib of rock which would show up in the snow. They were bound to have skilled trackers with them, men accustomed to the winter trails of bouquetin and chamois.

Adam snapped his glasses back into their case. "We must push on," he said. "Our friends are below at the inn. They may pick up our trail."

"Are they faster than us?"

"Than us two? Perhaps twice as fast. But we have a long start. Never fear, we shall beat them."

Creevey seemed to have exhausted his strength on the first steps. He had not the mountaineer's gift of walking delicately in difficult places, and he slipped and stumbled among the boulder-strewn herbage and several times fell heavily. Adam took his arm and forced the pace, so that when they reached the place where the stream fell in great leaps down a broken rock-wall he was puffing hard and limping.

In summer there was a faint track up this wall, but there was no sign of it now in the waste of glazed rock, snowy cracks and boggy ledges. Creevey was most of the time on his knees, for he retched with vertigo whenever he rose to his feet. Over most of the ground Adam simply dragged him, blaming himself bitterly for not having brought a rope. Sometimes they came to an impasse up which Creevey had to be lifted like baggage. His crawling soaked him to the skin, and it was a limp and sodden figure that dropped on the ground when the second shelf was reached.

"Get your breath," Adam told him. Creevey lay flat on his back looking up to the sky from which occasional flakes fell, while Adam made a short detour to the right, to a point where from a steep overhang he believed that a view could be got of the foot of the ravine where it debouched on the valley.

He got the view and something more, something which sent him racing back to Creevey. For on the spit of open sward below the trees, on the track by which they had come, he saw four figures, their heads bent like dogs following a trail.

He plucked Creevey to his feet. "On," he cried, "the hounds are out. At the speed they go they are less than an hour behind us."

The words woke the other's drugged mind to life. Never before had he known what it was to be in physical danger. He, the assured and authoritative, was being hunted like a fox, and the price of failure was death. He felt a cold clutch at his heart, but a new nervous power in his limbs. This shelf was more difficult than the first, but there was no drag on Adam's arm. Creevey covered the ground at a shamble which was almost running. "Don't strain yourself," said Adam's quiet voice in his ear. "We shall win all right"; but the sense of the words hardly penetrated to a brain obsessed with the passion of flight.

They were now at the last tier of the ascent, where at points, to avoid knuckles of sheer cliff, it was necessary to take to the bed of the infant stream. A round of the clock before Adam had descended the place like a falling stone, leaping in the strong moonlight from boulder to boulder. But now the rocks were more glazed and treacherous, and the snow, which was falling thickly, made the route harder to prospect. There were points where Adam simply took Creevey in his arms and jumped with him; others where he forced him up the tiny couloirs on his shoulders. It was a toil which few men could have compassed, but he scarcely felt it—at long last he was finding use for that physical strength which he had so jealously conserved. As he clutched the dripping, inert body of his companion, he felt a strange affection. This sodden thing, so feeble and yet so precious!

The stream ceased, a few hundred yards of snowy screes followed, and then they stood in the throat of the col. Adam let Creevey drop on the ground, and looked at his watch. It was a little after one o'clock.

The consciousness of having reached the summit seemed to rouse Creevey to a new vigour. He swallowed some brandy from Adam's flask and found his voice.

"Will the snow help us?" The words came from blue lips. "Will it hide us? What about leaving the road?"

"There is no route but the one, and these men could follow tracks in any weather."

"Then for God's sake let us get on." He started down-hill at a stumbling run. So far the wind, which was from the north, had been shut off by a wall of mountain, but the ravine on the Val Saluzzana side took a northward turn, and they had now the drift in their faces. Adam caught the other's arm, for the way down the long broken moraine was not easy, but his help was scarcely needed. Creevey had got a new reserve of vigour with the downward slope, his foothold was surer, and his face, plastered with the drift, was human again. On the last stage it had been washed clean of life like a sick animal's.

"How much longer?" he gasped.

"Two hours—not more. If the snow lasts we shall be safe, for it will prevent them shooting."

Then the wind seemed to be shut off again, and they moved in a soft feathery blanket. Creevey spoke.

"I did not know the world was so savage," he muttered, and it sounded like an apology.

"It is very near the edge," said Adam.

"You think I have helped to bring it to the edge?... That is what Loeffler believes... I thought it hysteria—he has a good many blind patches in his mind... But he was right... If we come through, you and I... I will go to Loeffler."

"Don't try to talk," Adam said. "You will want all your strength." The snow muffled sounds, and they moved in a world of deathly stillness, but he had the sense of proximity which wild things have, and it told him that the enemy had passed the col and were on the moraine. The hunters were faster by far than the hunted.

The snow was thinning. Presently they struck the torrent which came down from a tributary ravine, and the road now was in a narrow gully. The wind caught them again, and their immediate environs were blown clear—the beetling cliffs on their left, like chocolate dusted with sugar, the leaping white water, the icy ledge lipped by it where the track lay...

Adam looked back, and saw that the moraine by which they had come was visible almost as far as the col. There were figures on it, moving fast like plover in a spring plough. Half a mile behind—less. Within the next half-hour they must be overtaken.

A dozen plans flitted through his brain as he dragged Creevey down the gully. The latter had gone numb again, and was maintained only by the other's resolution. They were taking crazy chances, and again and again Adam's arm saved him from disaster. But no audacity could avail them, for the relentless trackers behind were their masters in pace, and the trail was for a child to read. Creevey's breath was labouring and he was stumbling drunkenly. Where was a hope, for hope there must be? They could not fail on the brink of success.

Suddenly they came to a point which Adam remembered. A huge boulder on the right was delicately poised above the track. He recollected it clearly, for here he had had to walk warily, since a very little would have sent it crashing down to block the route for ever. A man could dislodge it—a man on the upper side—and bar any further descent. But that man must remain on the near side of the chasm which he had created. He would be shut off himself from reaching the valley.

It was the sign which he had awaited, and a solemn gladness filled his heart. He had not been wrong in his hope, and

his purpose was now certain of fulfilment. Creevey saw that his face was smiling, and wondered.

"You must go on alone for a bit." Adam's arm pulled him to a standstill. "We are almost over the bad patch. After this the road is easy. The snow has stopped, and you will see where the track runs. Soon you will be among the trees."

"What do you mean?... Are you going to stay and fight?... I'll be damned if I leave you." Creevey was nearly at the end of his tether, but the weakness of his body was not reflected in his angry eyes.

"There will be no fighting. But I see a chance of blocking the road. On with you, for it is our only hope—a certain hope."

There was that in Adam's voice which could not be gainsaid.

"You will follow me? Promise that, or I won't stir. I must have you with me—always..."

"I will follow you. I will be with you always." Creevey heard the words, but he did not see the look on the other's face.

Adam circumvented the boulder and reached a point on the cliff above it, where its shallow roots clung to the mountain. His vantage ground gave him a view of Creevey stumbling downward towards the easier slopes where the first pines began. Very small he looked as his figure grew dim in the brume.

Then Adam put forth his strength. He found a stance where, with his feet against living rock, he thought he could prise the boulder from its hold... It quivered and moved, but at first it seemed as if it were too deep-rooted to fall. Desperation gave him the little extra force which was needed, and suddenly the foreground heaved, slipped, and with a sickening hollow sigh dropped into nothingness. Thunder awoke in the narrow glen, and the solid flank of the mountain seemed to shudder. The air was thick with dust and snow, and Adam, perched above the abyss, was for a moment blinded. Presently it cleared, and he saw that the side of the ravine had been planed smooth, smooth as the glassy rock-wall of the torrent. Only a bird could reach the Val Saluzzana...

Creevey was safe. He would be alarmed at the earthquake, and might totter back to look for his friend, but sooner or later he would reach the valley. It did not matter how long he took, for he was now beyond the reach of his enemies... Presently he would be restored to a world which had sore need of him. Loeffler would have a potent ally. The rock-fall was a curtain which cut him off from his foes and inaugurated a new epoch in his life. He would be the same man, hungry, masterful, audacious, infinitely resourceful, still striding with long quick steps, but his face would be turned to another goal. The gods did not stop half-way when they wrought miracles.

Adam looked into the chasm which was filled with a fine dust like spindrift. That way lay the long road he had travelled since boyhood. Did his eyes deceive him, or was there some brightening of the mist, as if somewhere behind it there were the fires of sunset? Pleasant things were there— all his youth with its hopes, and all the tense striving of the last years—the grim things forgotten and only the sunshine hours remaining. His friends, too, and Jacqueline above all. He felt a warm uprush of affection, but it was an affection without longing or regret. He had seen life and beauty and honour, and these things did not die; they would endure to warm the world he was leaving.

He turned his face up the ravine whence he had come, and there the air had the bitter clearness of an interval between snow-showers. His range of vision was small, but every detail stood out hard and bleak. It was like the world he had seen from the Greenland ice-cap, a world barren of life, the ante-chamber of death. It was motionless as the grave, for the wind had fallen. But there was movement in his ears. He could hear the rasp of nailed boots on stone, and what sounded like human speech. The pack was closing in on him.

* * * * *

Then suddenly he saw beyond it. His eyes were no longer looking at clammy rock and lowering clouds, or the icy shoulder of the Pomagognon lifting through a gap of cliff... They were on blue water running out to where the afternoon sun made a great dazzle of gold. He knew that he had found the sea which had eluded him in all his dreams. He was in a bay of white sand, and in front, crested with light foam, were the skerries where the grey seals lived. The scents of thyme and heather and salt were blent in a divine elemental freshness. Nigel had come back to him—he saw him skipping by the edge of the tide—he saw him running towards him—he felt his hand in his—he looked into eyes bright with trust and love. From those eyes he seemed to draw youth and peace and immortality.

* * * * *

A voice which was not Nigel's broke into his dream, but it did not mar his peace. There only remained the trivial business of dying.

THE END

The House of the Four Winds

John Buchan



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PROLOGUE

Great events, says the philosophic historian, spring only from great causes, though the immediate occasion may be small; but I think his law must have exceptions. Of the not inconsiderable events which I am about to chronicle, the occasion was trivial, and I find it hard to detect the majestic agency behind them. What world-force, for example, ordained that Mr Dickson McCunn should slip into the Tod's Hole in his little salmon-river on a bleak night in April; and, without changing his clothes, should thereafter make a tour of inspection of his young lambs? His action was the proximate cause of this tale, but I can see no profounder explanation of it than the inherent perversity of man.

The performance had immediate consequences for Mr McCunn. He awoke next morning with a stiff neck, an aching left shoulder, and a pain in the small of his back — he who never in his life before had had a touch of rheumatism. A vigorous rubbing with embrocation failed to relieve him, and, since he was accustomed to robust health, he found it intolerable to hobble about with a thing like a toothache in several parts of his body. Dr Murdoch was sent for from Auchenlochan, and for a fortnight Mr McCunn had to endure mustard plasters and mustard baths, to swallow various medicines, and to submit to a rigorous diet. The pains declined, but he found himself to his disgust in a low state of general health, easily tired, liable to sudden cramps, and with a poor appetite for his meals. After three weeks of this condition he lost his temper. Summer was beginning, and he reflected that, being now sixty-three years of age, he had only a limited number of summers left to him. His gorge rose at the thought of dragging his wing through the coming delectable months — long-lighted June, the hot July noons with the corncrakes busy in the hay, the days on August hills, red with heather and musical with bees. He curbed his distaste for medical science, and departed to Edinburgh to consult a specialist.

That specialist gave him a purifying time. He tested his blood and his blood pressure, kneaded every part of his frame, and for the better part of a week kept him under observation. At the end he professed himself clear in the general but perplexed in the particular.

"You've never been ill in your life?" he said. "Well, that is just your trouble. You're an uncommonly strong man — heart, lungs, circulation, digestion, all in first-class order. But it stands to reason that you must have secreted poisons in your body, and you have never got them out. The best prescription for a fit old age is a bad illness in middle life, or, better still, a major operation. It drains off some of the middle-age humours. Well, you haven't had that luck, so you've been a powder magazine with some nasty explosives waiting for the spark. Your tom-fool escapade in the Stinchar provided the spark, and here you are — a healthy man mysteriously gone sick. You've got to be pretty careful, Mr McCunn. It depends on how you behave in the next few months whether you will be able to fish for salmon on your eightieth birthday, or be doddering round with two sticks and a shawl on your seventieth."

Mr McCunn was scared, penitent and utterly docile. He professed himself ready for the extremest measures, including the drawing of every tooth in his head.

The specialist smiled. "I don't recommend anything so drastic. What you want first of all is an exact diagnosis. I can assess your general condition, but I can't put my finger on the precise mischief. That needs a technique which we haven't developed sufficiently in this country. Next, you must have treatment, but treatment is a comparatively simple affair if you first get the right diagnosis. So I am going to send you to Germany."

Mr McCunn wailed. Banishment from his beloved Blawearry was a bitter pill.

"Yes, to Germany. To quite a pretty place called Rosensee, in Saxon Switzerland. There's a kurhaus there run by a man called Christoph. You never heard his name, of course — few people have — but he is a therapeutic genius of the first order. You can take my word for that. I've known him again and again pull people out of their graves. His main subject is nerves, but he is good for everything that is difficult and mysterious, for in my opinion he is the greatest diagnoser in the world. . . . By the way, you live in Carrick? Well, I sent one of your neighbours to Rosensee last year — Sir Archibald Roylance — he was having trouble with a damaged leg — and now he walks nearly as well as you and me. It seems there was a misplaced sinew which everybody else had overlooked. . . . Dr Christoph will see you three times a day, stare at you like an owl, ask you a thousand questions and make no comment for at least a fortnight. Then he will deliver judgment, and you may take it that it will be right. After that the treatment is a simple matter. In a week or two you will be got up in green shorts and a

Tyrolese hat and an alpenstock and a rope round your middle, climbing the little rocks of those parts. . . . Yes, I think I can promise you that you'll be fit and ready for the autumn salmon."

Mr McCunn, trained to know a competent man when he saw him, accepted the consultant's prescription, and rooms were taken for him at the Rosensee kurhaus. His wife did not accompany him for three reasons: first, she had a profound distaste for foreign countries and regarded Germany as still a hostile State; second, she could not believe that rheumatism, which was an hereditary ailment in her own family, need be taken seriously, so she felt no real anxiety about his health; third, he forbade her. She proposed to stay at Blawearry till the end of June, and then to await her husband's return at a Rothesay hydropathic. So early in the month Mr McCunn a little disconsolately left these shores. He took with him as body-servant and companion one Peter Wappit, who at Blawearry was game-keeper, forester and general handy-man. Peter, having fought in France with the Scots Fusiliers, and having been two years a prisoner in Germany, was believed by his master to be an adept at foreign tongues.

Nor was there any profound reason in the nature of things why Lord Rhynns, a well-preserved gentleman of sixty-seven, should have tumbled into a ditch that spring at Vallescure and broken his left leg. He was an active man and a careful, but his mind had been busy with the Newmarket entries, so that he missed a step, rolled some yards down a steep slope of rock and bracken, and came to rest with a leg doubled unpleasantly under him. The limb was well set, but neuritis followed, with disastrous consequences to the Rhynns ménage. For his wife, whose profession was a gentle invalidism, found herself compelled to see to household affairs, and as a result was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The family moved from watering-place to watering-place, seeking a cure for his lordship's affliction, till at the mountain village of Unnütz Lady Rhynns could bear it no longer. A telegram was despatched to their only child requiring her instant attendance upon distressed parents.

This was a serious blow to Miss Alison Westwater, who had been making very different plans for the summer. She was then in London, living with her Aunt Harriet, who two years before had espoused Mr Thomas Carlyle Craw, the newspaper magnate. It was the Craws' purpose to go north after Ascot to the Westwater house, Castle Gay, in the Canonry, of which Mr Craw had a long lease, and Alison, for whom a very little of London sufficed, had exulted in the prospect. Now she saw before her some dismal weeks — or months — in an alien land, in the company of a valetudinarian mother and a presumably irascible father. Her dreams of Scotland, to which she was passionately attached, of salmon in the Callowa and trout in the hill lochs and bright days among the heather, had to be replaced by a dreary vista of baking foreign roads, garish foreign hotels, tarnished pine-woods, tidy clothes and all the things which her soul abominated.

There was perhaps more of a cosmic motive in the determination that summer of the doings of Mr Dougal Crombie and Sir Archibald Roylance, for in their cases we touch the fringe of high politics. Dougal was now a force, almost THE force, in the Craw Press. The general manager, Mr Archibald Bamff, was growing old, he had taken to himself a wife, and his fancy toyed pleasantly with retirement to some country hermitage. So in the past year Dougal had been gradually taking over his work, and, since he had the complete confidence of Mr Craw, and the esteem of Mr Craw's masterful wife, he found himself in his early twenties charged with much weighty and troublesome business. He was a power behind the throne, and the more potent because few suspected his presence. Only one or two people — a Cabinet minister, an occasional financial magnate, a few highly placed Government officials — realised the authority that was wielded by this sombre and downright young man. Early in June he set out on an extensive Continental trip, the avowed purpose of which was to look into certain paper-making concerns which Mr Craw had acquired after the war. But his main object was not disclosed, for it was deeply secret. Mr Craw had long interested himself in the republic of Evallonia, his sympathies being with those who sought to restore the ancient monarchy. Now it appeared that the affairs of that country were approaching a crisis, and it was Dougal's mission to spy out the land.

As for Sir Archibald Roylance, he had been saddled with an honourable but distasteful duty. He had been the better part of two years in the House of Commons, and had already made a modest mark. He spoke infrequently and always on matters which he knew something about — the air, agriculture, foreign affairs — and his concise and well-informed speeches were welcomed amid the common verbiage of debate. He had become parliamentary private secretary to the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, who had been at school with him. That summer the usual Disarmament Conference was dragging its slow length along; it became necessary for Mr Despenser, the Under-Secretary, to go to Geneva, and Sir Archie was ordered to accompany him. He received the mandate with little pleasure. The session that summer would end early, and he wanted to get to Crask, for he had been defrauded of his Easter holiday in the Highlands. Geneva he believed

might last for months and he detested the place, which, as Lord Lamancha had once said, was full of the ghosts of mouldy old jurisconsults, and the living presence of cosmopolitan bores. But his spirits had improved when he discovered that he might take Janet with him.

"We'll find a chance of slipping away," he told his wife. "One merit of these beastly conferences is that they are always adjourning. We'll hop it into eastern Europe or some other fruity place. Hang it all, now that I've got the use of both legs, I don't see why we shouldn't climb a mountain or two. Dick Hannay's yarns have made me rather keen to try that game."

Certain of these transmigrations played havoc with the plans of Mr John Galt, of St. Mark's College, Cambridge, who, having just attained a second class in his Tripos and having so concluded his university career, felt himself entitled to an adequate holiday. He had intended to make his headquarters at Blawearry, which was the only home he had ever known, and thence to invade the Canonry, fishing its lochs and sleeping in its heather. But Blawearry would presently be shut up in Mr McCunn's absence, and if Alison Westwater was not at Castle Gay, the Canonry lost all its charm. Still, he must have some air and exercise. The summer term had been busy and stuffy, and to a Rugby player there were few attractions in punts among lilled backwaters. He would probably have to go alone to the Canonry, but his fancy had begun to toy with another scheme — a walking-tour in southeastern France or among the Jura foothills, where new sights and smells and sounds would relieve his loneliness. It was characteristic of him that he never thought of finding a male companion; for the last two years Alison had been for him the only companion in the world.

On the 13th of June he was still undecided, but that night his thoughts were narrowed to a happy orbit. For Alison was dining with him before her journey abroad, and together they were going on to a party which the Lamanchas were giving to the delegates to an international conference then in session in London. For one evening at least the world was about to give him all he desired.

It was a warm night, but the great room at Maurice's was cool with fans and sunblinds, though every table was occupied. From their corner, at the foot of the shallow staircase which is the main entrance, they had an excellent view of the company. There seemed to be a great many uniforms about, and a dazzling array of orders, no doubt in view of the Lamancha function. It was easy to talk, for at Maurice's there is no band till supper-time.

"You shouldn't have brought me here, Jaikie," said Alison. "It's too extravagant. And you're giving me far too good a dinner."

"It's a celebration," was the answer. "I've done with Cambridge."

"Are you sorry?"

"No. I liked it, for I like most things, but I don't want to linger over them."

The girl laughed merrily, and a smile slowly crept into Jaikie's face.

"You're quite right," he said. "That was a priggish thing to say, but it's true, all the same."

"I know. I never met anyone who wasted so little time in regrets. I wish I were like you, for I want anything I like to go on for ever. Cambridge must have slipped off you like water off a duck's back. What did you get out of it?"

"Peace to grow up. I've very nearly grown up now. I have discovered most of the things I can do and the things I can't. I know the things I like and the things I don't."

Alison knitted her brows. "That's not much good. So do I. The thing to find out is, what you can do BEST and what you like MOST. You told me a year ago that that was what you were after. Have you decided?"

"No," was the glum answer. "I think I have collected the material, so to speak, but I haven't sorted it out. I was looking to you to help me this summer in the Canonry, and now you're bolting to Italy or somewhere."

"Not Italy, my dear. A spot called Unnutz in the Tirol. You're not very good at geography."

"Mayn't I come too?"

"No, you mayn't. You'd simply loath it. A landscape like a picture postcard. Tennis and bumble-puppy golf and promenades, all in smart clothes. Infinite boring evenings when I have to play picquet with Papa or talk hotel French to Mamma's friends. Besides, my family wouldn't understand you. You haven't been properly presented to them, and Unnutz is not the place for that. You wouldn't be at your best there."

Two people passed on the way to their table, a tall young man with a lean ruddy face, and a pretty young woman, whose hair was nearly as bright a thing as Alison's. The young woman stopped.

"My dear Allie," she cried, "I haven't seen you for ages. Archie, it's Cousin Allie. They tell me you're being dragged abroad, the same as us. What's your penitentiary? Ours is Geneva."

"Mine's a place in the Tirol. Any chance of our meeting?"

"There might be. Archie has a notion of dashing about, for apparently an international conference is mostly adjournments. He's so spry on his legs since Dr Christoph took him in hand that he rather fancies himself as a mountaineer. What's your address?"

The lady scribbled it down in a notebook which she took from her bag, nodded gaily, and followed her husband and a waiter to their own table. Alison looked after them.

"That's the nicest couple on earth. She was Janet Raden, a sort of cousin of mine. Her husband, Archie Roylance.. ."

Jaikie interrupted.

"Great Scot! Is that Sir Archibald Roylance? I once knew him pretty well — for one day. I've told you about the Gorbals Diehards and Huntingtower. He was the ally we enlisted — lived at a place called the Mains of Garple. Ask Mr McCunn about him. I've often wondered when I should see him again, for I felt pretty certain I would — some day. He hasn't changed much."

"He can't change. Sir Archie is the most imperishable thing God ever created. He'll be a wild boy till he's ninety. Even with Janet to steady him I consider him dangerous, especially now that he has no longer a game leg. . . . Hullo, Jaikie. We're digging into the past to-night. Look who's over there."

She nodded towards a very brilliant table where some twenty people were dining, most of them in uniform. Among them was a fair young man in ordinary evening dress, without any decorations. He suddenly turned his face, recognised Alison, and, with a word of apology to the others, left his seat and came towards her. When she rose and curtsied, Jaikie had a sudden recollection.

"It is Miss Westwater, is it not?" said the young man, bowing over her hand. "My adorable preserver! I have not forgotten Prince Charlie and the Solway sands."

He turned to Jaikie.

"And the Moltke of the campaign, too! What is the name? Wait a minute. I have it — Jaikie. What fun to see you again! Are you two by any happy chance espoused?"

"Not yet," said Alison. "What are you doing in England, sir?"

"Holidaying. I cannot think why all the world does not holiday in England. It is the only really peaceful and pleasant place."

"How true, sir! I have to go abroad tomorrow, and I feel like an exile."

"Then why do you go?"

"I am summoned by neglected parents. To Unnutz, in the Tirol."

The young man's pleasant face grew suddenly grave.

"Unnutz. Above the Waldersee, in the Firnthal?"

"The same. Do you know it, sir?"

"I know it. I do not think it a very good place for a holiday — not this summer. But if it becomes unpleasant you can return home, for you English are always free to travel. But I should be careful in Unnutz, my dear Miss Westwater, and I should take Mr Jaikie with you as a protector."

He shook hands and departed smiling, but he left on the two the impression of an unexpected solemnity.

"What do you suppose is worrying Prince John?" Alison asked.

"The affairs of Evallonia. You remember at Castle Gay we thought the Republic would blow up any moment and that a month or two would see Prince John on the throne. That's two years ago and nothing has happened. Dougal is out there now looking into the situation. He may ginger them up."

"What makes him so solemn about Unnutz? By all accounts it's the ordinary gimcrack little foreign watering-place. He talked of it as if it were a sort of Chicago slum."

"He is a wise man, for he said you should take me with you."

They had reached the stage of coffee and cigarettes, and were now more free to watch their neighbours. It was a decorous assembly, in accordance with the tradition of Maurice's, and the only gaiety seemed to be among the womenkind of Prince John's party. The Prince's own face was very clear in the light of an overhanging lamp, and both Alison and Jaikie found themselves watching it — its slight heaviness in repose, its quick vivacity when interested, the smile which drew half its charm from a most attractive wrinkling around the eyes.

"It is the face of a prince," said Alison, "but not of a king — at any rate, not the kind of king that wins a throne. There's no dynamite in it."

"What sort of face do you give makers of revolutions?" Jaikie asked.

The girl swung round and regarded him steadily.

"Your sort," she said. "You look so meek and good that everybody loves you. And wise, wise like an old terrier. And yet, in the two years I have known you, you have filled up your time with the craziest things. First" — she counted on her fingers — "you went off to Baffin Island to trade old rifles for walrus ivory."

Jaikie grinned. "I made seventy-three pounds clear: I call that a success."

"Then you walked from Cambridge to Oxford within a day and a night."

"That was a failure. I was lame for a fortnight and couldn't play in the Welsh match."

"You went twice as a deck hand on a Grimsby trawler — first to Bear Island and then to the Whales' Back. I don't know where these places are, but they sound beastly."

"They were. I was sick most of the time."

"Last and worst, it was only your exams and my prayers that kept you from trying to circumnavigate Britain in a sailing canoe, when you would certainly have been drowned. What do you mean by it, Jaikie? It looks as if you were as neurotic as a Bloomsbury intellectual, though in a different way. Why this restlessness?"

"I wasn't restless. I did it all quite calmly, on purpose." Into Jaikie's small face there had come an innocent seriousness.

"You see," he went on, "when I was a small boy I was rather a hardy citizen. I've told you about that. Then Mr McCunn civilised me, which I badly needed. But I didn't want it to soften me. We are living in a roughish world today, and it is going to get rougher, and I don't want to think that there is any experience to which I can't face up. I've been trying to keep myself tough. You see what I mean, Alison?"

"I see. It's rather like painting the lily, you know. I wish I were going to the Canonry, for there's a lot of things I want to have out with you. Promise to keep quiet till I come back."

The Lamanchas' party was so large and crowded that Alison and Jaikie found it easy to compass solitude. Once out of the current that sucked through the drawing-rooms towards the supper-room there were quiet nooks to be discovered in the big house. One such they found in an alcove, where the upper staircase ascended from the first floor, and where, at a safe distance, they could watch the procession of guests. Alison pointed out various celebrities to the interested Jaikie, and a number of relations with whom she had no desire to have closer contact. But on one of the latter she condescended to details. He was a very tall man, whose clothes, even in that well-dressed assembly, were conspicuous for their elegance. He had a neatly trimmed blond beard, and hair worn a little longer than the fashion and as wavy as a smart woman's coiffure. They only saw his profile as he ascended the stairs, and his back as he disappeared into the main drawing-room.

"There's another cousin of mine," said the girl, "the queerest in all our queer clan. His name is Randal Glynde, and he has been everything in his time from cow-puncher to film star, not to mention diplomat, and various sorts of soldier, and somebody's private secretary. The family doesn't approve of him, for they never know what he'll do next, but he was very nice to me when I was a little girl, and I used to have a tremendous culte for him."

Jaikie was not listening, for he felt very depressed. This was his last hour with Alison for months, and the light had suddenly gone out of his landscape. He had never been lonely in his life before he met her, having at the worst found good company in himself; but now he longed for a companion, and out of the many millions of the world's inhabitants there was only one that he wanted.

"I can't go to Scotland," he said. "Blawearie is impossible, and if I went into the Canonry with you not there I'd howl."

"Poor Jaikie!" Alison laid a hand upon his. "But it's only another bit of the toughening you're so fond of. I promise to

write to you a great deal, and it won't be long till the autumn. You won't be half as lonely as I."

"I wish I thought that," said Jaikie, brightening a little. "I like being alone, but I don't like being lonely. I think I'll go abroad too."

"Why don't you join Mr McCunn?"

"He won't let me. He's doing a cure and is forbidden company."

"Or Dougal?"

"He wouldn't have me either. He thinks he's on some silly kind of secret service, and he's as mysterious about it as a sick owl. But I might go for a tramp somewhere. My finances will just run to it."

"Hullo, here's Ran," said Alison. The tall man with the fair beard had drifted towards them, and was now looking down on the girl. On a closer view he appeared to be nearer forty than thirty. Jaikie noticed that he had Alison's piercing blue eyes, with the same dancing light in them. There and then, being accustomed to rapid judgments, he felt well disposed towards the tall stranger.

"Alison dear." Mr Glynde put his hand on the girl's head. "I hear that your father has at last achieved gout."

"No. It's neuritis, which makes him much angrier. He would accept gout as a family legacy, but he dislikes unexpected visitations. I go out to him tomorrow."

"Unnütz, isn't it? A dreary little place. I fear you won't enjoy it, my dear."

"Where have you come from, Ran? We last heard of you in Russia."

"I have been in many places since Russia." Mr Glynde's voice had an odd quality in it, as if he were gently communing with himself. "After a time in deep water I come up to breathe, and then go down again."

"You've chosen very smart clothes to breathe in."

"I always try to suit my clothes to my company. It is the only way to be inconspicuous."

"Have you been writing any more poetry?"

"Not a word in English, but I have written some rather charming things in mediæval Latin. I'll send you them. It is the best tongue for a vagabond."

Alison introduced Jaikie.

"Here's another of your totem, Cousin Ran. You can't corrupt him, for he is quite as mad as you."

Mr Glynde smiled pleasantly as he shook hands, and Jaikie had an impression that his eyes were the most intelligent that he had ever seen, eyes which took in everything, and saw very deep, and had a mind behind them that did not forget. He felt too that something in his own face pleased the other, for there was friendliness behind the inquisition.

"He has just finished Cambridge, and finds himself at a loose end. He is hesitating between Scotland and a tramp on the Continent. What do you advise?"

"When you are young these decisions may be fateful things. I have always trusted to the spin of a coin. I carry with me a Greek stater which has made most of my decisions for me. What about tossing for it?"

He took from the pocket of his white waistcoat a small gold coin and handed it to Jaikie.

"It's a lucky coin," he said. "At least it has brought me infinite amusement. Try it."

Jaikie had a sudden queer feeling that the occasion had become rather solemn, almost sacramental. "Heads Scotland, tails abroad," he said and tossed. It fell tails.

"Behold," said Mr Glynde, "your mind is made up for you. You will wander along in the white dust and drink country wine and doze in the woods, knowing that the unseen Powers are with you. Where, by the way, did you think of going? You have no preference? You have been very little abroad? How fortunate to have all Europe spread out for your choice. But I should not go too far east, Mr Galt. Keep to the comfortable west if you want peace. If you go too far east this summer, you may find that the spin of my little stater has been rather too fateful."

As Jaikie put Alison into a taxi, he observed Mr Glynde leaving the house on foot with a companion. He had a glimpse of that companion's face, and saw that it was Prince John of Evallonia.



Chapter 1

THE MAN WITH THE ELEPHANT

The inn at Kremisch, the Stag with the Two Heads, has an upper room so bowed with age that it leans drunkenly over the village street. It is a bare place, which must be chilly in winter, for the old casement has many chinks in it, and the china stove does not look efficient, and the rough beechen table, marked by many beer mugs, and the seats of beechwood and hide are scarcely luxurious. But on this summer night to one who had been tramping all day on roads deep in white dust under a merciless sun it seemed a haven of ease. Jaikie had eaten an admirable supper on a corner of the table, a supper of cold ham, an omelet, hot toasted rye-cakes and a seductive cheese. He had drunk wine tapped from a barrel and cold as water from a mountain spring, and had concluded with coffee and cream in a blue cup as large as a basin. Now he could light his pipe and watch the green dusk deepen behind the onion spire of the village church.

The milestones in his journey had been the wines. Jaikie was no connoisseur, and indeed as a rule preferred beer, but the vintage of a place seemed to give him the place's flavour and wines made a diary of his pilgrimage. His legs bore him from valley to valley, but he drank himself from atmosphere to atmosphere. He had begun among strong burgundies which needed water to make a thirst-quenching drink, and continued through the thin wines of the hills to the coarse red stuff of south Germany and a dozen forgotten little local products. In one upland place he had found a drink like the grey wine of Anjou, in another a sweet thing like Madeira, and in another a fiery sherry. Each night at the end of his tramp he concocted a long drink, and he stuck manfully to the juice of the grape; so, having a delicate palate and a good memory, he had now behind him a map of his track picked out in honest liquors.

Each was associated with some vision of sun-drenched landscape. He had been a month on the tramp, but he seemed to have walked through continents. As he half dozed at the open window, it was pleasant to let his fancy run back along the road. It had led him through vineyards grey at the fringes with dust, through baking beet-fields and drowsy cornlands and solemn forests; up into wooded hills and flowery meadows, and once or twice almost into the jaws of the great mountains; through every kind of human settlement, from hamlets which were only larger farms to brisk burghs clustered round opulent town-houses or castles as old as Charlemagne; by every kind of stream — unfordable great rivers, and milky mountain-torrents, and reedy lowland waters, and clear brooks slipping through mint and water-cress. He had walked and walked, seeking to travel and not to arrive, and making no plans except that his face was always to the sunrise. He was very dimly aware at any moment of his whereabouts, for his sole map was a sketchy thing out of a Continental Bradshaw.

But he had walked himself into contentment. At the start he had been restless and lonely. He wished that he could have brought Woolworth, now languishing at Blawearry, but he could not condemn that long-suffering terrier to months of quarantine. He wrote disconsolate letters to Alison in his vile handwriting, and received from her at various postes-restantes replies which revealed the dullness of her own life at Unnutz. She had nothing to write about, and it was never her habit to spoil good paper with trivial reflections. There was a time at the start when Jaikie's mind had been filled with exasperating little cares, so that he turned a blank face to the world he was traversing. His future — what was he to do now that he was done with Cambridge? Alison — his need of her grew more desperate every day, but what could he offer her worthy of her acceptance? Only his small dingy self, he concluded, with nothing to his credit except a second-class degree, some repute at Rugby football, and the slenderest of bank balances. It seemed the most preposterous affair of a moth and a star.

But youth and the sun and wide spaces played their old healing part. He began to rise whistling from his bed in a pinewood or in a cheap country inn, with a sense that the earth was very spacious and curious. The strong aromatic sunlight drugged him into cheerfulness. The humours of the road were spread before him. He had learned to talk French fairly well, but his German was scanty; nevertheless, he had the British soldier's gift of establishing friendship on a meagre linguistic basis, and he slipped inside the life of sundry little communities. His passion for new landscapes made every day's march a romance, and, having a love of the human comedy, he found each night's lodging an entertainment. He understood that he was looking at things in a new perspective. What had seemed a dull track between high walls was now expanding into open country.

Especially he thought happily about Alison. He did not think of her as a bored young woman with peevish parents in a

dull health resort, but as he knew her in the Canonry, an audacious ally in any venture, staunch as the hills, kind as a west wind. So far as she was concerned, prudential thoughts about the future were an insult. She was there waiting for him as soon as he could climb to her high level. He encountered no delicacy of scene or weather but he longed to have her beside him to enjoy it. He treasured up scraps of wayside humour for her amusement, and even some shy meditations which some day he would confide to her. They did not go into his letters, which became daily scappier — but these letters now concluded with what for Jaikie were almost the messages of a lover.

He was in a calmer mood, too, about himself. Had he been more worldly-wise he might have reflected that some day he must be a rich man. Dickson McCunn had no chick nor child nor near relation, and he and Dougal were virtually his adopted sons. Dougal was already on the road to wealth and fame, and Dickson would see that Jaikie was well provided for. But characteristically he never thought of that probability. He had his own way to make with no man's aid, and he was only waiting to discover the proper starting-point. But a pleasing lethargy possessed him. This delectable summer world was not the place for making plans. So far he was content with what he had done. Dickson had drawn him out of the depths into the normal light of day, and it had been his business to accustom his eyes to it. He was aware that, without Cambridge, he would have always been a little shy and suspicious of the life of a class into which he had not been born; now he knew it for what it was worth, and could look at it without prejudice but also without glamour. "Brother to a beggar, and fellow to a king" — what was Dougal's phrase? Jaikie was no theorist, but he had a working philosophy, with the notion at the back of his head that human nature was much the same everywhere, and that one might dig out of the unlikeliest places surprising virtues. He considered that he had been lucky enough to have the right kind of education for the practice of this creed.

But it was no philosopher who sat with his knees hunched on the window-seat, but a drowsy and rather excited boy. His travels had given him more than content, for in these last days a faint but delicious excitement had been creeping into his mind. He was not very certain of his exact whereabouts on the map, but he knew that he had crossed the border of the humdrum world and was in a land of enchantments. There was nothing in the ritual of his days to justify this; his legs like compasses were measuring out the same number of miles; the environment was the same, the slow kindly peasants, the wheel of country life, the same bright mornings and cool evenings, the same plain meals voraciously eaten, and hard beds in which he fell instantly asleep. He could speak little of the language, and he did not know one soul within a hundred miles. He was the humblest of pilgrims, and the lowness of his funds would presently compel his return. Nevertheless, he was ridiculously expectant. He laughed at himself, but he could not banish the mood. He was awaiting something — or something was awaiting him.

The apple-green twilight deepened into emerald, and then into a velvet darkness, for the moon would rise late, and a haze obscured the stars. Long ago the last child had been hunted from the street into bed. Long ago the last villagers had left the seat under the vine trellis where they had been having their evening sederunt. Long ago the oxen had been brought into the byres and the goats driven in from the hillside. A wood-wagon had broken down by the bridge, and the blacksmith had been hammering at its axle, but his job was finished, and a spark of a lamp beacons the derelict cart. Otherwise there was no light in earth or heaven, and no sound except the far-away drone of a waterfall in the high woods and an occasional stirring of beasts in byre or stable. Kremisch was in the deep sleep of those who labour hard, bed early, and rise with the dawn. Jaikie grew drowsy. He shook out his pipe, drew a long breath of the cool night air, and rose to take the lamp from the table and ascend to his bedroom.

Suddenly a voice spoke. It came from the outer air at about the level of the window. And it asked in German for a match.

Balaam was not more startled by the sudden loquacity of his ass than was Jaikie by this aerial summons. It shook him out of his sleepiness and made him nearly drop the lamp. "God bless my soul," he said — his chief ejaculation, which he had acquired from Mr McCunn.

"He will," said the voice, "if you'll give me a light for my cigarette."

The spirit apparently spoke English, and Jaikie, reassured, held the lamp to the darkness of the open casement. There was a face there, suspended in the air, a face with cheeks the colour of a dry beech leaf and a ragged yellow beard. It was a friendly face, and in the mouth was an unlit cigarette.

"What are you standing on?" Jaikie asked, for it occurred to him that this must be a man on stilts. He had heard of these as a custom in malarial foreign places.

“To be accurate, I am sitting,” was the answer. “Sitting on an elephant, if you must know. An agreeable female whom I call Aurunculeia. Out of Catullus, you remember. Almost his best poem.”

Jaikie lit a match, but the speaker waved it aside. “I think, if you don’t mind,” he said, “I’ll come in and join you for a minute. One doesn’t often meet an Englishman in these parts, and Aurunculeia has no vulgar passion for haste. As you have no doubt guessed, she and I are part of a circus — an integral and vital part — what you might call the primum mobile. But we were detained by a little accident. I was asleep, and we strayed from the road and did havoc in a field of marrows, which made some unpleasantness. So our lovely companions have faded and gone ahead to savour the fleshpots of Tarta, while we follow at our leisure. You have never ridden on an elephant? If you go slow enough, believe me it is the very poetry of motion, for you are part, as it were, of a cosmic process. How does it go? ‘Moved round in earth’s diurnal course, With rocks and stones and trees.’”

A word was spoken in a lower tone, there was the sound of the shuffling of heavy feet, and a man stepped lightly on to the window-sill and through the casement. His first act was to turn up the wick of the lamp on the table, and light his cigarette at its funnel.

Jaikie found himself gazing at a figure which might have been the Pied Piper. It was very tall and very ragged. It wore an old tunic of horizon-blue from which most of the buttons had gone, a scarlet cummerbund, and flapping cotton trousers which had once been white. It had no hat, and besides its clothes, its only other belonging was a long silver-mounted porcupine quill, which may have been used for the encouragement of Aurunculeia.

The scarecrow looked at Jaikie and saw something there which amused him, for he set his arms akimbo and laughed heartily. “How nature creeps up to art!” he cried. “Had this been an episode in a novel, it would have been condemned for its manifest improbability. There was an impish propulsive power about my little gold stater.”

He took a small coin from his pocket and regarded it affectionately. Then he asked a question which brought Jaikie out of his chair. “Have you any news of Cousin Alison, Mr Galt?”

Slowly, to Jaikie’s startled sight, the features of the scarecrow became the lineaments of the exquisite Mr Randal Glynde. The neat hair was now shaggy and very dusty, the beard was untrimmed, and every semblance of respectability had gone from his garments. But the long lean wrists were the same, the long slim fingers, and the penetrating blue eyes.

Mr Glynde replaced the stater in some corner of his person, and beamed upon Jaikie. He stretched an arm and grasped the jug of wine of which Jaikie had drunk about half, took a long pull at it, and set it down with a wry face.

“Vinegar,” he said. “I had forgotten that the Flosgebirge wine sours in an hour. Do not trouble yourself, Mr Galt, for I have long ago supped. We were talking about Cousin Alison, for whom I understand you have a kindness. So have I. So gracious is my memory of her that I have been reciting verses in her honour in the only tongue in which a goddess should be hymned.

Alison, bella puella candida,
Quae bene superas lac et lilium
Album, quae simul rosam rubidam
Aut expositum ebur Indicum,
Pande, puella, pande capillulos
Flavos, lucentes ut aurum nitidum.

What puzzles me is whether that is partly my own or wholly John the Silentiar’s. I had been reading John the Silentiar, but the book was stolen from me, so I cannot verify. . . . No, I will not sleep here. I must sleep at Tarta, though it will be broad daylight before I shut my eyes. Tatius, my manager, is a worthy man, but he is to Meleager my clown as acid to a raw wound, and without me to calm them they will be presently rubbing each other’s noses in the mud.”

“Are you a circus proprietor?” Jaikie asked.

Mr Glynde nodded pleasantly.

“In me you see the sole proprietor of the epochal, the encyclopædic, the grandiose Cirque Doré of Aristide Lebrun. The epithets are not mine, but those of the late Aristide, who these three years has been reposing in full evening dress in the cemetery of Montléry. I purchased the thing from his widow, stock-intrade, good-will and all — even the gentle Aurunculeia. I have travelled with it from the Pyrenees to the Carpathians and from the Harz to the Apennines. Some day, who knows, I will widen these limits and go from the Sierra-Nevada to the Urals, and from the Jotunheim to Parnassus. Geography has always intoxicated me.”

"I understand the fun of travelling," said Jaikie, "but isn't a circus rather heavy baggage to lug after you?"

"Ah, no. You do not realise the power of him who carries with him a little world of merriment, which can be linked to that substratum of merriment which is found in every human species. No fumbling for him — he finds the common touch at once. He must suit himself of course to various tastes. Clowning in one place, horse-tricks in a second, the sweet Aurunculeia in a third. The hills have different fancies from the valleys, and the valleys from the plains. The Cirque Doré is small, but I flatter myself it is select. We have as fine white barbs as ever came out of Africa, and Meleager my clown has the common denominator of comedy at which all Europe can laugh. No women. Too temperamental and troublesome. My people quarrel in every known tongue, but, being males, it is summer lightning. . . . Ah, Mr Galt, I cannot explain to you the intoxication of shifting camp weekly, not from town to town, but from one little human cosmos to another. I have the key which unlocks all doors, and can steal into the world at the back of men's minds, about which they do not speak to their politicians and scarcely even to their priests.

"I have power, too," Mr Glynde went on; "for I appeal to something old and deep in man's nature. Before this I have wrecked a promising insurrection through the superior charm of my circus over an émeute in a market-place. I have protected mayors and burgomasters from broken heads, and maybe from cut throats, by my mild distractions. And I have learned many things that are hidden from diplomats and eager journalists. I, the entertainer, the fils de joie, I am becoming an expert, if I may say so modestly, on the public opinion of Europe — or rather on that incoherent soul which is greater than opinion."

"Well, and what do you make of it?" Jaikie asked. He was fascinated by his visitor, the more so as he was a link with Alison, but sleep was descending upon him like an armed man, and he asked the conventional question without any great desire to hear the answer.

"Bad," said Mr Glynde. "Or, since a moral judgment is unnecessary, shall I say odd? We are now in the midst of the retarded liquidation of the war. I do not mean debts and currencies and economic fabrics, but something much more vital — the thoughts of men. The democracies have lost confidence. So long as they believed in themselves they could make shift with constitutions and parliaments and dull republics. But once let them lose confidence, and they are like children in the dark, reaching out for the grasp of a strong hand. That way lies the dictator. It might be the monarch if we bred the right kind of king. . . . Also there is something more dangerous still, a stirring of youth, disappointed, aggrieved youth, which has never known the discipline of war. Imaginative and incalculable youth, which clamours for the moon and may not be content till it has damaged most of the street lamps.

"But you nod," said Mr Glynde rising. "I weary you. You must to bed and I to Tarta. I must not presume upon the celestial patience of Aurunculeia."

Jaikie rose too and found the tall man's hand on his shoulder. He observed sleepily that his visitor's face, now clear in the lamplight, had changed, the smile had gone from it, and the eyes were cool and rather grave. Also the slight artifice of his speech, which recalled an affected Cambridge don of his acquaintance, was suddenly dropped.

"I gave you certain advice," said Mr Glynde, "when you spun my stater in London. I told you that if you wanted peace you should stick to the west. You are pretty far east, Mr Galt, so I assume that a quiet life is not your first object. You have been walking blindly and happily for weeks waiting for what the days brought forth. Have you any very clear notion where you have got to?"

"I'm rather vague, for I have a rotten map. But I know that I've come to the end of my money. To-morrow I must turn about and make for home. I mean to get to Munich and travel back by the cheapest way."

"Three and a quarter miles from Kremisch the road to Tarta drops into a defile among pine-trees. At the top there are two block-houses, one on each side of the highway. If you walked that way armed guards would emerge from the huts and demand your passport. Also they would make an inquisition into your baggage more peremptory than most customs-officers. That is the frontier of Evallonia."

Jaikie's sleepiness left him. "Evallonia!" he cried. "I had no notion I was so near it."

"You have read of Evallonia in the English press?"

"Yes, and I have heard a lot about it. I've met Evallonians too — all sorts." He counted on his fingers. "Nine — ten, including Prince John."

"Prince John! Ah, you saw him at Lady Lamancha's party."

"I saw him two years before that in Scotland, and had a good deal to do with him. With the others, too. I can tell you who they were, for I'm not likely to forget them. There were six Republicans — Mastrovin, Dedekind, Rosenbaum, Ricci, Calaman, and one whose name I never knew — a round-faced fellow in spectacles. There were three Monarchists — Count Casimir Muresco, Doctor Jagon and Prince Odalchini."

The tall man carefully closed the window, and sat down again. When he spoke it was in a low voice.

"You know some very celebrated people. I think I can place you, Mr Galt. You are called Jaikie, are you not, by your friends? Two years ago you performed a very notable exploit, which resulted in the saving of several honest men and the confounding of some who were not so honest. That story is famous in certain circles. I have laughed over it often, not dreaming that one day I should meet the hero."

Jaikie shifted nervously, for praise made him unhappy. "Oh, I didn't do anything much. It was principally Alison. But what has gone wrong with Evallonia? I've been expecting ever since to hear that the Monarchists had kicked out Mastrovin and his lot, but the whole thing seems to have fizzled."

Mr Glynde was regarding him with steady eyes, which even in the dim light seemed very bright.

"It has not fizzled, but Evallonia at this moment is in a critical state. It is no place for a quiet life, but then I do not think that is what you like. . . . Mr Galt, will you forgive me if I ask you a personal question? Have you any duty which requires your immediate return home?"

"None. But I've finished my money. I have just about enough to get me back."

"Money is nothing — that can be arranged. I would ask another question. Have you any strong interest in Evallonian affairs?"

"No. But some of my friends have — Mr Craw, the newspaper man, for example, and Dougal Crombie, his chief manager."

Mr Glynde brooded. "You know Mr Craw and Mr Crombie? Of course you would. But you have no prepossession in the matter? Except an inclination to back your friends' view?"

"Yes. I thought Prince John a decent fellow, and I liked the queer old Monarchist chaps. Also I greatly disliked Mastrovin and his crowd. They tried to bully me."

The other smiled. "That I am sure was a bad blunder on their part." He was silent for a minute, and then he laid a hand on Jaikie's knee. "Mr Galt," he said solemnly, "if you continued your walking-tour tomorrow eastward down the wooded glen, and passed the frontier — I presume your passport is in order? — you would enter a strange country. How strange I have no time to tell you, but I will say this — it is at the crisis of its destiny and any hour may see a triumph or a tragedy. I believe that you might be of some use in averting tragedy. You are a young man, and, I fancy, not indisposed to adventure. If you go home you will be out of danger in that happy cosseted world of England. If you go on, you will certainly find danger, but you may also find wonderful things for which danger is a cheap price. How do you feel about it?"

Jaikie felt many things. Now he knew why all day he had had that curious sense of expectation. There was a queer little flutter at his heart.

"I don't know," he said. "It's all rather sudden. I should want to hear more about it."

"You shall. You shall hear everything before you take any step which is irrevocable. If you will make one day's march into Evallonia, I will arrange that the whole situation is put honestly before you. . . . But no! I have a conscience. I can foretell what you will decide, and I have no right even to bring you within the possibility of that decision, for it will mean danger — it may even mean death. You are too young to gamble with."

"I think," said Jaikie, "I should like to put my nose inside Evallonia just to say I'd been there. You say I can come back if I don't like it. Where's that little coin of yours? It sent me out here, and it may as well decide what I do next."

"Sportsman," said Mr Glynde. He produced the stater and handed it to Jaikie, who spun it — "Heads go on, tails go home." But owing to the dim light, or perhaps to sleepy eyes, he missed his catch, and the coin rolled on the floor. He took the lamp to look for it, and behold it was wedged upright in a crack in the board — neither heads nor tails.

Mr Glynde laughed merrily. "Apparently the immortal Gods will have no part in this affair. I don't blame them, for Evallonia is a nasty handful. The omens on the whole point to home. Good night, Mr Galt. We shall no doubt meet in England."

“I’ll sleep on it,” said Jaikie. “If I decide to go on a little farther, what do I do?”

“You will reach Tarta by midday, and just beyond the bridge you will see a gipsy-looking fellow, short but very square, with whiskers and earrings and a white hat with ‘Cirque Doré’ embroidered on it in scarlet. That is Luigi, my chief fiddler. You will ask him the way to the Cirque, and he will reply in French, which I think you understand, that he knows a better restaurant. After that you will be in his charge. Only I beg of you to keep your mind unbiased by what I have said, and let sleep give you your decision. Like Cromwell I am a believer in Providences, and since that wretched stater won’t play the game, you must wait for some other celestial guidance.”

He opened the casement, spoke a word in an unknown tongue, and a heavy body stirred in the dust below. Then he stepped lightly into the velvet darkness, and there followed a heaving and shuffling which presently died away. When a minute later the moon topped the hill, the little street was an empty silver alley.



Chapter 2

THE HOUSE OF THE FOUR WINDS

The night brought no inspiration to Jaikie, for his head was no sooner on his chaff-filled pillow than he seemed to be awake in broad daylight. But the morning decided him. There had been an early shower, the dust was laid in the streets, and every cobble of the side-walk glistened. From the hills blew a light wind, bearing a rooty fragrance of pine and moss and bracken. A delicious smell of hot coffee and new bread ascended from below; cats were taking their early airing; the vintner opposite, who had a face like a sun, was having a slow argument with the shoemaker; a pretty girl with a basket on her arm was making eyes at a young forester in velveteen breeches and buckskin leggings; a promising dog-fight was in progress near the bridge, watched by several excited boys; the sky above had the soft haze which promises a broiling day.

Jaikie felt hungry both for food and enterprise. The morning's freshness was like a draught of spring water, and every sense was quick and perceptive. He craned his head out of the window, and looked back along the way he had come the night before. It showed a dull straight vista between trees. He looked eastward, and there, beyond the end of the village, the world dropped away, and he was looking at the blue heavens and a most appetising crook in the road, which seemed to hesitate, like a timid swimmer, before plunging downwards. There could be no question about it. On this divinest of mornings he refused dully to retrace his steps. He would descend for one day into Evallonia.

He breakfasted on fried eggs and brook trout, paid a diminutive bill, buckled on his knapsack, and before ten o'clock had left Kremisch behind him. The road was all that it had promised. It wound through an upland meadow with a strong blue-grey stream to keep it company, and every now and then afforded delectable glimpses of remote and shining plains. The hills shouldered it friendlily, hills with wide green rides among the firs and sometimes a bald nose of granite. Jaikie had started out with his mind chiefly on Randal Glynde, that suddenly-discovered link with Alison. Evallonia and its affairs did not interest him, or Mr Glynde's mysterious summons to adventure. His meditations during recent weeks had been so much on his own land and the opportunities which it might offer to a deserving young man that he was not greatly concerned with the doings of foreigners, even though some of them were his acquaintances. But he was strongly interested in Mr Glynde. He had never met anybody quite like him, so cheerful and secure in his absurdities. The meeting with him had rolled from Jaikie's back many of the cares of life. The solemnity with which he had proposed a visit to Evallonia seemed in the retrospect to be out of the picture and therefore negligible. Mr Glynde was an apostle of fantasy and his seriousness was itself a comedy. The memory of him harmonised perfectly with this morning world, which with every hundred yards was unveiling a new pageant of delight.

Presently he forgot even Mr Glynde in the drama of the roadside. There was a pool in the stream, ultramarine over silver sand, with a very big trout in it — not less than three pounds in weight. There was a bird which looked like a dipper, but was not a dipper. There was a hawk in the sky, a long-winged falcon of a kind he had never seen before. And on a boulder was perched — rarity of rarities — an unmistakable black redstart. . . . And then the glen seemed to lurch forward and become a defile, down which the stream dropped in a necklace of white cascades. At the edge was a group of low buildings, and out of them came two men carrying rifles.

Jaikie looked with respect at the first Evallonians he had seen on their native heath. They were small men with a great breadth of shoulder, and broad good-humoured countenances — a typical compound, he thought, of Slav and Teuton. But their manner belied their faces, for they were almost truculent, as if they had been soured by heavy and unwelcome duties. They examined everything in his pack and his pockets, they studied his passport with profound suspicion, and they interrogated him closely in German, which he followed with difficulty. Several times they withdrew to consult together; once they retired into the block-house, apparently to look up some book of regulations. It was the better part of an hour before they allowed him to pass. Then something ingenuous in Jaikie's face made them repent of their doubts. They grimaced and shook hands with him, and shouted *Grüss Gott* till he had turned a corner.

"Evallonia is a nervous country," thought Jaikie. "Lucky I had nothing contraband on me, or I should be bankrupt."

After that the defile opened into a horseshoe valley, with a few miles ahead the spires of a little town. He saw the loop of a river, of which the stream he had followed must be a tributary. On the north side was something which he took for a hill, but which closer inspection revealed to be a dwelling. It stood high and menacing, with the town huddled up to it, built

of some dark stone which borrowed no colour from the bright morning. On three sides it seemed to be bounded by an immense park, for he saw great spaces of turf and woodland which contrasted with the chessboard tillage of other parts of the plain.

A peasant was carrying hay from a roadside meadow. Jaikie pointed to the place and asked its name.

The man nodded. "Yes, Tarta."

"And the castle?"

At first the man puzzled; then he smiled. He pronounced a string of uncouth vocables. Then in halting German: "It is the great Schloss. I have given you its name. It means the House of the Four Winds."

As Jaikie drew nearer the town he saw the reason why it was so called. Tarta stood in the mouth of a horseshoe and three glens debouched upon it, his own from the west and two other sword-cuts from the north and south. It was clear that the castle must be a very temple of Aeolus. From three points of the compass the winds would whistle down the mountain gullies, and on the east there was no shelter from the devilments bred in the Asian steppes.

Before noon he was close to the confines of the little town. His stream had ceased to be a mountain torrent, and had expanded into broad lagoons, and just ahead was its junction with the river. Over the latter there was a high-backed bridge flanked by guard-houses, and beyond a jumble of masonry which promised narrow old — world streets. The castle, seen at closer range, was more impressive than ever. It hung over the town like a thundercloud, but a thundercloud from which the lightnings had fled, for it had a sad air of desolation. No flag flew from its turrets, no smoke issued from its many chimneys, the few windows in the great black sides which rose above the streets were like blind eyes. Yet its lifelessness made a strong appeal to Jaikie's fancy. This bustling little burgh under the shadow of a mediæval relic was like a living thing tied to a corpse. But was it really a corpse? He guessed at its vast bulk stretching northward into its wild park. It might have turned a cold shoulder on Tarta and yet within its secret demesne be furiously alive. Meantime it belied its name, for not a breath of wind stirred in the sultry noon. Somewhere beyond the bridge must be Luigi, the chief fiddler of the Cirque Doré. He hoped that Luigi would take him where he could get a long drink.

He was to get the drink, but not from Luigi's hands. On the side of the bridge farthest from the town the road passed through a piece of rough parkland, perhaps the common pasturage of the mediæval township. Here a considerable crowd had gathered, and Jaikie pressed forward to discover the reason of it. Down the road from Tarta a company of young men was marching, with the obvious intention of making camp in the park; indeed, certain forerunners had already set up a grove of little shelter-tents. They were remarkable young men, for they carried themselves with disciplined shoulders, and yet with the free swing from the hips of the mountaineer. Few of them were tall, but their leanness gave the impression of a good average height, and they certainly looked amazingly hard and fit. Jaikie, accustomed to judge physique on the Rugby field, was impressed by their light-foot walk and their easy carriage. They were not in the least like the Wandervögel whom he had met on many German roads, comfortable sunburnt folk out for a holiday. These lads were in serious training, and they had some purpose other than amusement.

As they passed, the men in the crowd saluted by raising the left hand and the women waved their handkerchiefs. In the rear rode a young man, a splendid figure on a well-bred flea-bitten roan. The rank-and-file wore shorts and green shirts open at the neck, but the horseman had breeches and boots and a belted green tunic, while a long hunting-knife swung at his middle. He was a tall fellow with thick fair hair, a square face and dark eyebrows — a face with which Jaikie was familiar in very different surroundings.

Jaikie, in the front row of the crowd, was so overcome with amazement that his left hand remained unraised and he could only stare. The horseman caught sight of him, and he too registered surprise, from which he instantly recovered. He spoke a word to the ranks; a man fell out, and beckoned Jaikie to follow. The other spectators fell back from him as from a leper, and he and his warder followed the horse's tail into the open space, where the rest were drawing up in front of the tents.

Then the horseman turned to him.

"Salute," he said. Jaikie's arm shot up obediently.

The leader cast an eye over the ranks, and bade them stand easy and then fall out. He dismounted, flinging his bridle to an orderly. "Follow me," he said to Jaikie in English, and led him to a spot on the river-bank, where a larger tent had been set up. Two lads were busy there with kit and these he dismissed. Then he turned to Jaikie with a broad grin. "What

on earth are you doing here?" he asked.

"Give me a drink first, Ashie," was the answer.

The young man dived into the tent and produced a bottle of white wine, a bottle of a local mineral water, and two tumblers. The two clinked glasses. Then he gave Jaikie a cigarette. "Now," he said, "what's your story?"

"I have been across half Europe," said Jaikie. "I must have tramped about five hundred miles. My money's done, and I go home tomorrow, but I thought I'd have a look inside Evallonia first. But what are YOU doing, Ashie? Is it Boy Scouts or a revolution?"

The other smiled and did not at once reply. That was a mannerism which the University of Cambridge had taught him, for when Count Paul Jovian (he had half a dozen other Christian names which we may neglect) entered St. Mark's he had been too loquacious. He and a cousin had shared lodgings, and at first they were not popular. They had an unpleasant trick of being easily insulted, talking about duels, and consequently getting their ears boxed. When they migrated within the College walls, the dislike of the cousin had endured, but Count Paul began to make friends. Finally came a night when the cousin's trousers were removed and used to decorate the roof, as public evidence of dislike, while Paul was unmolested. That occasion gave him his nickname, for he was christened Asher by a piously brought-up contemporary, the tribe of Asher having, according to the Book of Judges, "abode in its breaches." "Ashie" he had remained from that day.

Jaikie had begun by disliking him, he was so noisy and strange and flamboyant. But Count Paul had a remarkable gift of adapting himself to novel conditions. Presently his exuberance quieted down, he became more sparing in speech, he developed a sense of humour and laboured to acquire the idiom of their little society. In his second year he was indistinguishable from the ordinary English undergraduate. He had a pretty turn of speed, but it was found impossible to teach him the Rugby game; at boxing too he was a complete duffer; but he was a brilliant fencer, and he knew all that was to be known about a horse. Indeed, it was in connection with horses that Jaikie first came to like him. A groom from a livery stable lost his temper with a hireling, who was badly bitten and in a fractious temper. The Count's treatment of the case rejoiced Jaikie's heart. He shot the man into the gutter, eased the bit, and quieted the animal with a curious affectionate gentleness. After that the two became friends, in spite of the fact that the Count's taste for horses and hunting took him into a rather different set. They played together in a cricket eleven of novices called the "Cads of all Nations," who for a week of one long vacation toured the Midlands, and were soundly beaten by every village team.

There was a tough hardihood about the man which made Jaikie invite him more than once to be his companion in some of his more risky enterprises — invitations regretfully refused, for some business always took Ashie home. That home Jaikie knew to be in Eastern Europe, but he had not associated him with Evallonia. There was also an extreme innocence. He wanted to learn everything about England, and took Jaikie as his mentor, believing that in him he had found the greatest common measure of the British people. Whether he learned much may be doubted, for Jaikie was too little of a dogmatist to be a good instructor. But they slipped into a close friendship, and rubbed the corners off each other's minds.

"I know what I'm doing," said Ashie at last; "but I am not quite sure where it will finish. But that's a long story. You're a little devil, Jaikie, to come here at the tag-end of your holiday. If you had come a month ago we might have had all sorts of fun."

He had relapsed into the manner of the undergraduate, but there was something in him now which made it a little absurd. For the figure opposite Jaikie was not the agreeable and irresponsible companion he had known. Ashie looked desperately foreign, without a hint of Cambridge and England; bigger too, more mature, and rather formidable. The thick dark eyebrows in combination with the fair hair had hitherto given his appearance a touch of comedy; now the same brows bent above the grey eyes had something in them martial and commanding. Rob Roy was more of a man on his native heath than on the causeways of Glasgow.

"If you can arrange to stay here for a little," said Ashie, "I promise to show you life."

"Thank you very much, but I can't. I must be off home tomorrow — a week's tramping, and then the train."

"Give me three weeks."

"I'm sorry, but I can't." Jaikie found it hard to sort out his feelings, but he was clear that he did not want to dally in Evallonia.

Ashie's voice became almost magisterial.

"What are you doing here today?" he asked.

"I'm lunching with a friend and going back to Kremisch in the evening."

"Who's your friend?"

"I'm not quite sure of his name." Jaikie's caution told him that Mr Glynde might have many aliases. "He's in a circus."

Ashie laughed — almost in the old light-hearted way. "Just the kind of friend you'd have. The Cirque Doré? I saw some of the mountebanks in the streets. . . . You won't accept my invitation? I can promise you the most stirring time in your life."

"I wish I could, but — well, it's no use, I can't."

"Then we must part, for I have a lot to do."

"You haven't told me what you're doing."

"No. Some day I will — in England, if I ever come back to England."

He called one of his scouts, to whom he said something in a strange tongue. The latter saluted and waited for Jaikie to follow him. Ashie gave him a perfunctory handshake — "Good-bye. Good luck to you"; and entered his tent.

The boy led Jaikie beyond the encampment, and, with a salute and a long stare, left him at the entrance to the bridge. A clock on a steeple told him that it was a quarter-past twelve, pretty much the time that Mr Glynde had appointed. The bridge was almost empty, for the sight-seers who had followed Ashie's outfit had trickled back to their midday meals. Jaikie spent a few minutes looking over the parapet at the broad waters of the river. This must be the Rave, the famous stream which sixty miles on flowed through the capital city of Melina. He watched its strong current sweep past the walls of the great Schloss, which there dropped sheer into it, before in a wide circuit it formed the western boundary of the castle park. What an impregnable fortress, he thought, must have been this House of the Four Winds in the days before artillery, and how it must have lorded it over the little burgh under its skirts!

There was a gatehouse on the Tarta side of the bridge, an ancient crumbling thing bright with advertisements of the Cirque Doré. Beyond it a narrow street wound under the blank wall of the castle, ending in a square in which the chief building was a baroque town-house. From where Jaikie stood this town-house had an odd apologetic air, a squat thing dwarfed by the Schloss: like a dachshund beside a mastiff. The day was very warm, and he crossed over from the glare of one side of the street to the shadow of the other. The place was almost empty, most of the citizens being doubtless engaged with food behind shuttered windows. Jaikie was getting hungry, and so far he had looked in vain for Mr Glynde's Luigi. But as he moved towards the central square a man came out of an entry, and, stopping suddenly to light a cigarette, almost collided with him. Jaikie saw a white cap and scarlet lettering, and had a glimpse of gold earrings and a hairy face. He remembered his instructions.

"Can you show me the way to the Cirque Doré?" he asked.

The man grinned. "I will lead you to a better restaurant," he said in French with a villainous accent. He held out his hand and shook Jaikie's warmly, as if he had found a long-lost friend. Then he gripped him by the arm and poured forth a torrent of not very intelligible praise of the excellence of the cuisine to which he was guiding him.

Jaikie found himself hustled up the street and pulled inside a little dark shop, which appeared to be a combination of a bird-fancier's and a greengrocer's. There was nobody there, so they passed through it into a court strewn with decaying vegetables and through a rickety door into a lane, also deserted. After that they seemed to thread mazes of mean streets at a pace which made the sweat break on Jaikie's forehead, till they found themselves at the other end of the town, where it ebbed away into shacks and market-gardens.

"I am very hungry," said Jaikie, who saw his hopes of luncheon disappearing.

"The Signor must have patience," was the answer. "He has still a little journey before him, but at the end of it he will have honest food."

Luigi was an adept at under-statement. He seemed to wish to escape notice, which was easy at this stagnant hour of the day. Whenever anyone appeared he became still as a graven image, with an arresting hand on Jaikie's arm. They chose such cover as was available, and any track they met they crossed circumspectly. The market-gardens gave place to vineyards, which were not easy to thread, and then to wide fields of ripe barley, hot as the Sahara. Jaikie was in good training, but this circus-man Luigi, though he looked plump and soft, was also in no way distressed, never slackening pace and never panting. By and by they entered a wood of saplings which gave them a slender shade. At the far end of it was a

tall palisade of chestnut stakes, lichen and silvery with age. "Up with you," said Luigi, and gave Jaikie a back which enabled him to grasp the top and swing himself over. To his annoyance the Italian followed him unaided, supple as a monkey.

"Rest and smoke," he said. "There is now no reason for hurry except the emptiness of your stomach."

They rested for ten minutes. Behind them was the palisade they had crossed, and in front of them glades of turf, and wildernesses of fern and undergrowth, and groves of tall trees. It was like the New Forest, only on a bigger scale.

"It is a noble place," said Luigi, waving his cigarette. "From here it is seven miles to Zutpha, where is a railway. Tarta in old days was only, so to say, the farmyard behind the castle. From Zutpha the guests of the princes of this house were driven in great coaches with outriders. Now there are few guests, and instead of a coach-and-eight a Ford car. It is the way of the world."

When they resumed their journey it was at an easier pace. They bore to their left, and presently came in view of what had once been a formal garden on a grandiose scale. Runnels had been led from the river, and there was a multitude of stone bridges and classic statuary and rococo summer-houses. Now the statues were blotched with age, the bridges were crumbling, and the streams were matted beds of rushes. Beyond, rising from a flight of terraces, could be seen the huge northern façade of the castle, as blank as the side it showed to Tarta. It had been altered and faced with a white stone a century ago, but the comparative modernity of this part made its desolation more conspicuous than that of the older Gothic wings. What should have been gay with flowers and sun-blinds stood up in the sunlight as grim as a deserted factory; and that, thought Jaikie, is grimmer than any other kind of ruin.

Luigi did not take him up the flights of empty terraces. Beyond the formal garden he turned along a weedy path which flanked a little lake. On one side was the Cyclopean masonry of the terrace wall, and, where it bent at an angle, cloaked by a vast magnolia, they came suddenly upon a little paved court shaded by a trellis. It was cool, and it was heavily scented, for on one side was a thicket of lemon verbena. A table had been set for luncheon, and at it sat two men, waited on by a footman in knee breeches and a faded old coat of blue and silver.

"You are not five minutes behind time," said the elder of the two. "Anton," he addressed the servant, "take the other gentleman indoors and see to his refreshment." . . . To Jaikie he held out his hand. "We have met before, Mr Galt. I have the honour to welcome you to my poor house. Mr Glynde I think you already know."

"You expected me?" Jaikie asked in some surprise.

"I was pretty certain you would come," said Mr Glynde.

Jaikie saw before him that Prince Odalchini whom two years ago he had known as one of the tenants of the Canonry shooting of Knockraw. The Prince's hair was a little greyer, his well-bred face a little thinner, and his eyes a little darker round the rims. But in the last burned the same fire of a gentle fanaticism. He was exquisitely dressed in a suit of white linen with a tailed coat, and shirt and collar of turquoise-blue silk — blue and white being the Odalchini liveries. Mr Randal Glynde had shed the fantastic garments of the previous night, but he had not returned to the modishness of his English clothes; he wore an ill-cut suit of some thin grey stuff that made him look like a commis-voyageur in a smallish way of business, and to this part he had arranged his hair and beard to conform. To his outfit a Guards tie gave a touch of startling colour. "We will not talk till we have eaten," said the Prince. "Mr Galt must have picked up an appetite between here and Kremisch."

Jaikie had one of the most satisfying meals of his career. There was an omelet, a dish of trout, and such peaches as he had never tasted before. He had acquired a fresh thirst during his journey with Luigi, and this was assuaged by a white wine which seemed to be itself scented with lemon verbena, a wine in slim bottles beaded with the dew of the ice-cellar. He was given a cup of coffee made by the Prince's own hands, and a long fat cigarette of a brand which the Prince had specially made for him in Cairo.

"Luigi spoke the truth," said Mr Glynde smiling, "when he said that he would conduct you to a better restaurant."

The footman withdrew and silence fell. Bees wandered among the heliotrope and verbena and pots of sapphire agapanthus, and even that shady place felt the hot breath of the summer noon. Sleep would undoubtedly have overtaken Jaikie and Mr Glynde, but for the vigour of Prince Odalchini, who seemed, like a salamander, to draw life and sustenance from the heat. His high-pitched, rather emotional voice kept his auditors wakeful. "I will explain to you," he told Jaikie, "what you cannot know or have only heard in a perversion. I take up the history of Evallonia after Prince John sailed from

your Scotch loch.”

He took a long time over his exposition, and as he went on Jaikie found his interest slowly awakening. The cup of the abominations of the Republican Government had apparently long ago been filled. Evallonia was ready to spew them out, but unfortunately the Monarchists were not quite ready to take their place. This time it was not trouble with other Powers or with the League of Nations. Revolutions had become so much the fashion in Europe that they were taken as inevitable, whether their purpose was republic, monarchy, or dictatorship. The world was too weary to argue about the merits of constitutional types, and the nations were too cumbered with perplexed economics to have any desire to meddle in the domestic affairs of their neighbours. Aforetime the Monarchists had feared the intervention of the Powers or some finding of the League, and therefore they had sought the mediation of British opinion. Now their troubles were of a wholly different kind.

Prince Odalchini explained. Communism was for the moment a dead cause in Evallonia, and Mastrovin and his friends had as much chance of founding a Soviet republic as of plucking down the moon. Mastrovin indeed dared not show himself in public, and the present administration of his friends staggered along, corrupt, incompetent, deeply unpopular. It would collapse at the slightest pressure. But after that?

“Everywhere in the world,” said the Prince, “there is now an uprising of youth. It does not know what it seeks. It did not know the hardships of war. But it demands of life some hope and horizon, and it is determined to have the ordering of things in its hands. It is conscious of its ignorance and lack of discipline, so it seeks to inform and discipline itself, and therein lies its danger.”

“Ricci,” he went on. “You remember him in the Canonry? — a youngish man like a horse-dealer. At that time he was a close ally of the Republican Government, but eighteen months ago he became estranged from it — he and Count Jovian, who was not with the others in Scotland. Well, Ricci had an American wife of enormous wealth, and with the aid of her money he set out to stir up our youth. He had an ally in the Jovian I have mentioned, who was a futile vain man, like your Justice Shallow in Shakespeare, easily flattered and but little respected, but with a quick brain for intrigue. These two laid the foundations of a body called Juventus, which is now the strongest thing in Evallonia. They themselves were rogues, but they enlisted many honest helpers, and soon, like the man in the Arabian Nights, they had raised a jinn which they could not control. Jovian died a year ago — he was always sick — and Ricci is no longer the leader. But the thing itself marches marvellously. It has caught the imagination of our people and fired their pride. Had we an election, the Juventus candidates would undoubtedly sweep the board. As it is, it contains all the best of Evallonian youth, who give up to it their leisure, their ambition and their scanty means. It is in its way a noble thing, for it asks only for sacrifice, and offers no bribes. It is, so to speak, a new Society of Jesus, sworn to utter obedience. But, good or ill, it has most damnably spiked the guns of us Royalists.”

Jaikie asked why.

“Because it is arrogant, and demands that whatever is done for Evallonia it alone shall do it. The present Government must go, and at once, for it is too gross a scandal. If we delay, there will be a blind revolution of the people themselves. You will say — let Juventus restore Prince John. Juventus will do nothing of the kind, since Prince John is not its own candidate. If we restore him, Juventus will become anti-Monarchist. What then will it do? I reply that it does not yet know, but there is a danger that it may set up one of its own people as dictator. That would be tragic, for in the first place Evallonia does not need or desire a dictator, being Monarchist by nature, and in the second place Juventus does not want a dictatorship either. It is Nationalist, but not Fascist. Yet the calamity may happen.”

“Has Juventus any leader who could fill the bill?” Jaikie asked.

The Prince shook his head. “I do not think so — therefore its action would be only to destroy and obstruct, not to build. Ricci with his wife’s millions is now discredited; they have used him and cast him aside. There are some of the very young with power I am told — particularly a son of Jovian’s.”

“Is his name Paul?” Jaikie asked, and was told yes.

“I know him,” he said. “He was at Cambridge with me. I have just seen him, for about two hours ago he stood me a drink.”

The Prince in his surprise upset the coffee-pot, and even the sophisticated eyes of Mr Glynde opened a little wider.

“You know Paul Jovian? That is miraculous, Mr Galt. Will you permit me to speak a word in private with Mr Glynde?”

There are some matters still too secret even for your friendly ears."

The two withdrew and left Jaikie alone in the alcove among bees and butterflies and lemon verbena. He was a little confused in his mind, for after a solitary month he had suddenly strayed into a place where he seemed to know rather too many people. Embarrassing people, all of whom pressed him to stay longer. He did not much like their country. It was too hot for him, too scented and airless. He was not in the least interested in the domestic affairs of Evallonia, either the cantrips of Ashie or the solemn intrigues of the Prince. It was not his world; that was a cool, bracing upland a thousand miles away, for which he had begun to feel acutely homesick. Alison would soon be back in the Canonry, and he must be there to meet her. He felt that for the moment he was fed up with foreign travel.

The two men returned, and sat down before him with an air of purpose.

"Where did you find Count Paul?" the Prince asked.

"On the Kremisch side of the Tarta bridge. He was going into camp with a detachment of large-sized Boy Scouts."

"You know him well?"

"Pretty well. We have been friends ever since his first year. I like him — at least I liked him at Cambridge, but here he seems a rather different sort of person. He wanted me to stay on in Evallonia — to stay for three weeks."

The two exchanged glances.

"So!" said the Prince. "And your answer?"

"I refused. He didn't seem particularly well pleased."

"Mr Galt, we also make you that proposal. Will you be my guest here in Evallonia for a little — perhaps for three weeks — perhaps longer? I believe that you can be of incalculable value to an honest cause. I cannot promise success — that is not commanded by mortals — but I can promise you an exciting life."

"That was what I said to you last night," said Mr Glynde smiling. "My little stater would give you no guidance, but the fact that you have ventured into Evallonia encourages me to hope."

Jaikie at the moment had no desire for excitement. He felt limp and drowsy and oppressed; the Prince's luncheon had been too good, and this scented nook choked him; he wanted to be somewhere where he could breathe fresh air. Evallonia was wholly devoid of attractions.

"I don't think so," he said. "I'm tremendously honoured that you should want me, but I shouldn't be any use to you, and I must get home."

"You are not to be moved?" said Mr Glynde.

Jaikie shook his head. "I've had enough of the continent of Europe."

"I understand," said Mr Glynde. "I too sometimes feel that satiety, and think I must go home." He turned to the Prince. "I doubt if we shall persuade Mr Galt. I wish Casimir were here. Where, by the way, is he?"

The Prince replied with a word which sounded to Jaikie like "Unnutz," a word which woke a momentary interest in his lethargic mind.

"What then do you propose to do?" The Prince turned to him.

"Go back to Kremisch to-night, sleep there and set off home tomorrow."

"What must be must be. But I do not think it wise for you to start yet awhile. Let us go indoors, and I will show you some of the few household gods which poverty has left me."

Jaikie spent an hour or two pleasantly in the cool chambers of the great house. The place was shabby but not neglected, and there were treasures there which, judiciously placed on the market, might well have restored the Odalchini fortunes. He looked at long lines of forbidding family portraits; at a little room so full of masterpieces that it was a miniature Salle Carrée; at one of the finest collections of armour in the world; and at a wonderful array of sporting trophies, for the Odalchins had been famous game-shots. He was given tea at a little table in the hall quite in the English fashion. But very soon he became restless. The sun was getting low, and he had a considerable distance to walk before supper.

"You had better go first to the Cirque Doré," said Mr Glynde. "There I will meet you, and show you the way out of the town. You have been in dangerous territory, Mr Galt, and must be circumspect in leaving it. No, we cannot go together. I will take a different road and meet you there. Luigi will guide you. You will cross the park by the way you came, and Luigi

will be waiting for you outside the pale.”

“I am sorry,” said the Prince. He shook hands with so regretful a face, and his old eyes were so solemn that Jaikie had a moment of compunction. When he left the castle the cool of the evening was beginning, and the twilight scents came freshly and pleasantly to his nostrils. This was a better place than he had thought, and he felt more vigorous and enterprising. He had the faintest twinge of regret about his decision. After all, there was nothing to call him home, for there would be no Dickson McCunn there yet awhile, and no Dougal, and perhaps no Alison. But there would be the Canonry, and he fixed his mind upon its delectable glens as he retraced his path of the morning. One of Jaikie’s endowments was an almost perfect instinct for direction, and he struck the high chestnut pale pretty much at the spot where he had first crossed it.

Getting over without Luigi’s help was a difficult business, and, Jaikie’s energy being wholly employed in the task, he did not trouble to prospect the land. . . . He tumbled over the top and dropped into what seemed to be a crowd of people.

Strong hands gripped him. A cloth was skilfully wound round his face, blinding his eyes and blanketing his voice. Another wrapped his arms to his side, and a third bound his legs. He struggled, but his sense of the physical superiority of his assailants was so great that he soon gave it up; he was like a thin rabbit in the clutch of an enormous gamekeeper. Yet the hands were not unkindly, and his bandages, though effective, were not painful.

He was carried swiftly along for a few minutes and then placed in some kind of car. Somebody sat down beside him. The car was started, and bumped for a little along very rough roads. . . . Then it came to a highway and moved fast. . . . Jaikie had by this time collected his thoughts, and they were wrathful. His first alarm had gone, for he reflected that there was no one likely to mean mischief to him. He was pretty certain what had happened. This was Prince Odalchini’s way of detaining an unwilling guest. Well, he would presently have a good deal to say to the Prince and to Mr Glynde.

The car slowed down, and his companion, whoever he was, began with deft hands to undo his bonds. First he loosed his legs. Then, almost with the same movement, he released his arms and drew the bandages from his face. Then he snapped a switch which lit up dimly the interior of the limousine in which the blinds had been drawn.

Jaikie found himself looking at the embarrassed face of Ashie.



Chapter 3

DIVERSIONS OF A MARIONETTE

I

Miss Alison Westwater dropped with a happy sigh beside a bed of wild strawberries still wet with dew, and proceeded to make a second breakfast. It was still early morning — not quite seven o'clock — but she had been walking ever since half-past five, when she had broken her fast on a cup of coffee and a last-night's roll provided by a friendly chambermaid. She had left the highway, which, switch-backing from valley to valley, took the traveller to Italy, and had taken a forest track which after a mile or two among pines came out on an upland meadow, and led to a ridge, the spur of a high mountain, from which the kingdoms of the earth could be surveyed. The sky was not the pale turquoise bowl which in her own country heralded a perfect summer day, but an intense sapphire; the shadows were also blue, and the sunshine where it fell was a blinding essential light without colour, so that the grass looked like snowdrifts. The air had an aromatic freshness which stung the senses, and Alison drew great breaths of it till her throat was as cold as if she had been drinking spring water.

This was her one satisfactory time in the day. The rest of her waking hours were devoted to a routine which seemed void alike of mirth or reason. Her father's neuritis had almost gone, but so had his good humour, and it was a very peevish old gentleman that she accompanied in pottering walks by the lake-side or in aimless motor drives on blinding hot highways. Lord Rhynns was particular about his food, and the hotel cuisine did not please him, so he was in the habit of sampling, without much success, whatever Unnutz produced in the way of café and konditorei. He was also particular about his clothes, and since he dressed always in the elder fashion of tight trousers, coloured waistcoat, stiff collar and four-in-hand tie, he was generally warm and correspondingly irascible. Her mother did not appear till after midday, and required a good deal of coddling, for, having been driven out of her accustomed beat, she found herself short of acquaintances and quite unable to plan out her days. One curious consequence was that both, who had habituated themselves to a life of Continental vagrancy, suddenly began to long passionately for home. His lordship remembered that the shooting season would soon begin in the Canonry, and was full of sad reminiscences of the exploits of his youth, while to her ladyship came visions of the cool chambers and the smooth and comforting ritual of Castle Gay.

"I am a marionette," Alison had written to Jaikie. "I move at the jerk of a string, and it isn't my parents that pull it. It's this ghastly place, which has invented a régime for the idle middle-classes of six nations. I defy even you to break loose from it. I do the same things and make the same remarks and wear the same clothes every day at the proper hour. I'm a marionette and so are the other people — quite nice they are, and well-mannered, and friendly, but as dead as salted herrings. A good old-fashioned bounder would be a welcome change. Or a criminal."

As she sat on the moss she remembered this sentence — and something else. Unnutz was mainly villas and hotels, but there was an old village as a nucleus — wooden houses built on piles on the lake shore, and one or two narrow twisting streets with pumpkins drying on the shingle roofs. There was a bathing-place there very different from the modish thing on the main promenade, a place where you dived in a hut under a canvas curtain into deep green water, and could swim out to some fantastic little rock islets. She had managed once or twice to bathe there, and yesterday afternoon she had slipped off for an hour and had had a long swim by herself. Coming back she had recognised in a corner of the old village the first face of an acquaintance she had met since she came to Unnutz. Not an acquaintance exactly, for he had never seen her. But she remembered well the shaggy leonine head, the heavy brows and the forward thrust of the jaw. She had watched those features two years ago during some agonised minutes in the library of Castle Gay, till Mr Dickson McCunn had adroitly turned melodrama into farce, and she was not likely to forget them. She remembered the name too — Mastrovin, the power behind the Republican Government of Evallonia. Had not Jaikie told her that he was the most dangerous underground force in Europe?

What was this dynamic personage doing in a dull little Tirolese health resort? Was her wish to be granted, and their drab society enlivened by a criminal?

The thought only flitted across her mind, for she had other things to think about. She must make the most of her

holiday, for by half-past ten she must be back to join her father in his petit déjeuner on the hotel verandah. Usually she had the whole hillside to herself, but this morning she had seen a car on the road which led to the high pastures. It had been empty, standing at the foot of one of the tracks which climbed upward through the pines. Someone else had her taste for early mornings in the hills. It had annoyed her to think that her sanctuary was not inviolable. She hoped that the intruder, whoever he or she was, was short in the wind and would not get higher than the wood.

She got up from her lair among the strawberries and wandered across the meadow, where every now and then outcrops of rock stuck grey noses through the flowers. She had a drink out of an ice-cold runnel. She saw a crested tit, a bird which she had never met before, and screwed her single field-glass into her eye to watch its movements. Also she saw a kite high up in the blue, and, having only once in her life met that type of hawk, regarded him with a lively interest. Then she came to a little valley the top of which was a ravine in the high rocks, and the bottom of which was muffled in the woods. There was a woodcutter's cottage here, wonderfully hidden in a cleft, with the pines on three sides and one side open to the hill. Where Alison stood she looked down upon it directly from above, and could observe the beginning of its daily life. She had been here before, and had seen an old woman, who might have come out of Grimm, carrying pails of water from a pool in the stream.

Now instead of the old woman there was a young man, presumably her son. He came slowly from the cottage and moved to the fringe of the trees, where a path began its downhill course. He possessed a watch, for he twice consulted it, as if he were keeping an appointment. His clothes were the ordinary forester's — baggy trousers of homespun, heavy iron-shod boots, and an aged velveteen jacket with silver buttons. He carried himself well, Alison thought, better than most woodmen, who were apt to be round-shouldered and slouching.

A second man came out of the wood — also a tall man, but dressed very differently from the woodcutter, for he wore flannels and a green Homburg hat. "My motorist," thought Alison. "He must know something about the woods, for the way through them to this cottage isn't easy to find."

The newcomer behaved oddly. He took off his hat. The woodcutter gave him his hand and he bowed over it with extreme respect. Then the woodcutter slipped his arm in his and led him towards the cottage.

Alison in her perch far above put the glass to her eye and got a good view of the stranger. There could be no mistake. Two years ago she had sat opposite him at dinner at Castle Gay and at breakfast at Knockraw. She recognised the fine shape of his head, and the face which would have been classically perfect but for the snub nose. One did not easily forget Count Casimir Muresco.

But who was the other? Noblemen with nine centuries of pedigree behind them do not usually bow over the hands of foresters and uncover their heads. She could not see his face, for it was turned away from her, but before the two entered the cottage she had no doubt about his identity. She was being given the back view of the lawful monarch of Evallonia.

From that moment Alison's boredom vanished like dew in the sun. She realised that she had stumbled upon the fringe of great affairs. What was it that Prince John had said to her at the dinner at Maurice's? That Unnutz was not a very good place for a holiday that summer, that it might be unpleasant, but that, being English, she would always be free to get away. That could only mean that something momentous was going to happen at Unnutz. What was Prince John doing disguised as a woodcutter in this remote and secret hut? . . . What was Count Casimir, architect of revolutions, doing there so early in the morning? Plots were being hatched, thought the girl in a delicious tremor of excitement. The curtain was about to rise on the play, and, unknown to the actors, she had a seat in a box.

And then suddenly she remembered the face she had seen the afternoon before in the lakeside alley. Mastrovin! He was the deadly enemy of Count Casimir and the Prince. He must know, or suspect, that the Prince was in the neighbourhood. Casimir probably knew nothing of Mastrovin's presence. But she, Alison, knew. The thought solemnised her, for such knowledge is as much a burden as a delight.

Her first impulse was to scramble down the hillside to the cottage, break in on the conspirators, and tell them what she knew. But she did not move, for it occurred to her that she might be more useful, and get more fun out of the business, if she remained silent. She waited for ten minutes till the two men appeared again. This time she had a good view of the woodcutter through her glass, and she recognised the comely and rather heavy countenance of Prince John. Casimir took a ceremonious leave and started down the track through the forest. Alison, who knew all the paths, followed him at a higher level. She wanted to discover whether or not his steps had been dogged.

Alison had taught Jaikie many things, and he had repaid her by instructing her in some of his own lore. He had made her almost as artful and silent a tracker as himself, and under his tuition she had brought to a high pitch her own fine natural sense of direction. Like a swift shadow she flitted through the pines, now on bare needle-strewn ground, now among tangles of rock and whortleberry. The route she took was almost parallel to Casimir's, but now and then she had to make a circuit to avoid some rocky dingle, and there were times when she had to cast back or cast ahead to trace him. It was rough going in parts, and since Casimir showed a remarkable turn of speed she had sometimes to slither down steep slopes and sometimes to run. By and by came glimpses of the valley below, and at last through a thinning of the pines she saw the last twisting of the hill-path before it debouched on the highway. Presently she saw the waiting car, and the tracker, being a little ahead of the tracked, sank down among the whortleberries to await events.

Casimir appeared, going warily, with an eye on the white strip of high road. It was still empty, for the Firnthal does not rise early. He reached the car, and examined it carefully, as if he feared that someone might have tampered with it in his absence. Satisfied, he took the driver's seat, backed on to the high road, and set out in the direction of Italy.

Alison observed his doings with only half an eye, for between her and the car she had seen something which demanded attention. She was now some two hundred yards above the road, and the ground immediately below her was occupied by a little rock-fall much overgrown with fern and scrub. There was something among the bushes which had not been put there by nature. Her glass showed her that that something was the head of a man. It was a bare head, with grizzled hair and one bald patch at the back, and she knew to whom it belonged. Mastrovin was not in Unnütz for the sake of the excellent sulphur baths or the mountain air.

Alison slipped out of her lair and as noiselessly as she could crawled to her right along the slope of the hill. She struck the path by which Casimir had descended, a path which was, so to speak, the grand trunk road from the hills, and which a little higher forked in several directions. Waiting a moment to get her breath, she made a hasty bouquet of some blue campanulas and sprigs of whortleberry and then sauntered down the path, a little flushed, a little untidy about the hair and wet about the shoes, but on the whole a creditable specimen of early-rising vigorous maidenhood.

Mastrovin, when she came in sight of him, was descending the hill and had already reached the high road. He had covered his head with a green hat, and wore a dark green suit of breeches and Norfolk jacket, just like any other tourist in a mountain country. Alison's whistling caught his ear, and at the foot of the track he stopped to wait for her.

"Grüss Gott!" he said, forcing his harsh features into amiability. "I have been looking for a friend. Have you seen anyone — any man — up in the woods? My friend is tall and walks fast, and his clothes are grey."

One of Alison's accomplishments was that she understood German perfectly, and spoke it with fluency and a reasonable correctness. But it occurred to her that it would not be wise to reveal this talent; so she pretended to follow Mastrovin with difficulty and to puzzle over one word, and she began to answer in the purest Ollendorff.

"You are English?" he asked. "Speak English, please. I understand it."

Alison obeyed. She explained that she had indeed met a man in the high woods, though she had not specially remarked his clothes. She had passed him, and thought that he must have returned soon after, for she had not seen him on her way down. She described minutely the place of meeting — on the right-hand road at the main fork, near the brow of the hill, and not far from the rock called the Wolf Crag which looked down on Unnütz — precisely the opposite direction from the woodcutter's hut.

Mastrovin thanked her with a flourish of his hat. "I must now to breakfast," he said. "There is a gasthaus by the roadside where I will await my friend, if he is not already there."

II

Usually the two miles to Unnütz were the one black spot in the morning's walk, for they were flat and dusty and meant a return to the house of bondage. But today Alison was scarcely conscious of them, for she was thinking hard, with a flutter at her heart which was half-painful and half-pleasant. Prince John was here in retreat for some purpose, and Count Casimir was in touch with him; that must mean that things were coming to a head in Evallonia. Mastrovin, his bitterest enemy, was on the trail of Casimir, and must know that Prince John was in the neighbourhood. That meant trouble. Her false witness that morning might send Mastrovin on a wild-goose chase to the wrong part of the forest, but it was very

certain that he must presently discover the Prince's hermitage. The Prince and Casimir might suspect that their enemies were looking for them, but they did not know that Mastrovin was in Unnutz. She alone knew that, and she must make use of her knowledge. Casimir had gone off in the direction of Italy; therefore she must warn the Prince, and that must be done secretly when she could be certain that she was not followed. She had begun to plan a midnight journey, for happily she had a room giving on a balcony, from which it would be easy to reach the ground. To her surprise she found that she looked forward with no relish to the prospect; if she had had company it would have been immense fun, but, being alone, she felt only the weight of a heavy duty. She longed passionately for Jaikie.

Entering the hotel by a side door, she changed into something more like the regulation toilet of Unnutz, and sought her father on the verandah. For once Lord Rhynns was in a good humour.

"A little late, my dear," he complained mildly. "Yes, I have had a better night. I am beginning to hope that I have got even with my accursed affliction." Then, regarding his daughter with complacent eyes, he became complimentary. "You are really a very pretty girl, Alison, though your clothes are not such as gentlewomen wore in my young days." With a surprising touch of sentiment he added, "You are becoming very like my mother."

Taking advantage of her father's urbanity, Alison broached the question of going home.

"Presently, my dear. Another week, I think, should set me right. Your mother is anxious to leave — a sudden craving for Scotland. We shall go for a little to Harriet at Castle Gay — she has been more than kind about it, and Craw has behaved admirably. I am told he has the place very comfortable, and I have always found him conduct himself like a gentleman. Money, my dear. Ample means are not only the passport to the name of gentility, but they create the thing itself. In these days it is not easy for a pauper to preserve his breeding.

"By the way," he continued, "some friends of ours arrived here this morning. They are breakfasting more elaborately than we are in the *salle-à-manger*. The Roylances. Janet Roylance, you remember, was old Cousin Alastair Raden's second girl."

"What!" Alison almost shrieked. It was the best news she could have got, for now she could share her burden of responsibility. In the regrettable absence of Jaikie the Roylances were easily the next best.

"Yes," her father went on. "They have been at Geneva, and have come on here for a holiday. Sir Archibald, they tell me, is making a considerable name for himself in politics. For a young man in these days he certainly has creditable manners."

His lordship finished his coffee, and announced that he proposed to go to his sitting-room till luncheon to write letters. Alison dutifully accompanied him thither, paid her respects to her mother, who was also in a more cheerful mood, and then hastened downstairs. In the big dining-room she found the pair she sought at a table in one of the windows. Alison flung herself upon Janet Roylance's neck.

"You've finished breakfast? Then come outdoors and smoke. I know a quiet corner beside the lake. I must talk to you at once. You blessed angels have been sent by Heaven just at the right moment."

When they were seated where a little half-moon of shrubbery made an enclave above the blue waters of the Waldersee, Sir Archie offered Alison a cigarette.

"No, thank you. I don't smoke. If I did it would be a pipe, I'm so sick of the cigarette-puffing hussy. First of all, what brought you two here?"

Sir Archie grinned. "The Conference has adjourned till Bolivia settles some nice point with Uruguay."

"We came," said Janet, "because we are free people with no plans and we knew that you were here. We thought we should find you moribund with boredom, Allie, but you are radiant. What has happened? Have the parents turned over a new leaf?"

"Papa is quite good and nearly well. Mamma has actually begun to crave for Scotland. There's no trouble at present on the home front. But the foreign situation is ticklish. This place is going to be the scene of dark doings, and I can't cope with them alone. That's why I hugged you like a bear. Have you ever heard of Evallonia?"

"I have," said Janet, "for I sometimes read the Craw Press."

"We've expected a revolution there," said Sir Archie, "any time these last two years. But something seems to have gone wrong with the timing."

"Well, that has been seen to. The blow-up must be nearly ready, and it's going to start in this very place. Listen to me

very carefully. The story begins two years ago in Castle Gay.”

Briefly but vigorously Alison told the tale of the raid on the Canonry and the discomfiture by Jaikie and Dickson McCunn of Mastrovin and his gang. (“Jaikie?” said Sir Archie. “That’s the little chap we saw with you at Maurice’s? I was in a scrap alongside him years ago. Janet knows the story. Good stamp of lad.”) She sketched the personalities of the three Royalists and the six Republicans, and she touched lightly upon Prince John. She described the face seen the afternoon before in the old village, and her sight that morning of the Prince and Casimir at the woodcutter’s hut. The drama culminated in Mastrovin squatted like a partridge in the scrub above Casimir’s car.

“Mastrovin!” Sir Archie brooded. “He was at Geneva as an Evallonian delegate. Wonderful face of its kind, but it would make any English jury bring him in guilty of any crime without leaving the box. He was very civil to me. I thought him a miscreant but a sportsman, though I wouldn’t like to meet him alone on a dark night. He looked the kind of chap who wasn’t afraid of anything — except the other Evallonian female. You remember her, Janet?”

His wife laughed. “Shall I ever forget her? You never saw such a girl, Allie. A skin like clear amber, and eyes like topazes, and the most wonderful dark hair. She dressed always in bright scarlet and somehow carried it off. Archie, who as you know is a bit of a falconer, remembered that in the seventeenth century there was a hawk called the Blood-red Rook of Turkey, so we always called her that. She was a Countess Araminta Some-thing-or-other.”

Alison’s eyes opened. “I know her — at least, I have met her. She was in London the season before last. Her mother was English, I think, and hence her name. She rather scared me. She wasn’t a delegate, was she?”

“No,” said Archie. “She held a watching brief for something. I can tell you she scared old Mastrovin. He didn’t like to be in the same room with her, and he changed his hotel when she turned up at it.”

“Never mind the Blood-red Rook,” said Alison. “Mastrovin is our problem. I don’t care a hoot for Evallonian politics, but having once been on the Monarchist side I’m going to stick to it. Evallonia is apparently at boiling-point. The Monarchist cause depends upon Prince John. Mastrovin is for the Republic or something still shadier, and therefore he is against Prince John. That innocent doesn’t know his enemy is about, and Casimir has gone off in the direction of Italy. Therefore we have got to do something about it.”

“What puzzles me,” said Archie, “is what your Prince is doing in Unnutz, which isn’t exactly next door to Evallonia, and why he should want to get himself up as a peasant?”

“It puzzles me, too, but that isn’t the point. It all shows that things are getting warm in Evallonia. What we have got to do is to dig Prince John out of that hut before Mastrovin murders or kidnaps him, and stow him away in some safer place. I considered it rather a heavy job for me alone, but it should be child’s play for the three of us. Don’t tell me you decline to play.”

During the last few minutes of the conversation Archie’s face had been steadily brightening.

“Of course we’ll play,” he said. “You can count us in, Alison, but I’m getting very discreet in my old age, and I must think it over pretty carefully. It’s a chancy business purloining princes, however good your intentions may be. The thing’s easy enough, but it’s the follow-up that matters. . . . Wait a second. I’ve always believed that the best hiding-place was just under the light. What about bringing him to this hotel to join our party?”

“As Prince John or as a woodcutter?” Janet asked.

“As neither,” said Archie. “My servant got ‘flu in Geneva, and I had to leave him behind. How would the Prince fancy taking on the job? I can lend him some of my clothes. Is he the merry class of lad that likes a jape?”

The luncheon-gong boomed. “We can talk about that later,” said Alison. “Meanwhile, it’s agreed that we three slip out of this place after dark. We’ll take your car part of the way, and there’s a moon, and I can guide you the rest. We daren’t delay, for I’m positive that this very night Mastrovin will get busy.”

Sir Archie arose with mirth in his eye, patted his hair and squared his shoulders. A boy approached and handed him a telegram.

“It’s from Bobby Despensar,” he announced. “The Conference has resumed and he wants me back at once. Well, he can whistle for me.”

He tore the flimsy into small pieces.

“Take notice, you two,” he said, “that most unfortunately I have not received Bobby’s wire.”

III

On the following morning three people sat down to a late breakfast in a private sitting-room of the Hotel Kaiserin Augusta. All three were a little heavy about the eyes, as if their night's rest had been broken, but in the air of each was a certain subdued excitement and satisfaction.

"My new fellow is settling down nicely," said Sir Archie, helping himself to his third cup of coffee. "Answers smartly to the name of McTavish. Lucky I brought the real McTavish's passport with me. Curious thing, but the passport photograph isn't unlike him, and he has almost the same measurements. I've put some sticking-plaster above his left eye to correspond to the scar that McTavish got in Mesopotamia, and I've had a go at his hair with scissors — he objected pretty strongly to that, by the way. I've put him into my striped blue flannel suit, which you could tell for English a mile away, and given him a pair of my old brown shoes. Thank God, he's just about my size. I'm going to buy him a black Homburg — the shops here are full of them — and then he'll look the very model of a gentleman's gentleman, who has had to supplement his London wardrobe locally."

"But, Archie, he has the kind of face that you can't camouflage," said Janet. "Anyone who knows him is bound to recognise him."

Her husband waved his hand. "N'ayez pas peur, je m'en charge, as old Perriot used to say at Geneva. He won't be recognised, because no one will expect him here. He's in the wrong environment — under the light, so to speak, which is the best sort of hiding-place. He won't go much out of doors, and I've got him a cubby-hole of a bedroom up in the attics. Not too comfortable, but Pretenders to thrones must expect to rough it a bit. He'll mess with the servants, who are of every nationality on earth, and I've told him to keep his mouth shut. Like all royalties, he's a dab at languages, and speaks English without an accent, but I'm teaching him to give his words a Scotch twist. He tumbled to it straight off, and says 'Sirr' just like my old batman. If anyone makes trouble I've advised him to dot him one on the jaw in the best British style. He looks as if he could swing a good punch."

The small hours of the morning had been a stirring time for the party. They had left the hotel by Alison's verandah a little before midnight, and in Archie's car had reached the foot of the forest path, meeting no one on the road. Then their way had become difficult, for it was very dark among the pines, and Alison had once or twice been at fault in her guiding. The moon rose when they were near the crest of the hill, and after that it had been easy to find the road to the hut through the dew-drenched pastures. There things marched fast. There was pandemonium with two dogs, quieted with difficulty by Alison, who had a genius for animals. The old woman, who appeared with a stable-lantern, denied fiercely that there was any occupant of the hut except herself, her husband being dead these ten years and her only son gone over the mountains to a wedding. She was persuaded in the end by Alison's mention of Count Casimir, and the three were admitted.

Then Prince John had appeared fully dressed, with what was obviously a revolver in his pocket. He recognised Alison and had heard of Sir Archie, and things went more smoothly. The news that Mastrovin was on his trail obviously alarmed him, but he took a long time to be convinced about the need for shifting his residence. Clearly he was a docile instrument in the hands of the Monarchists, and hesitated to disobey their orders for fear of spoiling their plan. Things, it appeared, were all in train for a revolution in Evallonia, at any moment he might be required to act, and Unnütz had been selected as the council-chamber of the conspirators. On this point it took the united forces of the party to persuade him, but in the end he saw reason. Alison clinched the matter. "If Mastrovin and his friends get you, it's all up. If you come with us it may put a little grit in the wheels, but it won't smash the machine. Remember, sir, that these men are desperate, and won't stick at trifles. They were desperate two years ago at Castle Gay, but now it is pretty well your life or theirs, and it had better be theirs."

When he allowed himself to be convinced his spirits rose. He was a young man of humour, and approved of Sir Archie's proposal that he should go to their hotel. He liked the idea of taking the place of the absent McTavish, and thought that he could fill the part. There only remained to give instructions to the old woman. If anyone came inquiring, she was not to deny the existence of her late guest, though she was to profess ignorance of who or what he was. Her story was to be that he had left the preceding afternoon with his belongings on his back. She did not know where he had gone, but believed that it was over the mountains to the Vossthal, since he had taken the path for the Vossjoch.

The journey back had been simple, though Alison had thought it wise to make a considerable detour. It had been slightly complicated by the good manners of the Prince, since he persisted in offering assistance to Janet and Alison, who

needed it as little as a chamois. They had reached the hotel just before daybreak, and had entered, they believed, without being observed. That morning Sir Archie had explained to the manager about the delayed arrival of his servant, and the name of Angus McTavish had been duly entered in the hotel books with the Roylances' party.

"And now," said Archie, "he's busy attending to my dress-clothes. What says the Scriptures? 'Kings shall be thy ministers and queens thy nursing mothers.' We're getting up in the world, Janet. I'm going to raise a chauffeur's cap for him, and I want him to take your parents, Alison, out in the car this afternoon to accustom the neighbourhood to the sight of a new menial. As for me, I propose to pay another visit to the hut. There's bound to have been developments up that way, and we ought to keep in touch with them. I'll be an innocent tourist out for a walk to observe birds."

"What worries me," said Janet, "is how we are going to keep the Monarchists quiet. We may have Count Casimir here any moment, and that will give the show away."

"No, it won't. I mean, he won't. I left a letter for him which will give him plenty to think about."

Janet set down her coffee-cup. "What did you say in the letter?" she demanded severely.

"McTavish wrote it — I only dictated the terms. He quite saw the sense of it. It was by way of being a piteous cry for help. It said he had been pinched by Mastrovin and his gang, and appealed to his friends to fly to his rescue. Quite affecting it was. You see the scheme? We've got to keep McTavish cool and quiet on the ice till things develop. If Casimir and his lot are looking for him in Mastrovin's hands they won't trouble us. If Mastrovin is being hunted by Casimir he won't be able to hunt McTavish. What you might call a cancelling out of snags."

His wife frowned. "I wonder if you've not been a little too clever."

"Not a bit of it," was the cheerful answer. "Ordinary horse sense. As old Perriot said, 'N'ayez pas peur —'"

"Archie," said Janet, "if you quote that stuff again I shall fling the coffee-pot at you."

IV

Sir Archie did not return till nine o'clock that evening, for he had walked every step of the road and had several times lost his way. He refreshed himself in the sitting-room with sandwiches and beer, while Janet and Alison had their after-dinner coffee.

"How did McTavish behave?" he asked Alison.

"Admirably. He drives beautifully and both Papa and Mamma thought he was Scotch. The only mistake was that he treated us like grantees, and held the door open with his cap in his hand. How about you? You look as if you had been seeing life?"

"I've had a trying time," said Sir Archie, passing a hand through his hair. "There has been a bit of a row up at the hut. No actual violence, but a good deal of unpleasantness."

"Have you been fighting?" Janet asked, observing a long scratch on her husband's sunburnt forehead.

"Oh, that scratch is nothing, only the flick of a branch. But I've been through considerable physical tribulation. Wait till I get my pipe lit and you'll have the whole story. . . ."

"I reached the hut between four and five o'clock in what John Bunyan calls a pelting heat. Ye gods, but it was stuffy in the pinewoods, and blistering hot on the open hillside! I made pretty good time, and arrived rather out of condition, for my right leg — my game leg as was — wasn't quite functioning as it should. Well, there was the old woman, and in none too good a temper. Poor soul, she had been considerably chivvied since we last saw her. It seemed that we were just in time this morning, for Mastrovin and his merry men turned up about an hour after we left. It was a mercy we didn't blunder into them in the wood, and a mercy that we had the sense to hide the car a goodish distance from where the track starts. Mastrovin must have spent yesterday in sleuthing, for he had the ground taped, and knew that McTavish had been in the hut at supper. He had three fellows with him, and they gave the old lady a stiff time. They didn't believe her yarn about McTavish having started out for the Vossthal. They ransacked every corner of the place, and put in some fine detective work examining beds and cupboards and dirty dishes, besides raking the outhouses and beating the adjacent coverts. In the end they decided that their bird had flown and tried to terrorise the old lady into a confession. But she's a tough ancient, and by her account returned them as good as they gave. She wanted to know what concern her great-nephew

Franz was of theirs, poor Franz that had lost his health working in Innsbruck and had come up into the hills to recruit. All their bullying couldn't shake her about great-nephew Franz, and in the end they took themselves off, leaving her with a very healthy dislike of the whole push.

"Then, very early this morning, Count Casimir turned up and got his letter. It put him in a great taking. She said he grew as white as a napkin, and he started to cross-examine her about the hour and the manner of the pinching of McTavish. That was where I had fallen down, for I had forgotten to tell her what was in the letter. So she gave a very confused tale, for she described him as going off with us, mentioning the women in the party, and she also described Mastrovin's coming, and from what she said I gathered that he got the two visits mixed up. What specially worried him was that Mastrovin should have had women with him, and he was very keen to know what they were like. I don't know how the old dame described you two — I should have liked to hear her — but anyway, it didn't do much to satisfy the Count. She said that he kept walking about biting his lips, and repeating a word that sounded like 'Mintha.' After that he was in a hurry to be off, but before leaving he gave her an address — I've written it down — with which she was to communicate if she got any news.

"I was just straightening out the story for her — I thought it right to get her mind clear — and explaining that we had got McTavish safe and sound, but that it was imperative in his own interests that Count Casimir should believe there had been dirty work, when what do you think happened? Mastrovin turned up, accompanied by a fellow who looked like a Jew barber out of a job. He didn't recognise me and looked at me very old-fashioned. I was sitting in a low chair, and got up politely to greet him, when I had an infernal piece of bad luck. I sprang every blessed muscle in my darned leg. You see, it hadn't been accustomed to so much exercise for a long time, and the muscles were all flabby. Gad, I never knew such pain! It was the worst go of cramp I ever heard of. My toes stuck out like agonising claws — my calf was a solid lump of torment — the riding muscle above the knee was stiff as a poker and as hard as iron. I must have gone white with pain, and I was all in a cold sweat, and I'm dashed if I could do anything except wallow in the chair and howl.

"Well, Mastrovin wasn't having any of that. He gave me some rough-tonguing in German, and demanded of the old woman what kind of mountebank I was. But she had taken her cue — pretty quick in the uptake she is — or else she thought I was having a paralytic stroke. I was all dithered with the pain and couldn't notice much, but I saw that she had got off my shoes and stockings and had fetched hot water to bathe my feet. Then the barber-fellow took a hand, for he saw I wasn't playing a game. I daresay he was some kind of medico and he knew his business. He started out to massage me, beginning with the lower thigh, and I recognised the professional touch. In a few minutes he had me easier, and you know the way the thing goes — suddenly all the corded muscles dropped back into their proper places, and I was out of pain, but limp as chewing-gum.

"Then Mastrovin began to ask me questions, first in German, and then in rather better English than my own. I gave him my name, and his face cleared a little, for he remembered me from Geneva. He was quite polite, but I preferred his rough-tonguing to his civility. A nasty piece of work that lad — his eyes are as cold as a fish's, but they go through you like a gimlet. I was determined to outstay him, for I didn't want him to be giving the old lady the third degree, which was pretty obviously what he had come for. So I pretended to be down and out, and lay back in her chair gasping, and drank water in a sad invalidish way. I would have stuck it out till midnight, but friend Mastrovin must have been pressed for time, for after about half an hour he got up to go. He offered to give me a hand down the hill, but I explained that I wasn't yet ready to move, but should be all right in an hour or so. I consider I brought off rather a creditable piece of acting, for he believed me. I also told him that I had just popped in to Unnütz for a night and was hurrying back to Geneva. He knew that the Conference had been resumed, but said that he himself might be a little late. . . . That's about all. I gave him twenty minutes' law and then started home. D'you mind ringing the bell, Janet? I think I'll have an omelet and some more beer. Where's McTavish?"

"At his supper, I expect. What I want to know, Archie, is our next step. We can't go on hiding royal princes in the butler's pantry. McTavish will revolt out of sheer boredom."

"I don't think so." Archie shook a sapient head. "McTavish is a patient fellow, and has had a pretty strict training these last years. Besides, life is gayer for him here than up at that hut, and the food must be miles better. We've got to play a waiting game, for the situation is obscure. I had a talk with him this morning, and by all accounts Evallonian politics are a considerable mix-up."

"What did he tell you?" Alison asked sharply. She felt that to Archie and Janet it was all a game, but that she herself

had some responsibility.

“Well, it seems that the revolution is ready to the last decimal — the press prepared, the National Guard won over, the people waiting, and the Ministers packing their portmanteaux. The Republican Government will go down like ninepins. But while the odds are all on the monarchy being restored, they are all against its lasting very long. It appears that in the last two years there has been a great movement in Evallonia of all the younger lot. They’re tired of having the old ‘uns call the tune and want to play a sprig themselves. I don’t blame ‘em, for the old ‘uns have made a pretty mess of it.”

“Is that the thing they call Juventus?” Alison asked. “I read about it in The Times.”

“Some name like that. Anyhow, McTavish tells me it’s the most formidable thing Evallonia has seen for many a day. They hate the Republicans, and still more Mastrovin and his Communists. But they won’t have anything to do with Prince John, for they distrust Count Casimir and all that lot. Call them the ‘old gang,’ the same bouquets as we hand to our elder statesmen, and want a fresh deal with new measures and new men. They’re said to be more than half a million strong, all likely lads in hard condition and jolly well trained — they’ve specialised in marksmanship, for which Evallonia was always famous. They have the arms and the money, and, being all bound together by a blood oath, their discipline is the stiffest thing on earth. Oh, and I forgot to tell you — they wear green shirts — foresters’ green. They have a marching song about the green of their woodlands, and the green of their mountain lakes, and the green shirts of Evallonia’s liberators. It’s funny what a big part fancy haberdashery plays in the world today.”

“Have they a leader?” Alison asked.

“That’s what I can’t make out. There doesn’t seem to be any particular roi de chemises — that’s what Charles Lamancha used to call me in my dressy days. But apparently the thing leads itself. The fact we’ve got to face is that if Casimir puts McTavish on the throne, which apparently he can do with his left hand, Juventus will kick him out in a week, and McTavish naturally doesn’t want that booting. That’s why he has been so docile. He sees that the right policy for him is to lie low till things develop.”

“Then our next step must be to get in touch with Juventus,” said Alison.

Janet opened her eyes. “You’re taking this very seriously, Allie,” she said.

“I am,” was the answer. “You see, I was in it two years ago.”

“But how is it to be done?” Archie asked. “McTavish doesn’t know. He doesn’t know who the real leaders are — nor Casimir, and certainly not Mastrovin. You see, the thing is by way of being a secret society, sort of jumble-up of Boy Scouts, Freemasons and the Red Hand. They have their secret pass-words, and the brightest journalist never sticks his head into one of their conclaves. They can spot a Monarchist or Republican spy a mile off, and don’t stand on ceremony with ‘em. They have a badge like Hitler’s swastika — an open eye — but, apart from their songs and their green shirts, that’s their only public symbol.”

“My advice,” said Janet, “is that we keep out of it, and restore the Prince to the sorrowing Count Casimir as soon as we can get in touch with him. You go back to Scotland with your family, Allie, and Archie and I will pop down into Italy.”

There was a knock at the door and a waiter brought in the evening post. One letter was for Alison, which she tore open eagerly as soon as she saw the handwriting. She read it three times and then raised a flushed face.

“It’s from Jaikie,” she said, and there was that in her voice which made Archie and Janet look up from their own correspondence. “Jaikie, you know — my friend — Mr Galt that I told you about. He is somewhere in Evallonia.”

“My aunt!” exclaimed Archie. “Then there will be trouble for somebody.”

“There’s trouble for him. He seems to have got into deep waters. Listen to what he says.”

She read the following:

“I am in a queer business which I am bound to see through. But I can’t do it without your help. Can you manage to get away from your parents for a few days, and come to Tarta, just inside the Evallonian frontier? You take the train to a place called Zutpha, where you will be met. If you can come wire Odalchini, Tarta, the time of your arrival. I wouldn’t bother you if the thing wasn’t rather important, and, besides, I think you would like to be in it.”

“Short and to the point,” commented the girl. “Jaikie never wastes words. He has a genius for understatement, so if he says it is rather important it must be tremendously important. . . . Wait a minute. Odalchini! Prince Odalchini was one of the three at Knockraw two years ago. Jaikie has got mixed up with the Monarchists.”

Archie was hunting through his notebook. "What did you say was the name of the place? Tarta? That's the address Casimir gave the old woman to write to if she had any news. Schloss Thingumybob — the second word has about eight consonants and no vowels — Tarta, by Zutpha. Your friend Jaikie has certainly got among the Monarchists."

"Hold on!" Alison cried. "What's this?" She passed round the letter for inspection. It was a sheet of very common note-paper with no address on it, but in the top left-hand corner there was stamped in green a neat little open eye with some hieroglyphic initials under it.

"Do you see what that means?" In her excitement her voice sank to a whisper. "Jaikie is in touch with the Juventus people. This letter was sent with their consent — or the consent of one of them, and franked by him."

"Well, Allie?" Janet asked.

"Of course I'm going. I must go. But I can't go alone, for Papa wouldn't allow it. He and Mamma have decided to return to Scotland this week to Aunt Harriet at Castle Gay. You and Archie must go to Tarta and take me with you."

"Isn't that a large order? What about McTavish?"

"We must take him with us, for then we'll have all the cards in our hands. It's going to be terribly exciting, but I can promise you that Jaikie won't fail us. You won't fail me either?"

Janet turned smilingly to her husband. "What about it, Archie?"

"I'm on," was the answer. "I've been in a mix-up with Master Jaikie before. Bobby Dispenser can whistle for me. The difficulty will be McTavish, who's a compromising piece of goods, but we'll manage somehow. Lord, this is like old times, and I feel about ten years younger. 'T little profits that an idle king, matched with an aged wife. . . .' Don't beat me, Janet. We're both ageing. . . . I always thought that the Almighty didn't get old Christoph to mend my leg for nothing."



Chapter 4

DIFFICULTIES OF A REVOLUTIONARY

When Jaikie saw who his captor was, his wrath ebbed. Had it been Prince Odalchini it would have been an outrage, but since it was Ashie, it was only an undergraduate “rag” which could easily be repaid in kind. But his demeanour was severe.

“What’s the meaning of these monkey tricks?” he demanded.

“The meaning is,” Ashie had ceased to smile, “that you have deceived me. What about your business with your circus friend? I had you followed — I was bound to take every precaution — and instead of feeding in a pot-house you run in circles like a hunted hare and end up at the Schloss. I had my men inside the park, and when I heard what you were up to I gave orders that you should be brought before me. You went straight from me to the enemy. What have you to say to that?”

Ashie’s words were firm, but there was dubiety in his voice and a hint of uncertainty in his eye; this the other observed, and the sight wholly removed his irritation. Ashie was talking like a book, but he was horribly embarrassed.

“Well, I’m blown!” said Jaikie. “Who the blazes made you my keeper? Let’s get this straightened out at once. First, what I said was strictly true. I was going to lunch with my friend from the circus. If your tripe-hounds had been worth their keep they would have seen me meet him — a fellow with the name of the circus blazoned on his cap. The choice of a luncheon place was his own and I had nothing to do with it. As a matter of fact, I happened to know the man he took me to, Prince Odalchini — I met him two years ago in Scotland. Have you got that into your fat head?”

“Will you please give me the gist of your conversation with Prince Odalchini?”

“Why on earth should I? What has it got to do with you? But I’ll tell you one thing. He was very hospitable and wanted me to stay a bit with him — same as you. I said no, that I wanted to go home, and I was on my way back when I fell in with your push and got my head in a bag. What do you mean by it? I’m sorry to tell you that you have taken a liberty — and I don’t allow liberties.”

“Prince Odalchini is the enemy, and we are in a state of war.”

“Get off it. He’s not my enemy, and I don’t know anything about your local scraps. I told you I would have nothing to do with them, and I told the Prince the same.”

“So you talked of Evallonian affairs?” said Ashie.

“Certainly. What else was there to talk about? Not that he told me much, except that there was likely to be trouble and that he wanted me to stay on and see the fun. I told him I wasn’t interested in his tin-pot politics and I tell you the same.”

This had the effect which Jaikie intended, and made Ashie angry.

“I do not permit such language,” he said haughtily. “I do not tolerate insults to my country. Understand that you are not in your sleek England, but in a place where gentlemen defend their honour in the old way.”

“Oh, don’t be a melodramatic ass. I thought we had civilised you at Cambridge and given you a sense of humour, but you’ve relapsed into the noble savage. I’ve been in Evallonia less than one day and I know nothing about it. Your politics may be all the world to you, but they’re tin-pot to me. I refuse to be mixed up in them.”

“You’ve mixed yourself up in them by having intercourse with the enemy.”

“Enemy be blown! I talked for an hour or two to a nice old man who gave me a dashed good luncheon, and now you come butting in with your detective-novel tricks. I demand to be deported at once. Otherwise I’ll raise the hairiest row about the kidnapping of a British subject. If you want international trouble, I promise you you’ll get it. I don’t know where we are, but here’s this car, and you’ve got to deliver me at Kremisch by bedtime. That’s the least you can do to make amends for your cheek.”

Jaikie looked out of the window and observed that they had halted on high ground, and that below them lights twinkled as if from an encampment. For a moment he thought that he had struck the Cirque Doré. And then a bugle sounded, an instrument not generally used in circuses. “Is that your crowd down there?” he asked.

Ashie’s face, even in the dim interior light of the car, showed perplexity. He seemed to be revolving some difficult question in his mind. When he spoke again there was both appeal and apology in his voice. Jaikie had an authority among

his friends which was the stronger because he was wholly unconscious of it and in no way sought it. His personality was so clean-cut and his individuality so complete and secure that, while one or two gave him affection, all gave him respect.

"I'll apologise if you like," said Ashie. "I daresay what I did was an outrage. But the fact is, Jaikie, I badly want your help. Your advice, anyway. I'm in a difficult position, and I don't see my road very clearly. You see, I'm an Evallonian, and this is Evallonian business, but I've got a little outside the atmosphere of my own country. That's to the good, perhaps, for this thing is on the biggest scale and wants looking at all round it. That's why I need your help. Give me one night, and I swear, if you still want me to, I'll deliver you at Kremisch tomorrow morning and trouble you no more."

Jaikie was the most placable of mortals, he had a strong liking for Ashie, and he was a little moved by the anxious sincerity of his voice. He had half expected this proposal.

"All right," he said, "I'll give you one night. Have your fellows pinched my kit?"

Ashie pointed to a knapsack on the floor of the car, which he promptly shouldered. "Let's get out of this," he said. He spoke a word to the driver, who skipped round and opened the door, standing stiffly at the salute. Then he led the way down the little slope into the meadow of the twinkling lights. Presently he had to give a pass-word, and three times had to halt for that purpose before they reached his tent. The gathering was far larger than that which Jaikie had seen at the Tarta bridge, and he noticed a considerable number of picketed horses.

"What are these chaps after?" he asked.

"We are riding the marches," was the answer. "What at Cambridge they call beating the bounds. It is not desirable that for the present we should operate too near the capital."

There were two tents side by side and separated by a considerable space from the rest, as if to ensure the commander's privacy. A sentry stood on guard whom Ashie dismissed with an order. He led Jaikie into the bigger of the tents. It was furnished with a camp mattress, two folding chairs, and a folding table littered with maps. "You will sleep next door. You may have a companion for the night, but of that I speak later. Meantime, let us dine. I can only offer you soldiers' fare."

The fare proved excellent. A mushroom omelet was brought in by one of the green-shirts, and cups of strong coffee. There was a dish of assorted cold meats, and a pleasantly mild cheese. They drank white wine, and Ashie insisted on Jaikie tasting the native liqueur. "It is made from the lees of wine," he told him. "Like the French marc, but not so vehement."

When the meal was cleared away Jaikie lit his pipe and Ashie a thin black cigar. "Now for my story," the latter said. "There is one fact beyond question. The rotten Republican Government is doomed, and hangs now by a single hair which a breath of wind can destroy. But when the hair has gone, what then?"

He told much the same tale that Jaikie had heard that day from Prince Odalchini, but with a far greater wealth of detail. Especially he expounded the origin and nature of Juventus, with which he had been connected from the start. "Most of this is common knowledge," he said, "but not all — yet. We are not a secret society, but we have our arcana imperii." He described its beginnings. Ricci had designed it as a counter-move against the Monarchists, but it had soon turned into something very different, a power detached indeed from the Monarchists but altogether hostile to the Republic, and Ricci, the used instead of the user, had been flung aside. "It was no less than a resurgence of the spirit of the Evallonian nation," he said solemnly.

He explained how it had run through the youth of the country like a flame in stubble. "We are a poor people," he said, "though not so poor as some, for we are closer to the soil, and less dependent upon others. But we have been stripped of some of our richest parts where industry flourished, and many of us are in great poverty. Especially it is hard for the young, who see no livelihood for them in their fathers' professions, and can find none elsewhere. Evallonia, thanks to the jealous Powers, has been reduced to too great an economic simplicity, and has not that variety of interests which a civilised society requires. Also there is another matter. We have always made a hobby of our education, as in your own Scotland. Parents will starve themselves to send their sons to Melina to the university, and often a commune itself will pay for a clever boy. What is the consequence? We have an educated youth, but no work for it. We have created an academic proletariat and it is distressed and bitter."

Ashie told his story well, but his language was not quite his native wood-notes. Jaikie wondered whose reflections he was repeating. He wondered still more when he launched into an analysis of the exact feelings of Evallonian youth. There was a subtlety in it and an acumen which belonged to a far maturer and more sophisticated mind.

"So that is that," he concluded. "If our youth is to be satisfied and our country is to prosper, it is altogether necessary

that the Government should be taken to pieces and put together again on a better plan. What that plan is our youth must decide, and whatever it is it must provide them with a horizon of opportunity. We summon our people to a new national discipline under which everyone shall have both rights and duties.”

Where had Ashie got these phrases, Jaikie asked himself — “arcana imperii,” “academic proletariat,” “horizon of opportunity”? There must be some philosopher in the background. “That sounds reasonable enough,” was all he said.

“It is reasonable — but difficult. Some things we will not have. Communism, for one — of that folly Europe contains too many awful warnings. We have had enough talk of republics, which are the dullest species of oligarchy. Evallonia, having history in her bones, is a natural monarchy. Her happiest destiny would be to be like England.”

“That is all right then,” said Jaikie. “You have Prince John.”

Ashie’s face clouded.

“Alas! that is not possible. For myself I have nothing against the Prince. He represents our ancient line of kings, and he is young, and he is well spoken of, though I have never met him. But he is fatally compromised. His supporters, who are about to restore him, are indeed better men than our present mis-governors, but they are relics — fossils. They would resurrect an old world with all its stupidities. They are as alien to us as Mastrovin and Rosenbaum, though less hateful. If Prince John is set upon the throne, it is very certain that our first duty will be regretfully to remove him — regretfully, for it is not the Prince that we oppose, but his following.”

“I see,” said Jaikie. “It IS rather a muddle. Are the Monarchists only a collection of stick-in-the-muds?”

“You can judge for yourself. You have seen Prince Odalchini, who is one of the best. He worships dead things — he speaks the language of a vanished world.”

Once again Jaikie wondered how Ashie, whose talk had hitherto been chiefly of horses, had managed to acquire this novel jargon.

“You want a king, but you won’t — or can’t — have the Prince. Then you’ve got to find somebody else. What’s your fancy? Have you a possible in your own rank?”

Ashie knit his brows. “I do not think so. We have admirable regimental officers and good brigadiers, but no general-in-chief. Juventus was a spontaneous movement of many people, and not the creation of one man.”

“But you must have leaders.”

“Leaders — but no leader. The men who presided at its birth have gone. There was Ricci, who was a trickster and a coward. He has washed himself out. There was my father, who is now dead. I do not think that he would have led, for he was not sure of himself. He had great abilities, but he was too clever for the common run of people, and he was not trusted. He was ambitious, and since his merits were not recognised, he was always unhappy, and therefore he was ineffective. I have inherited the prestige of his name, but the Almighty has given me a more comfortable nature.”

“Why not yourself?” Jaikie asked. “You seem to fill the bill. Young and bold and not yet compromised. Ashie the First — or would it be Paul the Nineteenth? I’ll come and grovel at your coronation.”

Jaikie’s tone of badinage gave offence.

“There is nothing comic in the notion,” was the haughty answer. “Four hundred years ago my ancestors held the gates of Europe against the Turk. Two centuries before that they rode in the Crusades. The house of Jovian descends straight from the Emperors of Rome. I am of an older and prouder race than Prince John.”

“I’m sure you are,” said Jaikie apologetically. “Well, why not have a shot at it? I would like to have a pal a reigning monarch.”

“Because I cannot,” said Ashie firmly. “I am more confident than my father, God rest his soul, but in such a thing I do not trust myself. Your wretched England has spoiled me. I do not want pomp and glory. I should yawn my head off in a palace, and I should laugh during the most solemn ceremonies, and I should certainly beat my Ministers. I desire to remain a private gentleman and some day to win your Grand National.”

Jaikie whistled.

“We have certainly spoiled you for this game. What’s to be done about it?”

“I do not know,” was the doleful answer. “For I cannot draw back. There have been times when I wanted to slip away and hide myself in England. But I am now too deep in the business, and I have led too many people to trust me, and I have

to consider the honour of my house.”

“Honour?” Jaikie queried.

“Yes, honour,” said Ashie severely. “Have you anything to say against it?”

“N-o-o. But it’s an awkward word and apt to obscure reason.”

“It is a very real thing, which you English do not understand.”

“We understand it well enough, but we are shy of talking about it. Remember the inscription in the Abbey of Thelème — ‘Fais ce que voudrais, for the desires of decent men will always be governed by honour.’”

Ashie smiled, for Rabelais, as Jaikie remembered, had been one of the few authors whom he affected.

“That doesn’t get one very far,” he said. “I can’t leave my friends in the lurch any more than you could. I have been forced in spite of myself into a position out of which I cannot see my way, and any moment I may have to act against my will and against my judgment. That’s why I want your advice.”

“There are people behind you prodding you on? Probably one in particular? Who is it?”

“I cannot say.”

“Well, I can. It’s a woman.”

Ashie’s face darkened, and this time he was really angry. “What the devil do you mean? What have you heard? I insist that you explain.”

“Sorry, Ashie. That was a silly remark, and I had no right to make it.”

“You must mean something. Someone has been talking to you. Who? What? Quick, I have a right to know.”

Ashie had mounted a very high horse and had become unmistakably the outraged foreign grandee.

“It was only a vulgar guess,” said Jaikie soothingly. “You see, I know you pretty well, Ashie. It isn’t easy to shift you against your will. I couldn’t do it, and I don’t believe any of your friends could do it. You’ve become a sensible chap since we took you in hand, and look at things in a reasonable way. You’re not the kind of fellow to run your head against a stone wall. Here you are with all the materials of a revolution in your hands and you haven’t a notion what to do with them. It’s no good talking about honour and about loyalty to your crowd when if you go on you are only going to land them in the soup. And yet you seem determined to go on. Somebody has been talking big to you and you’re impressed. From what I know of you I say that it cannot be a man, so it must be a woman.”

Ashie’s face did not relax.

“So you think I’m that kind of fool! The slave of a sentimental woman? . . . The damnable thing is that you’re right. The power behind Juventus is a girl. Quite young — just about my own age. A kinswoman of mine, too, sort of second cousin twice removed. I’ll tell you her name. The Countess Araminta Troyos.”

Jaikie’s blank face witnessed that he had never heard of the lady.

“I’ve known her all my life,” Ashie went on, “and we have been more or less friends, though I never professed to understand her. Beautiful? Oh yes, amazingly, if you admire the sable and amber type. And brains! She could run round Muresco and his lot, and even Mastrovin has a healthy respect for her. And ambition enough for half a dozen Mussolinis. And her power of — what do you call the damned thing? — mass-persuasion? — is simply unholy. She is the soul of Juventus. There’s not one of them that doesn’t carry a picture postcard of her next his heart.”

“What does she want? To be Queen?”

“Not she, though she would make a dashed good one. She’s old-fashioned in some ways, and doesn’t believe much in her own sex. Good sane anti-feminist. She wants a man on the throne of Evallonia, but she’s going to make jolly well sure that it’s she who puts him there.”

“I see.” Jaikie whistled gently through his teeth, which was a habit of his. “Are you in love with her?”

“Ye gods, no! She’s not my kind. I’d as soon marry a were-wolf as Cousin Mintha.”

“Is she in love with you?”

“No. I’m positive no. She could never be in love with anybody in the ordinary way. She runs for higher stakes. But she mesmerises me, and that’s the solemn truth. When she orates to me I feel all the pith going out of my bones. I simply can’t stand up to her. I’m terrified of her. Jaikie, I’m in danger of making a blazing, blasted fool of myself. That’s why I want

you.”

Ashie’s cheerful face had suddenly become serious and pathetic, like a puzzled child’s, and at the sight of it Jaikie’s heart melted. He was not much interested in Evallonia, but he was fond of Ashie, now in the toils of an amber and sable Cleopatra. He could not see an old friend dragged into trouble by a crazy girl without doing something to prevent it. A certain *esprit de sexe* was added to the obligations of friendship.

“But what can I do?” he asked. “I don’t know the first thing about women — I’ve hardly met any in my life — I’m no match for your cousin.”

“You can help me to keep my head cool,” was the answer. “You stand for the world of common sense which will always win in the long run. When I’m inclined to run amok you’ll remind me of England. You’ll lower the temperature.”

“You want me to hold your hand?”

“Just so. To hold my hand.”

“Well,” said Jaikie after a pause. “I don’t mind trying it out for a fortnight. You’ll have to give me free board and lodging, or I won’t have the money to take me home.”

Ashie’s face cleared so miraculously that for one uncomfortable moment Jaikie thought that he was about to be embraced. Instead he shook hands with a grip like iron.

“You’re a true friend,” he said. “Come what may, I’ll never forget this. . . . There’s another thing. Unless we’re to have civil war there must be some arrangement. Somebody must keep in touch with the Monarchists, or in a week there will be bloody battles. Juventus has cut off all communication with the enemy and burned its boats, but it cannot be allowed to go forward blindly, and crash head-on into the other side. I want a *trait d’union*, and you’re the man for it. I can’t do it, for I’m too conspicuous — I should be found out at once, and suspected of treachery. But you know Prince Odalchini. You’ve got to be my go-between. How do you fancy the job?”

Jaikie fancied it a good deal. It promised amusement and a field for his special talents.

“It won’t be too easy,” Ashie went on. “You see, you’re by way of being my prisoner. All my fellows by this time know about your visit to the Prince and my having you kidnapped. We’ve tightened up the screws in Juventus, and I daren’t let you go now.”

“Then if I hadn’t decided to stay, you’d have kept me by force?” Jaikie demanded.

“No. I would have delivered you at Kremisch according to my promise, but it would have been an uncommon delicate job, and I should have had to do the devil of a lot of explaining. I’ve given out that you are an English friend, who is not hostile but knows too much to be safe. So you’ll have to be guarded, and your visits to the House of the Four Winds will have to be nicely camouflaged. Lucky I’m in charge of Juventus on this side of the country.”

“You’ve begun by handicapping me pretty heavily,” said Jaikie. “But I’ll keep my word and have a try.”

An orderly appeared at the tent door with a message. Ashie looked at his watch.

“Your stable-companion for the night has arrived,” he said. “I think you’d better clear out while I’m talking to him. He’s an English journalist, and rather a swell, I believe, who has been ferreting round for some weeks in Evallonia. It won’t do to antagonise the foreign press just yet — especially the English, so I promised to see him tonight and give him some dope. But I’ll see that he’s beyond the frontier tomorrow morning. We don’t want any Paul Prys in this country at present.”

“What’s his name?” Jaikie asked with a sudden premonition.

Ashie consulted a paper. “Crombie — Dougal Crombie. Do you know him?”

“I’ve heard of him. He’s second in command on the Craw Press, isn’t he?”

“He is. And he’ll probably be a sentimental royalist, like the old fool who owns it.”

Long ago in the Glasgow closes there had been a signal used among the Gorbals Die-hards, if one member did not desire to be recognised when suddenly confronted by another. So when Mr Crombie was ushered into the tent and observed beside the Juventus commander a slight shabby figure, which pinched its chin with the left hand and shut its left eye, he controlled his natural surprise and treated Ashie as if he were alone.

“May I go to bed, sir?” Jaikie asked. “I’m blind with sleep, and I won’t be wakened by my fellow-guest.”

Ashie assented, and Jaikie gave the Juventus salute and withdrew, keeping his eyes strictly averted from the said fellow-guest.

He did not at once undress, but sat on the sleeping valise and thought. His mind was not on the House of the Four Winds and the difficulties of keeping in touch with Prince Odalchini; it was filled with the picture of an amber and sable young woman. That he believed to be the real snag, and he felt himself unequal to coping with it. In the end, on note-paper which Ashie had given him, he wrote two letters. The first was to Miss Alison Westwater and the second to Prince Odalchini; then he got into pyjamas, curled himself inside the valise, and was almost at once asleep.

He was wakened by being poked in the ribs, and found beside him the rugged face of Dougal illumined by a candle.

“How on earth did you get here, Jaikie?” came the hoarse whisper.

“By accident,” was the sleepy answer. “Ran into Ashie — that’s Count Paul — knew him at Cambridge. I’m a sort of prisoner, but I’ll be all right. Don’t ask me about Evallonia, for you know far more than me.”

“I daresay I do,” said Dougal. “Man, Jaikie, this is a fearsome mess. Mr Craw will be out of his mind with vexation. Here’s everything ripe for a nice law-abiding revolution, and this dam-fool Juventus chips in and wrecks everything. I like your Count Paul, and he has some rudiments of sense, but he cannot see that what he is after is sheer lunacy. The Powers are in an easy temper, and there would be no trouble about an orderly restoration of the old royal house. But if these daft lads start running some new dictator fellow that nobody ever heard of, Europe will shut down like a clam. Diplomatic relations suspended — economic boycott — the whole bag of tricks. It’s maddening that the people who most want to kick out the present Government should be working to give it a fresh lease of life, simply because they insist on playing a lone hand.”

“I know all that,” said Jaikie. “Go away, Dougal, and let me sleep.”

“I tell you what”— Dougal’s voice was rising, and he lowered it at Jaikie’s request —“we need a first-class business mind on this job. There’s just one man alive that I’d listen to, and that’s Mr McCunn. He’s at Rosensee, and that’s not a thousand miles off, and he’s quite recovered now and will likely be as restless as a hen. I’m off there tomorrow morning to lay the case before him.”

“Good,” Jaikie answered. “Now get to bed, will you?”

“I must put him in touch with Count Casimir and Prince Odalchini — the big Schloss at Tarta is the place — that’s the Monarchist centre. And what about yourself? How can I find you?”

“If I’m not hanged,” said Jaikie drowsily, “it will be at the same address. I’ll turn up there some time or other. I wish you’d put these two letters in your pocket, and post them tomorrow when you’re over the frontier. And now for pity’s sake let me sleep.”



Chapter 5

SURPRISING ENERGY OF A CONVALESCENT

Mr Dickson McCunn sat in a wicker chair with his feet on the railing of a small verandah, and his eyes on a wide vista of plain and forest which was broken by the spires of a little town. Now and then he turned to beam upon a thick-set, red-haired young man who occupied a similar chair on his left hand. He wore a suit of grey flannel, a startling pink shirt and collar, and brown suede shoes — things so foreign to his usual wear that they must have been acquired for this occasion. He was looking remarkably well, with a clear eye and a clear skin to which recent exposure to the sun had given a becoming rosiness. His hair was a little thinner than two years ago, but no greyer. Indeed, the only change was in his figure, which had become more trim and youthful. Dougal judged that he had reduced his weight by at least a stone.

He patted his companion's arm.

"Man, Dougal, I'm glad to see you. I was thinking just yesterday that the thing I would like best in the world would be to see you and Jaikie coming up the road. I've been wearying terribly for the sight of a kenneled face. I knew you were somewhere abroad, and I had a sort of notion that you might give me a look in. Are they making you comfortable here? It's not just the place I would recommend for a healthy body, for they've a poor notion of food."

"Me?" he exclaimed in reply to a question. "I've never been better in my life. It's a perfect miracle. I walked fifteen miles the day before yesterday and never turned a hair. I'll give the salmon a fright this back-end. I tell you, Dougal, Dr Christoph hasn't his equal on this earth. He's my notion of the Apostles that could make the lame walk and the blind see. When I came here I was a miserable decrepit body that couldn't sleep, and couldn't take his meat, and wanted to lie down when he had walked a mile. He saw me twice a day, and glowered and glunched at me, like an old-fashioned minister at the catechising, and asked me questions — he's one that would speir a whelk out of its shell. But he wouldn't deliver a judgment — not him — just told me to possess my soul in patience till he was ready. He made me take queer wee medicines, and he prescribed what I was to eat. Oh, and I had what they call massage — he was a wonder at that, for he seemed to flype my body as you would flype a stocking. And I had to take a daft kind of bath, with first hot water and then cold water dropping on me from the ceiling and every drop like a rifle bullet. I thought I had wandered into a demented hydropathic. . . . Then after three weeks he spoke. 'Mr McCunn,' he says, 'I'm happy to tell you that there's nothing wrong with you. There's been a heap wrong, but it's gone now, the mischief is out of your system, and all you have to do is to build your system up. You will soon be able to eat what you like,' he says, 'and the more the better, and you can walk till you fall down, and you can ride on a horse' — not that I was likely to try that — 'and I don't mind if you tumble into the burn. You're a well man,' he says, 'but I'd like to keep you here for another three weeks under observation.' Oh, and he wrote a long screed about my case for the Edinburgh professor — I've got a copy of it — I don't follow it all, for it is pretty technical and Dr Christoph isn't very grand at English. But the plain fact is, that I've been a sick man and am now well, and that in five days' time I'll be on the road for Blawearry, singing the 126th Psalm:

"Among the heathen say the Lord
Great things for us hath wrought."

Mr McCunn hummed a stave from the Scots metrical version to a dolorous tune.

"You've been enjoying yourself fine," said Dougal.

The other pursed his lips. "I would scarcely say that. I've enjoyed the fact of getting well, but I haven't altogether enjoyed the process. There were whiles when I was terrible bored, me that used to boast that I had never been bored in my life. The first weeks it was like being back at the school. I had my bits of walks prescribed for me, and the hours when I was to lie on my back and rest, and when I sat down to my meals there was a nurse behind my chair to see that I ate the right things and didn't forget my medicine. I had an awful lot of time on my hands. I doddered about among the fir-woods — they're a careful folk, the Germans, and have all the hillsides laid out like gentlemen's policies — nice tidy walks, and seats to sit down on, and directions about the road that I couldn't read. I'll not deny that it's a bonny countryside — in its way, but the weather was blazing hot and I got terrible tired of these endless fir-trees. It's a monotonous place, for when you get to the top of one rig there's another of the same shape beyond, covered with the same woods. Man, I got fair sick for a sight of an honest bald-faced hill.

"Indoors," he went on, "it was just the same. It's all very well to be told to rest and keep your mind empty, but that was never my way. I brought out a heap of books with me, and was looking forward to getting a lot of quiet reading done. But the mischief was that I couldn't settle to a book. I had intended to read the complete works of Walter Savage Landor — have you ever tried him, Dougal? I aye thought the quotations from him I came across most appetising. But I might as well have been reading a newspaper upside down, for I couldn't keep my mind on him. I suppose that my thoughts having been so much concerned lately with my perishing body had got out of tune for higher things. So I fell back on Sir Walter — I'm not much of a hand at novels, as you know, but I can always read Scott — but I wasn't half through Guy Mannering when it made me so homesick for the Canonry that I had to give it up. After that I became a mere vegetable, a bored vegetable."

"You don't look very bored," said Dougal.

"Oh, it's been different the last weeks, when the doctor told me I was cured, for I've been pretty nearly my own master. I've had some grand long walks — what you would call training walks, for I was out just for the exercise and never minded the scenery. I've sweated pounds and pounds of adipose tissue off my bones. I hired a car, too, and got Peter Wappit to drive it, and I've been exploring the countryside for fifty miles round. I've found some fine scenery and some very respectable public-houses. You'll be surprised that I mention them, but the fact is that my mind has been dwelling shamelessly on food and drink. I've never been so hungry in all my days. I'm allowed to eat anything I like, but the trouble is that you can't get it in this house. The food is deplorable for a healthy man. Endless veal, which I cannot bide — and what they call venison, but is liker goat — and wee blue trouts that are as wersh as the doup of a candle — and they've a nasty habit of eating plums and gooseberries with butcher's meat. I'll admit the coffee is fine, but they've no kind of notion of tea. Tea has always been my favourite meal, but here you never see a scone or a cookie — just things like a baby's rusks, and sweet cakes that you very soon scunner at. So I've had to supplement my diet at adjacent publics. . . . I tell you what, Dougal, Peter is a perfect disgrace. It's preposterous that a man should have been two years in jyle in Germany and have picked up so little of the language. He just stammers and glowers and makes noises like a clocking hen, and it's me that has to do the questioning, with about six words of the tongue and every kind of daft-like grimace and contortion. If the Germans weren't an easy-tempered folk we'd have had a lot of trouble.

"But, thank God," said Mr McCunn, "that's all very near by with. I've got back my health and now I want something to occupy my mind and body." He pushed back his chair, stood up, doubled his fists and made playful taps at Dougal's chest to prove his vigour.

"What about yourself, Dougal?" he said. "Let's hear what you've been up to. Is Mr Craw still trying to redd up the affairs of Europe?"

"He is. That's the reason I'm out here. And that's the reason I've come to see you. I want your advice."

"In that case," said Mr McCunn solemnly, "we'd be the better of a drink. Beer is allowed here, and it's a fine mild brew. We'll have a tankard apiece."

"Now," said he, when the tankards had been brought, and he was comfortably settled again in his chair, "I'm waiting on your story. Where have you come from?"

"From Evallonia."

For a moment or two Dickson did not speak. The word set his mind digging into memories which had been heavily overlaid. In particular he recalled an autumn night on a Solway beach when in the moonlight a cutter swung down the channel with the tide. He saw a young man under whose greatcoat was a gleam of tartan, and he remembered vividly a scene which for him had been one of tense emotion. On the little finger of his left hand he wore that young man's ring.

"Aye, Evallonia," he murmured. "That's where you would be. And how are things going in Evallonia?"

"Bad. They couldn't be worse. Listen, Mr McCunn, and I'll give you the rudiments of a perfectly ridiculous situation."

Dickson listened, and his occasional grunts told of his lively interest. When Dougal had finished, he remained for a little silent and frowning heavily. Then he began to ask questions.

"You say the Monarchists have got everything arranged and can put Prince John on the throne whenever they're so minded? Can they put up a good Government?"

"I think so. They've plenty of brains among them and plenty of experience. Count Casimir Muresco is a sort of lesser Cavour. I've seen a good deal of him and can judge. You'll remember him?"

"Aye, I mind him well. I thought he had some kind of a business head. Prince Odalchini was a fine fellow, but a wee

thing in the clouds. What about the Professor — Jagon, I think they called him?”

“He has gone over to Juventus. Discovered that it fulfilled his notion of democracy. He was a maggotty old body.”

“Well, he’ll maybe not be much loss. You say that there’s a good Government waiting for Evallonia, but that this Juv-Juventus thing — that’s Latin isn’t it? — won’t hear of it because they didn’t invent it themselves. What kind of shape would they make at running the country?”

“Bad, I think. They’ve brains, but no experience, and not much common sense. They’re drunk with fine ideas and as full of pride as an old blackcock, but they’re babes and sucklings at the job of civil administration.”

“But they’ve power behind them?”

“All the power there is in Evallonia. They’ve an armed force uncommon well trained and disciplined — you never saw a more upstanding lot of lads. The National Guard, which is all the army that is permitted under the Peace Treaty, is good enough in its way, but it’s small, and the people don’t give a hang for it. Juventus has captured the fancy of the nation, and with these Eastern European folk, that means that the battle is won. They can no more make a good Government than they could square the circle, but they can play the devil with any Government that they don’t approve of. You may say that the real motive power in Evallonia today is destructive. But they’ll have to set up some sort of figure-head — one of themselves, though there’s nobody very obvious — and that will mean an infernal mess, the old futile dictatorship ran-dan, and no end of trouble with the Powers. I’ve the best reason to be positive on that point, for Mr Craw has seen —” and he mentioned certain august names.

Dickson asked one other question. “What about the Republicans?”

Dougal laughed. “Oh, their number’s up all right. Whoever is top-dog, they’re bound to be the bottom one for many a day. They’ve their bags packed waiting to skip over the frontier. But they’ll do their best, of course, to make the mischief worse. Mastrovin, especially. If he’s caught in Evallonia he’ll get short shrift, but he’ll be waiting outside to put spokes in the wheels.”

“Yon’s the bad one,” said Dickson reflectively. “When he is thrawn, he has a face that’s my notion of the Devil. . . . It seems that Juventus is the proposition we have to consider. What ails Juventus at Prince John?”

“Nothing. They’ve no ill-will to him — only he’s not their man. What they dislike is his supporters.”

“Why?”

“Simply because they’re the old gang and associated in their minds with all the misfortunes and degradation of Evallonia since the War. Juventus is thinking of a new world, and won’t have any truck with the old. They’re new brooms, and are blind to the merits of the old besoms. They’re like laddies at school, Mr McCunn — when catties come in they won’t look at a bool or a girr.”

Dickson whistled morosely through his teeth.

“I see,” he said. “Well, it looks ugly. What kind of advice do you want from me?”

“I want a business-like view of the situation from a wise man, and you can’t get that in Evallonia.”

“But how in the name of goodness can I give you any kind of view when I don’t know the place or the folk?”

“I’ve tried to put the lay-out before you, and I want the common sense of a detached observer. You may trust my facts. I’ve done nothing but make inquiries for the last month, for the thing is coming between Mr Craw and his sleep. I’ve seen Count Casimir and all his lot and talked with them till my brain was giddy. I’ve taken soundings in Evallonian public opinion, to which I had pretty good access.”

“Have you seen much of Juventus?”

Dougal drew down the corners of his mouth.

“Not a great deal. You see, it’s a secret society, and you can no more get inside it than into a lodge of Masons. I’ve talked, of course, to a lot of the rank-and-file, and I can judge their keenness and their popular support. There was one of them I particularly wanted to see — a woman called Countess Troyos — but I was warned that if I went near her she would have me shot against a wall — she’s a ferocious Amazon and doesn’t like journalists. But I managed to get an interview with one of the chiefs, a certain Count Paul Jovian, a son of the Jovian that was once a Republican Minister. It was that interview that gave me the notion of coming to you, for this Count Paul has some rudiments of sense, and has lived a lot in England, and I could see that he was uneasy about the way things were going. He didn’t say much, but he hinted that there

ought to be some sort of compromise with the Monarchists, so there's one man at any rate that will accept a reasonable deal. . . . And Jaikie whispered as much to me before I left."

"Jaikie!" The word came almost like a scream from the startled Mr McCunn. "I thought he was on a walking-tour in France."

"Well, he has walked into Evallonia. He was with Count Paul, whom it seems he knew at Cambridge. He told me he was a prisoner."

"How was he behaving himself?"

"Just as Jaikie would. Pretending to be good and meek and sleepy. The same old flat-catcher. If Juventus knew the type of fellow Jaikie was they wouldn't rest till they saw him safe in bed in the Canonry."

Dickson grinned. "I'm sure they wouldn't." But the grin soon faded. He strode up and down the little verandah with his head bowed and his hands clasped behind his back. He did this for perhaps five minutes, and then, with a "Just you bide here" to his companion, he disappeared into the house.

He was absent for the better part of an hour, and when he returned it was with a gloomy and puzzled countenance.

"I got the Head Schwester to telephone for me to Katzensteg to the aerodrome. There's some jukery-pukery on, and it seems I can't get a machine for the job. The frontier is closed to private planes and only the regular air service is allowed."

"Whatever do you want an aeroplane for?" Dougal asked.

"To get to Evallonia," said Dickson simply. "I've never been in one, but they tell me it's the quickest way to travel. There'll be nothing for it but to go by road. I'll have to attend strictly to the map, for Peter has no more sense of direction than a sheep."

"But what will you do when you get there?"

"I thought of having a crack with Prince Odalchini in the first place. . . ."

"The thing's impossible," Dougal cried. "Man, the country is already almost in a state of siege. Juventus won't let you near the Prince. They're sitting three-deep round his park wall. They carted me over the frontier yesterday with instructions that I wasn't to come back if I valued my life — and, mind you, I had their safe conduct."

"All the same, I must find some way of getting to him." In Dickson's voice there was a note of dismal obstinacy which Dougal knew well.

"But it's perfectly ridiculous," said Dougal. "I wish to Heaven I had never come here. You can't do a bit of good to anybody and you can do the devil of a lot of harm to yourself."

"I can see the place and some of the folk, and give you that business advice you said you wanted."

"You'll see nothing except the inside of a guardroom," Dougal wailed. "Listen to reason, Mr McCunn. I must be in Vienna tomorrow, for I have to sign a contract about paper for Mr Craw. Stay quietly here till I come back, and then maybe we'll be able to think of a plan."

"I can't," said Dickson. "I must go at once. . . . See here, Dougal. Do you observe that ring?" He held up his left hand. "I got it two years back come October on the Solway sands. 'I've gotten your ring, Sire,' I says to him, 'and if I get the word from you I'll cross the world.' Well, the word has come. Not direct from Prince John, maybe, but from what they call the logic of events. I would think shame to be found wanting. It's maybe the great chance of my life. . . . Where more by token is his Royal Highness?"

"How should I know?" said Dougal wearily. "Not in Evallonia, but lurking somewhere near, waiting on a summons that will likely never come. Poor soul, I don't envy him his job. . . . And you're going to stick your head into a bees' byke, when nobody asks you to. You say it's your sense of duty. If that's so, it's a misguided sense not very different from daftness. My belief is that the real reason is that you're looking for excitement. You're too young. You're like a horse with too much corn. You're doing this because it amuses you."

"It doesn't," was the solemn answer. "Make no mistake about that, Dougal. I'm simply longing to be back at Blawearry. I want to be on the river again — I hear the water's in fine trim — and I want to get on with my new planting — I'm trying Douglas firs this time. . . . I don't care a docken for Evallonia and its politics. But I'm pledged to Prince John, and in all my sixty-three years I've never broken my word. I'm sweir to go — I'll tell you something more, I'm feared to go. I've never had much truck with foreigners, and their ways are not my ways, and I value my comfort as much as anybody. That was why I

tried to get an aeroplane, for I thought it would commit me and get the first plunge over, for I was feared of weakening. As it is I'll have to content myself with the car and that sumph Peter Wappit. But some way or other I'm bound to go."

Dougal's grim face relaxed into an affectionate smile.

"You're a most extraordinary man. I'll not argue with you, for I know it's about as much good as making speeches to a tombstone. I'll go back to Evallonia as soon as my business is finished, and I only hope I don't see your head stuck up on a spike on Melina gate-house."

"Do you think that's possible?" Dickson asked with a curious mixture of alarm and rapture.

"Not a bit of it. I was only joking. The worst that can happen is that you and Peter will be sent back over the border with a flea in your ear. If Juventus catches you they'll deport you as a harmless lunatic. . . . But for God's sake don't get into the same parish as Mastrovin."



Chapter 6

ARRIVALS AT AN INN

Sir Archibald Roylance drove a motor-car well but audaciously, so that he disquieted the nerves of those who accompanied him; his new servant McTavish drove better, and with a regard for the psychology of others which made a journey with him as smooth as a trip in the Scotch express. The party left Unnutz early in the morning before the guests of the Kaiserin Augusta were out of bed, and since they had many miles to cover, Archie insisted on taking McTavish's place for a spell every three hours. All day under a blue sky they threaded valleys, and traversed forests, and surmounted low passes among the ranges, and since the air was warm and the landscape seductive, they did not hurry unduly. Lunch, for example, on a carpet of moss beside a plunging stream, occupied a full two hours. The consequence was that when they came out of the hills and crossed the Rave and saw before them the lights of the little railway station of Zutpha, it was already evening. Clearly not a time to pay a call upon Prince Odalchini, who did not expect them. Archie inquired of McTavish where was the nearest town, and was told Tarta, where the inn of the Turk's Head had a name for comfort. All the party was hungry and a little weary, so it was agreed to make for Tarta.

The car took a country road which followed the eastern side of Prince Odalchini's great park. Passing through Zutpha village, Archie, whose turn it was then to drive, noticed a number of youths who appeared to be posted on some kind of system. They stared at the car, and at first seemed inclined to interfere with it. But something — the road it was taking or the badges on the front of its bonnet — satisfied them, a word was passed from one to the other, and they let it go. They wore shorts, and shirts of a colour which could not be distinguished in the dark.

"Juventus," Archie turned his head to whisper. "We've come to the right shop. Thank heaven the lads don't want to stand between us and dinner."

Soon the road, which had lain among fields of maize and beet, turned into the shadow of woods, and was joined by many tributary tracks. Archie, who had a good sense of direction, knew the point of the compass where Tarta lay, and had an occasional glimpse of the park paling on his right to keep him straight. He was driving carelessly, for the road seemed deserted, and his mind was occupied in wondering what kind of fare the Turk's Head would give them, when in turning a corner he saw a yard or two ahead a stationary car, drawn up dangerously in a narrow place. He clapped on his brakes, for there was no room to pass it, since its nose was poked beyond the middle of the road, and came to a standstill in a crooked echelon, his off front wheel all but touching its running board.

Archie, like many casual people, was easily made indignant by casualness in others. On this occasion surprise made him indignant in his own language. "You fool!" he shouted. "Will you have the goodness to shift your dashed perambulator?"

One man sat stiffly at the wheel. The other was apparently engaged in examining a map with the assistance of the headlight. It was the latter who replied.

"Peter," he said, "they're English. Thank God for that."

The map-student straightened himself, and stood revealed in the glare of the big acetylene lamps as a smallish man in a tweed ulster. He took off his spectacles, blinked in the dazzle, and came deferentially towards Archie. His smile was so ingratiating that that gentleman's irritation vanished.

"That's a silly thing to do," was all he said. "If my brakes hadn't been good we'd have had a smash."

"I'm awful sorry. Peter lost his head, I doubt. You see, we've missed our road."

Something in the voice, with its rich Scots intonation, in the round benignant face, and in the friendly peering eyes stirred a recollection in Archie which he could not place. But he was not allowed time to drag the deeps of his memory. Alison from the back seat descended like a tornado, and was grasping the stranger's hand.

"Dickson," she cried, "who'd have thought of finding you here? You're a sight for sore eyes."

The little man beamed.

"Deed, so are you, Miss Alison. Mercy, but it's a queer world."

"This is Sir Archie Roylance. You know him? Aren't you a neighbour of his?"

Dickson extended a grimy hand.

"Fine I know him, though I haven't seen him for years. D'you not mind the Gorbals Die-hards, Sir Archibald, and Huntingtower where you and me fought a battle?"

"Golly, it's McCunn!" Archie exclaimed.

"And not a day older —"

"And that," said Alison, waving a hand towards the back of her car, "is my cousin Janet — Lady Roylance."

Dickson bowed, and, since he was too far off to shake hands, also saluted.

"Proud to meet you, mem. This is a fair gathering of the clans. I never thought when I started this morning to run into a covey of friends." The encounter seemed to have lifted care from his mind, for he beamed delightedly on each member of the party, not excluding McTavish.

"But what are you doing here?" Alison repeated. "I thought you were ill and at some German cure place."

"I've been miraculously restored to health," said Dickson solemnly. "And I'm here because I want to have a word with a man. You know him, Miss Alison — Prince Odalchini."

"But that's what we're here for too," the girl said.

"You don't tell me that. Have you tried to get inside his gates? That's what I've been seeking to do, and they wouldn't let me."

"Who wouldn't let you?"

"A lot of young lads in short breeks and green sarks. My directions were to go to a place called Zutpha, which was the proper way in. I found the lodge gates all right, but they were guarded like a penitentiary. I told the lads who I was seeking and got a lot of talk in a foreign language. I didn't understand a word, but the meaning was plain enough that if I didn't clear out I would get my neck wrung. One of them spoke German, and according to Peter what he said was the German for 'Go to hell out of this.' So I just grinned at them and nodded and told Peter to turn the car, for I saw it was no good running my head against a stone dyke. So now I'm looking for a town called Tarta, where I can bide the night and think things over."

"But what do you want with Prince Odalchini?"

"It's a long story, and this is not the place to tell it. It was Dougal that set me off. Dougal Crombie — you remember him at Castle Gay?"

"Dougal! You have seen him?"

"No farther back than the day before yesterday. He's in Vienna now. He came seeking me, for Dougal's sore concerned about this Evallonia business. Jaikie is in it, too. He had seen Jaikie."

"Where is Jaikie?" Alison asked, her voice shrill with excitement.

"Somewhere hereabouts. Dougal says he's a prisoner and in the hands of the same lads that shoo'ed me away from the Prince's gates."

Here Archie intervened. "This conference must adjourn," he said. "We're all famishing and Mr McCunn is as hungry as the rest of us. Dinner is the first objective. I'll back my car, and you" — he addressed Peter Wappit — "go on ahead. It's a straight road, and the town isn't five miles off. We can't talk here by the roadside, especially with Alison shrieking like a pea-hen. If Juventus has got the wind up, it's probably lurking three deep in these bushes."

The hostelry of the Turk's Head drew its name from the days when John Sobieski drove the Black Sultan from the walls of Vienna. Part of it was as old as the oldest part of the Schloss, and indeed at one time it may have formed an outlying appanage of the castle. In the eighteenth century, in the heyday of the Odalchins, it was a cheerful place, where great men came with their retinues, and where in the vast kitchen the Prince's servitors and foresters drank with the townfolk of Tarta. It still remained the principal inn of the little borough, but Tarta had decayed, and it stood on no main road, so while its tap-room was commonly full, its guest-rooms were commonly empty. But the landlord had been valet in his youth to the Prince's father, and he had a memory of past glories and an honest pride in his profession; besides, he was a wealthy man, the owner of the best vineyard in the neighbourhood. So the inn had never been allowed to get into disrepair; its rambling galleries, though they echoed to the tread of few guests, were kept clean and fresh; the empty stalls in the big stables were ready at a moment's notice for the horses that never came; there was good wine in the cellars

against the advent of a connoisseur. It stood in an alley before you reached the market-place, and its courtyard and back parts lay directly under the shadow of the castle walls.

The newcomers were received like princes. The landlord was well disposed to English milords, the class to which, from a glance at his card, he judged Archie to belong. Janet and Alison were his notion of handsome gentlewomen, for, being swarthy himself, he preferred them blonde; the two chauffeurs looked respectable; Dickson he could not place, but he had the carelessness of dress which in a Briton suggested opulence. So there was a scurrying of chambermaids in the galleries and a laborious preparation of hip-baths; the cars were duly bestowed in one of the old coach-houses, and the landlord himself consulted with Archie about dinner. McTavish and Peter were to be accommodated with their meals in a room by themselves — in old days, said the landlord, it had been the sitting-room of the Imperial couriers. The ladies and gentlemen would dine at the hour fixed in the grand parlour, which had some famous ancient carvings which learned men journeyed many miles to see. They would have the room to themselves — there were no other guests in the house. . . . He departed to see to the wine with a candlestick as large as a soup tureen.

The dinner was all that the landlord had promised. There was trout from the hills — honest, speckled trout — and a pie of partridges slain prematurely — and what Archie pronounced to be the best beef he had eaten outside England — and an omelet of kidneys and mushrooms — and little tartlets of young raspberries. It was a meal which Dickson was to regard as an epoch in his life; for, coming after the bare commons of Rosensee, it was a sort of festival in honour of his restored health. They drank a mild burgundy, and a sweet wine of the Tokay clan, and a local liqueur bottled forty years ago, and the coffee with which they concluded might have been brewed by the Ottoman whose severed head decorated the inn's sign.

"Dickson," Alison asked solemnly, "are you really and truly well again?"

"I'm a new man," was the answer. "Ay, and a far younger man. I aye said, Miss Alison, that I was old but not dead-old. I've an awful weight of years behind me, but for all that at this moment I'm feeling younger than when I retired from business. They tell me that you've been to Dr Christoph too, Sir Archibald?"

"He's a warlock," said Archie. "I had got as lame as a duck, and he made me skip like a he-goat on the mountains. I daren't presume too far, of course, or the confounded leg may sour on me. I got the most foul cramps the other day after a hill walk."

"Same with me," said Dickson. "The doctor says I may be a well body till the end of my days if I just go easy. I'm not very good at ca'ing canny, so no doubt I'll have my relapses and my rheumatic turns. But that's a small cross to bear. It's not half as bad as the gout that the old gentry used to get."

"Everybody," said Archie, "has gout — or its equivalent. It's part of man's destiny. Chacun à son goût, as they say in Gaul."

The miserable witticism was very properly ignored. It was Alison who brought them back to business. "I want to hear what Dougal said," she told Dickson. "I came here because Jaikie wrote telling me to. I haven't a notion where he is — I thought he was on his way home by this time. Archie and Janet came to keep me company. We're all bound for the same house — if we can get in. Now tell me — very slowly — everything that Dougal said."

Dickson, as well as he could, expounded Dougal's reading of Evallonian affairs. There was nothing new to his auditors in the exposition, for it was very much what they already knew from McTavish.

"What I don't understand," said Alison, "is what Dougal thought you could do, Dickson."

"I suppose," was the modest answer, "that he wanted a business-like view of the situation."

"But how could you give him that when you know so little about it?"

"That's just what I told him. I said that before I could help to redd up the mischief I had to discover exactly what the mischief was. That's why I came on here."

"You're a marvel," said Alison with wide eyes. "I didn't know you were so keen about Evallonia."

"I'm not. I don't care a docken about Evallonia. But, you see, I'm under a kind of bond, Miss Alison. You'll mind the night in the Canonry when I saw Prince John off in a boat. He gave me this ring" — he held up his left hand — "and I said to him that if ever I got the word I would cross the world to help him."

"He sent for you?"

"Not exactly. But the poor young man is evidently in sore difficulties, and I— well, I remembered my promise. I

daresay he'll be the better of a business mind to advise him. Dougal, I could see, thought me daft, but I'm sane enough. I don't particularly fancy the job, for I'm wearying to get home, but there it is. I thought I'd first have a crack with Prince Odalchini and get the lay-out right. And then —

"Then?"

"Then I must find Prince John, and the dear knows how I'll manage that."

A glance from Alison prevented Archie from saying something.

"It's more important," she said, "that you should find Jaikie."

"I daresay that will be the way of it," Dickson smiled. "He's a prisoner, and at Zutpha today I thought I would soon be a prisoner too, and would run up against Jaikie in some jyle."

"Jaikie," said Alison, "told me to come here, for he needed me. That means that sooner or later he'll be here too. They can't prevent us getting into the House of the Four Winds if we're Prince Odalchini's friends. It isn't war yet."

"It is not a bad imitation." A new voice spoke, and the four at the table, who had been intent on their talk, turned startled faces to the door. A tall man had quietly insinuated himself into the room, and was now engaged in turning the key in the lock. He had a ragged blond beard, and a face the colour of an autumn beech leaf: he wore an ill-cut grey suit and a vulgar shirt; also he had a Brigade tie.

"Good evening," he said pleasantly. "How are you, Roylance? Proser — that's the landlord — is a friend of mine and told me you were here." He smiled and bowed to Janet, and then he stopped short, registering extreme surprise on a face not accustomed to such manifestations. "Cousin Alison! My dear, what magic spirited you here?"

"Thank God!" Alison exclaimed fervently. "I've been thinking of you all day, Ran, and longing to get hold of you. This is Mr Dickson McCunn, who is a friend of Jaikie — you remember Jaikie at the Lamanchas? I don't know why you're here — I don't quite know why any of us are here — but here we are, and we must do something. By the way, you were saying as you slunk in-?"

"I was observing that the present state of affairs was a rather good imitation of war. How shall I put it? The Monarchists control the centre of Evallonia and the capital and can strike there when they please. Juventus is in power round the whole circumference of the country. They control its outlets and inlets — a very important point."

"That's why they are besieging the castle here?"

"Not besieging. Keeping it under observation. There has been as yet no overt act of hostility."

"But they are taking prisoners. They've pinched Jaikie."

Mr Glynde's nil admirari countenance for a second time in five minutes registered surprise.

"Jaikie?" he cried. "What do you mean?"

"He is in the hands of Juventus. He has been seen in captivity. Do you know anything about him?" Alison's voice had the sharpness of anxiety.

"I had the pleasure of meeting your Jaikie a few days ago up in the hills. I encouraged him to pay a visit to Evallonia. I helped to entertain him at luncheon with Prince Odalchini, when we tried to make him prolong his visit. You see, I had taken a fancy to Mr Jaikie and thought that he might be useful. I was to meet him that evening, but he never turned up, so I assumed that he was tired of my company, and had gone back across the frontier as he intended. It seems that I have misjudged him. He is a prisoner of Juventus, you say? That must be the doing of his friend Count Paul, and it looks as if all parties were competing for his company. Well, it may not be a bad thing, for it gives us an ally in the enemy's camp. You look troubled, Alison dear, but you needn't worry. Count Paul Jovian is not a bad sort of fellow, and I am inclined to think that Jaikie is very well able to look after himself."

"I'm not worrying about Jaikie, but about ourselves. I came here because Jaikie sent for me, and that means that he expects to meet me. He named Prince Odalchini's house. But how are we to get into it, if Juventus spends all its time squatting round it?"

"I think that can be managed," said Mr Glynde. "You have greatly relieved my mind, my dear. If Jaikie means to come to the House of the Four Winds, he will probably manage it, and he may be a most valuable link with the enemy. You must understand that Juventus is by no means wholly the enemy, but may with a little luck become a friend. . . . By the way, just how much do you know about the situation?"

He proceeded by means of question and answer to probe their knowledge, directing his remarks to Alison at first, but later to Dickson, when he perceived that gentleman's keenness.

"I must tell you one piece of bad news," and his voice became grave. "I have just heard it. Prince John was in hiding in a certain place, waiting for the summons, for everything depends on his safety, and all precautions had to be taken. But his enemies discovered his retreat, and he has been kidnapped. We know who did it — Mastrovin, the most dangerous and implacable of them all."

He was puzzled to find that the announcement did not solemnise his hearers. Indeed, with the exception of Dickson, it seemed to amuse them. But Dickson was aghast.

"Mercy on us!" he cried. "That's an awful business. I mind Mastrovin, and a blackguard murdering face he had. I must away at once —"

"It is the worst thing that could have happened," Mr Glynde continued. "They may kill him, and with him the hope of Evallonia. In any case it fatally disarranges the Monarchist plans. . . . What on earth is amusing you, Roylance?" he concluded testily.

Archie spoke, in obedience to a nod from Alison.

"Sorry," he said. "But the fact is we got in ahead of old Mastrovin. We were at Unnutz, and saw what he was up to, so we nipped in and pinched the Prince ourselves."

"Good God!" Mr Glynde for a moment could only stare. "Who knows about that?"

"Nobody, except us."

"Where have you put him?"

"At this moment he is upstairs having his supper along with Mr McCunn's chauffeur. His present job is to be my servant — name of McTavish — passport and everything according to Cocker."

For the third time that evening Mr Glynde was staggered. He rose and strode about the room, and his blue eyes had a dancing light in them.

"I begin to hope," he cried. "No, I begin to be confident. This freak of fate shows that the hussy is on our side." He took a glass from the sideboard and filled himself a bumper of the local liqueur. "I drink to you mountebanks. You have beaten all my records. I have always loved you, Janet. I adore you, Alison, my dear, and I have been writing you some exquisite poetry. Eructavit cor meum as the Vulgate says — now I shall write you something still more exquisite. Roylance, you are a man after my own heart. Where are you going?" he asked, for Dickson had risen from the table.

"I thought I would go up and have a word with His Royal Highness."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Sit down. And drop the Royal Highness business." Mr Glynde pulled a chair up to the table and leaned his elbows on it. "We must go very carefully in this business. You have done magnificently, but it's still dangerous ground. You say nobody knows of it except ourselves. Well, not another soul must know of it. Mastrovin is out to kill or spirit away Prince John — he must believe that the Prince is lost. Casimir and the Monarchists must believe that Mastrovin is the villain and go out hot on his trail — that will have the advantage of demobilising the Monarchists, which is precisely what is wanted at present. The Prince must be tucked away carefully till we want him — and when and how we will want him depends on the way things go. Oh, I can tell you we have scored one mighty big point which may give us the game and the rubber. But he can't stay here as your servant."

"It's a pretty good camouflage," said Archie. "He's the image of a respectable English valet, and I'm dashed if he hasn't picked up a Scotch accent, like the real McTavish. You'd have to examine him with a microscope before you spotted the Prince. He's a first-class actor, and it amuses him, so he puts his heart into it."

"Nevertheless it is too dangerous. You people will be moving in the wrong circles, and sooner or later he'll give himself away, or somebody will turn up that has known him from childhood. Luckily he hasn't been much in Evallonia since he was a boy, but you never know. We must bury him deeper. . . . Wait a moment. I have it. He shall go into my circus. You may not know that I'm a circus proprietor, Alison dear — the Cirque Doré— Glynde, late Aristide Lebrun — the epochal, the encyclopædic, the grandiose. We are encamped in the environs of Tarta, and every night sprigs of Juventus, who are admitted at half-price, applaud our performances. The Prince shall join my staff — I will devise for him some sort of turn — he will be buried there as deep as if he were under the Rave. It will be a joyful irony that the enemies who are looking for

him will applaud his antics. Then some day, please God, we will take him out of tights and grease-paint and give him a throne.”

Mr Glynde had become a poet, but he had not ceased to be a conspirator. “To-morrow morning,” he told Archie, “you will inform the landlord that you are sending your chauffeur home by road with your car. The cars will take your baggage to Zutpha, while you will walk there at your leisure through a pleasant country to catch the evening train. Proser is a good man, but it is unkind to burden even a good man with too much knowledge. Roylance’s chauffeur will not again be heard of. I will arrange about your baggage and the cars.”

“And what about us?” Archie asked.

“Before the evening — well before the evening, I hope — you will be in the House of the Four Winds.”

The party took an affectionate farewell of the landlord next morning, their baggage was piled into the cars, luncheon baskets were furnished, and Proser was informed that they meant to drive a mile or two till they cleared the town, and then to spend the day walking the woods on the left bank of the Rave, and catch the evening train at Zutpha. The cars would go straight to the railway station. There was no sign of Mr Randal Glynde.

McTavish, however, had been well coached. They crossed the Rave Bridge, passed the common where Jaikie had first met Count Paul, and plunged into a thick belt of woodland which covered all the country between the foothills and the river. Here there was no highway but many forest tracks, one in especial much rutted by heavy wagons and showing the prints of monstrous feet. The reason of this was apparent after a mile or so, when a clearing revealed the headquarters of the Cirque Doré. It was not its show-ground — that was in the environs of Tarta — but its base, where such animals were kept as were not immediately required. It was guarded by a stout palisade, and many notices warning the public that wild beasts lived there, and that they must not enter.

Mr Glynde was awaiting them, and one or two idlers hung around the gate. Archie caught, too, what he thought was a glimpse of a green shirt. Randal received them with the elaborate courtesies of a circus proprietor welcoming distinguished patrons. The chauffeurs of the two cars he directed how to proceed to Zutpha. “They will return by another road in due course,” he whispered to Alison, “but it is altogether necessary that they should be seen to leave this place.”

Of what followed no member of the party had a very clear recollection. They were taken to a tent less odoriferous than the rest, and provided with white caps on which the name of the circus was embroidered in scarlet. “We give a *matinée* today,” said Randal, “an extra performance asked for by Tarta. It will be in a dance-hall, and the programme is in Luigi’s hands — gipsy dances and songs and fiddling, for we are no mere vulgar menagerie. You will accompany the artistes back to Tarta. Trust me, you will not be suspected. The Cirque Doré has become a common object of the seashore.”

So Archie and Janet, Alison and Dickson, joined a party which crowded into an old Ford bus, and jolted back the way they had come. The dance-hall proved to be a building not far from the Turk’s Head, and it was already packed when the company arrived and entered by a side door. Randal deposited the four in a little room behind the stage. “You will lunch out of your baskets,” he told them, “while I supervise the start of the show. When it is in full swing I will come back.”

So while fiddles jigged a yard or two off and the feet and hands of Tarta citizens applauded, the four made an excellent meal and conversed in whispers. The circus cap was becoming to Alison and Janet, and it made Archie look like a professional cricketer, but on Dickson’s head it sat like an incongruous cowl out of a Christmas cracker. “A daft-like thing,” he observed, “but I’m long past caring for appearances. I doubt,” he added prophetically, “that there’ll be a lot of dressing-up before we’re through with this business. It’s a pity that I’ve the kind of face you cannot properly disguise. Providence never meant me to be a play-actor.”

Randal did not return for a good hour. He seemed satisfied. “The coast is clear,” he said, “and I’ve just had word from my camp that everything is all right there. Now we descend into the deeps, and I’m afraid it will be rather a dusty business. You can leave the circus caps behind, and put on your proper headgear. I hope you two women have nothing on that will spoil.”

He led them down a rickety wooden stair into a basement in which were stored many queer properties; then out of doors into a small dark courtyard above which beetled the walls of the castle. In a corner of this was a door, which he unlocked, and which led to further stables, this time of ancient stone. There followed a narrow passage, another door, and then a cave of a room which contained barrels and shelves and smelt of beer.

“We are now in the cellars of the Turk’s Head,” Randal expounded. “Proser knows this road, and he knows that I know

it, but he does not know of our present visit.”

From the beer cellar they passed into a smaller one, one end of which was blocked by a massive wooden frame containing bottles in tiers. Randal showed that one part of this frame was jointed, and that a section, bottles and all, formed a door. He pulled this back, and his electric torch revealed a low door in a stone wall. It was bolted with heavy ancient bolts, but they seemed to have been recently in use, for they slipped easily back. Now he evidently expected it to open, but it refused. There was a keyhole, but no key.

“Some fool must have locked it,” he grumbled. “It must have been Proser, and I told him to leave the infernal thing open. I’m extremely sorry, but you’ll have to wait here till I get a key. It’s filthy dirty, but you won’t suffocate.”

They did not suffocate, but they had a spell of weary waiting, for the place was pitch-dark and no one of them had a light. Dickson tried to explore in the blackness, and ran his head hard against an out-jutting beam, after which he sat down on the floor and slept. Archie smoked five cigarettes, and did his best to keep up a flow of conversation. “This is the Middle Ages right enough,” he said. “We’re making burglarious entry into an ancient Schloss, and I feel creepy down the spine. We didn’t bargain for this Monte Cristo business, Janet, when we left Geneva. And the last thing I heard that old ass Perrier say there was that the mediæval was out of date.” But by and by he too fell silent, and it was a dispirited and headachy company that at last saw the gleam of Mr Glynde’s torch.

“I humbly apologise,” said Randal, “but I had a devil of a hunt for Proser. He had gone to see a cousin about his confounded vines. He swears he never locked the door, so it must have been done from the other side. The people in the Schloss are evidently taking no chances. But I’ve got the key.”

The thing opened readily, and the explorers repeated their recent performance, threading a maze of empty cellars till they came to a door which led to a staircase. For a long time they seemed to be climbing a spiral inside a kind of turret, and came at last to a stage where thin slits of windows let in the daylight. Archie peered out and announced that in his opinion it must be about six o’clock. At last they reached a broad landing, beyond which further steps appeared to ascend. But there was also a door, which Randal tackled confidently as if he expected it to open at once.

It refused to budge. He examined it and announced that it was locked. “It is always kept open,” he said. “I’ve used it twenty times lately. What in thunder is the matter with it today?”

It was very plain what the matter was. It had been barricaded by some heavy object on the other side. It moved slightly under his pressure, but the barricade held fast.

“The nerves of this household have gone to blazes,” he said. “Roylance, lend a hand, and you, McCunn. We must heave our weight on it.”

They heaved their weight, but it did not yield; indeed, they heaved till the three men had no breath left in them. There was a creaking and grinding beyond, but the heavy body, whatever it was, held its ground. They laboured for the better part of an hour, and by and by made a tiny aperture between door and doorpost. The door was too strong to splinter, but Archie got a foot in the crack and, supported by vigorous pressure from behind, slowly enlarged it. Then something seemed to topple down with a crash beyond the door, and they found that it yielded. They squeezed past a big Dutch armoire, from the top of which had fallen a marble torso of Hercules.

Randal was now on familiar ground. The noise they had made had woken no response in the vast silent house. He led them through stone passages, and then into carpeted corridors, and through rooms hung with tapestries and pictures. There was no sign of servants or of any human life, but Janet and Alison, feeling the approach of civilisation, tried to tidy their hair, and Mr McCunn passed a silk handkerchief over a damp forehead. At last, when it seemed that they had walked for miles, Randal knocked at a door and was bidden enter.

It was a small room lined with books, aglow with the sunset which came through a tall window. In a chair sat an old man in a suit of white linen, and on a couch beside him a youthful and dishevelled figure which was refreshing itself with a glass of beer.



Chapter 7

“SI VIEILLESSE POUVAIT”

Mr John Galt had reason to seek refreshment, for he had had an eventful afternoon.

He had spent two days not unpleasantly in the camp of that wing of Juventus which Ashie commanded. (“Wing” was their major unit of division: they borrowed their names from the Romans, and Ashie was “Praefectus Alae.”) He was a prisoner, but in honourable captivity — an English friend of the Commander, detained not because he was hostile, but because of the delicacy of the situation. Ashie introduced him to the subordinate officers, and he found them a remarkable collection. There were old soldiers among them who attended to the military side, but there were also a number of young engineers and business men and journalists, who all had their special duties. Juventus, it appeared, was not only a trained and disciplined force, the youth of a nation in arms for defence and, it might be, offence; it was also an organisation for national planning and economic advancement. The recruits were brigaded outside their military units in groups according to their training and professions, and in each group were regular conferences and an elaborate system of education. Jaikie attended a meeting of an oil group, oil being one of Evallonia’s major industries, and was impressed by the keenness of the members and the good sense of the discussions, so far as they were explained to him. This was no mere ebullition of militarism, but something uncommonly like a national revival. He realised that it was not one man’s making. A leader would no doubt be necessary when Juventus took a hand in politics, but the movement itself had welled up from below. It was the sum of the spontaneous efforts of a multitude of people of all types and degrees, who had decided that they were tired of toy-shops and blind alleys and must break for open country.

Jaikie was a good mixer and very soon had made friends among the rank-and-file as well as among the officers. His meek cheerfulness and the obvious affection which the Commander showed for him were passports to their good-will. The language he found to be scarcely a difficulty at all. Most of the Evallonian youth had at least a smattering of English and many spoke it well, for it had long been in the schools the one obligatory foreign tongue. The second day he played in a Rugby game, a purifying experience on a torrid afternoon. Sports and gymnastics had a large part in Juventus, and every afternoon was consecrated to them. Ashie must have spread his fame, for he was invited to join the Blue fifteen, and was permitted to fill his old place at right wing three-quarters. It was a fierce, swift and not very orthodox game, the forwards doing most of the work, and the tackling being clumsy and uncertain. But he found that one or two of his side had a fair notion of the business, and some of them had certainly a fine turn of speed. One especially, the centre three-quarter next him, had clearly played a good deal, and now and then there was quite a creditable bout of passing. Jaikie had not a great deal of work to do, but in the second half he got the ball and scored a try, after a spectacular but not very difficult run down the field. However, that kind of run was apparently new to Evallonia, and it was received by the spectators with delirious applause.

Afterwards, when he was having a drink, Ashie introduced him to the centre, whose name was Ivar. The boy regarded him with open-eyed admiration.

“You have played for the English college of the Praefectus?” he asked respectfully.

“For a good deal more than that,” said Ashie. “Mr Galt is one of the most famous players in the world. He is what they call an International, and is the pride of his nation, which is Scotland.”

Ivar gasped.

“Scotland! That is a famous land. I have read romances about it. Its men dress like women but fight like lions. It loves freedom and has always helped other people to become free.”

Jaikie had a walk with Ivar within the limits of the cantonment and discovered a strong liking for the boy’s solemn enthusiasm. Ivar, it appeared, was a young electrical engineer and had been destined to a post in Brazil when Juventus called him. Now his ambition was limited to the immediate future, the great patriotic effort which the next few weeks would demand. He did not talk of it, for Juventus was schooled to reticence, but the light of it was in his eyes. But he spoke much of Evallonia, and Jaikie learned one thing from him — there was complete loyalty to the ideal of the cause, but no one leader had laid his spell upon it. Ivar mentioned with admiration and affection many names — Ashie’s among them — but there was no one that dominated the rest. “When we triumph,” he said, “we will call to our aid all good men.”

"Including the Monarchists?" Jaikie asked.

"Including the Monarchists, if they be found worthy."

They stood for a little on a ridge above the camp, where ran the high road along which Ashie's car had brought him. It was a clear evening and there was a wide prospect. Jaikie, who had his countrymen's uneasiness till he had the points of the compass in his head, was now able to orientate his position. The camp was in a crook of the Rave before it bent eastward in the long curve which took it to Melina. To the south he saw the confines of a big park, and to the east the smoke of a far-away train.

Ivar was glad to enlighten him.

"That is the nearest railway," he said. "The station of Zutpha is four miles off, beyond where you see the cornfield in sheaf. Yes, that is a nobleman's park, the castle called the House of the Four Winds. At the other side is the little city of Tarta, once a busy place, but now mouldering."

Jaikie asked who owned the castle.

"It is Prince Odalchini," said the boy with a grave face. "A famous house, the Odalchinis, and we of Juventus are not rootless Communists to despise ancient things. But this Prince Odalchini is an old man and he becomes foolish. He is a crazy Monarchist, and would bring back the old ways unchanged. Therefore he is closely watched by us. We do not permit any entry into his domain, or any exit except by our leave."

Jaikie cast his eye over the wide expanse of forest and pasture.

"But how can you watch so big a place when you have so many other things to do? It must be eight or nine miles round."

"It is part of our training," said Ivar simply. "The main entrances are of course picketed. For the rest, we have our patrols, and they are very clever. We Evallonians have sharp eyes and a good sense for country, and we have been most of us in our time what you call Boy Scouts, and many of us are hill-bred or forest-bred. We have our wood-craft and our field-craft. Believe me, Prince Odalchini is as securely guarded as if battalions of foot lined his park fence. Not a squirrel can enter without our knowing it."

"I see," said Jaikie, feeling a little depressed. His eye crossed the Rave and ran along a line of hills ten miles or so to the west. They were only foot-hills, two thousand feet high at the most, but beyond he had a glimpse of remote mountains. He saw to his left the horseshoe in which Tarta and its Schloss lay — he could not see the pass that led to Kremisch, since it was hidden by a projecting spur. To the north the hills seemed to dwindle away into a blue plain. Just in front of him there was a deeply-recessed glen, the containing walls of which were wooded to the summit, but at the top the ridge was bare, and there was a cleft shaped like the backsight of a rifle. In that cleft the sun was most spectacularly setting.

Ivar followed his gaze. "That is what we call the Wolf's Throat. It is the nearest road to the frontier. There in that cleft is the western gate of Evallonia."

As Jaikie looked at the nick, sharp cut against the crimson sky, he had a sudden odd sensation. Beyond that cleft lay his old life. Down here in this great shadowy cup of Evallonia was a fantastic world full of incalculable chances. These chances pleasurably excited him, but there were dregs of discomfort in his mind; he felt that he had been enticed here and that something in the nature of a trap might close on him. Now Jaikie had a kind of claustrophobia, and anything like a trap made him feel acutely unhappy, so it comforted him to see the outlet. That blazing rifle-backsight among the hills was the road to freedom. Some day soon he might have to use it, and it was good to know that it was there.

That night he observed after supper that he must be getting on with his job, and Ashie agreed. "I was just going to say the same thing myself," he said. "The air is full of rumours, and we can't get a line on what the Monarchists mean to do. There must be some hitch in their plans. We hear from Melina that there's not a Minister left in the place, only clerks carrying on, and that the National Guard are standing-to, waiting orders. We shall probably come on a Minister or two very soon trying to cross the frontier, but our orders are to speed their journey. We don't want a pogrom. What worries me is Cousin Mintha. She is in the south, among the oil-fields, and it looks as if she were on the warpath and moving towards Melina. We are nothing like ready for that, and she may put everything in the soup. The Monarchists must be allowed to show their hand first, but in this darned fog nobody knows anything. So the sooner you get inside the House of the Four Winds, my lad, the better for everybody."

"Can't you release me on parole?" Jaikie asked.

“Impossible. If you were caught in this neighbourhood and I had let you out on parole, I should be suspected of double-dealing, and I can’t afford that with Mintha on her high horse. No, you must escape and go off on the loose, so that if you are caught I can deal with you firmly. I may have to put you in irons,” he added with a grin.

“It won’t be easy to get into that castle,” said Jaikie. “I’ve had a word with the young Ivar and they seem to have taped every yard.”

“Well, that’s just where your genius comes in, my dear. I put my Evallonians high, but I’m prepared to back you as a strategist against them every time. Look at the way you ran round the Green backs this afternoon.”

“Then there’s the getting in here again.”

“That will be all right if you don’t take too long. I can have your tent shut up all day and give out that you’ve a touch of malaria and mustn’t be disturbed. . . . We can make sure that you leave camp unnoticed, for I’ll tell you the dispositions. Then it’s up to you to get inside the Schloss and out again and be back here early in the night. I can tell you the best place to enter our lines.”

“All right,” said Jaikie a little dolefully. “My only job is to dodge your lads and have a heart-to-heart talk with the Prince. What about him, by the way? Mayn’t he have a posse of keepers taking pot-shots at any intruder?”

“No, that’s not his way. You have only us to fear. Be thankful that you can reduce your enemies to one lot. Ours seem to produce a fresh crop daily. I’ve just heard that one of Mastrovin’s gang has been seen pretty near here. If Mastrovin turns up there’s likely to be dirty work.”

Jaikie went out literally with the milk. Every morning the neighbouring farms sent up milk for the camp in great tin drums borne in little pony-carts, and with them a batch of farm boys. Discipline was relaxed on these occasions, and Ashie had indicated one route which the milk convoy invariably followed. Jaikie, in much-stained flannel bags and a rough tweed jacket and ancient shoes, might easily pass as an Evallonian rustic. So he trotted out of camp behind a milk-cart, his hands assisting an empty drum to keep its balance. A hundred yards on and he slipped inconspicuously into the roadside scrub.

The weather was cooler than it had been of late, and there was a light fresh wind blowing from the hills. Jaikie felt rejuvenated, and began to look forward to his day’s task with a mild comfort. He did not believe that any patrols of Juventus could prevent him from getting inside the park. After that the job would be harder. He remembered the gentle fanaticism in Prince Odalchini’s eyes, and considered that it might be difficult to get him to agree to any counsels of moderation, or even to listen to them. He might regard Jaikie as one who had deliberately gone over to the other side. But Randal Glynde, if he were there, would help — Jaikie hoped he would be there. And there was just a chance that Alison might have turned up. It was this last thought that strung up his whole being to a delicious expectation.

As he expected, it was not very difficult to get inside the park. His prospect from the ridge the night before had given him his bearings. He realised that his former entrance with Luigi had been on the east side, not far from the road between Zutpha and Tarta; now he was on the north side, where there was no road following the boundary, and thick coverts of chestnut undergrowth extended right up to the paling. He did not find it hard to locate the Juventus cordon. The patrols made their rounds noiselessly and well, but he discovered from their low whistles the timing of their beats, and when it would be safe to make a dash. But it took an unconscionable time, and it was midday before his chance came, for he was determined to take no needless risks. There was a point where the high paling was broken by the mossy and ruinous posts of an old gateway. That was the place he had selected, and at exactly seventeen minutes past twelve he slipped over like a weasel and dropped into the fern of the park.

He travelled a few hundred yards, and then halted to lunch off some biscuits and chocolate provided by Ashie. Then with greater freedom he resumed his journey. Beneath him the ground fell away to a small stream, a tributary of the Rave, which had been canalised in a broad stone channel. There was no bridge, but for the convenience of the estate-labourers a plank had been laid across it. Beyond was a glade of turf, at the end of which he could see the beginning of a formal garden. This was very plain sailing, and he became careless, forgetting that Juventus might have their patrols inside the park as well as without. . . . Suddenly, when he was within a few yards of the culvert, swinging along and humming to himself, he found his feet fly from beneath him. He had been tripped up neatly by a long pole, and the owner sat himself heavily on his chest.

Convinced after the first movement that he was hopelessly outmatched in physical strength, Jaikie did not struggle. Vain resistance he had always regarded as folly. His assailant behaved oddly. He ejaculated something as the result of a

closer inspection, and then removed himself from his prisoner's chest. But he did not relax a tight grip on his arm. Jaikie observed with some surprise that he was in the hands of Ivar.

Ivar's surprise was greater. His arms imprisoned Jaikie's to his sides, and to a spectator the couple must have had a lover-like air.

"Mr Galt!" he gasped. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"You may well ask," said Jaikie pleasantly. "The fact is, I've broken bounds. I wanted to have a look at that Schloss. D'you mind not gripping my shoulder so hard? You've got me safe enough."

"You have escaped?" said Ivar solemnly. "You have not been permitted to come here on parole?"

"No. Count Paul did not give me permission — he knows nothing about it — this is my own show. But look here, Ivar, you're a sensible chap and must listen to reason. I'm on your side, and I'm trying to help your cause in my own way. I have special reasons for being here which I can't explain to you now. I mean to be back in camp this evening — I'll pledge you my word of honour for that. So if you're wise you'll let me go and never say a word about having seen me."

Ivar's face showed the confusion of his feelings.

"You know all about me," Jaikie went on. "You know I'm a friend of the Praefectus. Well, I'm trying to help him, without his knowledge — that's why I'm here. You won't interfere with me if you've the interests of Juventus at heart."

The boy's face had changed from bewilderment to sternness.

"I cannot let you go. You are my prisoner and you must return with me. It is not for me to use my discretion. I must obey my orders, and the orders are clear."

There was that in his eye which warned Jaikie that argument was futile. The discipline of Juventus allowed no quibbling. But Jaikie continued to plead, judging meantime the distance from the culvert and the plank. Then he seemed to give it up as a bad job. "All right," he said. "So be it. I daresay it's the only thing you can do, but it's infernal hard luck on me. The Praefectus will think I have been trying to double-cross him, and I honestly wanted to help him. You believe that, don't you?"

Ivar, remembering his admiration of yesterday, relented so far as to say that he did. Jaikie's surrender, too, caused him to relax the tightness of his grip, and in an instant Jaikie acted. With an eel-like twist he was out of his clutches and Ivar found himself sprawling on the slope. Before he had found his feet Jaikie had skipped over the culvert and had kicked the plank into the water. The two faced each other across a gully which was too broad to jump, and to cross which meant the descent and ascent of slimy stone walls.

"Let's talk sense," said Jaikie. "You know you haven't an earthly chance of catching me. You've done your duty, in arresting me — only I've escaped, which is your rotten luck. Now listen. I'm going on to reconnoitre that house, never mind why. But, as I told you, I'm on your side, and on Count Paul's side, and I'm coming back. I'll have to wait till it's darkish — eight or nine o'clock perhaps, I daresay. Will your lads be on duty then?"

Something in Jaikie's tone impressed Ivar. "I shall be on duty," he said. "I return here for my second tour at eight o'clock."

"Well, I'll come back this way, and I'll surrender myself to you. I don't want to outrage your discipline. You can march me to the camp, and hand me over to the Praefectus, and it will be my business to make my peace with him. Have you got that right?"

But Ivar's sense of duty was not to be beguiled. He started to climb down into the culvert. "Ass!" said Jaikie as he turned and trotted off in the direction of the castle. He dived into one of the side glades, and when he had reached the first terrace wall and looked back he saw that his pursuer had halted not very far from the culvert. Perhaps, he thought, there was some order of Juventus which confined their patrols to a certain distance inside the park bounds.

Jaikie, as he threaded the terrace paths, and climbed stairways between neglected creepers and decaying statuary, discovered that he had come to the northern end of the Schloss, which was one of the last-century additions, castellated, battlemented, topped with bogus machicolations. The great house had looked deserted on his first visit, but now it had the air of a forsaken mausoleum. He turned the flank of it and moved along the weedy upper terrace, looking for the door by which he and the Prince had entered after luncheon. He found it, but it was locked and apparently barricaded. He found other doors, but they were in the same condition. The House of the Four Winds seemed to have prepared itself for a siege.

This was discouraging. It occurred to him that the Prince might have departed, but in that case Juventus would have known of it and would not be maintaining its vigilant beleaguerment. He retired to the terrace wall, from which he could get a good view of the tiers of windows. All of them were blind and shuttered. If there were people in the castle they were dwelling in the dark. This he knew was the side where the chief living-rooms were, and if there were inmates anywhere it would be here.

At last his quick eyes caught sight of something on the third floor. It was a window open a little at the top. It was dark, but that might be because of blinds and not of shutters — the sun was so placed that it was hard to judge of that. By that window, and by that window only, he might effect an entrance.

It was an easy conclusion to reach, but the ways and means were not easy. Beneath each line of windows ran a narrow ledge along which it might be just possible to make a traverse. But the question was how to reach that ledge, for there were no friendly creepers on the great blank stone façade. Jaikie, moving stealthily in the cover of pots and statues, for he had an ugly feeling that he might be under hostile observation, reconnoitred carefully the whole front. Something told him that he was not alone in this business; he had the sense that somewhere else on that terrace there were human beings engaged perhaps in the same enterprise. Could Juventus have flung out their scouts thus far? He scarcely believed it, judging from Ivar's behaviour, but he had no time for nervousness, for the day was getting on and he had still his main work to do.

The front yielded him nothing. But at the flanking tower which he had first approached he got a glimmer of hope. There was a fire escape which had been allowed to fall into disrepair, but which was certainly still climbable. The question was would it give access to the ledge below the window? He thought that it might, and started to ascend.

Many of the rungs were rotten, and he had to move with extreme caution; indeed, at one moment he feared that the whole contraption would break loose from the wall. Now his early training proved its worth, for he was without a suspicion of vertigo, and could look down unmoved from any height. The fire-escape led up to the third story, and he found that by stepping to his left he could stand on the sill of a narrow window in the gap between the tower and the main façade. He got his hands on the ledge and to his relief found it broader than he had hoped — at least a foot and a half of hard stone. The difficulty would be to draw himself up on to it.

He achieved this, not without some tremor of the heart, for a foot and a half is not much of a landing-place. Very cautiously he laid himself along it, and then slowly raised himself to his feet. By turning his head he had a glimpse of a great swimming landscape running out into blue distances — he did not look twice, for even his cool head grew a little giddy at the sight. With his face to the wall of the castle he began to side-step along the ledge.

It proved far simpler than he had feared, for the stone was firm. He passed window after window, all closed and shuttered, till his heart began to sink. Had he blundered after all? Surely the window he had marked had been the fifth from the right. . . . And then he came to one which, as he approached it, seemed suddenly to move. A hand was lifting the lower sash, and an old face looked out into the sunlight.

Jaikie took a firm grip of the inner sill, for he felt that anything might happen, and the terrace was a long way below. "Prince Odalchini," he said, "I've come back."

The old face scarcely changed. Its eyes peered and blinked a little at the uncouth figure which seemed to be hanging in air.

"I'm Galt," said the figure. "Do you mind me coming in?"

"Ah, yes — Mr Galt," said the voice. "Certainly come in. You are very welcome. I do not think anyone has attempted that ledge since for a bet I did it as a boy. But my effort was limited to the traverse between two windows. You have come all the way from the North Tower! Magnificent! You will desire, I think, some refreshment."

Dickson McCunn sat in a deep armchair sipping a mammoth cup of tea. Prince Odalchini had offered every kind of refreshment, but it had taken time to dig the old housekeeper and the older butler out of the cavernous lower regions, and indeed Janet and Alison had had to descend themselves and help to make tea. All seven were now sitting in the Prince's cabinet, and for the last quarter of an hour the conversation had been chiefly an examination of Jaikie by the Prince and Randal Glynde. Dickson listened with only half an ear, for Jaikie was confirming what they already knew. He was more intent on savouring the full strangeness of this experience.

Two days ago he had been an ordinary convalescent at a German kurhaus, on the eve of returning to the homely delights of Blawearry. Now he found himself inside an old stone palace which was in a state of siege, a palace which he had

entered like a rat through mysterious cellars. His mind kept casting back to the spring morning nine — or was it ten? — years ago, when, being freed for ever from the routine of business, he had set out on a walking-tour, and had found himself in another great house among desperate folk. He remembered his tremors and hesitations, and that final resolve which he had never regretted, which indeed had been the foundation of all his recent happiness. Was he destined to face another crisis? Looking back, it seemed to him that everything had been predestined. He had left the shop and set out on his travels because he was needed at Huntingtower. Had Providence decreed that Dr Christoph should give him back his health simply that he should come here?

Dickson felt solemn. He had that Calvinistic belief in the guidance of Allah which is stronger than any Moslem's, and he had also the perpetual expectation of the bigoted romantic. . . . But he was getting an old man, too old for cantrips. His eye fell upon Prince Odalchini, who was also old, though he seemed to have grown considerably younger in the past half-hour. He felt that he had misjudged the Prince; his face was shrewder than he had thought, and he seemed to be talking with authority. Jaikie, too. Dickson was not following the talk, but Jaikie's gravity was impressive, and the rest were listening to him eagerly. He felt a sudden uprush of pride in Jaikie. He was a different being now from the pallid urchin of Huntingtower, who had wept bitterly when he was getting dangerous.

His eyes roamed round the walls, taking in a square of old tapestry, and a line of dark kit-kat portraits. The window showed a patch of golden evening sky. The light caught Alison's hair, and he began to wonder about her and Jaikie. Would they ever be man and wife? It would be a queer match between long descent and no descent at all — but it was a queer world, and nothing could be queerer than this place. Janet and Archie belonged to a familiar sphere, but Mr Glynde was like nothing so much as the Pied Piper of Hamelin. What was he, Dickson McCunn, doing among such outlandish folk? Dougal had said that they wanted his advice; but he felt as impotent as Thomas the Rhymer no doubt felt when he was consulted on the internal affairs of Fairyland. . . . Still, common sense was the same all the world over. But what if common sense was not wanted here, but some desperate quality of rashness, some insane adventurousness? He wished he were twenty years younger, for he remembered Prince John. He was sworn to do his best for the exiled monarch, and that very morning with a break in his voice he had renewed the pledge to the chauffeur McTavish.

By this time he was coming out of his dreams, and hearing something of the conversation. As he finished his tea Jaikie was putting the heart of his problem in staccato sentences, and Prince Odalchini and Mr Glynde with gloomy faces were nodding their assent. Something in the words stirred a reminiscence. . . .

"I mind," said Dickson out of the depths of his chair.

It was the first time he had spoken, and the others turned to him, so that he felt a little embarrassed.

"I mind," he said, "when Jimmy Turnbull was running for Lord Provost of Glasgow. He was well liked and far the best man for the job, but the feck of the Town Council didn't fancy his backers, and if it had come to the vote Jimmy would have been beat. So Tam Dickson — he was my own cousin and was Baillie then and afterwards Lord Provost himself — Tam was the wily one and jerked his brains to think of a way out. What he did was this. He got Jimmy's friends to drop Jimmy and put up one David Duthie, who was a blethering body that was never out of the papers. He had a sore job persuading them, he told me, but he managed it in the end. The consequence was that the very men that were opposed to Jimmy's backers, now that he was quit of them, took up Jimmy, and since they were a majority of the Council he was triumphantly elected."

Dickson's apologue was received with blank faces by the others, with the exception of Randal Glynde. Into that gentleman's eyes came a sudden comprehending interest, and Dickson saw it and was encouraged. His own mind was awaking to a certain clearness.

"If Prince John didn't exist," he asked, "is there anybody else the Monarchists could put up?"

"There is no one," said Prince Odalchini sadly. "There is, of course, his uncle, the late king's brother, the Archduke Hadrian, but he is impossible."

"Tell us about the Archduke," said Dickson.

"He is an old man, and very frail. He has not been in Evallonia for many years, and even his name is scarcely remembered. He is believed to be one of the greatest living numismatologists, and he has given his life to his hobby. I alone of the Evallonian nobility have kept in touch with him, and it was only yesterday that I had a letter from his secretary. His Royal Highness is a bachelor, and for long has lived in a chateau in France near Chantilly, scarcely going beyond his park walls. He is as strict a recluse as any mediæval hermit. Now he is bedridden, and I fear cannot have many months to live."

Prince Odalchini rose, opened a cabinet, and took out a photograph.

"That is His Royal Highness, taken two years ago at my request, for I desired to have a memento of him. In my youth he was kind to me."

He handed it to Dickson, who studied it carefully. It showed a man not unlike Mr Pickwick or the great Cavour, with a round face, large innocent eyes, and grey hair thinning on the temples — a man of perhaps seventy years, but, so far as could be judged from the photograph, still chubby and fresh-complexioned. It was passed round the company. Janet and Archie scarcely glanced at it, but Mr Glynde looked at it and then looked at Dickson, and his brow furrowed. Jaikie did the same, and when it came to Alison she cried out — "Why, Dickson, it might be you, if your hair was greyer."

"I was just thinking that," was the answer. Dickson retrieved the photograph and studied it again.

"What size of a man is he?" he asked. His clearness of mind was becoming acid.

"Shortish, about your own height," said the Prince.

"Umphm! Now what hinders you to do the same with the Archduke as my cousin Tam Dickson did with David Duthie? Jaikie says that Juventus would be for Prince John but for you and your friends. Well, if you run the Archduke, they'll take up Prince John, and since you tell me they'll have the upper hand of you, they'll put Prince John on the throne. D'you see what I mean? It's surely common sense."

This speech had a considerable effect on the others. Archie laughed idiotically, and Mr Glynde found it impossible to remain seated. But Prince Odalchini only shook his head.

"Ingenious," he said, "but impossible. His Royal Highness is old and frail and bedridden. He would not consent, and even if he consented, he would be dead before he reached Evallonia."

Dickson's mind was moving by leaps to a supreme boldness.

"What for should he come near Evallonia? He need never leave his chateau, and indeed the closer he lies there the better. It's not his person, but his name that you want. . . . See here, Prince. You say that nobody in Evallonia knows him, and few have ever seen him, but that there's a general notion of what he looks like. Can you persuade your friends to change their minds about Prince John and declare for the Archduke as the older and wiser man and more suited for this crisis? If you do that, and put him or something like him on the throne, Juventus will come along in a week and fling him out and set up Prince John, and then you'll all be happy together."

The company was staring at him open-mouthed and wide-eyed, all except Prince Odalchini, who seemed inclined to be cross.

"But I tell you we cannot get His Royal Highness," he said.

"I said 'or something like him,'" was Dickson's answer. His mind was now as limpid as an April morning.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean somebody you can pass off as the Archduke."

"And where shall we find him?" The Prince's tone was ironical.

"What about myself?" said Dickson.

For an instant there was utter silence.

Prince Odalchini's face showed a range of strong emotions, anger, perplexity, incredulity and then something that was almost hope. When he spoke, his words were inadequate to his feelings. "Are you mad?" he asked.

"Deed I'm not. I came here as a business man to give you my advice, and there it is. It's a perfectly simple proposition, and there's just the one answer. By the mercy of God I'm reasonably like the old man, though I'm a good deal younger, and anyway there is nobody to tell the differ. I'm willing to take the chance, though I suppose it will be high treason if I'm grippit, for I'm not going back on my word to Prince John. I'll see yon lad with his hinder parts on the throne before I leave Evallonia, or my name's not Dickson McCunn."

"You realise that you would be running tremendous risks?"

"Ugh, ay, but I've taken risks before this. The only thing I stipulate is that I'm not left too long on the throne, for I wouldn't be up to the job. I might manage a week before I went skelping across the frontier — but not more."

Prince Odalchini's expression had changed. There was now respect in it, and excitement, and a twitching humour.

"I think you are the boldest man I have ever met," he said.

"Never heed that," said Dickson. "My knees will likely be knocking together before I've done. What I want to know is, can you persuade the rest of your lot, Muresco particularly, to agree to this plan?"

The Prince considered. "It may be difficult, but I think it can be done. After all, it is the only way."

"And can you upset the Republic and set up the Archduke?"

"Beyond doubt. For a little while — that is to say."

"Last and most important, can Juventus be persuaded to accept Prince John?"

It was Jaikie who answered.

"I believe they could. Count Paul would jump at him, and so would the rank-and-file. I don't know about the other leaders. There's a woman who matters a good deal."

"Prince John must marry her then. That's all. We're desperate folk and we're not going to stick at trifles." Dickson was in that mood of excited authority which always with him followed the taking of a great resolution. "But, Jaikie, it's terrible important that, if I get that far, Juventus must force me to abdicate in a week — I couldn't manage longer. It would be an awful business if at my time of life I was kept cocked up on a throne I didn't want. There's just the one job for you, and that's to manage Juventus, and, mind, I've trusted you often and never known you fail. Away with you back to your camp, for there's no time to lose."

"We dine in half an hour," said Prince Odalchini.

"Well, let's get pencil and paper and work out the details."

But they did not immediately get to business, for Alison rose and ceremoniously embraced Mr McCunn. Her kiss was like that of Saskia's years before in the house of Huntingtower; it loosed a force of unknown velocity upon the world.

The twilight had fallen when Jaikie emerged from one of the terrace doors, which was promptly locked behind him. He proposed to return the way he had come and surrender himself to Ivar. After that he and Ashie must hold high converse. He had a task before him of immense difficulty and his head was already humming with plans. But Dickson's certainty had given him hope, and he thanked his stars that he had not gone home, for now he was in the kind of adventure he had dreamed of, and his comrades were the people he loved best in the world. This was his notion of happiness.

He must hurry, if he was not to miss Ivar, so he short-circuited his route, by dropping from the successive terrace walls instead of going round by the stairways. . . . At the last of them he found that he had dropped into a human embrace which was strict and powerful, but not friendly.

His instinct of the afternoon had been right. Others besides himself had been lurking among the paths and statues of the terraces.



Chapter 8

SPLENDIDE MENDAX

Jaikie's captors, whoever they were, meant business. Before the sack was slipped over his head a cloth, sticky and sweet-smelling, was twisted round his mouth. He was vaguely aware of struggling against an immense suffocating eiderdown, and that was his last conscious moment for perhaps ten minutes. These minutes should have been hours if the intentions of his ill-wishers had been fulfilled. But in Jaikie they had struck a being oddly constituted. Just as it was nearly impossible to make him drunk, so he was notably insensitive to other forms of dope. Had he ever had to face a major operation, the anaesthetist would have had a difficult time with him. Moreover, his nose had come into contact with something hard and was bleeding copiously, which may have counteracted the stuff on the bandage. The consequence was that he presently regained his senses, and found himself in a position of intense bodily discomfort. He was being borne swiftly along by persons who treated him with no more respect than as if he were a bundle of faggots.

He was a good deal frightened, but his anger was greater than his fright, and it was directed against himself. For the third time within a week he had stumbled blindly into captivity — first Ashie, then Ivar that very day, and now some enemy unknown. What had become of the caution on which he had prided himself? He had been an easy victim, because he had had no thought for anything but the immediate future, and had not recognised that he had been walking among hidden fires. He reproached himself bitterly. Ashie had trusted him, Prince Odalchini had trusted him, and he had proved himself only a blundering child. What especially rankled was that he must break his pledge to Ivar. That dutiful youth would be looking for him near the boundary of the park, and would set him down as a common liar.

Indignation, especially against one's self, is a wonderful antidote to fear. It also tends to sharpen the wits. Jaikie, with a horrid crick in his neck and a back aching from rough treatment, began to think hard and fast. Who was responsible for this outrage? Certainly not Prince Odalchini or anyone connected with the House of the Four Winds. Not Juventus. Ivar was the only Greenshirt who knew of his visit to the castle, and Ivar was too much of a gentleman to resort to these brigand tricks. So far his conclusions were clear, but they were only negative. Who would want to capture him? Somebody who knew about his new job? — But the only people in the secret were his friends in the castle. Somebody who had a grudge against Prince Odalchini? — But that could only be Juventus, and he had ruled Juventus out. Somebody who had a grievance against himself? — But he was a humble stranger unknown in Evallonia. Somebody who hated Juventus and the Prince alike and who suspected him as a liaison between them? — Now, who filled that bill? Only the present Republican Government in Evallonia. But all his information was to the effect that that Government was shaking in its shoes, and that its members were making their best speed to the frontier. They could have neither leisure nor inclination to spy thus effectively on a castle at whose gates the myrmidons of Juventus were sitting.

And then suddenly he remembered what Ashie had told him and Prince Odalchini had repeated. Behind the effete Republic was a stronger and darker power. . . . A horrid memory of Mastrovin came to his mind, the face which had glowered on him in the room in the Portaway Hydropathic, the face which he had seen distorted with fury in the library of Castle Gay — the heavy shaven chin, the lowering brows, the small penetrating eyes — the face which Red Davie had described as that of a maker of revolutions. . . . The thought that he might be in Mastrovin's hands sent a shiver down his aching spine. The man had tried to kidnap Prince John and had been foiled by Alison. He must be desperate with all his plans in confusion, a mad dog ready to tear whatever enemy he could get his fangs into.

Jaikie's fears must have stopped well short of panic, for he had enough power of reflection left to wonder where he was being taken. He was no longer in the park or the garden, for the feet of his bearers sounded as if they were on some kind of pavement. He had an impression, too, that he was not in the open air, but inside a masoned building. It could not be the castle, for he had heard that evening from Alison of her entry through the cellars and the difficulties of the route; if that approach was so meticulously guarded, it was probable that the same precautions had been taken with all. . . . And then it occurred to him that, since the great building abutted on the town of Tarta, there must be other ways into the streets from the park, through outhouses and curtilages, for once the burgh had been virtually part of the castle. No doubt these were now disused and blocked up, but some knowledge of them might linger in queer places.

His guess was confirmed, for presently it was plain that his bearers were in a low and narrow passage. There seemed to

be at least three of them, and they went now in Indian file — crouching as he could tell from their movements, and now and then pushing him before them. He felt his legs grating on rough stone. Once his foot caught in a crevice, and his ankle was nearly twisted when it was dragged out of it. The place was a sort of drain, and it seemed to him miles long; the air was warm and foul, and he was inert not from policy, but from necessity, for he could hardly breathe inside the sack. Once or twice his bearers seemed to be at fault, for they stopped and consulted in muffled voices. These halts were the worst of all, for there loomed before Jaikie the vision of the death of a sewer rat.

Then the passage manifestly widened, the air grew fresher, and there came the sound of flowing water. He remembered that he had seen runnels of water in the Tarta streets, effluents from the Rave, and he realised that he had been right — they were now underneath the town. After that he was only dimly conscious of his whereabouts. He believed that the party were ascending — not stairs, but an inclined tunnel. There came a point in which they moved with extreme caution, as if people were near, people who must not hear or see them. There followed the grating of an opening door, then another and another, and even through the folds of the sack Jaikie recognised that they were in some kind of dwelling. There was the feel in the air of contiguity to human uses. . . .

The end came when he was suddenly dumped on a wooden floor, and one of the party struck a light. The sack was taken from his head, and he was laid on a truckle-bed where were some rough blankets and an unbleached pillow. He had already decided upon his course, so he kept his eyes shut and breathed heavily as if he were still under the opiate. The three men left the room, taking the candle with them, and locking the door behind them, so that all he saw was their retreating backs and these told him nothing. They looked big fellows in nondescript clothes, indoor or outdoor servants.

Jaikie's first feeling was of intense relief. Whatever happened to him, at any rate he was not going to be stifled in a drain. He lay for a little breathing free air and gasping like a fish on the shingle. His second feeling was that all his bones were broken, but that he was too tired to care. There were various other feelings, but they all blended into a profound fatigue. In about three minutes Jaikie was asleep.

He must have slept a round of the clock, and he awoke in a state of comparative bodily ease, for Rugby football had inured him to rough handling. The room was a small one, evidently little used, for it had no furniture but a bed; it looked like an attic in an unprosperous inn. Its one dormer window looked over a jumble of roofs to a large blank wall. But since it faced east, it caught the morning sunlight, and the dawn of the wholesome day had its effect on Jaikie's spirits. The ugly little fluttering at his heart had gone. He had only himself to thank for his troubles, he decided, and whatever was in store for him he must keep his head, and not be the blind fool of the past week. He had awakened with one thought in his mind. Prince John was the trump card. It was Prince John that Mastrovin was looking for — if indeed Mastrovin was his captor — and it was for him, Jaikie, to be very wary at this point. Was there any way in which he could turn his present predicament to the advantage of his mission? He had a shadow of a notion that there might be.

The door was unlocked and breakfast was brought him, not by one of his bearers of the night before, but by an ancient woman with a not unpleasing face. She gave him "Grüss Gott" in a friendly voice. Since she spoke German like all the Tarta people, and since the breakfast of coffee and fresh rolls looked good, he was encouraged to ask for some means of washing. She nodded, and fetched a tin basin of water, soap, a towel, a cracked mirror and a broken comb, doubtless part of her own toilet equipment. Jaikie washed the blood from his face, scrubbed from his hands some of the grime of last night's cellars, dusted his clothes, and tidied up his unruly hair. Then he made a hearty meal, lit a pipe and lay down on the bed to think.

He was not left long to his reflections. The door opened and two men entered, who may or may not have been his captors. They were clearly not countrymen, for they had the pallor of indoor workers, and the stoop which comes from bending many hours in the day. They had solemn flat faces with a touch of the Mongol in them, and one of them very civilly restored to Jaikie a knife which had dropped out of his pocket. They beckoned to him to follow them, and when he obeyed readily they forbore to take his arm, but one went before and one behind him. He was escorted down a narrow wooden staircase, and along a passage to a room at the door of which they knocked ceremonially. Jaikie found himself thrust into a place bright with the morning sun, where two men sat smoking at a table.

He recognised them both. One was a tall man with a scraggy neck and a red, pointed beard, a creature of whipcord muscles and large lean bones, who seemed to be strung on wires, for his fingers kept tapping the table, and his eyelids were always twitching. Jaikie remembered his name — it was Dedekind, who had been left with the Jew Rosenbaum to keep guard in the Castle Gay library when the others searched the house. The second was beyond doubt Mastrovin, a little older, a little balder, but formidable as ever. It was not the library scene that filled Jaikie's mind as he looked at them, but that

earlier episode, in the upper room of the Portaway Hydropathic, when they had cross-examined an alcoholic little journalist. That scene stuck in his memory, for it had been for him one of gross humiliation. They had bullied him, and he had had to submit to be bullied, and that he could not forget. Hate was a passion in which he rarely indulged, but he realised that he cordially hated Mastrovin.

Could they recognise him? Impossible, he thought, for there could be no link between that cringing little rat and the part he now meant to play. He also was two years older, and in youth one changes fast. So he confronted the two men with a face of cold wrath, but there was a tremor beneath his coolness, for Mastrovin's horrid little eyes were very keen.

"Your name?" Mastrovin barked. "You are English?"

"I should like to know first of all who you are and what you mean by your insolence?" Jaikie spoke in the precise accent of a Cambridge don, very unlike the speech of the former reporter of the *Craw Press*.

Mastrovin bent his heavy brows. "You will be wise to be civil — and obedient. You are in our power. You have been found at suspicious work. We are not men to be trifled with. You will speak, or you will be made to speak, and if you lie you will suffer for it. A second time, your name?"

For some obscure reason the man's tone made Jaikie feel more cheerful. This was common vulgar bullying, bluffing on a poor hand. He thought fast. Who did they think he was? He had noticed that at the first sight of him the faces of both men had fallen. Had he been arrested because they believed that he was Prince John?

"I am English," he said. "An English traveller. Is this the way that Evallonia welcomes visitors?"

"You are English, no doubt, and therefore you are suspect. It is known that the English are closely allied with those who are plotting against our Government."

"Oh, I see." Jaikie shrugged his shoulders and grinned. "You think I'm taking a hand in your politics. Well, I'm not. I don't know the first thing about them, and I care less. But if you're acting on behalf of the Government, then I daresay you're right to question me. I'll tell you everything about myself, for I've nothing to conceal. My name is John Galt. I've been an undergraduate at Cambridge and I have just finished with the University. I've been taking a holiday walking across Europe, and I came into Evallonia exactly four days ago. I'll give you every detail about what I've been doing since."

While smoking his after-breakfast pipe, he had made up his mind on his course. He would tell the literal truth, which he hoped to season with one final and enormous lie.

"You have proof of what you say?" Mastrovin asked.

Jaikie took from his breast pocket the whole of its contents, which were not compromising. There was a lean pocket-book with very little money in it, his passport, the stump of a cheque book, and one or two Cambridge bills. Fortunately, Alison's letters from Unnutz were in his rucksack.

"There's every paper I've got," he said and laid them on the table.

Mastrovin studied the bundle and passed it to Dedekind.

"Now you will recount all your doings since you came to Tartar. Be careful. Your story can be checked."

Jaikie obliged with a minute recital. He described his meeting with his Cambridge friend, Count Paul Jovian. He explained that he knew Prince Odalchini slightly and had letters to him, and that he had called on him at the castle and stayed to lunch. He described his ambush by Ashie, and his life in the Juventus camp. On this Mastrovin asked him many questions, to which he replied with a great air of unintelligent honesty. "They were always drilling and having powwows," he said, "but I couldn't make out what they were after. All I did was to play football. I'm rather good at that, for I play for Scotland."

"Now we will have your doings of yesterday," said Mastrovin grimly.

Jaikie replied with expansive details. "I was getting tired of the camp. You see, I was a sort of prisoner, though Heaven knows why. I suppose it had something to do with your soda-water politics. Anyway, I was fed up and wanted a change — besides, I had promised to see Prince Odalchini again. So I slipped out of the camp and had a pretty difficult time getting into the castle grounds. The Juventus people were patrolling everywhere, and I had a bit of a scrap with one of them. Then I had a still more difficult time getting inside the castle. I had to climb in like a cat-burglar." Jaikie enlarged with gusto on the sensational nature of that climb, for he believed that Mastrovin's people had been somewhere on the terrace and must have seen him. It looked as if the guess was correct, for Mastrovin seemed to accept his story.

"Within the castle you saw — whom?" he barked. He had a most unpleasant intimidating voice.

"I saw the Prince, and dined with him. There were one or two other people there, but I didn't catch their names. One was an English Member of Parliament, I think."

"So!" Mastrovin nodded to Dedekind. "And when you had dined you left? Where were you going?"

"I was going back to the camp. I hadn't given my parole or anything of the kind, but I felt that I was behaving badly to my friend. Though he had made me prisoner he treated me well, and I am very fond of him. I proposed to go back and tell him what I had done."

"He knew of your visit to the castle?"

"Not he. I took French leave. But I didn't like to leave Evallonia without having an explanation with him. Besides, I doubt if I could have managed it with his scouts everywhere. When your ruffians laid hands on me, I was going back the way I had come in the morning."

Mastrovin talked for a little with Dedekind in a tongue unknown to Jaikie. Then he turned upon him again his hanging countenance.

"You may be speaking the truth. You say you have no interest in the affairs of Evallonia. If that be so, you can have no objection to doing the Government of the Republic a service. It is threatened by many enemies, with some of whom you have been consorting. You must have heard talk — much talk — in the camp of your friend Jovian and in the castle of Prince Odalchini. You will tell me all that you heard. It will be to your interest, Mr Galt, to be frank, and it will be very much to your disadvantage to be stubborn."

Jaikie put up a very creditable piece of acting. He managed to produce some sort of flush on his pale face, and he put all the righteous indignation he could muster into his eyes. It was not all acting, for once again this man was threatening him, and he felt that little shiver along the forehead which was a sign of the coming of one of his cold furies.

"What the devil do you mean? Do you think that I spy on my friends? I know that Juventus is opposed to your Government, and being a stranger I take no sides. There was much talk in the camp, and I didn't understand what it was all about. But if I had I would see you and your Government in Tophet before I repeated it."

Dedekind looked ugly and whispered something to Mastrovin, which was no doubt a suggestion that means might be found for making Jaikie speak. Mastrovin whispered back what may have been an assurance that such means would come later. Jaikie could not tell, for he knew no Evallonian. But he was a little nervous lest he should have gone too far. He did not want to put a premature end to these interrogations.

Mastrovin's next words reassured him. He actually forced his heavy face into a show of friendliness.

"I respect your scruples," he said. "We have no desire to outrage your sense of honour. Besides, there is not much that Juventus does of which we are not fully informed. They are our declared enemies and against them we use the methods of war. But your friend Prince Odalchini is surely in a different case. He has lived peacefully under republican rule, though he has no doubt a preference for a monarchy. We bear him no ill-will, but we are anxious that he should not compromise himself by an alliance with Juventus. It was for that reason that you were brought here, that we might probe what relation there was between the two, for we were aware that you had come from the Juventus camp. You can have no objection to telling us what is Prince Odalchini's frame of mind and what things were spoken of in the castle."

Jaikie smiled pleasantly. "That's another pair of shoes. . . . The Prince is sick of politics. He is angry with Juventus, and asked me pretty much the same questions as you. But he is an old man and a tired one, and all he wants is to be left alone. He doesn't like these patrols sitting round his park and letting nobody in that they don't approve of. When I met him in England he was a strong Monarchist, but I don't think there is much royalism left in him now."

Mastrovin was interested. "No? And why?"

"Because he thinks the Monarchists so feeble. He was very strong on that point with the English Member of Parliament — what was his name? Sir Archibald Something-or-other." Jaikie was now talking like a man wholly at his ease.

"He thinks them feeble, does he? What are his reasons?"

"Well, one of them is that they have mislaid their trump card — their Prince John. I must say that sounds fairly incompetent."

"So he said that?" Mastrovin's interest had quickened.

“Yes. But it wasn’t only losing Prince John that he blamed them for, but for their failure to discover who had got him. It seems that they believe he has been kidnapped by your people, or rather by the left wing of your people. Prince Odalchini mentioned a name — something like Merovingian — it began with an M, anyway. But that appears to have been a completely false scent.”

“Prince Odalchini thinks it a false scent?” Mastrovin’s voice was suddenly quiet and gentle.

“Yes, because they now know where he is.” Jaikie had ceased to be a witness in the box, and was talking easily as if to a club acquaintance. He launched his mendacious bomb-shell in the most casual tone, as if it were only a matter of academic interest. “It’s Juventus that have Prince John. Not the lot here, but the division a hundred miles south that is holding the oil-fields. There’s a woman in command. I remember her name, because it was so fantastic — the Countess Araminta Troyos.”

There was dead silence for a second or two. Mastrovin’s eyes were on the table, and Dedekind’s fingers ceased to beat their endless tattoo.

“So you see,” Jaikie concluded lightly, “Prince Odalchini is naturally sick of the whole business. I would like to see him out of the country altogether, for Evallonia at present seems to me no place for an old gentleman who only asks for a quiet life.”

Mastrovin spoke at last. If Jaikie’s news was a shock to him he did not show it. He was smiling like a large, sleepy cat.

“What you tell us is very interesting,” he said. “But we have much more to learn from you, Mr Galt.”

“I can’t tell you anything more.”

“I think you can. At any rate, we will endeavour to help your memory.”

Jaikie, who had been rather pleased with himself, found his heart sink. There was a horrid menace behind that purring voice. Only the little shiver across his forehead kept him cool.

“I demand to be released at once,” he said. “As an Englishman you dare not interfere with me, since you have nothing against me.”

“You propose?”

“To go back to the Juventus camp, and then to go home to England.”

“The first cannot be permitted. The second — well, the second depends on many things. Whether you will ever see England again rests with yourself. In the meantime you will remain in our charge — and at our orders.”

He rasped out the last words in a voice from which every trace of urbanity had departed. His face, too, was as Jaikie remembered it in the Canonry, a mask of ruthlessness.

And then, like an echo of his stridency, came a grinding at the door. It was locked and someone without was aware of that fact and disliked it. There was a sound of a heavy body applied to it, and, since the thing was flimsy, the lock gave and it flew open. Jaikie’s astonished eyes saw a young Greenshirt officer, and behind him a quartet of hefty Juventus privates.

He learned afterwards the explanation of this opportune appearance. A considerable addition had been made to Ashie’s wing, and it was proposed to billet the newcomers in the town. Accordingly a billeting party had been despatched to arrange for quarters, and it had begun with the principal inns. At this particular inn, which stood in a retired alley, the landlord had not been forthcoming, so the party had explored on their own account the capacities of the building. They had found their way obstructed by sundry odd-looking persons, and, since Juventus did not stand on ceremony, had summarily removed them from their path. A locked door to people in their mood seemed an insult, and they had not hesitated to break it open.

With one eye Jaikie saw that Mastrovin and Dedekind had their fingers on pistol triggers. With the other he saw that the Greenshirt had no inkling who the two were. His first thought was to denounce them, but it was at once discarded. That would mean shooting, and he considered it likely that he himself would stop a bullet. Besides, he had at the back of his head a notion that Mastrovin might malgré lui prove useful. By a fortunate chance he knew the officer, who had been the hooker of the forwards against whom he had played football, and to whom he had afterwards been introduced. He saw, too, that he was recognised. So he gave the Juventus salute and held out his hand.

“I’m very glad to see you,” he said. “I was just coming to look for you. I surrender myself to you. It’s your business to arrest me and take me back to camp. The fact is, I broke bounds yesterday and went on the spree. No, there was no parole.

I meant to return last night, but I was detained. I shall have to have it out with the Praefectus. I deserve to be put in irons, but I don't think he'll be very angry, for I have a good many important things to tell him." Jaikie had managed to sidle towards the door, so that he was close to the Greenshirts.

The officer was puzzled. He recognised Jaikie as a friend of the Praefectus and one for whose football capacities he had acquired a profound respect. Moreover, the frankness of his confession of irregular conduct disarmed him.

"Why should I arrest you?" he stammered in his indifferent English.

"Because I am an escaped prisoner. Discipline's discipline, you know, though a breach of it now and then may be good business."

The young officer glanced at the morose figures at the table. Happily he did not see the pistols which they fingered. "Who are these?" he asked.

"Two people staying in this inn. Bagmen — of no consequence. . . . By the way, I wonder what fool locked that door?"

The young man laughed. "It is a queer place this, and I do not like it. Few of the rooms are furnished, and the landlord has vanished, leaving only boorish servants. But I have to find billets for three companies before evening, and in these times one cannot be fastidious." He paused. "You are not — how do you say it? — pulling my foot?"

"Lord, no. I'm deadly serious, and the sooner I see the Praefectus the better."

"Then I will detail two men to escort you back to camp. We will leave this place, which is as bare as a rabbit-warren. I apologise, sirs, for my intrusion." He bowed to the two men at the table, and, to Jaikie's amusement, they stood up and solemnly bowed in return.

Jaikie spent a somnolent afternoon in the tent of the Praefectus, outside of which, at his own request, an armed sentry stood on guard.

"Don't curse me, Ashie," he said when its owner returned. "I know I've broken all the rules, so you've got to pretend to treat me rough. Better say you're deporting me to headquarters for punishment. I want some solid hours of your undivided attention this evening, for I've the deuce of a lot to tell you. After dinner will be all right. Meantime, I want a large-scale map of Evallonia — one with the Juventus positions marked on it would be best. Any word of the Countess Araminta?"

"Yes, confound her! She has started to move. Moving on Krovolin, which is the Monarchists' headquarters. Devil take her for an abandoned hussy. Any moment she may land us in bloody war."

"All the more reason why you and I should get busy," said Jaikie.

"You have blood on your forehead," Ashie told him that evening, when at last the Praefectus was free from his duties. "Have you been in a scrap?"

"That comes of having a rotten mirror. I thought I had washed it all off. No, I had no scrap, but I got my nose bled. By Mastrovin — or rather by one of his minions."

Ashie's eyes opened. "You seem to have been seeing life. Get on with your story, Jaikie. We're by ourselves, and if you tantalise me any longer I'll put you in irons."

Jaikie told the last part first — a sober narrative of kidnapping, an unpleasant journey, a night's lodging, a strictly truthful talk with two dangerous men, and the opportune coming of the Greenshirt patrol. Ashie whistled.

"You were in a worse danger than you knew. I almost wish it had come to shooting, for there were enough Greenshirts in Tarta this morning to pull that inn down stone by stone. I should love to see Mastrovin in his grave. But I daresay he would have taken you with him, and that would never do. . . . Well, I've got the end of your tale. Now get back to the beginning. How did you get into the park?"

"Easily enough, but your people made it a slow business. By the way, I wish you would have up a lad called Ivar and explain to him that I was unavoidably prevented from keeping my engagement with him. He's a pleasant chap, and I shouldn't like him to think me a crook. The park was easy, but the castle was a tougher proposition. I had to do rather a fine bit of roof-climbing, and it was then that Mastrovin's fellows saw me, when I was spidering about the battlements. However, in the end I found an open window and got inside and met a pleasant little party. English all of them, except Prince Odalchini."

"Good Lord, what were they doing there?"

"Justifying Mastrovin's suspicion that England is mixed up with the Evallonian Monarchists. I think they are going to

be rather useful people, for they are precisely of your own way of thinking. So is Prince Odalchini, and he believes he can persuade Count Casimir and the rest of his crowd. At any rate, he is going to have a dashed good try."

"But I don't understand," said the puzzled Ashie. "Persuade him about what?"

"Listen very carefully and you'll hear, and prepare for shocks." Jaikie proceeded to recount the conversation at the castle, and when he mentioned the Archduke Hadrian, Ashie sat up. "He's my godfather," he said; "but I never saw him. No one has. I thought he was dead."

"Well, he isn't. He's alive but bedridden, and it's only his name we want. Ashie, my dear, within a week the Monarchists are going to put the Archduke Hadrian on the throne. Only it won't be the Archduke, but another, so to speak, of the same name. One of the visitors at the castle is sufficiently like him to pass for him — except with his intimates, of whom there aren't any here. Then in another week Juventus butts in in all the majesty of its youth, ejects the dotard, and sets up Prince John, and everybody lives happy ever after."

Ashie's reactions to this startling disclosure were many. Bewilderment, doubt, incredulity, even a scandalised annoyance chased each other across his ingenuous face. But the final residuum was relief.

"Jaikie," he asked hoarsely, "was that notion yours?"

"No. My line is tactics, not grand strategy. The notion came from the man who is going to play the part of the Archduke. He's an old Scotsman, and his name is McCunn, and he's the best friend I ever had in my life. Ashie, I want to ask a special favour of you. Mr McCunn is playing a bold game, and I'll back him to see it through. I don't know how much you'll come into it yourself, but if you do I want you to do your best for him. There may be a rough-house or two before he escapes over the frontier, and if you have a chance, do him a good turn. Promise."

"I promise," said Ashie solemnly. "But for heaven's sake tell me more."

"YOU tell me something. Would the rank-and-file of Juventus stand for Prince John?"

"They would. Ninety-nine per cent. of them." But his face was doubtful, so that Jaikie asked where the snag was.

"It's Cousin Mintha. I don't know how she'll take it."

"That's my job. I'm off tomorrow at break of day. You'll have to let me go, and find me a motor-bicycle."

"You're going to Mintha?"

"I must. Every man to his job, and that's the one I've been allotted. I can't say I fancy it. I'd sooner have had any other, but there it is, and I must make the best of it. You must give me all the tips you can think of."

"You'd better get hold of Doctor Jagon first. He is Mintha's chief counsellor."

"Good. I know him — met him in Scotland. A loquacious old dog, but honest."

"How are you going to get Prince John out of the Monarchist crowd into Mintha's arms?"

"He isn't with the Monarchists. He's lost."

"Lost! That spikes our guns."

"Officially lost. He disappeared a few days ago from the place in the Tirol where Count Casimir had him hidden. The Count thought that Mastrovin had pinched him, and Mastrovin — well, I don't know what Mastrovin thought, but he's raking heaven and earth to find him. Nobody knows where he is except the little party that dined last night in the castle. That's why Casimir will be friendly to the idea of the Archduke, for he has mislaid his Prince."

"Where is he?" Ashie demanded.

"I had better not tell you. It would be wiser for you not to know — at present. But I promise you I can lay my finger on him whenever we want him. What you've got to do is to put it about that he's with Juventus. That will prepare people's minds and maybe force your cousin's hand. I did a useful bit of work this morning, for I told Mastrovin that Prince John was with the Countess Araminta. That means, I hope, that he will go there after him and annoy your cousin into becoming a partisan."

Ashie looked at his friend with admiration slightly tempered by awe.

"Mintha is a little devil," he said slowly; "but she's a turtle-dove compared to you."



Chapter 9

NIGHT IN THE WOODS

The great forest of St Sylvester lies like a fur over the patch of country through which the little river Silf — the Amnis Silvestris of the Romans — winds to the Rave. At the eastern end, near the Silf's junction with the main river, stands the considerable town of Krovolin; south of it stretch downs studded with the ugly headgear of oil wells; and west is the containing wall of the mountains. It is pierced by one grand highway, and seamed with lesser roads, many of them only grassy alleys among the beeches.

At one of the cross-roads, where the highway was cut at right angles by a track running from north to south, two cars were halted. The Evallonian summer is justly famed for its settled weather, but sometimes in early August there falls for twenty-four hours a deluge of rain, if the wind should capriciously shift to the west. The forest was now being favoured with such a downpour. All day it had rained in torrents, and now, at eleven o'clock at night, the tempest was slowly abating. It was dark as pitch, but if the eyes had no work for them, the ears had a sufficiency, for the water beat like a drum in the tops of the high trees, and the drip on the sodden ground was like the persistent clamour of a brook.

One of the cars had comprehensively broken down, and no exploration of its intestines revealed either the reason or the cure. It was an indifferent German car, hired some days before in the town of Rosensee; the driver was Peter Wappit, and the occupants were Prince Odalchini and Dickson McCunn. The party from the other car, which was of a good English make, had descended and joined the group beside the derelict. Three men and two women stood disconsolately in the rain, in the glow of the two sets of headlights.

Prince Odalchini had not been idle after the momentous evening session in the House of the Four Winds. He had his own means of sending messages in spite of the vigilance of the Juventus patrols, and word had gone forthwith to the Monarchist leaders and to the secretaries of the Archduke Hadrian far away in the French chateau. It had been a more delicate business getting the castle party out of the castle confines. The road used was that which led through the cellars of the Turk's Head, and the landlord Proser, who had now to be made a confidant, had proved a tower of strength. So had Randal Glynde, whose comings and goings seemed to be as free and as capricious as the wind. The cars — and Peter Wappit — had been duly fetched from the Cirque Doré or wherever else they had been bestowed, and early that morning, before Tarta was astir, two batches of prosperous-looking tourists had left the inn, after the hearty farewells which betoken generous tipping. Their goal was the town of Krovolin, but the route they took was not direct. Under Prince Odalchini's guidance — no one would have recognised the Prince, for Mr Glynde had made him up to look like an elderly American with a goatee — they made a wide circuit among the foothills, and entered the Krovolin highway by a route from the south-west.

The weather favoured them, for the Tarta streets were empty when they started, and they met scarcely a traveller on the roads. There was one exception, for about four miles from the town their journey was impeded by part of a travelling circus, which seemed to be bearing south. Its string of horses and lurching caravans took a long time to pass in the narrow road, and during the delay the proprietor of the circus appeared to offer his apologies. This proprietor, a tall, fantastically dressed being with a ragged beard, conversed with various members of the party while the block ahead was being cleared, and much of his conversation was in low tones and in a tongue which was neither German nor Evallonian.

The five figures in the rain had a hurried conference. The oldest of them seemed to be the most perturbed by the contretemps. He peered at a map by the light of the lamps, and consulted his watch.

"Krovolin is less than thirty kilometres distant," he said. "We could tow this infernal car if we had such a thing as a rope, which we haven't. We can wait here for daylight. Or one car can go on to Krovolin and send out help."

"I'm for the last," said Sir Archie. "I would suggest our all stowing into my car, but it would mean leaving our kit behind, and in these times I don't think that would be safe. I tell you what. You and Mr McCunn get into my car and Peter will drive you. Janet and Alison and I will wait behind with the crock, and you can send help for us as soon as you can wake up a garage."

Prince Odalchini nodded. "I think that will be best," he said. "I can promise that you will not have long to wait, for at Casimir's headquarters there is ample transport. I confess I do not want to be delayed, for I have much to do. Also it is not

wise for me to be loitering in St Sylvester's woods, since at present in this country I am somewhat contraband goods. Mr McCunn too. It is vital that no mishap should befall him. You others are still free people."

"Right," said Archie, and began moving the kit of his party from his own car to the derelict. "You'd both be the better of a hot bath and a dressing-down, for you've been pretty well soaked all day. We'll begin to expect the relief expedition in about an hour. If I can get this bus started, where do I make for in Krovolin?"

"The castle of Count Casimir," was the answer. "It is a huge place, standing over Krovolin as the House of the Four Winds stands over Tarta."

When the tail-lights of his own car had disappeared, Archie set himself to make another examination of Dickson's, but without success. It was a touring car with a hood of an old-fashioned pattern, which during the day had proved but a weak defence against the weather. The seats were damp and the floor was a shallow pool. Since the rain was lessening, Archie managed to dry the seats and invited the women to make themselves comfortable. Janet Roylance and Alison had both been asleep for the past hour, and had wakened refreshed and prepared to make the best of things. Janet produced chocolate and biscuits and a thermos of coffee, and offered supper, upon which Alison fell ravenously. Archie curled his legs up on the driver's seat and lit his pipe.

"I'm confoundedly sleepy," he said. "A long day in the rain always makes me sleepy. I wonder why?" A gout of wet from the canvas of the hood splashed on his face. "This is a comfortless job. Looks as if the fowls of the air were one up on us to-night. I'll get a crick in my neck if I stick here longer, and I'd get out and roost on the ground if it weren't so sloppy. 'A good soft pillow for my good grey head'— how does the thing go?"

"Were better than this churlish turf of France." Alison completed the quotation. "Have some coffee. It will keep you awake."

"It won't. That's my paradoxical constitution. Coffee makes me sleepier." He looked at his watch. "Moon's due in less than an hour. I call this a rotten place — not the sound of a bird or beast, only that filthy drip. I say, you know, you two look like a brace of owls in a cage."

It was not an inept comparison for the women in their white waterproofs, which caught dimly the back-glow of the side-lamps. The place was sufficiently eery, for the trees were felt rather than seen, and the only food for the eye was the glow made by the head-lights on the shining black tarmac of the highway. The car had been pushed on to the turf with its nose close to the main road, opposite where the track from the north debouched. Archie to cheer himself began a song, against which his wife stoutly protested.

"That's sacrilege," she said. "This is a wonderful place, for there must be fifteen miles of trees round us in every direction. Be quiet, Archie, and, if you can't dose and won't have any supper, think good thoughts."

"The only good thought I have is the kind of food Count Casimir will give us. Is he the sort of fellow that does himself well, Alison? You're the only one of us that knows him. I want beefsteaks — several of 'em."

"I think so," the girl answered. "He praised our food at Castle Gay and he gave me a very good breakfast at Knockraw. But the breakfast might have been Prince John's affair, for he was a hungry young man. . . . I wonder where HE is now. I don't think he was with Ran's outfit when we passed it this morning."

"We have properly dissipated our forces," said Archie. "However, that's a good rule of strategy if you know how to concentrate them later. I wonder where Jaikie is?"

"Poor Jaikie!" Alison sighed. "He has an awful job before him, for he is as shy as an antelope really, though he does brazen things. He'll be scared into fits by the Countess Araminta. Dickson was the one to deal with her."

"He may fall in love with her," said Archie. "Quite possible, though she's not the sort I fancy myself. Very beautiful, you know. When I first saw her I thought her wonderful sunburn came out of a bottle, and I considered her too much of a movie star, but when I found it was the gift of Heaven I rather took to her. But Jaikie will have to stand up to her or she'll eat him. I say, Janet, how much use do you think Prince Odalchini is?"

"Good enough for a day with the bitch pack on the hills," was the drowsy answer. "Not much good for the Vale and the big fences."

"Just my own notion. He's too old, and though he's a brave old boy, I don't see him exactly leading forlorn hopes. What about Count Casimir, Alison?"

The girl shook her head. "I'm not sure. He talks too much."

"Too romantic, eh?"

"Too sentimental. Dickson's romantic, which is quite a different thing."

"I see. Well, I take it there's no question about the Countess. By all accounts she's a high-powered desperado. Apart from her it looks as if this show was a bit short of what Bobby Desperado calls 'dynamic personages,' and that what there are are mostly our own push. There's McCunn — no mistake about him. And Jaikie — not much mistake about Jaikie. And there's your lunatic cousin Glynde. To think that when I saw him at Charles Lamancha's party two months ago, I thought him rather a nasty piece of work — too much the tailor's model and the pride of the Lido. Who'd have guessed that he was a cross between a bandit and a bard?"

Conversation had dispelled Archie's languor.

"This promises to be a merry party," he said. "The trouble is to know how and when it will stop and what kind of heads we'll have in the morning. Do you realise the desperate way we're behaving? We're taking a hand in another fellow's revolution, and some of us have taken charge of it. And, more by token, who are we? A retired Glasgow grocer that wants to keep a crazy promise — and a Rugger tough from Cambridge — and a girl I've purloined from her parents — and a respectable married woman — and myself, an ornament of the Mother of Parliaments, who should be sitting at Geneva before a wad of stationery making revolutions for ever impossible. . . . Hullo, what's this?"

There was a noise like that of a machine-gun which rapidly grew louder, and down the side road from the north came the lights of a motor-bicycle. Its rider saw the lamps of the car, slowed down, skidded on the tarmac, and came to a standstill in a clump of fern. A soaked and muddy figure stood blinking in the car lights. So dirty was his face that two of the three did not recognise him. But Alison in a trice was out of the car with a cry of "Jaikie."

Mr John Galt had had a laborious day. Ashie had prepared for him a pass, giving him safe conduct to the camp of the Countess Araminta, but had warned him that, except for Juventus, it was of no use, and that Juventus had few representatives in the piece of country through which he must travel. He had also provided a map, and the two had planned an ingenious course, which would take him to the oil-fields by unfrequented by-ways. It had proved too ingenious, for Jaikie had lost his way, and gone too far west into the foothills. The blanket of low clouds and the incessant rain made it impossible for him to get a prospect, and the countryside seemed empty of people. The only cottages he passed were those of woodcutters whose speech he could not understand, and when he mentioned place-names he must have mispronounced them, for they only shook their heads. His only clue was the Silf, of which he struck the upper waters after midday. But no road followed the Silf, which ran in a deep ravine, and he was compelled to bear north again till he found a road which would take him south through the forest. But he knew now his position on the map, and he hoped to reach his destination before dark, when his machine began to give trouble. Jaikie was a poor mechanic and it took him three hours before he set the mischief right. By this time the dark skies were darkening further into twilight. There was no shelter for the night in the forest, so he decided to struggle on till at any rate he was out of the trees. The map showed a considerable village on the southern skirts which would surely provide an inn.

His lamp gave him further trouble, for it would not stay lit. He had been soaked since early in the day, for Ashie could not provide him with overalls, and his shabby mackintosh was no protection against the deluge. He was also hungry, for he had long ago finished his supply of biscuits and chocolate. The consolations of philosophy, of which he had a good stock, were nearly exhausted when he skidded on the tarmac of the trunk highway.

Archie laughed boisterously.

"I was just saying that we had dangerously dispersed our forces, but now we've begun to concentrate. Where have you been, my lad?"

Jaikie, grinning sheepishly at Alison, shook the water from his ancient hat, and pushed back a lock of hair which had straggled over his left eye.

"I've been circumnavigating Evallonia. I daresay I've come two hundred miles."

"Was that purpose or accident?"

"Accident. I've been lost most of the day up on the edge of the hills. And I've got a relic of a bicycle. But what are you doing here?"

"Accident, too. This car of McCunn's soured on him, so we sent him and the Prince on to Krovolin in mine, and Janet

and Alison and I are waiting here like Babes in the Wood till we're rescued."

"Have you any food to spare?" Jaikie asked. He had recovered his spirits, and saw his misadventures in a more cheerful light, since they had led to this meeting.

Alison gave him some coffee out of the thermos and the remains of the biscuits.

"You're a grisly sight, Jaikie," she said severely. "I've seen many a tattie-bogle that looked more respectable."

"I know," he said meekly. "I've been looking a bit of a ragamuffin for a long time, but today has put the lid on it."

"You simply can't show yourself to the Countess like that. You look like a tramp that has been struck by lightning and then drowned."

"I thought I might find an inn where I could tidy up and get my clothes dried."

"Nothing will tidy you up. Juventus are a dressy lot, you know, and they'll set the dogs on you."

"But I have letters from Ashie." He dived into his inner pocket and drew forth a sodden sheaf. "Gosh! they're pulp! The rain's got at them and the ink has run. They're unreadable. What on earth am I do?"

"You're a child of calamity. Didn't you think of oilskin or brown paper? . . . You'd better come on with us to Krovolin for a wash and brush up, and Prince Odalchini will find you more decent clothes."

Jaikie shook his head. "I must obey orders. That's the first rule of Juventus, and I belong to Juventus now. Properly speaking, I'm at present your enemy. . . . I must be getting on, for I've a big job before me. I'm glad you pushed off the Prince and Mr McCunn, for they also have their job. You three are only camp-followers."

"You're an ungrateful beast," said Alison indignantly, "to call us camp-followers, when you know I came hundreds of miles because you said you needed me. . . . Get off then to your assignation. A pretty figure you'll cut in a lady's bower!"

Jaikie's face fell. "Lord, but duty is an awful thing! I funk that interview more than anything I remember. What, by the way, is her proper name? I must get that right, for Ashie, who's her cousin, calls her Mintha."

"She is the Countess Araminta Troyos — have you got that? How do you propose to approach her? Mr Galt to see the Countess on private business? Or a courier from the Praefectus of the Western Wing?"

"I'm going first to the Professor man — what's his name — Doctor Jagon. He won't make much of this mass of pulp, but he may remember me from the Canonry. Anyway, I think I can persuade him that I'm honest."

Jaikie was in the act of wheeling his machine into the track which ran south when he started at a shout of Archie's, and turning his head saw the glow of a great car lighting up the aisle among the trees.

"Well done the Prince," said Archie. "Gad, he's done us proud and sent two cars — there's another behind."

"But they're coming from the wrong direction," said Janet.

An avalanche of light sped through the darkness, and the faces of the waiting four took on an unearthly whiteness. This was a transformation so sudden and startling that each remained motionless — Jaikie with his hand on his bicycle, Alison holding the thermos, Janet with her head poked out of the car, and Archie with one foot on the step. The lights halted, and the two cars were revealed. They were big roadsters with long rakish bonnets, and in each were two men.

Jaikie happened to be nearest, and he was the first to recognise the occupants. The man at the wheel he did not know, and what he could see of his face was only a long nose between his hat and the collar of his waterproof. But the other who sat beside him was unmistakable. He saw the forward-thrusting jaw, the blunt nose, and the ominous eyes of Mastrovin.

His first thought was to get off, for he considered that he alone of the four was likely to be interfered with. But unfortunately the recognition had been mutual. Mastrovin cried a sharp word of command which brought the two men out of the second car, and he himself with surprising agility leaped on to the road. Jaikie found himself held by strong hands and looking into a most unfriendly face.

"I am in luck," said Mastrovin. "We did not finish our conversation the other day, Mr — Galt, I think you said the name was? I am glad to have the opportunity of continuing it, and now I think we shall not be interrupted."

"Sorry," said Jaikie, "but I can't wait."

"Sorry," was the answer, "but you must."

Jaikie found his hands wrenched from the bicycle handles and his person in the grip of formidable arms. He observed that Mastrovin had turned his attention to the others.

"How are you, Mr Mastrovin?" he heard Archie say in a voice of falsetto cheerfulness. "We met, you remember, at Geneva?"

"We have met since," was the answer. "We met in a hut in the mountains at Unnutz." There was an unpleasant suggestion in his tone that that meeting had not been satisfactory.

Mastrovin peered within the car and saw Janet, who apparently did not interest him. But Alison was a different matter. He must have had a good memory for faces, for he instantly recognised her.

"Another from Unnutz," he said. "A young lady who took early morning walks in the hills. So!" He cried a word to the driver of his car, which Jaikie did not understand. Then he faced Sir Archie, his brows drawn to a straight line and his mouth puckered in a mirthless smile.

"You are the English who have been in the House of the Four Winds. I did not think I was mistaken. . . . Two of you I have seen elsewhere — at the time I suspected you and now I know. You have meddled in what does not concern you, and you must take the consequences."

He rasped out the final words in a voice which made it plain that these consequences would not be pleasant. Archie, whose temper was rising, found himself looking into the barrel of a pistol held in a very steady hand.

"Do not be foolish," Mastrovin said. "We are four armed men, and we do not take chances. You will accompany us — you and the women. You are in no danger if you do as I bid you, but it is altogether necessary that for a little you should be kept out of mischief."

Archie's angry protests were checked on his lips, they were so manifestly futile. Janet and he were ordered into the first car, where Mastrovin took the seat opposite them. They were permitted to take their baggage, and that was bundled into the second car, whither Alison accompanied it. The man who was holding Jaikie asked a question, oddly enough in French, to which Mastrovin replied by bidding him put the "little rat" beside the luggage. Jaikie found himself on a folding seat with a corner of Archie's kit-bag in his ribs and Alison sitting before him.

The cars sped down the Krovolin road, and after some five miles they passed another car coming in the opposite direction. That, thought Jaikie, must be the relief sent by Prince Odalchini. . . . He was in what for him was a rare thing, a mood of black despair. Partly it was due to his weary and sodden body, but the main cause was that he had suddenly realised the true posture of affairs. He had slipped idly into this business, as had the others, regarding it only as an amusing game, a sort of undergraduate "rag." There was a puzzle to solve, where wits and enterprise could come into play, but the atmosphere was *opéra-bouffe*, or at the best comedy. The perplexed Ashie was a comic figure; so were Prince Odalchini and the Monarchists; so was the formidable Countess Mintha; so even two days ago had seemed Mastrovin. Alison and Janet and Archie were all votaries of the comic spirit.

But now he realised that there were darker things. Mastrovin's pistol had suddenly dispelled the air of agreeable farce, and opened the veils of tragedy. The jungle was next door to the formal garden — and the beasts of the jungle. As in the library of Castle Gay two years before, he had a glimpse of wolfish men and an underworld of hideous things. That night for the second time he had been called a rat by Mastrovin and his friends, but the insult did not sting him, for he was in the depths of self-abasement. The bitter thought galled his mind that he had brought Alison into a grim business. For that he was alone responsible, and he saw no way out. It was bad that he should be compelled to fail Ashie, for his mission was now hopeless, but it was worse that Alison should have to pay for his folly. Mastrovin would never let them go, and if things went ill with Mastrovin's side he would make them pay the penalty. . . . And he was utterly helpless. He knew nothing of the country and could not speak the tongue, he had no money, and only a boy's strength. Prince Odalchini and Dickson might persist in their plot and Juventus continue its high career, but Alison and Janet and Archie and he were out of it for ever, prisoners in some dim underworld of Mastrovin's contriving.

They came out of the forest to find that the rain had stopped and that the moon was rising among ragged clouds. He saw a gleam of water and what looked like the spires of a city. They were being taken to Krovolin, and presently they approached the first houses of its western faubourg. . . . And then something happened which brought a thin ray of hope to Jaikie's distressed soul. There were lights in an adjacent field, and from them came the strains of a fiddle. It was playing Dvorak's Humoresque, and that was the favourite tune of Luigi of the Cirque Doré.

Chapter 10

AURUNCULEIA

The familiar melody brought only a momentary refreshment to Jaikie's spirit. The feeling was strong upon him that he had stumbled out of comedy into a melodrama which might soon darken into tragedy. As they entered the city of Krovolin, this mood was increased by the sight of unmistakable pistols in the hands of his guards. Some kind of watch was kept at the entrance, for both cars were stopped and what sounded like pass-words were exchanged. Krovolin he knew was the headquarters of the Monarchists, but Mastrovin, having spent all his life in intrigue, was not likely to be stopped by so small a thing as that. It was like his audacity to have domiciled himself in the enemy's camp, and he probably knew most of that enemy's secrets. Jaikie dismissed the thought of appealing to these Monarchist sentries and demanding to be taken to Count Casimir, for he was convinced that at that game he would be worsted. Besides, he could not talk the language.

The hour was late, and there were few people in the well-lit street which descended to the bridge of the river. The cars turned along the edge of the water over vile cobbles, and presently wove their way into a maze of ancient squalor. This was the Krovolin of the Middle Ages, narrow lanes with high houses on both sides, the tops of which bent forward so as to leave only a slender ribbon of sky. Up a side alley they went, and after many twistings came to the entrance of a yard. Here they were clearly expected, for a figure stood on watch outside, who after a word with Mastrovin opened a pair of ancient rickety gates. The car scraped through with difficulty, and Jaikie found himself in a cobbled space which might once have been the courtyard of a house. Now the moon showed it as a cross between a garage and a builder's yard, for it held two other cars, a motor-lorry, and what looked like the debris of a recent earthquake. When he got out he promptly fell over a heap of rubble and a sheaf of spades. Somebody had recently been digging there.

He was given no time to prospect. Mastrovin came forward, bowed to Alison and shepherded her to the side of Janet and Archie. Two men took charge of the baggage, and the party were conducted indoors. For a moment Jaikie was left alone, and his hopes rose — perhaps he was too humble for Mastrovin's attentions. He was speedily undeceived, for the man who had been with Mastrovin at Tarta gave an order, and the fellow who had been outside the gate clutched Jaikie's arm. He was also a prisoner, only a more disconsidered one than the others. He was pushed through a door and prodded down a passage and up a narrow staircase, till he reached a little room smelling abominably of garlic. It was a bedroom, for there was a truckle bed and a deal table carrying on it the stump of a candle. His conductor nodded to the bed, on which he flung Jaikie's rucksack, and then departed, after locking the door.

There was a window which seemed to look out upon a pit of darkness. It was not shuttered, but the sashes were firmly bolted. By bending low Jaikie could see upwards to a thin streak of light. The room must be on the street side, and what he saw was a strip of moonlit sky. It must also be on the first floor, for he had ascended only one flight of stairs. If this was meant as a prison it was an oddly insecure one.

But all thought of immediate escape was prevented by the state of his body. He was immeasurably weary, and so sleepy that his eyes were gummed together, a condition which with him usually followed a day of hard exercise in the rain. The stuffiness of the place increased his drowsiness. He sat on the edge of the bed and tried to think, but his mind refused to work. He must have sleep before he could do anything. He stripped off his sodden clothes, and found that he was not so wet as he had feared — of his under-garments only the collar and sleeves of his shirt had suffered. He hung them to dry on rusty nails with which the walls were abundantly provided. There were plenty of bedclothes and they seemed clean, so, wrapping his naked body in them, he was presently asleep.

He woke to a dusty twilight, but there was a hum out-of-doors which suggested that it was full day. A glance from the window showed him that though the sun had not yet got into the alley the morning's life had begun. The place was full of people, and by standing on the sill he could see their heads beneath him. He had been right — the room was on the first story. It bulged out above the street, so his vision was limited; he saw the people in the middle and on the other side, but not those directly beneath him.

He was very hungry, for he had had scanty rations the day before, and he wondered if breakfast was included in this new régime. There was no sign of it, so he turned his attention to the window. It was of an old-fashioned type, with folding sashes secured by slim iron bars which ran into sockets where they were held by padlocks. Jaikie was a poor mechanic, but

he saw that these bolts would be hard to tamper with. If the place were kept sealed up like this no wonder the air was foul. Fortunately the sun could not make itself felt in that cavern of a street, but, all the same, by noon it would be an oven.

This was a disheartening thought, and it took the edge off his appetite. What he particularly wanted was something to drink, beer for preference, but he would have made shift with water. He lay down on the bed, for to look out of the sealed window only distressed him.

As the morning advanced he must have slept again, for the opening of the door woke him with a start. The newcomer was Mastrovin.

He looked very square and bulky in that narrow place, and he seemed to be in an ugly temper. He walked to the window and examined the fastenings. Jaikie observed for the first time that there were no shutters. What if he smashed the glass and dropped into the street? It could not be more than ten yards, and he was as light on his feet as a cat.

Mastrovin may have guessed his thought, for he turned to him with a sour smile.

"Do not delude yourself, Mr — Galt, isn't it? That window is only the inner works of this fortress. Even if you opened it you would be no better off. The outer works would still have to be passed, and they are human walls, stronger than stone and lime."

"Am I to have any breakfast?" Jaikie asked. "I don't suppose it's any good asking you what you mean by bringing me here. But most gaolers feed their prisoners."

"I am the exception. Life at present is too hurried with me to preserve the amenities. But a word from you will get you breakfast; liberty also — conditional liberty. You cannot be released just at once, but I will have you taken to a more comfortable place. That word is the present address of Prince John."

Mastrovin spoke as Jaikie remembered once hearing a celebrated statesman speak when on a visit to Cambridge — slowly, pronouncing his words as if he relished the sound of them, giving his sentences an oratorical swing. It was certainly impressive.

"I haven't the remotest idea," he said, speaking the strictest truth.

"Let me repeat," said Mastrovin with a great air of patience. "The English have long been suspected of dabbling in Monarchist plots. That I have already told you. You have been at Tarta in the House of the Four Winds, which is the home of such plots. Did not my people pick you out of it? You admitted to me that you were acquainted with Prince Odalchini. Where, I ask you now, is Prince Odalchini's master?"

"I tell you, I don't know. As I told you at Tarta, I heard a rumour that he was with some lady called the Countess Troyos."

"That rumour is a lie," said Mastrovin fiercely. "For a moment I believed it, but I have since proved it a lie. What is more, when you told it me you knew it was a lie. I repeat my question." The formidable eyebrows were drawn together, and the whole man became an incarnate menace. Jaikie, empty, headachy, sitting in his shabby clothes on the edge of the bed, felt very small and forlorn. He sometimes felt like that, and on such occasions he would have given all he possessed for another stone of weight and another two inches of height.

"I don't know," he said. "How should I know? I'm an ordinary English tourist who came to Evallonia by accident. I don't know anybody in it except Prince Odalchini . . . and Count Paul Jovian — and you."

"You will know a good deal more about me very soon, my friend. Listen. You are lying — I am a judge of liars, and I can read your face. You are a friend of the three other English — the man and the two women — I find you in the forest in their company. Of these other English I know something. I last saw them in the neighbourhood of Prince John, and it is certain that they know where he has gone and what he is now doing. That knowledge I demand you to share — and at once."

"I don't know what the others know, but I know what I don't know. Though you kept me here till I had a long grey beard I couldn't give you any other answer."

"You will not stay long enough to grow a beard. Only a little time, but it will not be a pleasant time. You will do what I ask, I think. The others — the others are, as you say in England, of the gentry — a politician and baronet — two ladies of birth. I hold such distinctions as less than rotten wood, but I am a man of the world, and now and then I must submit to the world's valuation. . . . But you are of a different class. You are of the people, the new educated proletariat on which England prides herself. . . . With you I can use elementary methods. . . . With the others in time, if they are stubborn. . . but

with you, now.”

He spat out the last words with extraordinary venom. No doubt he thought that in that moment he was being formidable, but as a matter of fact to Jaikie he had ceased to be even impressive. He had insulted him, threatened him, had wakened the small efficient devil that lived at the back of his mind. Jaikie was very angry, and with him wrath always blanketed fear. He saw Mastrovin now, not as a sinister elemental force, but as a common posturing bully.

He yawned.

“I wish you’d send me up some breakfast,” he said. “A cup of coffee, if you’ve nothing else.”

Mastrovin moved to the door.

“You will get no food until you speak. And no drink. Soon this room will be as hot as hell, and may you roast in it!”

The exhilaration of Jaikie’s anger did not last long, though it left behind it a very solid dislike. He realised that he had got himself into an awkward place, from which every exit seemed blocked. But what struck cold at his heart was the peril of Alison. He had heard at the House of the Four Winds of her days at Unnutz, and he realised that Mastrovin had good grounds for connecting her and Janet and Archie with Prince John’s disappearance. He must have suspected them from the start, and the sight of the trio at Tarta had clinched his suspicions.

Jaikie tried to set out the case soberly and logically. Prince John was for Mastrovin the key of the whole business. If he could lay hands on him he could render the Monarchists impotent. He was probably clever enough to have foreseen the possibilities of Juventus taking up the Prince’s cause, for without the Prince or somebody like him Juventus would spend its strength on futilities. So long as it had no true figure-head it was at the mercy of Mastrovin and his underworld gang. The settlement of Evallonia was the one thing the latter must prevent: the waters must be kept troubled, for only then could he fish with success. . . . Jaikie saw all that. He saw Mastrovin’s purpose, and knew that he would stop at nothing to effect it, for he was outside the pale of the decencies. He meant to try to starve Jaikie himself into submission; but, far worse, he would play the same game with Alison and Janet. All four had stumbled out of a bright world into a mediæval gloom which stank horribly of the Inquisition.

For a moment his heart failed him. Then his sense of feebleness changed into desperation. He knew that the lives of the other three depended on him, and the knowledge stung him into action. Never had he felt so small and feeble and insignificant, but never so determined. A memory came to him of that night long ago at Huntingtower when the forlorn little band of the Gorbals Die-hards had gone into action. He remembered his cold fury, which had revealed itself in copious tears. Nowadays he did not weep, but if there had been a mirror in the room it would have shown a sudden curious pallor in his small face.

He set to work on the window. His rucksack had been searched for weapons, but he had in his pocket what is known as a sportsman’s knife, an implement with one blade as strong as a gully, and with many gadgets. He could do nothing with the bolts and the padlocks, but he might cut into the supporting wood.

It proved an easier task than he had feared. The windows across the street were shuttered, so he could work without fear of detection. The socket of the lower bolt had a metal plate surrounding it, but the upper was fair game for his knife. The wood was old and hard, but after labouring for an hour or two he managed to dig out the square into which the bolt fastened. That released the top of one window, and he turned to the harder job of the bottom.

Here he had an unexpected bit of luck. There seemed something queer about the lower padlock, and to his joy he found that he could open it. It had been locked without the tongue being driven home. This was providential, for the lower part was solidly sheathed in metal and his knife would have been useless. With some difficulty he drew the stiff bolts, and one half of the window was at his disposal.

Very gingerly he pushed it open. A hot breath of air came in on him from the baking alley, but it was fresh air and it eased his headache. Then cautiously he put his head out and looked down upon the life of the street.

Mastrovin had not been bluffing. There were strong outworks to this fortress, and the outworks were human. Few people were about, perhaps because it was the time for the midday meal. It was a squalid enough place, with garbage in the gutters, but it had one pleasant thing, a runnel of water beside the pavement on the other side, no doubt a leat from the Rave or the Silf. The sight of the stream made his thirst doubly vexatious, but he had no time to think of it, for something else filled his eye. There were men on guard — two below his window, and one on the kerb opposite. This last might have seen him, but happily he was looking the other way.

Jaikie drew in his head and shut the window.

That way lay no hope of escape. If he dropped into the street it would be into such arms as had received him on Prince Odalchini's terrace.

This was disheartening, but at first he was not greatly disheartened. The fact that he had made an opening into the outer world had given him an illogical hope. Also he could now abate the stuffiness of his prison-house. The place was still an oven, but the heat was not stifling. In time evening would come — and night. Might not something be done in the darkness? He had better try to sleep.

But as he lay on the bed he found that his thoughts, quickened by anxiety for Alison, ran in a miserable whirligig and that hope was very low. Mastrovin was taking no chances. Before night he would probably examine the window; in any case his ruffians below were likely to be on stricter duty. His own bodily discomfort added to his depression, for his tongue was like a stick and he was sick with hunger. A man, he knew, could fast for many days if only he had water, but if he had neither food nor drink his strength would soon ebb.

What, he wondered, was Alison doing? Enduring the same misery? Not yet — though that would come unless he could bestir himself. But she and Janet and Archie must be pretty low in mind. . . . He remembered that he was failing Prince Odalchini and Ashie, and doing nothing about the duty which had been assigned him. But that was the least of his troubles. This infernal country might go hang for all he cared. What mattered was Alison.

One thought maddened him — that the four of them had gone clean out of the ken of their friends. It would be supposed that at the moment he was with the Countess Araminta, and no one would begin to ask questions. About the other three there might be some fuss, for the relief car would find the derelict in the forest. Also his motor-bicycle, though again that would mean nothing to anybody. Archie and his party were expected to join Dickson and Prince Odalchini at Count Casimir's headquarters. When they did not arrive and the derelict was found there would no doubt be a hue-and-cry. But to what effect? Mastrovin would have covered his tracks, and the last place to look for the missing would be the slums of Krovolin. The best hiding-place was under the light.

The street had been almost noiseless in the early afternoon, when good citizens were taking their siesta. About three it woke up a little. There was a drunken man who sang, and from the window Jaikie saw the tops of greengrocers' carts moving country-wards, after the forenoon market. After that there was silence again, and then the tramp of what sounded like a police patrol. Between four and five there was considerable movement and the babble of voices. Perhaps the street was a short cut between two popular thoroughfares; at any rate it became suddenly quite a lively place. There were footsteps outside his door, and Jaikie closed the window in a hurry and lay back on the bed. Was Mastrovin about to pay him another visit? But whoever it was thought better of it, and he heard the steps retreating down the stairs. They had scarcely died away, when out of doors came a sound which set Jaikie's nerves tingling. Someone was playing on a flute, and the tune was Dvorak's Humoresque.

He flew to the window and cautiously looked out. There was no watcher on the opposite pavement. Quite a number of people were in the street, shopgirls and clerks for the most part on their way home. A beggar was playing in the gutter, playing a few bars and then supplicating the passers-by. His face was towards Jaikie, who observed that he wore a gipsy cap of cats' skins and for the rest was a ruin of rags. Underneath the cap there was a glimpse of dark southern eyes and a hairy unshaven face.

The man as he played kept an eye on Jaikie's window when he was not ogling the shop-girls. The light in the street was poor, and he seemed to be looking for something and to be uncertain if he had found it. Jaikie stuck his head farther out, and this seemed to give the man what he sought. He took his eyes off the window, finished his tune, and held out his cap for alms. Jaikie saw the gleam of earrings. Then he blew into his flute, pocketed it, and started to shamble inconspicuously down the gutter till in a minute he was lost to view.

Jaikie shut the window and resolutely stretched himself on the bed. But now his mood had wholly changed. Luigi had seen him. The Cirque Doré knew his whereabouts. Soon it would be dark, and then Randal Glynde would come to his rescue.

So complete was his trust in Mr Glynde that he forebore to speculate on the nature of the rescue. Had he done so he might have been less confident. Here in this squalid place Mastrovin was all powerful, and he had his myrmidons around him. The Cirque Doré could produce no fighting men; besides, any attempt at violence would probably mean death for

those on whose behalf it was used. Mastrovin had the manners of the jungle. . . . Jaikie thought of none of these things. His only fear was of a second visit from his gaoler, when, if he proved recalcitrant, he might be removed to other quarters in this dark rabbit-warren. At all costs he must remain where Luigi had seen him.

Jaikie had now forgotten both his thirst and hunger. As the room darkened into twilight he lay listening for footsteps on the stairs. The falling of plaster, the scurrying of rats, the creaking of old timbers threw him into a sweat of fear. But no steps came. The noises of the street died away, and the place began to settle into its eery nightly quiet.

Suddenly from out of doors came a tumultuous and swelling sound. At first Jaikie thought that a rising had broken out in some part of the city, for the noise was that of many people shouting. But there were no shots, and the tumult had no menace in it. It grew louder, so it was coming nearer. He looked into the darkness, and far on his right he saw wavering lights, which from their inconstancy must be torches held in unsteady hands. The thing, whatever it was, was coming down this street.

There was a patter of feet below him, and he saw a mob of urchins, the forerunners of the procession, who trotted ahead with frequent backward glances. The light broadened till the alley was bright as day, but with a fearsome murky glow. It was torches, sure enough, carried and waved by four half-naked figures with leopard-skin mantles and chaplets of flowers on their heads. Behind them came four cream-coloured ponies, also garlanded, drawing a sort of Roman chariot, and in that chariot was a preposterous figure who now and then stood on its head, now and then balanced itself on the chariot's rim, and all the time kept up a shrill patter and the most imbecile grimaces. He recognised Meleager, the clown of the Cirque Doré.

Jaikie knew that the moment had come. The rescue party had arrived and he must join it. But how? It was not halting; in a moment Meleager's chariot had passed on, and he was looking down on zebras ridden by cowboys. It was not a big circus, and the procession could not last long, so he must get ready for action.

He noticed that it was hugging his side of the street, so that the accompanying crowd was all on the far pavement. That meant that Mastrovin's watchers could not keep their places just below him. Did Randal Glynde mean him to drop down and move under the cover of the cavalcade? That must be it, he thought. He opened the window wide, and sat crouched on the sill.

Then he noticed another thing. The whole procession was not lit up, but clusters of torches and flares alternated with no lights at all, and the dark patches were by contrast very dark. He must descend into one of these tracts of blackness.

Marie Antoinette, or somebody like her, had just passed in a gaudy illuminated coach, and he made ready to drop into her wake. But a special tumult warned him that something odd was following. Though an unlit patch succeeded, the crowd on the opposite kerb seemed to be thicker. Straining his eyes to the right he saw a huge shadow moving up the alley, so close to his side of the street that it seemed to be shouldering the houses. It was high, not six feet below his perch, and it was broad, for it stretched across to the very edge of the runnel of water. And it moved fast, as fast as the trotting ponies, though the sound of its movement was lost in the general din.

It was under him, and, clutching his rucksack, he jumped for it. A hand caught his collar, and dumped him between two pads. He found himself looking up at the stars from the back of the elephant Aurunculeia.

He lay still for a time, breathing in the clean air, while Mr Glynde was busy with his duties as mahout. Presently they were out of the narrow street, and Aurunculeia swung more freely now that dust was under her and not cobbles.

"You did well," said Mr Glynde. "I did not overrate your intelligence."

Jaikie roused himself.

"Thank God you came," he said. "I don't know how to thank you. But the job isn't finished, for there are three other people left in that beastly house."

"So I guessed," said Mr Glynde. "Well, everything in good time. First we must get you safely off. We cut things pretty fine, you know. Just as you joined our convoy someone came into your room with a light. I got a glimpse of his face and it was familiar. At present he is probably looking for you in the street. . . . But he may push his researches farther."



THE BLOOD-RED ROOK

Jaikie was not conscious of most of that evening's ride. Thirty-six hours of short commons and the gentle swaying of Aurunculeia made him feel slightly sea-sick and then very drowsy. He found a strap in the trappings through which he crooked his arm, and the next he knew he was being lifted down a step-ladder by Randal Glynde in a place which smelt of horses and trodden herbage.

Mr Glynde was a stern host. He gave him a bowl of soup with bread broken into it, but nothing more. "You must sleep before you eat properly," he said, "or you'll be as sick as a dog." Jaikie, who was still a little light-headed, would have gladly followed this advice, when something in Randal's face compelled his attention. It was very grave, and he remembered it only as merry. The sight brought back to him his immediate past, and the recollection of the stifling room in the ill-omened house effectively dispelled his drowsiness. He had left Alison behind him.

"I can't stay here," he croaked. "I must get the others out. . . . That man's a devil. He'll stick at nothing. . . . What about Count Casimir? He's a big swell here, isn't he? and he has other Monarchists with him. . . . Where are we now? I should get to him at once, for every hour is important." Then, as Randal remained silent, with the same anxious eyes, he said, "Oh, for God's sake, do something. Make a plan. You know this accursed country and I don't."

"You have just escaped from the most dangerous place in Europe," said Randal solemnly. "I think you are safe now, but it was a narrower thing than you imagine. The wild beast is in his lair, and a pretty well-defended lair it is. You may smoke him out, but it may be a bad thing for those he has got in the lair beside him."

Jaikie's wits were still muddled, but one feeling was clear and strong, a horror of that slum barrack in the mean street.

"Are there no police in Krovolin?" he demanded.

"The ordinary police would not be much use in what has been a secret rendezvous for years. The place is a honeycomb. You might plant an army round it, and Mastrovin would slip out — and leave ugly things behind him."

Jaikie shuddered.

"Then I'm going back. You don't understand. . . . I can't go off and leave the others behind. You see, I brought your cousin here . . . Alison —" He ended his sentence with something like a moan.

Randal for the first time smiled. "I expected something like that from you. It may be the only way — but not yet. Alison and the Royslances are not in immediate danger. At present to Mastrovin they are important means of knowledge. When that fails they may become hostages. Only in the last resort will they be victims."

"Give me a cigarette, please," said Jaikie. He suddenly felt the clouds of nausea and weariness roll away from him. He had got his second wind. "Now tell me what is happening."

Randal nodded to a sheaf of newspapers on the floor of the caravan.

"The popular press, at least the Monarchist brand of it, announces that the Archduke Hadrian has crossed the Evallonian frontier. One or two papers say that he is now in Krovolin. They all publish his portrait — the right portrait. Prince Odalchini's staff-work is rather good."

Jaikie found himself confronted with a large-size photograph of Dickson McCunn. It must have been recently taken, for Mr McCunn was wearing the clothes which he had worn at Tarta.

"I have other news," Randal continued, "which is not yet in the press. The Archduke, being an old man, is at present resting from the fatigue of his journey. To-morrow afternoon, accompanied by his chief supporters, he will move to Melina through a rejoicing country. It has all been carefully stage-managed. His escort, two troops of the National Guard, arrive here in the morning. The distance is only fifteen miles, and part of the road will be lined with His Royal Highness's soldiers. Melina is already occupied on his behalf, and the Palace is being prepared for his reception."

"Gosh!" said Jaikie. "How are people taking that?"

"Sedately. The Evallonians are not a politically-minded nation. They are satisfied that the hated Republic is no more, and will accept any Government that promises stability. As for His Royal Highness, they have forgotten all about him, but

they have a tenderness for the old line, and they believe him to be respectable.”

“He is certainly that. How about Juventus?”

“Juventus is excited, desperately excited, but not about the Archduke. They regard him as a piece of antiquated lumber, the last card of a discredited faction. But the rumour has gone abroad that Prince John has joined them, and that has given them what they have been longing for, a picturesque figure-head. I have my own ways of getting news, and the same report has come in from all the Wings. The young men are huzzaing for the Prince, who like themselves is young. Their presses are scattering his photograph broadcast. Their senior officers, many of whom are of the old families, are enthusiastic. Now at last the wheel has come full circle for them — they have a revolution of youth which is also a restoration, and youth will lead it. They are organised to the last decimal, remember, and they have the bulk of the national feeling behind them, except here in Krovolin and in the capital. They are sitting round the periphery of Evallonia waiting for the word to close in. Incidentally they have shut the frontier, and are puzzled to understand how the Archduke managed to cross it without their knowledge. When the word is given there will be a march on Melina, just like Mussolini’s march on Rome. There is only one trouble — the Countess Araminta.”

“Yes. What about her?” was Jaikie’s gloomy question.

“That young woman,” said Randal, “must be at present in a difficult temper and not free from confusion of mind. She has not been consulted about Prince John; therefore she will be angry. All Juventus believes that the Prince is now with her Wing, but she knows that to be untrue. She has not seen His Royal Highness since she was a little girl. . . . Besides, there’s another complication. I said that Juventus was waiting. But not the Countess. Some days ago she took the bit between her teeth, and started to march on Krovolin. My information is that to-night she is encamped less than ten miles from this city. To-morrow should see her at its gates.”

“Then she’ll pinch Mr McCunn before he starts.”

“Precisely. At any rate there will be fighting, and for the sake of the future it is very necessary that there should be no fighting. At the first rifle-shot the game will get out of hand.”

“Can’t you get him off sooner?”

“Apparently no. Some time is needed for the arrangements in Melina, and already the programme has had to be telescoped.”

“What a hideous mess! What’s to be done? She must be stopped.”

“She must. That is the job to which I invite your attention.”

“Me!” The ejaculation was wrung from Jaikie by a sudden realisation of the state of his garments. His flannel bags were shrunken and to the last degree grimy, his tweed jacket was a mere antique, his shoes gaped, his hands and presumably his face were black with dust. Once again he felt, sharp as a toothache, his extreme insignificance.

Randal followed his glance. “You are certainly rather a scarecrow, but I think I can make you more presentable. You must go. You see, you are the last hope.”

“Couldn’t you —?” Jaikie began.

“No,” was the decided answer. “I have my own work to do, which is as vital as yours. There is one task before you. You must get her to halt in her tracks.”

“She won’t listen to me.”

“No doubt she won’t — at first. She’ll probably have you sent to whatever sort of dungeon a field force provides. But you have one master-card.”

“Prince John?”

“Prince John. She must produce him or she will be put to public shame, and she hasn’t a notion where to look for him. She is a strong-headed young woman, but she can’t defy the public opinion of the whole of Juventus. You alone know where the Prince is.”

“I don’t.”

“You will be told . . . So you can make your terms. From what I remember of her you will have a rough passage, but you are not afraid of the tantrums of a minx.”

“I am. Horribly.”

Randal smiled. "I don't believe you are really afraid of anything."

"I'm in a desperate funk of one thing, and that is, what is going to happen to Alison."

"So am I. You are fond, I think, of Cousin Alison. Perhaps you are lovers?"

Jaikie blushed furiously.

"I have been in love with her for two years."

"And she?"

"I don't know. I hope . . . some day."

"You are a chilly Northern pair of children. Well, she is my most beloved and adored kinswoman, and for her sake I would commit most crimes. We are agreed about that. It is for the sake of Alison and the sweet Lady Roylance that you and I are going into action. I wait in Krovolin and keep an eye on Mastrovin. He is a master of ugly subterranean things, but I also have certain moles at my command. There will be a watch kept on the Street of the White Peacock — that is the name of the dirty alley — a watch of which our gentleman will know nothing. When the Cirque Doré mobilises itself it has many eyes and ears. For you the task is to immobilise the Countess. Your price is the revelation of Prince John. Your reason, which she will assuredly ask, is not that the Archduke should get safely off to Melina — for remember your sympathies are with Juventus. It is not even that the coming revolution must not be spoiled by bloodshed, and thereby get an ill name in Europe. She would not listen to you on that matter. It is solely that your friends are in the power of Mastrovin, whom she venomously hates. If she enters Krovolin Mastrovin will be forced into action, and she knows what that will mean."

Jaikie saw suddenly a ray of hope.

"What sort of woman is she?" he asked. "Couldn't I put it to her that she has not merely to sit tight, but has to help to get my friends out of Mastrovin's clutches? I can't do anything myself, for I don't know the place or the language. But she is sure to have some hefty fellows with her to make up a rescue party. She can't refuse that if she's anything of a sportsman. It's a fair deal. She'll have the Prince if she gives me my friends. By the way, I suppose you can produce the man when I call for him?"

"I can. What's more, I can give you something if she asks for proof. It's the mourning ring prepared for his late Majesty, which only the royal family possess. She'll recognise it."

Randal's gravity had slightly melted. "I think you could do with a drink now," he said. "Brandy and soda. I prescribe it, for it's precisely what you need. Do you know, I think you have hit upon the right idea. Get her keen on doing down Mastrovin, and she won't bother about the price. She's an artist for art's sake. Make it a fight between her and the Devil for the fate of three innocents and she'll go raging into battle. I believe she has a heart, too. Most brave people have."

As he handed Jaikie his glass, he laughed.

"There's a good old English word that exactly describes your appearance. You look 'varminty'— like a terrier that has been down a badger's earth, and got its nose bitten, and is burning to go down again."

The car, a dilapidated Ford, fetched a wide circuit in its southward journey, keeping well to the west of Krovolin, and cutting at right angles the road from the forest of St Sylvester. The morning was hazy and close, but after the last two days it seemed to Jaikie to be as fresh as April. They crossed the Silf, and saw it winding to its junction with the Rave, with the city smoking in the crook of the two streams. Beyond the Rave a rich plain stretched east towards the capital, and through that plain Dickson that afternoon must make his triumphant procession. Even now his escort would be jingling Krovolinwards along its white roads.

Jaikie had recovered his bodily vigour, but never in his life had he felt so nervous. The thought of Alison shut up in Mastrovin's den gnawed like a physical pain. The desperate seriousness of his mission made his heart like lead. It was the kind of thing he had not been trained to cope with; he would do his best, but he had only the slenderest hope. The figure of the Countess Araminta grew more formidable the more he thought about her. Alison at Tarta had called her the Blood-red Rook — that had been Lady Roylance's name for her — and had drawn her in colours which suggested a cross between a vampire and a were-wolf. Wild, exotic, melodramatic and reckless — that had been the impression left on his mind. And women were good judges of each other. He could deal with a male foreigner like Ashie whom Cambridge had partially tamed, but what could he do with the unbroken female of the species? He knew less about women than he knew about the physics of hyperspace.

His forebodings made him go over again his slender assets. He knew the line he must take, provided she listened to him. But how to get an audience? The letters which Ashie had given him, being written on official flimsies, had been reduced to a degraded pulp by the rain, and he had flung them away. He had nothing except Randal's ring, and that seemed to him an outside chance. His one hope was to get hold of Dr Jagon. Jagon would remember him from the Canonry — or on the other hand he might not. Still, it was his best chance. If he were once in Jagon's presence he might be able to recall himself to him, and Jagon was the Countess's civilian adviser. But his outfit might never get near Jagon; it might be stopped and sent packing by the first sentry.

It was not a very respectable outfit. The car was a disgrace. He himself had been rigged up by Randal in better clothes than his own duds, but he realised that they were not quite right, for the Cirque Doré was scarcely abreast of the fashions. He had a pair of riding breeches of an odd tubular shape, rather like what people at Cambridge wore for beagling, and they were slightly too large for him. His coat was one of those absurd Norfolk jacket things that continentals wear, made of smooth green cloth with a leather belt, and it had been designed for someone of greater girth than himself. He had, however, a respectable pair of puttees, and his boots, though too roomy, were all right, being a pair of Randal's own. He must look, he thought, like a shop-boy on a holiday, decent but not impressive.

Then for the first time he took notice of the chauffeur. He was one of the circus people, whom Randal had vouched for as a careful driver who knew the country. The chief point about the man's appearance was that he wore a very ancient trench burberry, which gave him an oddly English air. He was apparently middle-aged, for he had greying side whiskers. His cheeks had the pallor which comes from the use of much grease-paint. There was nothing horsey about him, so Jaikie set him down as an assistant clown. He looked solemn enough for that. He wondered what language he spoke, so he tried him in French, telling him that their first business was to ask for Professor Jagon.

"I know," was the answer. "The boss told me that this morning."

"Where did you learn English?" Jaikie asked, for the man spoke without the trace of an accent.

"I am English," he said. "And I picked up a bit of French in the war."

"Do you know Evallonia?"

"I've been here off and on for twenty years."

The man had the intonations of a Londoner. It appeared that his name was Newsom, and that he had first come to Evallonia as an under-chauffeur in a family which had been bankrupted by the war. He had gone home and fought on the British side in a Royal Fusilier battalion, but after the Armistice he had again tried his fortune in Evallonia. His luck had been bad, and Mr Glynde had found him on his uppers, and given him a job in the circus. Transport was his principal business, but he rather fancied himself as a singer, and just lately had been giving Meleager a hand. "We're a happy family in the old Cirque," he said, "and don't stick by trade-union ways. I can turn my hand to most anything, and I like a bit of clowning now and then. The trouble is that the paint makes my skin tender. You were maybe noticing that I'm not very clean shaved this morning." And he turned a solemn mottled face for Jaikie's inspection.

In less than an hour they came out of the woods into a country of meadows which rose gently to a line of hills. They also came into an area apparently under military occupation. A couple of Greenshirts barred the road. Jaikie tried them in English, but they shook their heads, so he left it to Newsom, who began to explain in Evallonian slowly, as if he were hunting for words, and with an accent which to Jaikie's ears sounded insular. There was a short discussion, and then the Greenshirts nodded and stood aside. "They say," said Newsom, "that Dr Jagon's quarters are at the farm a kilometre on, but they believe that he is now with the Wing-Commander. But they don't mind our calling on him. I said you were an old friend of his, and brought important news from Krovolin."

The next turn of the road revealed a very respectable army on the march. The night's bivouac had been in a broad cup formed by the confluence of two streams. There was a multitude of little tents, extensive horse-lines, and a car park, and already there were signs that movement was beginning. Men were stamping out the breakfast fires, and saddling horses, and putting mule teams to transport wagons, and filling the tanks of cars. "I must hurry," thought Jaikie, "or that confounded woman will be in Krovolin this afternoon." His eye caught a building a little to the rear of the encampment which had the look of a small hunting-lodge. The green and white flag of Juventus was being lowered from its flagstaff.

There was no Jagon at the farm, but there was a medical officer who understood English. To him Jaikie made the appeal which he thought most likely to convince. He said he was a friend of the Professor — had known him in England —

and brought a message to him of extreme importance.

The officer rubbed his chin. "You are behind the fair," he said. "You come from Krovolin? Well, we shall be in Krovolin ourselves in three hours."

"That is my point," said Jaikie. "There's something about Krovolin which you should hear. It concerns Mastrovin."

The name produced an effect.

"Mastrovin! You come from him?" was the brusque question.

"Only in the sense that I escaped last night from his clutches. I've something to tell the Professor about Mastrovin which may alter all your plans."

The officer looked puzzled.

"You are English?" he demanded. "And he?" He nodded towards Newsom.

"Both English, and both friends of Juventus. I came here as a tourist and stumbled by accident on some important news which I thought it my duty to get to Professor Jagon. He is the only one of you I know. I tell you, it's desperately important."

The officer pondered.

"You look an honest little man. I have my orders, but we of the special services are encouraged to think for ourselves. The Professor is at this moment in conference with the Praefectus, and cannot be interrupted. But I will myself take you to headquarters, and when he is finished I will present you. Let us hurry, for we are about to march."

He stood on the footboard of the car, and directed Newsom along a very bumpy track, which skirted the horse-lines, and led to the courtyard of the hunting-lodge. Here was a scene of extreme busyness. Greenshirts with every variety of rank-badges were going in and out of the building, a wagon was being loaded with kit, and before what seemed to be the main entrance an orderly was leading up and down a good-looking chestnut mare. Out of this door merged the burly figure of a man, with a black beard and spectacles, who was dressed rather absurdly in khaki shorts and a green shirt, the open neck of which displayed a hairy chest.

"The Professor," said the medical officer. He saluted. "Here is an Englishman, sir, who says he knows you and has an urgent message."

"I have no time for Englishmen," said Jagon crossly. His morning conference seemed to have perturbed him.

"But you will have time for me," said Jaikie. "You remember me, sir?"

The spectacled eyes regarded Jaikie sourly. "I do not."

"I think you do. Two years ago I came to breakfast with you at Knockraw in Scotland. I helped you then, and I can help you now."

"Tchut! That is a long-closed chapter." But the man's face was no longer hostile. He honoured Jaikie with a searching stare. "You are that little Scotsman. I recall you. But if you come from my companions of that time it is useless. I have broken with them."

"I don't come from them. I come from the man you beat two years ago — I escaped from him twelve hours ago. I want to help you to beat him again."

Jagon looked at the medical officer and the medical officer looked at Jagon. The lips of both seemed to shape, but not to utter, the same word. "I think the Englishman is honest, sir," said the officer.

"What do you want?" Jagon turned to Jaikie.

"Five minutes' private talk with you."

"Come in here. Keep an eye on that chauffeur"— this to the officer. "We know nothing about him."

"I'm an Englishman, too," said Newsom, touching his cap.

"What the devil has mobilised the British Empire this morning?" Jagon led Jaikie into a little stone hall hung with sporting trophies and then into a cubby-hole where an orderly was packing up papers. He dismissed the latter, and shut the door.

"Now let's have your errand. And be short, for we move in fifteen minutes."

Jaikie felt no nervousness with this hustled professor. In half a dozen sentences he explained how he had got mixed up

in Evallonia's business, but he did not mention Prince Odalchini, though he made much of Ashie. "I want to see the Countess Araminta. And you, who know something about me, must arrange it."

"You can't. The Praefectus sees no strangers."

"I must. If I don't she'll make a godless mess of the whole business."

"You would tell her that?" said Jagon grimly. "The Praefectus is not so busy that she cannot find time to punish insolence."

"It isn't insolence — it's a fact. I didn't talk nonsense to you at Knockraw, and it was because you believed me that things went right. You must believe me now. For Heaven's sake take me to the Countess and let's waste no more time."

"You are a bold youth," said the Professor. "Bold with the valour of ignorance. But the Praefectus will see no one. Perhaps this evening when we have entered Krovolin —"

"That will be too late. It must be now."

"It cannot be. I have my orders. The Praefectus is not one to be disobeyed." The eyes behind the spectacles were troubled, and the black beard did not hide the twitching of the lips. He reminded Jaikie of a don of his acquaintance in whom a bonfire in the quad induced a nervous crisis. His heart sank, for he knew the stubbornness of the weak.

"Then I am going direct to the Countess."

A clear voice rang outside in the hall, an imperative voice, and a woman's. Jaikie's mind was suddenly made up. Before Jagon could prevent him, he was through the door. At the foot of the stairs were two Greenshirts at attention, and on the last step stood a tall girl.

Indignation with the Professor and a growing desperation had banished Jaikie's uneasiness. He saluted in the Greenshirt fashion and looked her boldly in the face. His first thought was that she was extraordinarily pretty. What had Alison meant by drawing the picture of a harpy? She was dressed like Ashie in green riding breeches and a green tunic, and the only sign of the Blood-red Rook was her scarlet collar and the scarlet brassard on her right arm. Her colouring was a delicate amber, her eyes were like pools in a peaty stream, and her green forester's hat did not conceal her wonderful dead-black hair. Her poise was the most arrogant that he had ever seen, for she held her little head so high that the world seemed at an infinite distance beneath her. As her eyes fell on him they changed from liquid topaz to a hard agate.

She spoke a sharp imperious word and her voice had the chill of water on a frosty morning.

Audacity was his only hope.

"Madam," said Jaikie. "I have forced myself upon you. I am an Englishman, and I believe that you have English blood. I implore your help, and I think that in turn I can be of use to you."

She looked over his head, at the trembling Jagon and the stupefied Greenshirts. She seemed to be asking who had dared to disobey her.

"I take all the blame on myself," said Jaikie, trying to keep his voice level. "I have broken your orders. Punish me if you like, but listen to me first. You are leading a revolution, and in a revolution breaches of etiquette are forgiven."

At last she condescended to lower her eyes to him. Something in his face or his figure seemed to rouse a flicker of interest.

"Who is this cock-sparrow?" she asked, and looked at Jagon.

"Madam," came the trembling answer, "he is a Scotsman who once in Scotland did me a service. He is without manners, but I believe he means honestly."

"I see. A revenant from your faulty past. But this is no time for repaying favours. You will take charge of him, Professor, and be responsible for him till my further orders." And she passed between the sentries towards the door.

Jaikie managed to plant himself in her way. He played his last card.

"You must listen to me. Please!" He held out his hand.

It was his face that did it. There was something about Jaikie's small, wedge-shaped countenance, its air of innocence with just a hint of devilry flickering in the background, its extreme and rather forlorn youth, which most people found hard to resist. The Countess Araminta looked at him and her eyes softened ever so little. She looked at the outstretched hand in which lay a ring. It was a kind of ring she had seen before, and the momentary softness left her face.

"Where did you get that?" she demanded in a voice in which imperiousness could not altogether conceal excitement.

"It was given me to show to you as a proof of my good faith."

She said something in Evallonian to the guards and the Professor, and marched into the cubby-hole which Jaikie had lately left. "Follow," said the Professor hoarsely. "The Praefectus will see you — but only for one minute."

Jaikie found himself in a space perhaps six yards square, confronting the formidable personage the thought of whom had hitherto made his spine cold. Rather to his surprise he felt more at his ease. He found that he could look at her steadily, and what he saw in her face made him suddenly change all his prearranged tactics. She was a young woman, but she was not in the least a young woman like Alison or Janet Roylance. He was no judge of femininity, but there was not much femininity here as he understood it. . . . But there was something else which he did understand. Her eyes, the way she held her head, the tones of her voice had just that slightly insecure arrogance, that sullen but puzzled self-confidence, which belonged to a certain kind of public-school boy. He had studied the type, for it was not his own, and he had had a good deal to do with the handling of it. One had to be cautious with it, for it was easy to rouse obstinate, half-comprehended scruples, but it was sound stuff if you managed it wisely. His plan had been to propose a bargain with one whom he believed to be the slave of picturesque ambitions. In a flash he realised that he had been mistaken. If he suggested a deal it would be taken as insolence, and he would find himself pitched neck-and-crop into the yard. He must try other methods.

"Countess," he said humbly, "I have come to you with a desperate appeal. You alone can help me."

He was scrupulously candid. He told how he had come to Evallonia, of his meeting with Ashie, of his visit to Prince Odalchini. He told how he had brought Alison and the Roylances to the House of the Four Winds. "It was none of my business," he admitted. "I was an interfering fool, but I thought it was going to be fun, and now it's liker tragedy."

"The Roylances," she repeated. "They were at Geneva. I saw them there. The man is the ordinary English squire, and the woman is pleasant. Miss Westwater too I know — I have met her in England. Pretty and blonde — rather fluffy."

"Not fluffy," said Jaikie hotly.

She almost smiled.

"Perhaps not fluffy. Go on."

He told of Mastrovin, sketching hurriedly his doings in the Canonry two years before. He described the meeting in the Forest of St Sylvester, when he himself had been on the way to the Countess with letters from Ashie. "I can't give you them," he said, "for the rain pulped them." He described the house in the Street of the White Peacock and he did not mince his words. But he skated lightly over his escape, for he felt that it would be bad tactics to bring Randal Glynde into the story at that stage.

There could be no question of her interest. At the mention of Mastrovin her delicate brows descended and she cross-examined him sharply. The Street of the White Peacock, where was it? Who was with Mastrovin? She frowned at the name of Dedekind. Then her face set.

"That rabble is caught," she said. "Trapped. To-night it will be in my hands."

"But the rabble is desperate. You have an army, Countess, and you can surround it, but it will die fighting with teeth and claws. And if it perishes my friends will perish with it."

"That I cannot help. If fools rush in where they are not wanted they must take the consequences."

"You don't wish to begin with a tragedy. You have the chance of a bloodless revolution which for its decency will be unlike all other revolutions. You mustn't spoil it. If it starts off with the murder of three English its reputation will be tarnished."

"The murders will have been done by our enemies, and we shall avenge them."

"Of course. But still you will have taken the gloss off Juventus in the eyes of England — and of Europe."

"We care nothing for foreign opinion."

Jaikie looked her boldly in the eyes.

"But you do. You must. You are responsible people, who don't want merely to upset a Government, but to establish a new and better one. Public opinion outside Evallonia will mean a lot to you."

Her face had again its arrogance.

"That is dictation," she said, "and who are you to dictate?"

"I am nobody, but I must plead for my friends. And I am hot on your side. I want you to begin your crusade with an act of chivalry."

"You would show me how to behave?"

"Not I. I want you to show me and the world how to behave, and prove that Juventus stands for great things. You are strong enough to be merciful."

He had touched the right note, for her sternness patently unbent.

"What do you want me to do?" Her tone was almost as if she spoke to an equal.

"I want you to halt where you are. I want you to let me have half a dozen of your best men to help me to get my friends out of Mastrovin's hands. If we fail, then that's that. If we succeed, then you occupy Krovolin and do what you like with Mastrovin. After that you march on Melina with a good conscience and God prosper you!"

She looked at him fixedly and her mouth drew into a slow smile.

"You are a very bold young man. Are you perhaps in love with Miss Westwater?"

"I am," said Jaikie, "but that has nothing to do with the point. I brought her to this country, and I can't let her down. You know you could never do that yourself."

Her smile broadened.

"I am to stop short in a great work of liberation to rescue the lady-love of a preposterous Englishman."

"Yes," said Jaikie, "because you know that you would be miserable if you didn't."

"You think you can bring it off?"

"Only with your help."

"I am to put my men under your direction?"

"We'll make a plan together. I'll follow any leader."

"If I consent, you shall lead. If I am to trust you in one thing I must trust you in all."

Jaikie bowed. "I am at your orders," he said.

She continued to regard him curiously.

"Miss Westwater is noble," she said. "Are you?"

Jaikie puzzled at the word. Then he understood.

"No, I'm nobody, as I told you. But we don't bother about these things so much in England."

"I see. The Princess and the goose-boy. I do not quarrel with you for that. You are like our Juventus, the pioneer of a new world."

Jaikie knew that he had won, for the agate gleam had gone out of her eyes. He had something more to say and he picked his words, for he realised that he was dealing with a potential volcano.

"You march on Melina," he said, "you and the other wings of Juventus. But when you march you must have your leader."

Her eyes hardened. "What do you know of that?" she snapped.

"I have seen the newspapers and I have heard people talking." Jaikie walked with desperate circumspection. "The Republic has fallen. The Monarchists with their old man cannot last long. Juventus must restore the ancient ways, but with youth to lead."

"You mean?" Her eyes were stony.

"I mean Prince John," he blurted out, with his heart sinking. She was once more the Valkyrie, poised like a falcon for a swoop. He saw the appropriateness of Alison's name for her.

"You mean Prince John?" she repeated, and her tone was polar ice.

"You know you can't put a king on the throne unless you have got him with you. Juventus is wild for Prince John, but nobody knows where he is. I know. I promise to hand him over to you safe and sound."

There were many things in her face — interest, excitement, relief, but there was also a rising anger.

"You would make a bargain with me?" she cried. "A huckster's bargain — with ME!"

Strangely enough, the surprise and fury in her voice made Jaikie cool. He knew this kind of tantrum, but not in the Countess's sex.

"You mustn't talk nonsense, please," he said. "I wouldn't dare to make a bargain with you. I appealed to you, and out of your chivalry you are going to do what I ask. I only offer to show my gratitude by doing what I can for you. Besides, as I told you, I'm on your side. I mean what I say. You can go back on me and refuse what I ask, and I'll still put you in the way of getting hold of Prince John, if you'll give me a couple of days. I can't say fairer than that. A mouse may help a lion."

For a second or two she said nothing. Then her eyes fell.

"You are the first man," she said, "who has dared to tell me that I was a fool."

"I didn't," Jaikie protested, with a comfortable sense that things were going better.

"You did, and I respect you for it. I see that there was no insult. What I do for you — if I do it — I do because I am a Christian and a good citizen. . . . For the other thing, what proof have you that you can keep your word?"

Jaikie held out the ring. The Countess took it, studied the carving on the carnelian, and returned it. She was smiling.

"It is a token and no more. If you fail —"

"Oh, have me flayed and boiled in oil," he said cheerfully. "Anything you like as long as you get busy about Mastrovin."

She blew a silver whistle, and spoke a word to the orderly who entered. Then Jagon appeared, and to him she gave what sounded like a string of orders, which she enumerated on her slim gloved fingers. When he had gone she turned to Jaikie.

"I have countermanded the march for today. Now we go to choose your forlorn hope. You will lunch with me, for I have some things to say to you and many to ask you. What is your name, for I know nothing of you except that you are in love with Miss Westwater and are a friend of my cousin Paul?"

"Galt," she repeated. "It is not dignified, but it smells of the honest earth. You will wait here, Galt, till I send for you."

Jaikie, left alone, mopped his brow, and, there being no chairs in the place, sat down on the floor, for he felt exhausted. He was not accustomed to this kind of thing.

"Public-school," he reflected. "Best six-cylinder model. Lord, how I love the product and dislike the type! But fortunately the type is pretty rare."



THE STREET OF THE WHITE PEACOCK

Jaikie rubbed the dust from his eyes, for he had landed in a heap of debris, and looked round for Newsom. Newsom was at his elbow, having exhibited an unexpected agility. He was still a little puzzled to learn how Newsom came to be with him. After his business with the Countess he had found him waiting with the car, stubbornly refusing to move till he had the word from his master. He had despatched him with a message to Randal Glynde and the man had returned unbidden. "Boss's orders," he had explained. "The boss says I'm to stick to you, sir, till he tells me to quit." And when in the evening the expeditionary force left the camp Newsom had begged for a place in it, had indeed insisted on being with Jaikie in whatever part the latter was cast for. It was not "boss's orders" this time, but the plea of a sportsman to have a hand in the game, and Jaikie, looking at the man's athletic figure and remembering that he was English, had a little doubtfully consented. Now he was more comfortable about that consent. At any rate Newsom was an adept at climbing walls.

The Countess had allowed him to pick six Greenshirts, herself showing a most eager interest in their selection. They were all young townsmen, for this was not a job for the woodlander or mountaineer, and four of them could speak English. All were equipped with pistols, electric torches, and the string-soled shoes of the country. As reserves he had twenty of a different type, men picked for their physique and fighting value. He thought of them as respectively his scouts and his shock-troops. He had made his dispositions pretty much in the void, but he reasoned that he wanted light men for his first reconnaissance, and something heavier if it came to a scrap. His judgment had been sound, for when in the evening the party, by devious ways and in small groups, concentrated at the Cirque Doré encampment, he found that Randal Glynde had had the same notion.

Randal, having had the house in the Street of the White Peacock for some time under observation, and knowing a good deal about its antecedents, had come to certain conclusions. The place was large and rambling, and probably contained cellars extending to the river, for in old days it had been the dwelling of a great merchant of Krovolin. There was no entrance from the street, the old doorway having been built up, and coming and going was all by the courtyard at the back. The prisoners might be anywhere inside a thousand square yards of masonry, but the odds were that they were lodged, as Jaikie had been, in rooms facing the street. The first thing was to get rid of the watchers there, and this was the immediate task of the six Greenshirts. But it must be done quickly and circumspectly so as not to alarm the inmates. There were five watchers by day and three by night, the latter taking up duty at sundown. If a part of the Cirque passed through the street in the first hours of the dark, it would provide excellent cover for scragging the three guards, and unobtrusively packing them into one of the vans. The street must be in their hands, for it was by the street-front that escape must be made. Randal, who had become a very grave person, was insistent upon the need for speed and for keeping the business with his watchers secret from Mastrovin. Mastrovin must not be alarmed, for, like Jaikie, he feared that, if he were cornered too soon, he would have recourse to some desperate brutality.

It was Jaikie's business to get inside the house, and the only way was by the courtyard at the back. Randal had had this carefully reconnoitred, and his report was that, while the gate was kept locked and guarded, the wall could be climbed by an active man. It was impossible to do more than make a rudimentary plan, which was briefly this. Jaikie was to get into the courtyard, using any method he pleased, and to overpower, gag, and bind the guard. Randal had ascertained that there was never more than a single guard. For this purpose he must have a companion, since his fighting weight was small. His hour of entrance must be 10 p.m., at which time the Six were to deal with the watchmen in the street. Their success was to be notified to Jaikie by Luigi's playing of Dvorak's Humoresque on his fiddle, which in that still quarter at that hour of night would carry far.

Then there was to be an allowance of one hour while the Six kept watch in the street, and Jaikie, having entered the house, discovered where the prisoners were kept. After that came the point of uncertainty. It might be possible to get the prisoners off as inconspicuously as Jaikie himself had made his departure. On the other hand, it might not, and force might have to be used against desperate men. At all costs the crisis, if it came, was to be postponed till eleven o'clock, at which time the reserves, the Twenty, would arrive in the courtyard. It was assumed that Jaikie would have got the gates open so that they could enter. He must also have opened the house door. Two blasts on his whistle would bring the

rescuers inside the house, and then God prosper the right!

That last sentence had been the parting words of Randal, who had no part allotted him, being, as he said, an ageing man and no fighter. Jaikie remembered them as he crouched in the dust of the courtyard and peered into the gloom. So far his job had been simple. A way up the wall had been found in a corner where an adjacent building slightly abutted and the stones were loose or broken. He had lain on the top and examined the courtyard in the dying light, and he had listened intently, but there had been no sight or sound of the watchman. Then, followed by Newsom, he had dropped on to soft rubble, and lain still and listened, but there was no evidence of human presence. The place was empty. Satisfied about this, he had examined the gate. He had been given some elementary instruction in lock-picking that evening at the Cirque, and had brought with him the necessary tools. But to his surprise they were not needed. The gate was open.

A brief reconnaissance showed him that the courtyard was different from what it had been on his arrival two days ago. The medley of motorcars had gone. The place was bare, except for the heaps of stone and lime in the corner where someone seemed to have been excavating . . . Jaikie did his best to think. What was the meaning of the unlocked gate? Someone must be coming there that night and coming in a hurry. Or someone must be leaving in a hurry. Why had Mastrovin suddenly opened his defences? The horrid thought came to him that Mastrovin might be gone, and have taken Alison and the others with him. Was he too late? The mass of the house rose like a cliff, and in that yard he seemed to be in a suffocating cave. Far above him he saw dimly clouds chasing each other in the heavens, but there was no movement of air where he sat. The place was so silent and lifeless that his heart sank. Childe Roland had come to the Dark Tower, but the Dark Tower was empty.

And then he saw far up on its façade a light prick out. His momentary despair was changed to a furious anxiety. There was life in the place, and he felt that the life was evil and menacing. The great blank shell held a brood of cockatrices, and among them was what he loved best in the world. Hitherto the necessity for difficult action had kept his mind from brooding too much on awful presentiments. He had had to take one step at a time and keep his thoughts on the leash. There had been moments when his former insouciance had returned to him and he had thought only of the game and not of the consequences . . . Indeed, in the early evening, as he approached Krovolin, he had had one instant of the old thrill. Far over the great plain of the Rave, from the direction of the capital, had come the sound of distant music and dancing bells. He had known what that meant. Mr Dickson McCunn was entering his loyal city of Melina.

But now he knew only consuming anxiety and something not far from terror. He must get inside the house at once and find Alison. If she had gone, he must follow. He had a horrid certainty that she was in extreme peril, and that he alone was to blame for it. . . . He got to his feet and was about to attempt the door, when something halted him.

It was the sound of a fiddle, blanketed by the great house, but dropping faint liquid notes in the still air. It held him like a spell, for it seemed a message of hope and comfort. One part of the adventure at any rate had succeeded, and the Six were in occupation of the Street of the White Peacock. It did more, for it linked up this dark world with the light and with his friends. He listened, he could not choose but listen, till the music died away.

It was well that he did so, for Newsom's hand pulled him down again. "There's someone at the gate," he whispered. The two crouched deeper into the shadows.

The gate was pushed open, and a man entered the courtyard. He had an electric torch which he flashed for a moment, but rather as if he wanted to see that the torch was in working order than to examine the place. That flash was enough to reveal the burly form of Mastrovin. He shut the gate behind him, but he did not lock it. Evidently he expected someone else to follow him. Then he walked straight to the excavation, and, after moving some boards aside, he disappeared into it.

The sight of Mastrovin switched Jaikie from despondency into vigorous action. "After him," he whispered to Newsom. Clambering over the rubble they looked down a steep inclined passage, where a man might walk if he crouched, and saw ahead of them the light of Mastrovin's torch. It vanished as he turned a corner.

The two followed at once, Newsom hitting his head hard on the roof. Jaikie did not dare to use his own torch, but felt his way by the wall, till he came to a passage debouching to the right. That was the way Mastrovin had gone, but there was no sign of his light. Jaikie felt that he could safely look about him.

They were in a circular space whence several passages radiated. That by which they had come was new work, with the marks of pick and shovel still on it. But the other passages were of ancient brick, with stone roofs which might have been new two centuries ago. Yet in all of them was the mark of recent labour, a couple of picks propped up against a wall, and

spilt lime and rubble on the floor. Jaikie deduced that the passage from the upper air was not the only task that Mastrovin's men had been engaged in; they had been excavating also at the far ends of some of the other passages.

He did not stop, for their quarry must not be lost track of. He turned up the alley Mastrovin had taken, feeling his way by the wall.

"There's wiring here," he whispered to Newsom.

"I spotted that," was the answer. "Someone's up to no good."

Presently they reached a dead end, and Jaikie thought it safe to use his torch. This revealed a steep flight of steps on the left. It was a spiral staircase, for after two turnings they had a glimpse of light above them. Mastrovin was very near. Moreover, he was speaking to someone. The voice was quite distinct, for the funnel of the staircase magnified it, but the words were Evallonian, which Jaikie did not understand.

But Newsom did. He clutched Jaikie's arm, and with every sentence of Mastrovin's that clutch tightened. Then some command seemed to be issued above, and they heard the reply of Mastrovin's interlocutor. The light wavered and moved, and presently disappeared, for Mastrovin had gone on. But there came the sound of feet on the stairs growing louder. The other man was descending — in the dark.

It was a tense moment in Jaikie's life. He took desperate hold of his wits, and reasoned swiftly that the man descending in the dark would almost certainly hug the outer wall, the right-hand wall of the spiral, where the steps were broader. Therefore he and Newsom must plaster themselves against the other wall. The staircase was wide enough to let two men pass abreast without touching. If they were detected he would go for the stranger's throat, and he thought he could trust Newsom to do the same.

The two held their breath while the man came down the stairs. Jaikie, sensitive as a wild animal, realised that his guess had been right — the man was feeling his way by the outer wall. Newsom's shoulder was touching his, and he felt it shiver. Another thing he realised — the stranger was in a hurry. That was to the good, for he would not be so likely to get any subconscious warning of their presence.

For one second the man was abreast of them. There was a waft of some coarse scent, as if he were a vulgar dandy. Then he was past them, and they heard him at the foot of the stairs groping for the passage.

Jaikie sat down on a step to let his stifled breath grow normal. But Newsom was whispering something in his ear.

"I heard their talk," he gasped. "I've got their plan. . . . They are going to let the Countess occupy the town. . . . She must cross the river to get to Melina. . . . They've got the bridge mined, and will blow it up at the right moment . . . and half the place besides. . . . God, what swine!"

To Jaikie the news was a relief. That could only be for the morrow, and in the meantime Mastrovin would lie quiet. That meant that his prisoners would be in the house. The cockatrices — and the others — were still in their den.

But Newsom had more to say.

"There are people coming here — more people. That fellow has gone to fetch them."

Jaikie, squatted in the darkness, hammered at his wits, but they would not respond. What could these newcomers mean? What was there to do in the house that had not been done? Mastrovin had the bridge mined, and half the town as well, and could make havoc by pressing a button. He had his cellars wired, and new passages dug. All that was clear enough. But why was he assembling a posse to-night? . . .

Then an idea struck him. If the gates were open to let people in, they were open to let the same people out. And they might take others with them. . . . He had it. The prisoners were to be removed that night, and used in Mastrovin's further plans. When he had struck his blow at Juventus they might come in handy as hostages. Or in the last resort as victims.

From the moment that he realised this possibility came a radical change in Jaikie's outlook. The torments of anxious love were still deep in his soul, but overlying them was a solid crust of hate. His slow temper was being kindled into a white flame of anger.

He looked at his watch. It was one minute after half-past ten. The Twenty would not arrive till eleven.

"I must go on," he whispered. "I must find what that brute is after and where he keeps my friends. . . . You must go back and wait in the yard. Please Heaven our fellows are here before the others. If they are, bring them up here — I'll find some way of joining up with you. . . . If the others come first, God help us all. I leave it to you."

As he spoke he realised sharply the futility of asking a cockney chauffeur to hold at bay an unknown number of the toughest miscreants in Evallonia. But Newsom seemed to take it calmly. His voice was steady.

"I'll do my best, sir," he said. "I'm armed, and I used to be a fair shot. Have you a pair of clippers in that packet of tools you brought?"

Jaikie dived into his pocket and handed over the desired article.

"Good," said Newsom. "I think I'll do a spot of wire-cutting." And without another word he began to feel his way down.

Jaikie crept upward till the stairs ended in a door. This was unlocked, as he had expected, for Mastrovin was leaving his communications open behind him. Inside all was black, so he cautiously flashed his torch. The place was dusty and unclean, a passage with rotting boards on the floor and discoloured paper dropping from the walls. He tiptoed along it till it gave on to a small landing from which another staircase descended. Here there were two doors and he cautiously tried the handles. One was locked, but the other opened. It was dark inside, but at the far end there was a thin crack of light on the floor. There must be a room there which at any rate was inhabited.

The first thing he did, for he had put out his torch, was to fall with a great clatter over some obstacle. He lay still with his heart in his mouth, waiting for the far door to be thrown open. But nothing happened, so he carefully picked himself up and continued with extreme circumspection. There were chairs and tables in this place, a ridiculous number of chairs, as if it had been used as a depository for lumber, or perhaps as a council-chamber. He had no further mishap, and reached the streak of light safely. . . . There were people in that farther room; he could hear a voice speaking, and it sounded like Mastrovin's.

Another thing he noticed, and that was the same odd smell of coarse scent which he had sniffed as the man passed him on the stairs. The odour was like a third-rate barber's shop, and it came through the door.

He could hear Mastrovin talking, rather loud and very distinct, like a schoolmaster to stupid pupils. He was speaking English too.

"You are going away," he was saying. "Do you understand? I will soon visit you — perhaps in a day or two. I do not think you will try to escape, but if you do, I warn you that I have a long arm and will pluck you back. And I will punish you for it."

The voice was slow and patient as if addressed to backward children. And there was no answer. Mastrovin must be speaking to his prisoners, but they did not reply, and that was so unlike Sir Archie that a sudden horrid fear shot into Jaikie's mind. Were they dying, or sick or wounded? Was Alison? . . .

He waited no longer. Had the door been triple-barred he felt that he had the strength to break it down. But it opened easily.

He found himself in a small, square, and very high room, wholly without windows, for the air entered by a grating near the ceiling. It smelt stuffy and heavily scented. Mastrovin sat in an armchair, with behind him a queer-looking board studded with numbered buttons. There was a clock fixed on the wall above it which had a loud solemn tick.

The three prisoners sat behind a little table. Archie looked as if he had been in the wars, for he had one arm in a sling, and there was a bloodstained bandage round his head. He sat stiffly upright, staring straight in front of him. So did Janet, a pale unfamiliar Janet, with her hair in disorder and a long rent in one sleeve. Like her husband, she was looking at Mastrovin with blank unseeing eyes. Alison sat a little apart with her arms on the table and her head on her arms. He saw only her mop of gold hair. She seemed to be asleep.

All that Jaikie took in at his first glance was the three prisoners. What devilry had befallen them? He had it. They had been drugged. They were now blind and apathetic, mindless perhaps, baggage which Mastrovin could cart about as he chose. There had evidently been a row, and Archie had suffered in it, but now he was out of action. It was the sight of Alison's drooped head that made him desperate, and also perfectly cool. He had not much hope, but at any rate he was with his friends again.

This reconnaissance took a fraction of a second. He heard Mastrovin bark, "Hands up!" and up shot his arms.

There were two others in the room, Dedekind with his red pointed beard, and a sallow squat man, whom he remembered in the Canonry. What was his name? Rosenbaum?

It was the last who searched him, plucking the pistol from his breeches pocket. Jaikie did not mind that, for he had

never been much good with a gun. For the first time he saw the clock on the wall, and noted that it stood at a quarter to eleven. If he could spin out that quarter of an hour there was just the faintest chance, always provided that Mastrovin's reinforcements did not arrive too soon.

"I have come back," he said sweetly. "I really had to get some decent clothes, for I was in rags."

"You have come back," Mastrovin repeated. "Why?"

"Because I liked your face, Mr Mastrovin. I have the pleasantest recollection of you, you know, ever since we met two years ago at Portaway. Do you remember the Hydropathic there and the little Glasgow journalist that you cross-examined? Drunken little beast he was, and you tried to make him drunker. Have you been up to the same game with my friends?"

He glanced at Archie, trying to avoid the sight of Alison's bowed head. To his surprise he seemed to detect a slight droop of that gentleman's left eye. Was it possible that the doping had failed, and that the victims were only shamming?... The clock was at thirteen minutes to eleven.

Mastrovin was looking at him fixedly, as if he were busy reconstructing the past to which he had alluded.

"So," he said. "I have more against you than I imagined."

"You have nothing against me," said Jaikie briskly. "I might say I had a lot against you — kidnapping, imprisonment, no food or drink, filthy lodgings, and so forth. But I'm not complaining. I forgive you for the sake of your face. You wanted me to tell you something, but I couldn't, for I didn't know. Well, I know now, and I've come back to do you a good turn. You would like to know where Prince John is. I can tell you."

Jaikie stopped. His business was to spin out this dialogue.

"Go on," said Mastrovin grimly. He was clearly in two minds whether or not this youth was mad.

"He is with the Countess Troyos. I know, for I saw him there this morning."

"That is a lie."

"All right. Have it your own way. But when you blow up the bridge here tomorrow you had better find out whether I am speaking the truth, unless you want to kill the Prince. Perhaps you do. Perhaps you'd like to add him to the bag. It's all the same to me, only I thought I'd warn you."

He was allowed to finish this audacious speech, because Mastrovin was for once in his masterful life fairly stupefied. Jaikie's purpose was to anger him so that he might lay violent hands on him. He thought that, unless they took to shooting, he could give them a proof of the eel-like agility of the Gorbals Die-hards, not to speak of the most famous three-quarter back in Britain. He did not think they would shoot him, for they were sure to want to discover where he had got his knowledge.

He certainly succeeded in his purpose. Mastrovin's face flushed to an ugly purple, and both Dedekind and Rosenbaum grew a little paler. The last-named said something in Evallonian, and the three talked excitedly in that language. This was precisely what Jaikie wanted. He observed that the clock was now at eight minutes to the hour. He also noted that Alison, though her head was still on the table, was looking sideways at him through her fingers, and that her eyes had an alertness unusual in the doped.

Suddenly he heard a shot, muffled as if very far off. This room was in the heart of the house, and noises from the outer world would come faintly to it, if at all. But he had quick ears, and he knew that he could not be mistaken. Was the faithful Newsom holding the bridge alone like Horatius? He could not hold it long, and there were still five deadly minutes to go before the Twenty could be looked for. . . .

Yet it would take more than five minutes to get the prisoners out of the house and the gate. That danger at any rate had gone. What remained was the same peril which had brooded over the library at Castle Gay, before Dickson McCunn like a north wind had dispersed it. These wild beasts of the jungle, if cornered, might make a great destruction. Here in this place they were all on the thin crust of a volcano. He did not like that board with studs and numbers behind Mastrovin's head.

Again came the faint echo of shots. This time Mastrovin heard it. He said something to Dedekind, who hurried from the room. Rosenbaum would have followed, but a word detained him. Mastrovin sat crouching like an angry lion, waiting to spring, but not yet quite certain of his quarry.

"Stand still," he told Jaikie, who had edged nearer Alison. "If you move I will kill you. In a moment my friend will

return, and then you will go — ah, where will you go?”

He sucked his lips, and grinned like a great cat.

There were no more shots, and silence fell on the place, broken only by the ticking of the clock. Jaikie did not dare to look at the prisoners, for the slightest movement on his part might release the fury of the wild beast in front of him. He kept his eyes on that face which had now become gnarled like a knot in an oak stump, an intense concentration of anxiety, fury and animal power. It fascinated Jaikie, but it did not terrify him, for it was like a monstrous gargoyle, an expression of some ancient lust which was long dead. He had the impression that the man was somehow dead and awaited burial, and might therefore be disregarded. . . .

He strove to stir his inertia to life, but he seemed to have become boneless. “It’s you that will be dead in a minute or two,” he told himself, but apathetically, as if he were merely correcting a misstatement. Anger had gone out of him, and had taken fear with it, and only apathy remained. He felt Mastrovin’s eyes beginning to dominate and steal his senses like an anæsthetic. That scared him, and he shifted his gaze to the board on the wall, and the clock. The clock was at three minutes after eleven, but he had forgotten his former feverish calculation of time.

The door opened. Out of a corner of his eye he saw that Dedekind had returned. He noted his red beard.

Jaikie was pulled out of his languor by the behaviour of Mastrovin, who from a lion couchant became a lion rampant. He could not have believed that a heavy man well on in years could show such nimbleness. Mastrovin was on his feet, shouting something to Rosenbaum, and pointing at the newcomer the pistol with which he had threatened Jaikie.

The voice that spoke from the door was not Dedekind’s.

“Suppose we lower our guns, Mr Mastrovin?” it said. “You might kill me — but I think you know that I can certainly kill you. Is it a bargain?”

The voice was pleasant and low with a touch of drawl in it. Jaikie, in a wild whirling survey of the room, saw that it had fetched Alison’s head off her hands. It woke Janet and Archie, too, out of their doll-like stare. It seemed to cut into the stuffiness like a frosty wind, and it left Jaikie in deep bewilderment, but — for the first time that night — with a lively hope.

Mr Glynde sniffed the air.

“At the old dodge, I see,” he said. “You once tried it on me, you remember. You seem to have struck rather tough subjects this time.” He nodded to the Roylances and smiled on Alison.

“What do you want?” The words seemed to be squeezed out of Mastrovin, and came thick and husky.

“A deal,” said Randal cheerfully. “The game is against you this time. We’ve got your little lot trussed up below — also my old friend, Mr Dedekind.”

“That is a lie.”

Randal shrugged his shoulders.

“You are a monotonous controversialist. I assure you it is true. There was a bit of a tussle at first before our people arrived, and I’m afraid two of yours were killed. Then the rest surrendered to superior numbers. All is now quiet on that front.”

“If I believe you, what is your deal?”

“Most generous. That you should get yourself out of here in ten minutes and out of the country in ten hours. We will look after your transport. The fact is, Mr Mastrovin, we don’t want you — Evallonia doesn’t want you — nobody wants you. You and your bravos are back numbers. Properly speaking, we should string you up, but we don’t wish to spoil a good show with ugly episodes.”

Randal spoke lightly, so that there was no melodrama in his words, only a plain and rather casual statement of fact. But in that place such lightness was the cruellest satire. And it was belied by Randal’s eyes, which were as sharp as a hawk’s. They never left Mastrovin’s pistol hand and the studded board behind his head.

Mastrovin’s face was a mask, but his eyes too were wary. He seemed about to speak, but what he meant to say will never be known. For suddenly many things happened at once.

There was the sound of a high imperious voice at the door. It opened and the Countess Araminta entered, and close behind her a wild figure of a man, dusty, bleeding, with a coat nearly ripped from his back.

The sight of the Countess stung Mastrovin into furious life. A sense of death and fatality filled the room like a fog.

Jaikie sprang to get in front of Alison, and Archie with his unwounded arm thrust Janet behind him. In that breathless second Jaikie was conscious only of two things. Mastrovin had fired, and then swung round to the numbered board; but, even as his finger reached it he clutched at the air and fell backward over the arm of his chair. There was a sudden silence, and a click came from the board as if a small clock were running down.

Then Jaikie's eyes cleared. He saw a pallid Rosenbaum crouching on the floor. He saw Randal lower his pistol, and touch the body of Mastrovin. "Dead," he heard him say, "stone dead. Just as well perhaps."

But that spectacle was eclipsed by other extraordinary things. The Countess Araminta was behaving oddly — she seemed to be inclined to sob. Around his own neck were Alison's arms, and her cheek was on his, and the thrill of it almost choked him with joy. He wanted to weep too, and he would have wept had not the figure of the man who had entered with the Countess taken away what breath was left in him.

It was Newsom the chauffeur, transfigured beyond belief. He had become a younger man, for exertion had coloured his pallid skin, his whiskers had disappeared, and his tousled hair had lost its touch of grey. He held the Countess with one arm and looked ruefully at his right shoulder.

"Close shave," he said. "The second time tonight too. First casualty in the Revolution." Then he smiled on the company. "Lucky I cut the wires, or our friend would have dispersed us among the planets."

The Countess had both hands on his arm, and was looking at him with misty eyes.

"You saved my life," she cried. "The shot was meant for me. You are a hero. Oh, tell me your name."

He turned, took her hand, bent over it and kissed it.

"I am Prince John," he said, "and I think that you are going to be kind enough to help me to a throne."

She drew back a step, looked for a second in his face, and then curtsied low.

"My king," she said.

Her bosom heaved under her tunic, and she was no more the Praefectus but a most emotional young woman. . . . She looked at Randal and Jaikie, and at Janet and Archie, as if she were struggling for something to relieve her feelings. Then she saw Alison, and in two steps was beside her and had her in her arms.

"My dear," she said, "you have a very brave lover."



THE MARCH ON MELINA

I

In Krovolin's best hotel, the Three Kings of the East, Jaikie enjoyed the novel blessings of comfort and consideration. By the Countess's edict Alison, the Roylances and he were at once conducted there, and the mandate of Juventus secured them the distinguished attentions of the management. The released prisoners were little the worse, for they had not been starved as Jaikie had been, and the only casualty was Archie, who had been overpowered in a desperate effort the previous morning to get into the Street of the White Peacock. The doping had been clumsily managed, for some hours before Jaikie's arrival the three had been given a meal quite different from the coarse fare to which they had been hitherto treated. They were offered with it a red wine, which Archie at his first sip pronounced to be corked. Alison had tasted it, and, detecting something sweet and sickly in its flavour, had suspected a drug, whereupon Janet filled their glasses and emptied them in a corner. "Look like sick owls," she advised, when they were taken to Mastrovin's sanctum, where the overpowering scent was clearly part of the treatment. Mastrovin's behaviour showed that her inspiration had been right, for he had spoken to them as if they were somnambulists or half-wits. . . .

On the following morning Jaikie, feeling clean and refreshed for the first time for a week, descended late to the pleasant restaurant which overlooked the milky waters of the Rave. The little city sparkled in the sunlight, and the odour and bustle of a summer morning came as freshly to his nose and ears as if he had just risen from a sick-bed. He realised how heavy his heart had been for days, and the release sent his spirits soaring. . . . But his happiness was more than the absence of care, for last night had been an epoch in his life, like that evening two years before when, on the Canonry moor, Alison had waved him good-bye. For the first time he had held Alison in his arms and felt her lips on his cheek. That delirious experience had almost blotted out from his memory the other elements in the scene. As he dwelt on it he did not see the dead Mastrovin, and the crouched figure of Rosenbaum, and the Countess Araminta on the verge of tears, or hear the ticking of the clock, and the pistol shot which ended the drama; he saw only Alison's pale face and her gold hair like a cloud on his shoulder, and heard that in her strained voice which he had never heard before. . . . Jaikie felt the solemn rapture of some hungry, humble saint who finds his pulse changed miraculously into the ambrosia of Paradise.

A waiter brought him the morning paper. He could not read it, but he could guess at the headlines. Something tremendous seemed to be happening in Melina. There was a portrait of the Archduke Hadrian, edged with laurels and roses, and from it stared the familiar face of Mr McCunn. There was a photograph of a street scene in which motor-cars and an escort of soldiers moved between serried ranks of presumably shouting citizens. In one, next to a splendid figure in a cocked hat, could be discerned the homely features of Dickson.

He dropped the paper, for Alison had appeared, Alison, fresh as a flower, with the colour back in her cheeks. Only her eyes were still a little tired. She came straight to him, put her hands on his shoulders, and kissed him. "Darling," she said.

"Oh, Alison," he stammered. "Then it's all right, isn't it?"

She laughed merrily and drew him to a breakfast table in the window. "Foolish Jaikie! As if it would ever have been anything else!"

There was another voice behind him, and Jaikie found another fair head beside his.

"I shall kiss you too," said Janet Roylance, "for we're going to be cousins, you know. Allie, I wish you joy. Jaikie, I love you. Archie? Oh, he has to stay in bed for a little — the doctor has just seen him. He's all right, but his arm wants a rest, and he got quite a nasty smack on the head. . . . Let's have breakfast. I don't suppose there's any hope of kippers."

As they sat down at a table in the window Alison picked up the newspaper. She frowned at the pictures from Melina. Her coffee grew cold as she puzzled over the headlines.

"I wish I could read this stuff," she said. "Everything seems to have gone according to plan, but the question is, what is the next step? You realise, don't you, that we've still a nasty fence to leap. We've got over the worst, for the Blood-red Rook has taken Prince John to her bosom. She'll probably insist on marrying him, for she believes he saved her life, and I doubt if he is man enough to escape her. Perhaps he won't want to, for she's a glorious creature, but — Jaikie, I think you are

lucky to have found a homely person like me. Being married to her would be rather like domesticating a Valkyrie. You managed that business pretty well, you know."

"I don't deserve much credit, for I was only fumbling in the dark. Mr Glynde was the real genius. Do you think he arranged for the Countess to turn up, or was it an unrehearsed effect? If he arranged it he took a pretty big risk."

"I believe she took the bit in her teeth. Couldn't bear to be left out of anything. But what about Cousin Ran? He has disappeared over the skyline, and the only message he left was that we were to go back to Tarta and await developments. I'm worried about those developments, for we don't know what may happen. Everything has gone smoothly — except of course our trouble with Mastrovin — but I'm afraid there may be an ugly snag at the end."

"You mean Mr McCunn?"

"I mean the Archduke Hadrian, who is now in the royal palace at Melina wishing to goodness that he was safe home at Blawearry."

"I trust him to pull it off," said Jaikie.

"But it's no good trusting Dickson unless other people play up. Just consider what we've done. We've worked a huge practical joke on Juventus, and if Juventus ever came to know about it everything would be in the soup. Here you have the youth of Evallonia, burning with enthusiasm and rejoicing in their young prince, whom they mean to make king instead of an elderly dotard. What is Juventus going to say if they discover that the whole thing has been a plant to which their young prince has been a consenting party? Prince John's stock would fall pretty fast. You've wallowed in super-cherie from your cradle, Jaikie dear, so you don't realise how it upsets ordinary people, especially if they are young and earnest."

Jaikie laughed. "I believe you are right. Everybody's got their own panache, and the public-school notion of good form isn't really very different from what in foreigners we call melodrama. I mean, it's just as artificial."

"Anyhow, there's not a scrap of humour in it," said Alison. "The one thing the Rook won't stand is to be made ridiculous. No more will Juventus. So it's desperately important that Dickson should disappear into the night and leave no traces. How many people are in the plot?"

Jaikie as usual counted on his fingers.

"There's we three — and Sir Archie — and Ashie — and Prince John — and Prince Odalchini — and I suppose Count Casimir and maybe one or two other Monarchists. Not more than that, and it's everybody's interest to keep it deadly secret."

"That's all right if we can be certain about Dickson getting quietly away in time. But supposing Juventus catches him. Then it's bound to come out. I don't mean that they'll do him any harm beyond slinging him across the frontier. But he'll look a fool and we'll look fools — and, much more important, Prince John will look a fool and a bit of a knave — and the Monarchist leaders, who Ran says are the only people that can help Juventus to make a success of the Government. . . . We must get busy at once. Since that ruffian Ran has vanished, we must get hold of Prince John."

But it was not the Prince who chose to visit them as they were finishing breakfast, but the Countess Araminta. Jaikie had seen her in camp as Praefectus, and was prepared to some extent for her air of command, but the others only knew her as the exotic figure of London and Geneva, and as the excited girl whose nerves the night before had been stretched to breaking-point. Now she seemed the incarnation of youthful vigour. The door was respectfully held open by an aide-de-camp, and she made an entrance like a tragedy queen. She wore the uniform of Juventus, but her favourite colour glowed in a cape which hung over one shoulder. There was colour too in her cheeks, and her fine eyes had lost their sullenness. Everything about her, her trim form, the tilt of her head, the alert grace of her carriage, spoke of confidence and power. Jaikie gasped, for he had never seen anything quite like her. "Incessu patuit dea," he thought, out of a vague classical reminiscence.

They all stood up to greet her.

"My friends, my good friends," she cried. She put a hand on Jaikie's shoulder, and for one awe-stricken moment he thought she was going to kiss him.

She smiled upon them in turn. "Your husband is almost well," she told Janet. "I have seen the doctor. . . . What do you wish to do, for it is for you to choose? I must go back to my camp, for here in Krovolin during the next few days the whole forces of Juventus will concentrate. I shall be very busy, but I will instruct others to attend to you. What are your wishes? You have marched some distance with Juventus — do you care to finish the course, and enter Melina with us? You have

earned the right to that.”

“You are very kind,” said Janet. “But if you don’t mind, I believe we ought to go home. You see, my husband should be in Geneva . . . and I’m responsible for my cousin Alison. . . . I think if Archie were here he would agree with me. Would it be possible for us to go back to Tarta and rest there for a day or two? We don’t want to leave Evallonia till we know that you have won, but — you won’t misunderstand me — I don’t think we should take any part in the rest of the show. You see, we are foreigners, and it is important that everybody should realise that this is your business and nobody else’s. My husband is a member of our Parliament, and there might be some criticism if he were mixed up in it — not so much criticism of him as of you. So I think we had better go to Tarta.”

Janet spoke diffidently, for she did not know how Juventus might regard the House of the Four Winds and its owner. But to her surprise the Countess made no objection.

“You shall do as you wish,” she said. “Perhaps you are right and it would be wise to have no foreign names mentioned. But you must not think that we shall be opposed and must take Melina by storm. We shall enter the city with all the bells ringing.”

She saw Janet’s glance fall on the newspaper on the floor.

“You think there is a rival king? Ah, but he will not remain. He will not want to remain. The people will not want him. Trust me, he will yield at once to the desire of his country.”

“What will you do with the Archduke?” Alison asked.

“We will treat him with distinguished respect,” was the answer. “Is he not the brother of our late king and the uncle of him who is to be our king? If his health permits, he will be the right-hand counsellor of the Throne, for he is old and very wise. At the Coronation he will carry the Sacred Lamp and the Mantle of St Sylvester, and deliver with his own voice the solemn charge given to all Evallonia’s sovereigns.”

Alison groaned inwardly, having a vision of Dickson in this august rôle.

“I must leave you,” said the Countess. “You have done great service to my country’s cause, for which from my heart I thank you. An evil thing has been destroyed, which could not indeed have defeated Juventus but which might have been a thorn in its side.”

“Have you got rid of Mastrovin’s gang?” Jaikie asked.

She looked down on him smiling, her hand still on his shoulder.

“They are being rounded up,” she replied; “but indeed they count for nothing since he is dead. Mastrovin is not of great importance — not now, though once he was Evallonia’s evil genius. At the worst he was capable of murder in the dark. He was a survivor of old black days that the world is forgetting. He was a prophet of foolish crooked things that soon all men will loath.”

Her voice had risen, her face had flushed, she drew herself up to her slim height, and in that room, amid the debris of breakfast and with the sun through the long windows making a dazzle of light around her, the Countess Araminta became for a moment her ancestress who had ridden with John Sobieski against the Turk. To three deeply impressed listeners she expounded her creed.

“Mastrovin is dead,” she said; “but that is no matter, for he and his kind were dead long ago. They were revenants, ghosts, hideous futile ghosts. They lived by hate, hating what they did not understand. They were full of little vanities and fears, and were fit for nothing but to destroy. Back-numbers you call them in England — I call them shadows of the dark which vanish when the light comes. We of Juventus do not hate, we love, but in our love we are implacable. We love everything in our land, all that is old in it and all that is new, and we love all our people, from the greatest to the humblest. We have given back to Evallonia her soul, and once again we shall make her a great nation. But it will be a new nation, for everyone will share in its government.” She paused. “All will be sovereigns, because all will be subjects.”

She was a true actress, for she knew how to make the proper exit. Her rapt face softened. With one hand still on Jaikie’s shoulder she laid the other on Alison’s head and stroked her hair.

“Will you lend me your lover, my dear?” she said. “Only for a little — since he will join you at Tarta. I think he may be useful as a liaison between Juventus and those who doubtless mean well but have been badly advised.”

Then she was gone, and all the colour and half the light seemed to have left the room.

“Gosh!” Jaikie exclaimed, when they were alone. “It looks as if I were for it.” He remembered the phrase about subjects and sovereigns as coming from a philosopher on whom at Cambridge he had once written an essay. No doubt she had got it from Dr Jagon, and he had qualms as to what might happen if the public-school code got mixed up with philosophy.

Janet looked grave.

“What a woman!” she said. “I like her, but I’m scared by her. The Blood-red Rook is not the name — she’s the genuine eagle. I’m more anxious than ever about Mr McCunn. Juventus is a marvellous thing, but she said herself that it was implacable. There’s nothing in the world so implacable as the poet if you attempt to guy his poetry, and that’s what we have been doing. There’s going to be a terrible mix-up unless Dickson can disappear in about two days and leave no traces behind him; and I don’t see how that’s to be managed now that he is planted in a palace in the middle of an excited city.”

To three anxious consultants there entered Prince John. Somehow or other he had got in touch with his kit, for he was smartly dressed in a suit of light flannels, with a rose in his buttonhole.

“I’m supposed to be still incognito,” he explained, “and I have to lurk here till the concentration of Juventus is complete. That should be some time tomorrow. Sir Archie is all right. I’ve just seen him, and he is to be allowed to get up after luncheon. I hope you can control him, Lady Roylance, for I can’t. He is determined to be in at the finish, he says, and was simply blasphemous when I told him that he was an alien and must keep out of it. It won’t do, you know. You must all go back to Tarta at once. He doesn’t quite appreciate the delicacy of the situation or what compromising people you are.”

“We do,” said Janet. “We’ve just had a discourse from the Countess. You won’t find it easy to live up to that young woman, sir.”

Prince John laughed.

“I think I can manage Mintha. She is disposed to be very humble and respectful with me, for she has always been a staunch royalist. Saved her life, too, she thinks — though I don’t believe Mastrovin meant his shot for her — I believe he spotted me, and he always wanted to do me in. She’s by way of being our prophetess, but she is no fool, and, besides, there’s any number of sober-minded people to keep her straight. What I have to live up to is Juventus itself, and that will take some doing. It’s a tremendous thing, you know, far bigger and finer than any of us thought, and it’s going to be the salvation of Evallonia. Perhaps more than that. What was it your Pitt said — ‘Save its country by its efforts and Europe by its example’? But it’s youth, and youth takes itself seriously, and if anybody laughs at it or tries to play tricks with it he’ll get hurt. That’s where we are rather on the knife-edge.”

“My dear Uncle Hadrian,” he went on, “is in bed at home in France and reported to be sinking. That is Odalchini’s last word, and Odalchini has the affair well in hand. My uncle’s secretary is under his orders, and not a scrap of news is allowed to leave the chateau.”

“The Countess seems to be better disposed to Prince Odalchini,” said Janet.

“She is. Odalchini has opened negotiations with Juventus. He has let it be known that he and his friends will not contest my right to the throne, and that the Archduke has bowed to this view and proposes to leave the country. Of course he speaks for Casimir and the rest. That is all according to plan. Presently His Royal Highness will issue a proclamation resigning all claims. But in the meantime our unhappy Scotch friend is masquerading in the palace of Melina — in deep seclusion, of course, for the Archduke is an old and frail man, and is seeing no one as yet — but still there, with the whole capital agog for a sight of him. You will say, smuggle him out and away with him across the frontier. But Juventus has other ideas — Mintha has other ideas. There is to be a spectacular meeting between uncle and nephew — a noble renunciation — a tender reconciliation — and the two surviving males of the Evallonian royal house are to play a joint part in the restoration of the monarchy. Juventus has the good sense to understand that it needs Casimir and his lot to help it to get the land straight, and it thinks that that will be best managed by having its claimant and their claimant working in double harness. I say ‘Juventus thinks,’ but it’s that hussy Mintha who does the thinking, and the others accept it. That’s the curse of a romantic girl in politics. . . . So there’s the tangle we’re in. There will be the devil to pay if the Archduke isn’t out of the country within three days without anyone setting eyes on him, and that’s going to be a large-size job for somebody.”

“For whom?” Jaikie asked.

“Principally for you,” was the answer. “You seem to get all the worst jobs in this business. You’re young, you see — you’re our Juventus.”

“She says I have to go with her.”

“You have to stay here. I asked for you. Thank Heaven she has taken an enormous fancy to you. Miss Alison needn’t be jealous, for Mintha has about as much sex as a walking-stick. I daresay she would insist on marrying me, if she thought the country needed it, but I shall take jolly good care to avoid that. No warrior-queen for me. . . . All of you except Jaikie go back to Tarta this afternoon, and there Odalchini will keep you advised about what is happening. Jaikie stays here, and as soon as possible he goes to Melina. Don’t look so doleful, my son. You won’t be alone there. Randal Glynde, to the best of my belief, is by this time in the palace.”

Late that afternoon Janet and Alison, accompanied by a bitterly protesting Archie, left Krovolin for the House of the Four Winds. Next day there began for Jaikie two crowded days filled with a manifold of new experiences. The wings of Juventus, hitherto on the periphery of Evallonia, drew towards the centre. The whole business was a masterpiece of organisation, and profoundly impressed him with the fact that this was no flutter of youth, but a miraculous union of youth and experience. Three-fourths of the higher officers were mature men, some of them indeed old soldiers of Evallonia in the Great War. The discipline was military, and the movements had full military precision, but it was clear that this was a civilian army, with every form of expert knowledge in it, and trained more for civil reconstruction than for war.

Dr Jagon, who embraced him publicly, enlarged on its novel character. “It is triumphant democracy,” he declared, “purged of the demagogue. Its root is not emotion but reason — sentiment, indeed, of the purest, but sentiment rationalised. It is the State disciplined and enlightened. It is an example to all the world, the pioneer of marching humanity. God be praised that I have lived to see this day.”

Prince John’s presence was formally made known, and at a review of the wings he took his place, in the uniform of Juventus, as Commander-in-Chief. The newspapers published his appeal to the nation, in which he had judiciously toned down Dr Jagon’s philosophy and the Countess’s heroics. Presently, too, they issued another document, the submission of the Monarchist leaders. City and camp were kindled to a fervour of patriotism, and addresses poured in from every corner of the land.

On the afternoon of the second day Jaikie was summoned to the Prince’s quarters, where the Countess and the other wing commanders were present. There he was given his instructions. “You will proceed at once to Melina, Mr Galt,” said the Prince, “and confer with Count Casimir Muresco, with whom I believe you are already acquainted. To-morrow we advance to the capital, of whose submission we have been already assured. We desire that His Royal Highness the Archduke should be associated with our reception, and we have prepared a programme for the approval of His Royal Highness and his advisers. On our behalf and on behalf of Juventus you will see that this programme is carried out. I think that I am expressing the wishes of my headquarters staff.”

The wing commanders bowed gravely, and the Countess favoured Jaikie with an encouraging smile. He thought that he detected in Prince John’s eye the faintest suspicion of a wink. As he was getting into his car, with an aide-de-camp and an orderly to attend him, Ashie appeared and drew him aside.

“For God’s sake,” he whispered, “get your old man out of the way. Shoot him and bury him if necessary.”

“I’d sooner shoot the lot of you,” said Jaikie.

“Well, if you don’t you’d better shoot yourself. And me, too, for I won’t survive a fiasco. Mintha has got off on her high horse, and Juventus is following her. She has drawn up a programme of ceremonies a yard long, in which your old fellow is cast for a principal part. There’ll be bloody murder if they find themselves let down. They’re a great lot, and my own lot, but they won’t stand for ragging.”

II

Dickson, enveloped in a military great-coat and muffled up about the neck because of his advanced age and indifferent health, enjoyed his journey in the late afternoon from Krovolin to Melina. He sat beside Prince Odalchini on the back seat of a large Daimler, with Count Casimir opposite him. There were police cars in front and behind, and a jingling escort of National Guards who made their progress slow. The movement, the mellow air, the rich and sunlit champaign raised his spirits and dispelled his nervousness. His roving eye scanned the landscape and noted with pleasure the expectant villagers and the cheering group of countrymen. On the outskirts of the capital a second troop of Guards awaited them, and as they

entered by the ancient River Port there was a salute of guns from the citadel and every bell in every steeple broke into music. It had been arranged, in deference to His Royal Highness's frailty, that there should be no municipal reception, but the streets were thronged with vociferous citizens and the click of cameras was like the rattle of machine-guns.

The cars swung through what looked like a Roman triumphal arch into a great courtyard, on three sides of which rose the huge baroque Palace. At this point Dickson's impressions became a little confused. He was aware that troops lined the courtyard — he heard a word of command and saw rifles presented at the salute. He was conscious of being tenderly assisted from his car, and conducted between bowing servants through a high doorway and across endless marble pavements. Then came a shallow staircase, and a corridor lined with tall portraits. He came to anchor at last in what seemed to be a bedroom, though it was as big as a church. The evening was warm, but there were fires lit in two fireplaces. As he got out of his great-coat he realised that he was alone with Prince Odalchini and Count Casimir, each of whom helped himself to a stiff whisky-and-soda from a side-table.

"Thank Heaven that is over," cried the latter. "Well over, too. Your Royal Highness will keep your chamber to-night, and you will be valeted by my own man. Do not utter one word, and for God's sake try to look as frail as possible. You are a sick man, you understand, which is the reason for this privacy. To-morrow you will have to show yourself from one of the balconies to the people of Melina. To-morrow, too, I hope that your own equerry will arrive. It is better that you should be alone to-night. You realise, I think, how delicate the position is? Silence and great bodily weakness — these are your trump cards. It may be a little lonely for you, but that is inevitable."

Dickson looked round the immense room, which was hung with tapestries depicting the doings in battle of the sixteenth-century King John of Evallonia. From the windows there was a wide view over the glades of the park with a shining river at the end. The two fires burned brightly, and on a bed like a field he observed his humble pyjamas. His spirits were high.

"Ugh," he said, "I'll do fine. This is a cheery place. I'll not utter a cheep, and I'll behave as if I was a hundred years old. I hope they'll send me up a good dinner, for I'm mortal hungry."

Dickson spent a strange but not unpleasant evening. Count Casimir's valet proved to be an elderly Frenchman whose reverence for royalty was such that he kept his eyes downcast and uttered no word except "Altesse," and that in a tone of profound humility. Dickson was conducted to an adjoining bathroom, where he bathed in pale-blue scented water. In the bathroom he nearly drowned himself by turning on all the taps at once, but he enjoyed himself hugely splashing the water about and watching it running in marble grooves to an exit. After that he was enveloped in a wonderful silk dressing-gown, which hid the humbleness of his pyjamas — pyjamas from which he observed that the name-tag had been removed.

The dinner served in his bedroom was all that his heart would wish, and its only blemish was that, from a choice of wines offered him, he selected a tokay which tasted unpleasantly like a medicine of his boyhood, so that he was forced to relapse upon a whisky-and-soda. "Even in a palace life may be lived well," he quoted to himself from a favourite poet. After dinner he was put to bed between sheets as fine as satin, and left with a reading-lamp on his bedside table surrounded by a selection of fruit and biscuits. He turned out the lamp, and lay for some time watching the glow of the fire and the amber twilight in the uncurtained windows. Outside he could hear the tramp of the sentries and far off the rumour of crowded streets. At first he was too excited to be drowsy, for the strangeness of his position came over him in gusts, and his chuckles were mingled with an unpleasant trepidation. "You'll need to say your prayers, Dickson my man," he told himself, "for you're in for a desperate business. It's the kind of thing you read about in books." But the long day had wearied him, and he had dined abundantly, so before long he fell asleep.

He woke to a bright morning and a sense of extreme bodily well-being. He drank his tea avidly; he ran off the hot bath which had been prepared for him, and had a cold one instead. He took ten minutes instead of five over his exercises, and two instead of five over his prayers. He put on his best blue suit — he was thankful he had brought it from Rosensee — and a white shirt and a sober tie, for he felt that this was no occasion for flamboyance in dress. From all his garments he noted with interest that the marks of identification had been removed. As he examined his face in the glass he decided that he did not look the age of the Archduke and that he was far too healthily coloured for a sick man, so he rubbed some of the powder which Count Casimir had given him over his cheeks and well into his thinning hair. The result rather scared him, for he now looked a cross between a consumptive and a badly made-up actor. At breakfast he was compelled to exercise self-denial. He could have eaten everything provided, but he dared not repeat his performance at dinner the night before, so he contented himself with three cups of coffee, a peach, and the contents of the toast rack. The servants who cleared

away saw an old man resting on a couch with closed eyes, the very image of a valetudinarian.

After that time hung heavy on his hands. It was a fine morning and he felt that he could walk twenty miles. The sound of the bustle of an awaking city, and the view from the windows of miles of sunburnt grass and boats on the distant river, made him profoundly restless. His great bedroom was furnished like a room in a public building, handsomely but dully; there was nothing in it to interest him, and the only book he had brought was Sir Thomas Browne, an author for whom at the moment he did not feel inclined. Urn-burial and a doctor's religion were clean out of the picture. A sheaf of morning papers had been provided, but he could not read them, though he observed with interest the pictures of his entry into Melina. He prowled about miserably, taking exercise as a man does in the confined space of a ship's deck.

Then it occurred to him that he might extend his walk and do a little exploration. He cautiously opened the door and looked into a deserted corridor. The place was as empty and as silent as a tomb, so there could be no risk in venturing a little way down it. He tried one or two doors which were locked. One opened into a vast chamber where the furniture was all in dust sheets. Then he came to a circular gallery around a subsidiary staircase, and he was just considering whether he might venture down it when he heard voices and the sound of footsteps on the marble. He skipped back the road he had come, and for an awful minute was uncertain of his room. One door which he tried refused to open, and the voices were coming nearer. Happily the next door on which he hurled himself was the right one, and he dropped panting into an armchair.

This adventure shook him out of all his morning placidity. "I won't be able to stand this place very long," he reflected. "I can't behave like a cripple, when I'm fair bursting with health. It's worse than being in jyle." And then an uglier thought came to him. "I've got in here easy enough, but how on earth am I going to get out? I must abdicate, and that's simple, but what's to become of me after that? How can I disappear, when there will be about a million folk wanting a sight of me?"

He spent a dismal forenoon. He longed for some familiar face, even Peter Wappit, who had been sent back to Tarta. He longed especially for Jaikie, and he indulged in some melancholy speculations as to that unfortunate's fate. "He had to face the daft Countess," he thought, "and Jaikie was always terrible nervous with women." Then he began to be exasperated with Count Casimir and Prince Odalchini, who had left him in this anxious solitude. And Prince John. It was for Prince John's sake that he had come here, and unless he presently got some enlightenment he would go out and look for it.

He was slightly pacified by the arrival of both the Count and Prince Odalchini about midday, for both were in high spirits. Luncheon was served to the three in his bedroom, a light meal at which no servants were present and they waited on themselves. They had news of high importance for him. Prince John was with Juventus — had been accepted with acclamation by Juventus and not least by the Countess Araminta. Juventus was in a friendly mood and appeared willing to accept the overtures of the Monarchists, who had already informed it that the Archduke would not resist what was plainly the desire of the people, but would relinquish all claims to the throne. "We must prepare your abdication," said Count Casimir. "It should be in the papers tomorrow, or the day after at the latest. For the day after tomorrow Juventus will reach Melina."

"Thank God for that," said Dickson. "I'll abdicate like a shot, but what I want to know is, how I'm to get away. I must be off long before they arrive, for yon Countess will be wanting my blood."

"I hope not," said the Count. "Juventus will have too much on its hands to trouble about a harmless old gentleman."

"I'm not worrying about Juventus," said Dickson gloomily. "It's the woman I'm thinking about, and from all I've heard I wouldn't put it past her."

"One of your difficulties will be the Press," Prince Odalchini said. "Correspondents are arriving here from all quarters of Europe — mostly by the air, since the frontiers are closed."

"Here! This is awful," cried the alarmed Dickson. "I know the breed, and they'll be inside this place and interviewing me, and where will we all be then?"

"I think not. You are well guarded. But there's one man I'm uncertain about. He flew here this morning from Vienna, and I don't quite know what to do about him. He's not a correspondent, you see, but the representative of the English Press group that has always been our chief ally."

"What's his name?" Dickson asked with a sudden hope.

The Prince drew a card from his pocket. "Crombie," he read. "The right-hand man of the great Craw. I haven't seen him, but he has written to me. I felt that I was bound to treat him with some consideration, so he is coming here at three

o'clock."

"You'll bring him to me at once," said Dickson joyfully. "Man, you know him — you saw him in the Canonry — a lad with a red head and a dour face. It's my old friend Dougal, and you can trust him to the other side of Tophet. You'll bring him straight up, and you'll never let on it's me. He'll get the surprise of his life."

Mr McCunn was not disappointed. Dougal at three o'clock was duly ushered into the room by Count Casimir. "Your Royal Highness, I have to present Mr Crombie of the Craw Press," he said, and bowed himself out.

Dougal made an awkward obeisance and advanced three steps. Then he stopped in his tracks and gaped.

"It's you!" he stammered.

"Ay, it's me," said Dickson cheerfully. "You didn't know what you were doing when you whippit me out of Rosensee and sent me on my travels. This was my own notion, and I'm sort of proud of it. I got it by minding what happened when Jimmy Turnbull was running for Lord Provost of Glasgow, and his backers put up David Duthie so that the other and stronger lot could run Jimmy. You'll mind that?"

"I mind it," said Dougal hoarsely, sinking into a chair.

"And by the mercy of Providence it turned out that I was the living image of the old Archduke. It has answered fine. Here I am as His Royal Highness, the brother of his late Majesty, and Juventus has gone daft about Prince John, and I'm about to abdicate, and in two-three days Prince John will be King of Evallonia and not a dog will bark. I think I've done well by that young man."

"Ay, maybe you have," said Dougal grimly. "But the question is, what is to become of YOU? This is not the Glasgow Town Council, and Evallonia is not Scotland. How are you going to get out of this?"

"Fine," Dickson replied, but less confidently, for Dougal's solemn face disquieted him. "There's not a soul knows about it, except two or three whose interest it is to keep quiet. When I've abdicated I'll just slip cannily away, and be over the border before Juventus gets here."

"You think that will be easy? I only arrived this morning, but I've seen enough to know that the whole of Melina is sitting round the palace like hens round a baikie. They're for you and they're for Prince John, and they want to see the two of you make it up. And half the papers in Europe have sent their correspondents here, and I know too much about my own trade to take that lightly. To get you safely out of the country will be a heavy job, I can tell you."

"I'll trust my luck," said Dickson stoutly, but his eyes were a little anxious. "Thank God you're here, Dougal."

"Yes, thank God I'm here. The trouble with you is you're too brave. You don't stop to think of risks. Suppose you're found out. Juventus is a big thing, a bigger thing than the world knows, but it's desperate serious, and it won't understand pranks. Won't understand, and won't forgive. At present it's inclined to be friendly with the Monarchists, and use them, for it badly needs them. But if it had a suspicion of this game, Count Casimir and Prince Odalchini and the rest would be in the dock for high treason. And yourself! Well, I'm not sure what would happen to you, but it wouldn't be pleasant."

"You're a Job's comforter, Dougal. Anyway, it's a great thing to have you here. I wish I had Jaikie too. You'll come and bide here, for I'll want you near me?"

"Yes, I'd better move in. I'll see the Count about it at once. Some of us will have to do some pretty solid thinking in the next twenty-four hours."

Dougal found Count Casimir in a good humour, for he had further news from Krovolin. It appeared that Juventus not only forgave the putting forward of the Archduke, but applauded it as a chance of making the monarchical restoration impressive by enlisting both the surviving males of the royal house. The Countess Araminta was especially enthusiastic, and an elaborate programme had been drawn up — first the meeting of Prince John and his uncle — then the presentation to Melina of the young man by the old — and last, the ceremonial functioning of the Archduke at the Coronation.

"The wheel has come full circle," said the Count. "Now all the land is royalist. But it is the more incumbent upon us to proceed with caution, for a slip now would mean a dreadful fall. We must get our friend away very soon."

At this conference a third person was present — Randal Glynde, so very point-device that his own employees would scarcely have recognised in him the scarecrow of the Cirque Doré. His hair and beard were trimly barbered, the latter having been given a naval cut, and his morning suit was as exquisite a thing as the clothes he had worn at the Lamanchas' party. "I am His Royal Highness's chief equerry," he told Dougal, "just arrived from France. The news will be in the evening

papers. Since I speak Evallonian I can make life a little easier for him.”

Dougal had listened gloomily to Count Casimir’s exposition of the spectacular duties which Juventus proposed for the Archduke.

“You haven’t told Mr McCunn that?” he demanded anxiously, and was informed that the Count had only just heard it himself.

“Well, you mustn’t breathe a word of it to him. Not on your life. He’s an extraordinary man, and though I’ve studied him for years, I haven’t got near the bottom of him. He’s what you might call a desperate character. What other man would have taken on a job like this — for fun? For fun, remember. He has always been like that. He thinks it was his promise to Prince John, but that was only a small bit of it. The big thing for him was that he was living up to a notion he has of himself, and that notion won’t let him shirk anything, however daft, if it appeals to his imagination. He’s the eternal adventurer, the only one I’ve ever met — the kind of fellow Ulysses must have been — the heart of a boy and the head of an old serpent. I’ve been trying to solemnise him by telling him what a needle-point he’s standing on — how hard it will be for him to get away, and what a devil’s own mess there’ll be if he doesn’t. He was impressed, and a little bit frightened — I could see that — but in a queer way he was pleased too. He’ll go into it with a white face and his knees trembling, but he’ll go through with it, and by the mercy of God he’ll get away with it. But just let him know what Juventus proposes and he won’t budge one step. The idea of a Coronation and his carrying the Sacred Lamp and all the rest of it would fair go to his head. He would be determined to have a shot at it and trust to luck to carry him through. Oh, I know it’s sheer mania, but that’s Mr McCunn, and when he sticks his hoofs into the ground traction engines wouldn’t shift him. . . . You’ve got that clear? I want you to arrange for me to move in here, for I ought to be near him.”

Count Casimir bowed. “I accept your reading of him,” he said, “and I shall act on it.” Then he added, rather to Randal than to Dougal, “I believe he was originally a Glasgow grocer. The provision-trade in Scotland must be a remarkable profession.”

Dickson had on the whole a pleasant evening. In the first place he had Mr Glynde, an exquisite velvet-footed attendant, whose presence made other servants needless except for the mere business of fetching and carrying. Then he enjoyed the business of writing his abdication. The draft was prepared by Count Casimir, but he took pains to amend the style, assisted by Randal, in whom he discovered a literary connoisseur of a high order. I am afraid that the resulting document was a rather precious composition, full of Stevensonian cadences and with more than a hint of the prophet Isaiah. Happily Count Casimir was there to turn it into robust Evallonian prose.

Dickson and Randal dined alone together, and the former heard with excitement of the doings in the Street of the White Peacock. The peril of Alison and the Royslances, not to speak of Jaikie, made him catch his breath, and the manner of Mastrovin’s end gave him deep satisfaction.

“I’m glad yon one is out of the world,” he said. “He was a cankered body. It was your shot that did it? What does it feel like to kill a man?”

“In Mastrovin’s case rather like breaking the back of a stoat that is after your chickens. Have you ever been the death of anyone, Mr McCunn?”

“I once had a try,” said Dickson modestly. Then his thoughts fastened on Jaikie.

“You tell me he’s safe and well? And he gets on fine with the Countess?”

“He promises to be her white-headed boy. She is a lady of violent likes and dislikes, and she seems to have fallen completely for Master Jaikie. Prince John, of course, is deep in his debt. I think that if he wants it he might have considerable purchase at the new Court of Evallonia.”

“Do you say so? That would be a queer profession for a laddie that came out of the Gorbals. There’s another thing.” Dickson hesitated. “I think Jaikie is terrible fond of Miss Alison.”

Randal smiled. “I believe that affair is going well. Last night, I fancy, clinched it. They clung together like two lovers.”

Dickson’s eyes became misty.

“Well — well. It’s a grand thing to be young. That reminds me of something where I want you to help me, Mr Glynde. My will was made years ago, and is deposited with Paton and Linklater in Glasgow. I haven’t forgot Jaikie, but I think I must make further and better provision for him, as the lawyers say. I’ve prepared a codicil, and I want it signed and witnessed the morn. I’ve determined that Jaikie shall be well-tochered, and if Miss Alison has the beauty and the blood he

at any rate will have the siller. No man knows what'll happen to me in the next day or two, and I'd be easier in my mind if I got this settled."

"To-morrow you must stay in bed," said Randal, as he said good night. "You must profess to be exceedingly unwell."

Dickson grinned. "And me feeling like a he-goat on the mountains!"

III

Next day an unwilling Dickson kept his bed. He had the codicil of his will signed and witnessed, which gave him some satisfaction. Randal translated for him the comments of the Evallonian Press on his abdication, and he was gratified to learn that he had behaved with a royal dignity and the self-abnegation of a patriot. But after that he grew more restless with every hour.

"What for am I lying here?" he asked repeatedly. "I should be up and off or I'll be grippit."

"Juventus works to a schedule," Randal explained, "and its formal entry into Melina is timed for tomorrow. The Press announces today that you are seriously indisposed, and therefore you cannot appear in public before the people, which is what Melina is clamouring for. News of your being confined to bed this morning has already been issued, and a bulletin about your health will be published at midday. You appreciate the position, Mr McCunn?"

"Fine," said Dickson.

"It is altogether necessary that you get away in good time, but it is also necessary that you have a good reason for your going — an excuse for Melina, and especially for Juventus. They are not people whose plans can be lightly disregarded. If there is to be peace in Evallonia, Count Casimir and his friends must be in favour with Juventus, and that will not happen if we begin by offending it. We must get a belief in your critical state of health firm in the minds of the people, and our excuse for your going must be that any further excitement would endanger your life. So we must move carefully and not too fast. Our plan is to get you out of here to-night very secretly, and the fact that you did not leave till the question of your health became urgent will, we hope, convince Juventus of our good intentions."

"That's maybe right enough," said Dickson doubtfully, "but it's a poor job for me. I have to lie here on my back, and I've nothing to read except Sir Thomas Browne, and I can't keep my mind on him. I'm getting as nervous as a peesweep."

Luncheon saw an anxious company round his bed, Prince Odalchini, Count Casimir, Dougal and Mr Glynde. They had ominous news. The advanced troops of Juventus had arrived, a picked body who had been instructed to take over the duty of palace guards. They had accordingly replaced the detachment of National Guards, which had been sent to occupy the approaches to the city. There had been no difficulty about the transference, but it appeared that there was going to be extreme difficulty with the palace's new defenders. For these Juventus shock-troops had strict orders, and a strict notion of fulfilling them. No movement out of the city was permitted for the next twenty-four hours. No movement out of the Palace was permitted for the same period. Count Casimir had interviewed the officer commanding and had found him respectful but rigid. If any member of the Archduke's entourage wished to leave it would be necessary to get permission by telephone from headquarters at Krovolin.

"I do not think that Juventus is suspicious," said the Count. "It is only its way of doing business. It has youth's passion for meticulous detail."

"That puts the lid on it for us," said Dougal. "We can't ask permission for Mr McCunn to leave, for Juventus would be here in no time making inquiries for itself. And it will be an awful business to smuggle him out. I can tell you these lads know their work. They have sentries at every approach, and they are patrolling every yard of the back parts and the park side. Besides, once he was out of here, what better would he be? He would have still to get out of the city, and the whole countryside between here and Tarta is policed by Juventus. They are taking no chances."

There were poor appetites at luncheon. Five reasonably intelligent men sat in a stupor of impotence, repeating wearily the essentials of a problem which they could not solve. They must get Dickson away within not more than twenty hours, and they must get him off in such a manner that they would have a convincing story to tell Juventus. Dickson sat up in his bed in extreme discomposure, Dougal had his head in his hands, Count Casimir strode up and down the room, and even Randal Glynde seemed shaken out of his customary insouciance. Prince Odalchini had left them on some errand of his

own.

The last-named returned about three o'clock with a tragic face.

"I have just had a cipher telegram," he said. "I have my own means of getting them through. The Archduke Hadrian died this morning at eleven o'clock. His death will not be announced till I give the word, but the announcement cannot be delayed more than two days — three at the most. Therefore we must act at once. There is not an hour to waste."

"There is not an hour to waste," Casimir cried, "but we are an eternity off having any plan."

"I'm dead," said Dickson. "At least the man I'm pretending to be is dead. Well, I'll maybe soon be dead myself." His tone was almost cheerful, as if the masterful comedy of events had obliterated his own cares.

"There is nothing to do but to risk it," said Prince Odalchini. "We must go on with our plan for to-night, and pray that Juventus may be obtuse. The odds I admit are about a thousand to one."

"And on these crazy odds depends the fate of a nation," said Casimir bitterly.

To this miserable conclave entered Jaikie — Jaikie, trim, brisk and purposeful. He wore the uniform of a Juventus staff-officer, and on his right arm was the Headquarters brassard. To Dickson's anxious eyes he was a different being from the shabby youth he had last seen at Tarta. This new Jaikie was a powerful creature, vigorous and confident, the master, not the plaything, of Fate. He remembered too that this was Alison's accepted lover. At the sight of him all his fears vanished.

"Man Jaikie, but I'm glad to see you," he cried. "You've just come in time to put us right."

"I hope so," was the answer. "Anyway, I've come to represent Juventus Headquarters here till they take over tomorrow."

He looked round the company, and his inquiring eye induced Casimir to repeat his mournful tale. Jaikie listened with a puckered brow.

"It's going to be a near thing," he said at last. "And we must take some risks. . . . Still, I believe it can be done. Listen. I've brought a Headquarters car with the Headquarters flag on the bonnet. Also I have a pass which enables me and the car and anyone I send in the car to go anywhere in Evallonia. I insisted on that, for I expected that there might be some trouble. That is our trump card. I can send Mr McCunn off in it, and that will give us a story for Juventus tomorrow. . . . But on the other hand there is nothing to prevent the Juventus sentries from looking inside, and if they see Mr McCunn — well, his face is unfortunately too well known from their infernal papers, and they have their orders, and they're certain to insist on telephoning to Krovolin for directions, and that would put the fat in the fire. We must get them into a frame of mind when they won't want to look too closely. Let me think."

"Ay, Jaikie, think," said Dickson, almost jovially. "It must never be said that a Gorbals Die-hard was beat by a small thing like that."

After a little Jaikie raised his head.

"This is the best I can do. Mr McCunn must show himself to Melina. In spite of his feebleness and the announcement in the Press today, he must make an effort to have one look at his affectionate people. Ring up the newspaper offices, and get it into the stop-press of the evening papers that at seven o'clock the Archduke will appear on the palace balcony. You've got that? Then at a quarter-past seven my car must be ready to start. You must go with it, Prince. Have you a man of your own that you can trust to drive, for I daren't risk the Juventus chauffeur."

Prince Odalchini nodded. "I have such a man."

"What I hope for is this," Jaikie went on. "The Juventus guards, having seen the Archduke on the balcony a few minutes before, and having observed a tottering old man who has just risen from a sick-bed, won't expect him to be in the car. I'll have a word with their commandant and explain that you are taking two of your servants to Tarta, and that you have my permission, as representing the Headquarters staff."

He stopped.

"But there's a risk, all the same. If they catch a glimpse of Mr McCunn they will insist on ringing up Krovolin. I know what conscientious beggars they are, and I'm only a staff-officer, not their commander. Couldn't we do something to distract their attention at the critical moment?" He looked towards Randal with a sudden inspiration.

Mr Glynde smiled.

“I think I can manage that,” he said. “If I may be excused, I will go off and see about it.”

As the hour of seven chimed from the three and thirty towers of Melina, there was an unusual bustle in the great front courtyard of the Palace. The evening papers had done their work, rumour with swift foot had sped through the city, and the Juventus sentries had permitted the entrance of a crowd which the Press next day estimated as not less than twenty thousand. On the balcony above the main portico, flanked by a row of palace officials, stood a little group of men. Some wore the uniform of the old Evallonian Court, and Jaikie alone had the Juventus green. They made a passage, in which appeared Count Casimir and Prince Odalchini, both showing the famous riband and star of the White Falcon. Between them they supported a frail figure which wore a purple velvet dressing-gown and a skull-cap, so that it looked like some very ancient Prince of the Church. It was an old man, with a deathly white face, who blinked his eyes wearily, smiled wanly, and bowed as with a great effort to the cheering crowds. There was a dignity in him which impressed the most heedless, the dignity of an earlier age, and an extreme fragility which caught at the heart. The guards saluted, every hat was raised, but there was some constraint in the plaudits. The citizens of Melina felt that they were in the presence of one who had but a slender hold on life.

Dickson was stirred to his depths. The sea of upturned faces moved him strangely, for he had never before stood on a pinnacle above his fellow-men. He did not need to act his part, for in that moment he felt himself the authentic Archduke, an exile returning only to die. He was wearing a dead man's shoes. Next day the papers were to comment upon the pathetic spectacle of this old man bidding Ave atque vale to the people he loved.

The car was waiting in a small inner courtyard. It was a big limousine with the blinds drawn on one side, so that the interior was but dimly seen. Dickson entered and sat himself in the duskiest corner, wearing the military overcoat in which he had arrived, with the collar turned up and a thick muffler. Dougal took the seat by the driver. The car moved through the inner gateway and came into the outer court, which was the private entrance to the Palace. At the other end the court opened into the famous thoroughfare known as the Avenue of the Kings, and there stood the Juventus sentries.

The Headquarters flag fluttered at the car's bonnet, and Prince Odalchini's hand through the open window displayed the familiar green and white Headquarters pass. The sentries saluted, and their officer, whom Jaikie had already interviewed, nodded and took a step towards the car. It may have been his intention to examine the interior, but that will never be known, for his activities were suddenly compelled to take a different form.

In the Avenue was a great crowd streaming away from the ceremony in the main palace courtyard. The place was broad enough for thousands, and the sounding of the car's horn had halted the press and made a means of egress. But coming from the opposite direction was a circus procession, which, keeping its proper side of the road, had got very close to the palace wall. It had heard the horn of the car and would have stopped, but for the extraordinary behaviour of an elephant. The driver of the animal, a ridiculous figure of a man in flapping nankeen trousers, an old tunic of horizon blue and a scarlet cummerbund, apparently tried to check it, but at the very moment that the car was about to pass the gate it backed into the archway, scattering the Juventus guards.

There was just room for the car to slip through, and, as it swung into the avenue, Dickson, through a crack in the blind, saw with delight that his retreat was securely covered by the immense rump of Aurunculeia.

IV

The last guns of the royal salute had fired, and the cheering of the crowds had become like the murmur of a distant groundswell. The entrance hall of the Palace was lined with the tall Juventus guards, and up the alley between them came the new King-designate of Evallonia. There was now nothing of McTavish and less of Newsom about Prince John. The Juventus uniform well became his stalwart figure, and he was no more the wandering royalty who for some years had been the sport of fortune, but a man who had found again his land and his people. Yet in all the group, in the Prince and his staff and in the wing commanders, there was a touch of hesitation, almost of shyness, like schoolboys who had been catapulted suddenly into an embarrassing glory. The progress from Krovolin to Melina had been one long blaze of triumph, for again and again the lines of the escort had been broken by men and women who kissed the Prince's stirrup, and it had rained garlands of flowers. The welcome of Melina had been more ceremonial, but not less rapturous, and they had listened to that roar of many thousands, which, whether it be meant in love or in hate, must make the heart stand still. All the group,

even the Countess Araminta, had eyes unnaturally bright and faces a little pale.

At the foot of the grand staircase stood Count Casimir and Jaikie. Ashie translated for the latter the speeches that followed. The Count dropped on his knee.

"Sire," he said, "as the Chamberlain of the king your father I welcome you home."

Prince John raised him and embraced him.

"But where," he asked, "is my beloved uncle? I had hoped to be welcomed by him above all others." His eye caught Jaikie's for a moment, and what the latter read in it was profound relief.

"Alas, Sire," said the Count, "His Royal Highness's health has failed him. Being an old man, the excitement of the last days was too much for him. A little more and your Majesty's joyful restoration would have been clouded by tragedy. The one hope was that he should leave at once for the peace of his home. He crossed the frontier last night, and will complete his journey to France by air. He left with profound unwillingness, and he charged me to convey to Your Majesty his sorrow that his age and the frailty of his body should have prevented him from offering you in person his assurances of eternal loyalty and affection."

The Countess's face had lost its pallor. Once again she was the Blood-red Rook, and it was on Jaikie that her eyes fell, eyes questioning, commanding, suspicious. It was to her rather than to Prince John that he spoke, having imitated the Count and clumsily dropped on one knee.

"I was faithful to your instructions, Sire," he said, "but a higher Power has made them impossible. I was assured that you would not wish this happy occasion to be saddened by your kinsman's death."

He saw the Countess's lips compressed as if she checked with difficulty some impetuous speech. "True public-school," thought Jaikie. "She would like to make a scene, but she won't."

Prince John saw it too, and his manner dropped from the high ceremonial to the familiar.

"You have done right," he said aloud in English. "Man proposeth and God disposeth. Dear Uncle Hadrian — Heaven bless him wherever he is! And now, my lord Chamberlain, I hope you can give us something to eat."

ENVOI

Down in the deep-cut glen it had been almost dark, for the wooded hills rose steeply above the track. But when the horses had struggled up the last stony patch of moraine and reached the open uplands the riders found a clear amber twilight. And when they had passed the cleft called the Wolf's Throat, they saw a great prospect to the west of forest and mountain with the sun setting between two peaks, a landscape still alight with delicate, fading colours. Overhead the evening star twinkled in a sky of palest amethyst. Involuntarily they halted.

Alison pointed to lights a mile down the farther slope.

"There are the cars with the baggage," she said, "and the grooms to take the horses back. We can get to our inn in an hour. You are safe, Dickson, for we are across the frontier. Let's stop here for supper, and have our last look at Evallonia."

Mr McCunn descended heavily from his horse.

"Ay, I'm safe," he said. "And tomorrow there will be a telegram from France saying I'm dead. Well, that's the end of an auld song." He kicked vigorously to ease his cramped legs, and while Dougal and Sir Archie took the food from the saddle-bags and the two women spread a tablecloth on a flat rock, he looked down the ravine to the dim purple hollow which was the country they had left.

Jaikie's last word to Dougal at Melina had been an injunction to make the end crown the work. "Be sure and have a proper finish," he had told him. "You know what he is. Let him think he's in desperate danger till he's over the border. He would break his heart if he thought that he was out of the game too soon." So Dougal had been insistent with Prince Odalchini. "You owe Mr McCunn more than you can ever repay, and it isn't much that I ask. He must believe that Juventus is after him to bring him back. Get him off to-night, and keep up the pretence that it's deadly secret. Horses — that's the thing that will please his romantic soul."

So Dickson had all day been secluded in the House of the Four Winds, his meals had been brought him by Dougal, and Peter Wappit had stood sentry outside his chamber door. As the afternoon wore on his earlier composure had been shot with restlessness, and he watched the sun decline with an anxious eye. But his spirits had recovered when he found himself hoisted upon an aged mare of Prince Odalchini's, which was warranted quiet, and saw the others booted and spurred. He

had felt himself living a moment of high drama, and to be embraced and kissed on both cheeks by Prince Odalchini had seemed the right kind of farewell. The ride through secluded forest paths had been unpleasant, for he had only once been on a horse in his life before, and Archie hustled them along to keep up the illusion of a perilous flight. Dougal, no horseman himself, could do nothing to help him, but Alison rode by his side, and now and again led his beast when he found it necessary to cling with both hands to the saddle.

But once they were in the mountain cleft comfort had returned, for now the pace was easy and he had leisure for his thoughts. He realised that for days he had been living with fear. "You're not a brave man," he told himself. "The thing about you is that you're too much of a coward to admit that you're afraid. You let yourself in for daft things because your imagination carries you away, and then for weeks on end your knees knock together. . . . But it's worth it — you know it's worth it, you old epicurean," he added, "for the sake of the relief when it's over." He realised that he was about to enjoy the peace of soul which he had known long ago at Huntingtower on the morning after the fight.

But this time there was more than peace. He cast an eye over his shoulder down the wooded gorge — all was quiet — he had escaped from his pursuers. The great adventure had succeeded. Far ahead beyond the tree-tops he saw the cleft of the Wolf's Throat sharp against the sunset. In half an hour the frontier would be passed. His spirit was exalted. He remembered something he had read — in Stevenson, he thought — where a sedentary man had been ravished by a dream of galloping through a midnight pass at the head of cavalry with a burning valley behind him. Well, he was a sedentary man, and he was not dreaming an adventure, but in the heart of one. Never had his wildest fancies envisaged anything like this. He had been a king, acclaimed by shouting mobs. He had kept a throne warm for a friend, and now he was vanishing into the darkness, an honourable fugitive, a willing exile. He was the first grocer in all history that had been a Pretender to a Crown. The clack of hooves on stone, the jingling of bits, the echo of falling water were like strong wine. He did not sing aloud, for he was afraid of alarming his horse, but he crooned to himself snatches of spirited songs. "March, march, Ettrick and Teviotdale" was one, and "Jock o' Hazeldean" was another.

Even on that hill-top the summer night was mild, and the fern was warm, baked by long hours of sun. The little company felt the spell of the mountain quiet after a week of alarms, and ate their supper in silence. Dickson munched a sandwich with his face turned east. He was the first to speak.

"Jaikie's down there," he said. "I wonder what will become of Jaikie? He's a quiet laddie, but he's the dour one when he's made up his mind. Then he's like a stone loosed from a catapult. But I've no fear for Jaikie now he has you to look after him." He turned to beam upon Alison and stroked her arm.

"He doesn't know what to do," said the girl. "We talked a lot about it in the summer. He went on a walking-tour to think things out and discover what he wanted most."

"Well, he has found that out," said Dickson genially. "It's you, Miss Alison. Jaikie's my bairn, and now I've got another in yourself. I'm proud of my family. Dougal there is already a force for mischief in Europe."

Dougal grinned. "I wonder what Mr Craw will say about all this. He'll be over the moon about it, and he'll think that he and his papers are chiefly responsible. Humbug! There are whiles when I'm sick of my job. They talk about the power of the Press, and it is powerful enough in ordinary times. The same with big finance. But let a thing like Juventus come along, and the Press and the stock exchange are no more than penny whistles. It's the Idea that wins every time — the Idea with brains and guts behind it."

"Youth," said Janet. "Yes, youth is the force in the world today, for it isn't tired and it can hope. But you have forgotten Mr McCunn. He made the success of Juventus possible, for he found it its leader. It's a pity the story can't be told, for he deserves a statue in Melina as the Great Peacemaker."

"It's the same thing," said Dougal. "He's youth."

"In two months' time I'll be sixty-three," said Dickson.

"What does that matter? I tell you you're young. Compared to you Jaikie and I are old, done men. And you're the most formidable kind of youth, for you've humour, and that's what youth never has. Jaikie has a little maybe, but nothing to you, and I haven't a scrap myself. I'll be a bigger man than Craw ever was, for I haven't his failings. And Jaikie will be a big man,

too, though I'm not just sure in what way. But though I become a multimillionaire and Jaikie a prime minister, we will neither of us ever be half the man that Mr McCunn is. It was a blessed day for me when I first fell in with him."

"Deary me," said Dickson. "That's a grand testimonial, but I don't deserve it. I have a fair business mind, and I try to apply it — that's all. It was the Gorbals Die-hards that made me. Eight years ago I retired from the shop, and I was a timid elderly body. The Die-hards learned me not to be afraid."

"You don't know what fear is," said Dougal.

"And they made me feel young again."

"You could never be anything but young."

"You're wrong. I'm both timid and old — the best you can say of me is that, though I'm afraid, I'm never black-afraid, and though I'm old, I'm not dead-old."

"That's the best that could be said about any mortal man," said Archie solemnly. "What are you going to do now? After this game of king-making, won't Carrick be a bit dull?"

"I'm going back to Blawearry," said Dickson, "to count my mercies, for I'm a well man again. I'm going to catch a wheen salmon, and potter about my bits of fields, and read my books, and sit by my fireside. And to the last day of my life I'll be happy, thinking of the grand things I've seen and the grand places I've been in. Ay, and the grand friends I've known — the best of all."

"I think you are chiefly a poet," said Alison.

Dickson did not reply for a moment. He looked at her tenderly and seemed to be pondering a new truth.

"Me!" he said. "I wish I was, but I could never string two verses together."



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The Island of Sheep

John Buchan



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE

PART I

FOSSE

CHAPTER 1

LOST GODS

I have never believed, as some people do, in omens and forewarnings, for the dramatic things in my life have generally come upon me as suddenly as a tropical thunderstorm. But I have observed that in a queer way I have been sometimes prepared for them by my mind drifting into an unexpected mood. I would remember something I had not thought of for years, or start without reason an unusual line of thought. That was what happened to me on an October evening when I got into the train at Victoria.

That afternoon I had done what for me was a rare thing, and attended a debate in the House of Commons. Lamancha was to make a full-dress speech, and Lamancha on such an occasion is worth hearing. But it was not my friend's eloquence that filled my mind or his deadly handling of interruptions, but a reply which the Colonial Secretary gave to a question before the debate began. A name can sometimes be like a scent or a tune, a key to long-buried memories. When old Melbury spoke the word 'Lombard,' my thoughts were set racing down dim alleys of the past. He quoted a memorandum written years ago and incorporated in the report of a certain Commission; 'A very able memorandum,' he called it, 'by a certain Mr. Lombard,' which contained the point he wished to make. Able! I should think it was. And the writer! To be described as 'a certain Mr. Lombard' showed how completely the man I once knew had dropped out of the world's ken.

I did not do justice to Lamancha's speech, for I thought of Lombard all through it. I thought of him in my taxi going to the station, and, when I had found my compartment, his face came between me and the pages of my evening paper. I had not thought much about him for years, but now Melbury's chance quotation had started a set of pictures which flitted like a film series before my eyes. I saw Lombard as I had last seen him, dressed a little differently from today, a little fuller in the face than we lean kine who have survived the War, with eyes not blurred from motoring, and voice not high-pitched like ours to override the din of our environment. I saw his smile, the odd quick lift of his chin — and I realized that I was growing old and had left some wonderful things behind me.

The compartment filled up with City men going home to their comfortable southern suburbs. They all had evening papers, and some had morning papers to finish. Most of them appeared to make this journey regularly, for they knew each other, and exchanged market gossip or commented on public affairs. A friendly confidential party; and I sat in my corner looking out of the window at another landscape than what some poet has called 'smoky dwarf houses,' and seeing a young man's face which was very different from theirs.

Lombard had come out to East Africa as secretary to a Government Commission, a Commission which he very soon manipulated as he pleased. I met him there when I was sent up on a prospecting job. He was very young then, not more than twenty-five, and he was in his first years at the Bar. He had been at one of the lesser public schools and at Cambridge, had been a good scholar, and was as full as he could hold of books. I remembered our first meeting in a cold camp on the Uasin Gishu plateau, when he quoted and translated a Greek line about the bitter little wind before dawn. But he never paraded his learning, for his desire was to be in complete harmony with his surroundings, and to look very much the pioneer. Those were the old days in East Africa, before the 'Happy Valley' and the remittance man and settlers who wanted self-government, and people's hopes were high. He was full of the heroes of the past, like Roddy Owen and Vandeleur and the Portals, and, except that he was a poor horseman, he had something in common with them. With his light figure and bleached fair hair and brown skin he looked the very model of the adventurous Englishman. I thought that there might be a touch of the Jew in his ancestry — something high-coloured and foreign at any rate, for he was more expansive and quickly fired than the rest of us. But on the whole he was as English as a Hampshire water-meadow. . . .

The compartment was blue with pipe-smoke. My companions were talking about rock-gardens. The man in the corner opposite me was apparently an authority on the subject, and he had much to say about different firms of nursery

gardeners. He was blond, plump, and baldish, and had a pleasant voice whose tones woke a recollection which I could not fix. I thought that I had probably seen him at some company meeting. . . .

My mind went back to Lombard. I remembered how we had sat on a rock one evening looking over the trough of Equatoria, and, as the sun crimsoned the distant olive-green forests, he had told me his ambitions. In those days the after-glow of Cecil Rhodes's spell still lay on Africa, and men could dream dreams. Lombard's were majestic. 'I have got my inspiration,' he told me. His old hankerings after legal or literary or political success at home had gone. He had found a new and masterful purpose.

It was a very young man's talk. I was about his own age, but I had knocked about a bit and saw its crudity. Yet it most deeply impressed me. There were fire and poetry in it, and there was also a pleasant shrewdness. He had had his 'call' and was hastening to answer it. Henceforth his life was to be dedicated to one end, the building up of a British Equatoria, with the highlands of the East and South as the white man's base. It was to be both white man's and black man's country, a new kingdom of Prester John. It was to link up South Africa with Egypt and the Sudan, and thereby complete Rhodes's plan. It was to be a magnet to attract our youth and a settlement ground for our surplus population. It was to carry with it a spiritual renaissance for England. 'When I think,' he cried, 'of the stuffy life at home! We must bring air into it, and instead of a blind alley give 'em open country. . . .'

The talk in the compartment was now of golf. Matches were being fixed up for the following Sunday. My vis-à-vis had evidently some repute as a golfer, and was describing how he had managed to lower his handicap. Golf 'shop' is to me the most dismal thing on earth, and I shut my ears to it. 'So I took my mashie, you know, my LITTLE mashie'— the words seemed to have all the stuffiness of which Lombard had complained. Here in perfection was the smug suburban life from which he had revolted. My thoughts went back to that hilltop three thousand miles and thirty years away. . . .

All of us at that time had talked a little grandiloquently, but with Lombard it was less a rhapsody than a passionate confession of faith. He was not quite certain about the next step in his own career. He had been offered a post on the staff of the Governor of X— which might be a good jumping-off ground. There was the business side, too. He had the chance of going into the firm of Y— which was about to spend large sums on African development. Money was important, he said, and cited Rhodes and Beit. He had not made up his mind, but ways and means did not greatly trouble him. His goal was so clear that he would find a road to it.

I do not think that I have ever had a stronger impression of a consuming purpose. Here was one who would never be content to settle among the fatted calves of the world. He might fail, but he would fail superbly.

'Some day,' I said, 'there will be a new British Dominion, and it will be called Lombardy. You have the right sort of name for Empire-making.'

I spoke quite seriously, and he took it seriously.

'Yes, I have thought of that,' he said, 'but it would have to be Lombardia.'

That was not the last time I saw him, for a year later he came down to Rhodesia, again on Government business, and we went through a rather odd experience together. But it was that hour in the African twilight that stuck in my memory. Here was a man dedicated to a crusade, ready to bend every power of mind and body to a high ambition, and to sacrifice all the softer things of life. I had felt myself in the presence of a young knight-errant, gravely entering upon his vows of service. . . .

I looked round the compartment at the flabby eupeptic faces which offered so stark a contrast to the one I remembered. The talk was still of golf, and the plump man was enlarging on a new steel-shafted driver. Well, it required all kinds to make a world. . . .

I had not seen Lombard for more than a quarter of a century. I had not even heard his name till that afternoon when Melbury mentioned him in the House. But at first I had often thought of him and waited for his avatar. I felt about him as Browning felt about Waring in the poem, for I believed that sooner or later — and rather soon than late — he would in some way or other make for himself a resounding name. I pictured him striding towards his goal, scorning half-achievements and easy repute, waiting patiently on the big chance and the great moment. Death alone, I was convinced, would stop him. And then the War came. . . .

The compartment had nearly emptied. Only my vis-à-vis remained. He had put up his feet on the seat and was skimming a motoring journal. . . .

Yes, I decided, the War had done it. Lombard would of course have fought — he was the kind of man who must — and in some obscure action in some part of the world-wide battlefield death had closed his dreams. Another case of unfulfilled renown. The thought made me melancholy. The fatted calves had always the best of it. Brains and high ambitions had perished, and the world was for the comfortable folk like the man opposite me.

We passed a station, and the next was obviously my companion's destination, for he got up, stretched his legs, and took down a parcel from the rack. He was carrying back the fish for dinner. He folded up his papers and lit a cigarette. Then for the first time he had a proper look at me, and in his face I saw slowly the dawning of recognition. He hesitated, and then he spoke my name.

'Hannay?' he said. 'Isn't it Dick Hannay?'

The voice did the trick with me, for I remembered those precise tones which he had never managed to slur and broaden after our outland fashion. My eyes cleared, and a response clicked in my brain. I saw, behind the well-covered cheeks and the full chin and the high varnish of good living, a leaner and younger face.

'Lombard!' I cried. 'I haven't seen or heard of you for twenty years. Do you know that the Colonial Secretary referred to you in the House this afternoon? I have been thinking of you ever since.'

He grinned and he held out his hand.

'What did he say? Nothing uncomplimentary, I hope. We've been having a bit of a controversy with his department over Irak. I've often heard of YOU, and read about you in the papers, and I've been hoping to run across you some day. You made some splash in the War. You're a K.C.B., aren't you? They offered me a knighthood too, but my firm thought I'd better stand out. Bad luck we didn't spot each other sooner, for I should have liked a yarn with you.'

'So should I,' was my answer. 'We have plenty to talk about.'

He replied to the question in my eye.

'Those were funny old times we had together. Lord, they seem a long way off now. What have I been doing since? Well, I went in for oil. I wish I had taken it up sooner, for I wasted several years chasing my tail. My firm made a pot of money in the War, and we haven't done so badly since.'

He was friendly and obviously glad to see me, but after so long a gap in our acquaintance he found it difficult to come to close quarters. So did I. I could only stare at his bland comfortable face and try in vain to recapture in it something that had gone for ever.

He felt the constraint. As we slackened speed, he dusted his hat, adjusted an aquascutum on his arm, and looked out of the window. I seemed to detect some effort in his geniality.

'I live down here,' he said. 'We mustn't lose sight of each other now we have foregathered. What about lunching together one day — my club's the Junior Carlton? Or better still, come down to us for a week-end. I can give you quite a decent game of golf.'

The train drew up at a trim little platform covered with smooth yellow gravel, and a red station house, like a Wesleyan chapel, which in June would be smothered with Dorothy Perkins roses. There was a long line of fading geraniums, and several plots of chrysanthemums. Beyond the fence I could see a glistening tarmac road and the trees and lawns of biggish villas. I noticed a shining Daimler drawn up at the station entrance, and on the platform was a woman like a full-blown peony, to whom Lombard waved his hand.

'My wife,' he said, as he got out. 'I'd like you to meet her. . . . It's been great seeing you again. I've got a nice little place down here. . . . Promise you'll come to us for some week-end. Beryl will write to you.'

I continued my journey — I was going down to the Solent to see about laying up my boat, for I had lately taken to a mild sort of yachting — in an odd frame of mind. I experienced what was rare with me — a considerable dissatisfaction with life. Lombard had been absorbed into the great, solid, complacent middle class which he had once despised, and was apparently happy in it. The man whom I had thought of as a young eagle was content to be a barn-door fowl. Well, if he was satisfied, it was no business of mine, but I had a dreary sense of the fragility of hopes and dreams.

It was about myself that I felt most dismally. Lombard's youth had gone, but so had my own. Lombard was settled like Moab on his lees, but so was I. We all make pictures of ourselves that we try to live up to, and mine had always been of somebody hard and taut who could preserve to the last day of life a decent vigour of spirit. Well, I kept my body in fair

training by exercise, but I realized that my soul was in danger of fatty degeneration. I was too comfortable. I had all the blessings a man can have, but I wasn't earning them. I tried to tell myself that I deserved a little peace and quiet, but I got no good from that reflection, for it meant that I had accepted old age. What were my hobbies and my easy days but the consolations of senility? I looked at my face in the mirror in the carriage back, and it disgusted me, for it reminded me of my recent companions who had pattered about golf. Then I became angry with myself. 'You are a fool,' I said. 'You are becoming soft and elderly, which is the law of life, and you haven't the grit to grow old cheerfully.' That put a stopper on my complaints, but it left me dejected and only half convinced.



CHAPTER 2

HANHAM FLATS

All that autumn and early winter I had an uneasy feeling at the back of my mind. I had my pleasant country-gentleman's existence, but some of the zest had gone out of it. Instead of feeling, as I usually did, that it was the only life for a white man, I had an ugly suspicion that satisfaction with it meant that I had grown decrepit. And at the same time I had a queer expectation that an event was about to happen which would jog me out of my rut into something much less comfortable, and that I had better bask while the sun shone, for it wouldn't shine long. Oddly enough, that comforted me. I wasn't looking for any more difficult jobs in this world, but the mere possibility of one coming along allowed me to enjoy my slippered days with a quieter conscience.

In the week before Christmas came the second of the chain of happenings which were the prelude to this story. My son came into it, and here I must beg leave to introduce Peter John, now in his fourteenth year.

The kind of son I had hoped for when he was born was the typical English boy, good at games, fairly intelligent, reasonably honest and clean, the kind of public-school product you read about in books. I say had 'hoped for,' for it was the conventional notion most fathers entertain, though I doubt if I should have had much patience with the reality. Anyhow, Peter John was nothing like that. He didn't care a rush for the public-school spirit. He was rather a delicate child, but after he had passed his seventh birthday his health improved, and at his preparatory school he was a sturdy young ruffian who had no ailments except the conventional mumps and measles. He was tall for his age and rather handsome in his own way. Mary's glorious hair in him took the form of a sandy thatch inclining to red, but he had her blue eyes and her long, slim hands and feet. He had my mouth and my shape of head, but he had a slightly sullen air which he could have got from neither of us. I have seen him when he was perfectly happy looking the picture of gloom. He was very quiet in his manner; had a pleasant, low voice; talked little, and then with prodigiously long words. That came of his favourite reading, which was the Prophet Isaiah, Izaak Walton, and an eighteenth-century book on falconry translated from the French. One of his school reports said he spoke to his masters as Dr. Johnson might have addressed a street-arab.

He was never meant for any kind of schoolboy, for talk about 'playing the game' and the 'team spirit' and 'the honour of the old House' simply made him sick. He was pretty bad at his books, though he learned to slog along at them, but he was a hopeless duffer at games, which indeed he absolutely refused to learn. He detested his preparatory school, and twice ran away from it. He took the lowest form at his public school, where, however, he was happier, since he was left more to himself. He was the kind of boy who is the despair of masters, for he kept them at arm's length, and, though very gentle and well-mannered, could not help showing that he didn't think much of them. He didn't think much of the other boys either, but most were wise enough not to resent this, for he was for his weight one of the handiest people with his fists I have ever seen.

Peter John's lack of scholastic success used to worry Mary sometimes, but I felt that he was going his own way and picking up a pretty good education. He was truthful and plucky and kindly, and that was what I chiefly cared about. Also his mind never stopped working on his own subjects. He scarcely knew a bat from a ball, but he could cast a perfect dry-fly. He was as likely to be seen with a doll as with a tennis-racquet, but before he was twelve he was a good enough shot with his 16-bore to hold his own at any covert shoot. He had a funny aversion to horses, and wouldn't get into a saddle, but he was a genius with other animals. He could last out a long day in a deer forest when he had just entered his teens. Also he had made himself a fine field naturalist, and even Archie Roylance respected his knowledge of birds. He took up boxing very early and entirely of his own accord, because he didn't like the notion of being hit in the face, and thought that he had better conquer that funk. It proved to be a game in which he was a natural master, for he had a long reach and was wonderfully light on his feet. I would add that in his solemn way he was the friendliest of souls. The whole countryside within twenty miles of Fosse had a good word for him. One habit of his was to call everybody 'Mr.' and it was a queer thing to hear him 'mistering' some ragamuffin that I had helped on the Bench to send to jail a few months before. Peter John was getting his education from wild nature and every brand of country folk, and I considered that it was about as good a kind as any.

But it made him rather a misfit as a schoolboy, since he had none of the ordinary ambitions. He wouldn't have thanked

you for putting him into the Eleven or the Boat, and the innocent snobbery of boys left him untouched. He simply wasn't running for the same stakes. I think he was respected by other boys, and on the whole rather liked by the masters, for he was always being forgiven for his breaches of discipline. Certainly he had an amazing knack of getting away with things. He twice stayed out all night, and wasn't expelled for it, since no one thought of disbelieving his explanation that in one case he had been timing a badger, and in the other waiting for an expected flight of grey-lags. He must have poached and never been caught, for he once sent his mother a brace of woodcock with his compliments, after she had complained in a letter that the birds were scarce with us. Also he kept hawks from his second week as a lower boy and nobody seemed to mind. At the date of which I write he was in his fourth half at school, and had at various times possessed goshawks, sparrow-hawks, merlins, and innumerable kestrels. The whole aviary in handboxes used to accompany him backwards and forwards in the car. He had generally a hawk of sorts tucked away in his change coat, and once a party of American tourists got the surprise of their lives when they stopped a gentle-looking child to ask some question about the chapel, and suddenly saw a bird come out of the heavens and dive under his jacket.

Mary announced at breakfast that Peter John was cutting down costs and reducing his establishment. Archie Roylance, who was staying with us, looked up sympathetically from his porridge bowl.

'What? Sending his horses to Tattersall's and shutting up the old home? Poor old chap!'

'He has lost his she-goshawk, Jezebel,' Mary said, 'and can't afford another. Also white horse-leather for jesses costs too much. He has nothing left now except a couple of kestrels. If you want to live with death, Archie, keep hawks. They perish at the slightest provocation. Hang themselves, or have apoplexy, or a clot or something, or they get lost and catch their jesses in a tree and die of starvation. I'm always being heartbroken by Peter John coming in with a sad face in the morning to tell me that another bird is dead. Last summer he had four kestrels, called Violet, Slingsby, Guy, and Lionel. The most beloved little birds. They sat all day on their perches on the lawn, and scolded like fishwives if one of Dick's cockers came near them, for they couldn't abide black dogs. Not one is left. Jezebel killed one, two died of heart-disease, and one broke its neck in the stable-yard. Peter John got two eyasses to take their place from the Winstanleys' keeper, but they'll go the same road. And now Jezebel is a corpse. I never liked her, for she was as big as an eagle and had a most malevolent eye, but she was the joy of his soul, and it was wonderful to see her come back to the lure out of the clouds. Now he says he can't afford to buy any more and is putting down his establishment. He spent most of his allowance on hawks, and was always corresponding with distressed Austrian noblemen about them.'

Just then Peter John came in. He was apt to be late for breakfast, for, though he rose early, he had usually a lot to do in the morning. He was wearing old beagling breeches, and a leather-patched jacket which a tramp would have declined.

'I say, I'm sorry about your bad luck,' Archie told him. 'But you mustn't chuck falconry. Did you ever have a peregrine?'

'You mustn't talk like that,' Mary said. 'Say tassel-gentle or falcon-gentle, according to the sex. Peter John likes the old names, which he gets out of Gervase Markham.'

'Because,' Archie continued, 'if you'd like it I can get you one.'

Peter John's eye brightened.

'Eyass or passage-hawk?' he asked.

'Eyass,' said Archie, who understood the language. 'Wattie Laidlaw got it out of a nest last spring. It's a female — a falcon, I suppose you'd call it — and an uncommon fine bird. She has been well manned too, and Wattie has killed several brace of grouse with her. But she can't go on with him, for he has too much to do, and he wrote last week that he wanted to find a home for her. I thought of young David Warcliff, but he has gone to France to cram for the Diplomatic. So what about it, my lad? She's yours for the taking.'

The upshot was that Peter John had some happy days making new hoods and leashes and jesses, and that a week later the peregrine arrived in a box from Crask. She was in a vile temper, and had damaged two of her tail feathers, so that he had to spend a day with the imping needle. If you keep hawks you have to be a pretty efficient nursemaid, and feed them and wash them and mend for them. She hadn't a name, so Peter John christened her Morag, as a tribute to her Highland ancestry. He spent most of his time in solitary communion with her till she got to know him, and in the first days of the New Year he had her in good train.

Always in January, if the weather is right, I go down to the Norfolk coast for a few days' goose-shooting. This year I had meant to take Peter John with me, for I thought that it would be a sport after his own heart. But it was plain that he

couldn't leave Morag, and, as I wanted company, I agreed to her coming. So on the night of January 7 Peter John, his bird, and myself found ourselves in the Rose and Crown at Hanham, looking out over darkening mudflats which were being scourged by a south-west gale.

Peter John found quarters for Morag in an outhouse, and after supper went to bed, for he had to be up at four next morning. I looked into the bar for a word with the old fowlers, particularly my own man, Samson Grose, whom I had appointed to meet me there. There were only two in the place besides Samson, Joe Whipple and the elder Green, both famous names on the Hanham Flats, for the rest were at the evening flight and would look in later on their way home for the fowler's jorum of hot rum-and-milk. All three were elderly — two had fought in the Boer War — and they had the sallow skins and yellowish eyeballs of those who spend their lives between the Barrier Sands and the sea. I never met a tougher, and I never saw a less healthy-looking, breed than the Hanham men. They are a class by themselves, neither quite of the land nor quite of the water.

Samson had good news. The Baltic must be freezing, for wild fowl were coming in plentifully, though too thin to be worth shooting. Chiefly widgeon and teal, but he had seen a little bunch of pintail. I asked about geese. Plenty of brent, he said, which were no good, for they couldn't be eaten, and a few barnacle and bean. The white-fronts and the pink-foot were there, though they had been mortal hard to get near, but this gale was the right thing to keep them low. The evening flight was the better just now, Samson thought, for there was no moon, and geese, whose eyesight is no keener than yours or mine, left the shore fields early to get back to the sea, and one hadn't to wait so long. He fixed 4.15 as the time he was to meet us at the inn-door next morning; for dawn would not be till close on eight, and that gave us plenty of time to get well out into the mud and dig our 'graves.'

The three fowlers left for home, and I went into the bar-parlour to have a talk with the hostess, Mrs. Pottinger. When I first visited Hanham she and Job her husband were a handsome middle-aged pair, but Job had had his back broken in Hanham Great Wood when he was drawing timber, and his widow had suddenly become an old woman. It was a lonely business at the Rose and Crown, on the edge of the salt marshes and a couple of miles from any village, but that she minded not at all. Grieving for Job, and a kind of recurring fever which is common in those parts in the autumn, a sort of mild malaria, had taken the vigour out of her, and put a pathos like a dog's into her fine dark eyes. She ran the little inn for the fowlers, who had been Joe's friends, and did a small transport business with a couple of barges in the creek and an ancient carrier's cart along the shore. She took me in as a guest because Job had liked me, but, though the house had three or four snug little bedrooms, she did not hold it out as a place for visitors, and would have shut the door in the face of an inquisitive stranger.

I found her having a late cup of tea and looking better than I remembered her last time. A fire burned pleasantly, and window and roof-beams shook in the gale. She was full of inquiries about Peter John, who in his old-fashioned way had at once paid his respects to her and begged her tolerance for Morag. She shook her head when she heard that he was going out next morning. 'Pore little lad,' she said. 'Young bones want long lays abed.' Then she broke to me what I should never have suspected, that there was another guest in the Rose and Crown.

'Nice, quiet, young gentleman,' she said, 'and not so young neither, for he'll never see thirty-five again. Name of Smith — Mr. James Smith. He has been ill and wanted a place where folks wouldn't worrit him, and he heard of this house through my cousin Nance, her that's married on a groom at Lord Hanham's racin' stables. He wrote to me that pleadingly that I hadn't the heart to refuse, and now he's been a fortnight in the red room and become, as you might say, a part of the 'ousehold. Keeps hisself to hisself, but very pleasant when spoke to.'

I asked if Mr. Smith was a sportsman.

'No. He ain't no gunner. He lies late and goes early to bed, and in between walks up and down about the shore from Trim Head to Whaffle Creek. But this night he has gone out with the gunners — for the first time. He persuaded Jeb Smart to take him, for, like your little gentleman son, he has a fancy for them wild birds.'

Mrs. Pottinger roused herself with difficulty out of her chair, for in spite of her grief she had put on weight since her husband's death.

'I think I hear them,' she said. 'Job always said I had the ears of a wild goose. I must see if Sue has kept up the fire in the bar, and got the milk 'ot. The pore things will be perished, for it's a wind to blow the tail off a cow, as folks say.'

Sure enough it was the returning fowlers. Two men, whose short frieze jackets made them seem as broad as they were

long, were stamping their feet on the brick floor. A third was peeling off an airman's leather coat with a fleece lining, and revealing long legs in trench-boots and a long body in home-spun. I thought him one of the biggest fellows I had ever seen.

I knew the two Smarts, Jeb and Zeb — their shortened Christian names were a perpetual confusion — and they introduced me to the third, for Mrs. Pottinger, after satisfying herself that all was well, had retreated to her parlour. The fowlers drank their rum-and-milk and between gulps gave me their news. They had not done much — only a 'Charlie,' which is a goose that has been pricked by a shot and has dropped out of the flight. But they thought well of the chances in the morning, for the gale would last for twenty-four hours, there were plenty of white-fronts and pink-foot now out on the sea, and in that hurricane they would fly in low. Jeb and Zeb had never much conversation, and in three minutes they grunted good-night and took the road.

I was left with the third of the party. As I have said, he was a very big man, clean-shaven except for a small fair moustache, and with a shock of sandy hair which had certainly not been cut by a good barber. He was wearing an old suit of home-spun tweeds, and he had a pull-over of a coarse black-and-white pattern, the kind of thing you see in a Grimsby trawler. I would have set him down as a farmer of sorts, but for the fact that his skin was oddly pallid, and that his hands were not those of a man who had ever done manual toil. He had bowed to me in a way which was not quite English. I said something about the weather, and he replied in good English with just a suspicion of a foreign accent.

Clearly he had not expected to find another guest in the Rose and Crown, for his first glance at me had been one of extreme surprise. More than surprise. I could have sworn that it was alarm, almost panic, till something about me reassured him. But his eyes kept searching my face, as if they were looking for something which he dreaded to find there. Then, when I spoke, he appeared to be more at his ease. I told him that I had come to Hanham for some years, and that I had brought my boy with me, and hoped to show him a little sport.

'Your boy?' he asked. 'He is young?'

When I told him nearly fourteen, he seemed to be relieved.

'The boy — he is fond of shooting?'

I said that Peter John had never been after geese before, but that he was mad about birds.

'I too,' he said. 'I do not shoot, but I love to watch the birds. There are many here which I have not seen before, and some which I have seen rarely are here in multitudes.'

As I went to bed I speculated about Mr. Smith. That he was a foreigner I judged both from his slight accent and from his rather elaborate English. I thought that he might be a German or a Dutchman or a Swede, perhaps a field-naturalist who was visiting Hanham just as Archie Roylance used to visit Texel. I liked his face, which was kindly and shy, and I decided that, since he seemed to be a lonely fellow, Peter John and I would offer to take him out with us. But there were two things about him that puzzled me. One was that I had a dim consciousness of having seen him before, or at least some one very like him. The set of his jaw and the way his nose sprang sharply from below his forehead were familiar. The other was that spasm of fright in his eyes when he had first seen me. He could not be a criminal in hiding — he looked far too honest and wholesome for that — but he was in fear, in fear of some one or something coming suddenly upon him even in this outlandish corner of England. I fell asleep wondering what might lurk in the past of this simple, substantial being.

At four o'clock we were called, and after a cup of tea joined Samson on the jetty, and by the light of an exiguous electric torch started to find our way over the dry sand, and out into the salt marshes. The gale had dropped a little, but the wind blew cruelly on our right cheek, and the whole dark world was an ice-box. Peter John and I wore rubber knee-boots, beastly things to walk in, and, not having Samson's experience, we plunged several times up to the waist in the little creeks. Both of us had 8-bore guns firing cartridges three and a half inches long, while Samson had a 12-bore with a barrel as long as a Boer roer. By and by we were free of the crab grass and out on the oozy mud-flats. There Samson halted us, and with the coal-shovels from our goose-bags we started to dig our 'graves,' piling up a rampart of mud on the sea side from which the birds were coming. After that there fell a silence like death, while each of us crouched in our holes about a hundred yards apart, peering up with chattering teeth into the thick darkness, and waiting for that slow lightening which would mean the dawn.

A little after six there came a sound above us like the roar of a second gale, the first having subsided to a fairly steady south-west wind. I knew from experience what it was, and I had warned Peter John about it. It was thousands and thousands of waders, stints and knots and redshanks and the like, flying in batches, each batch making the noise of a great

wave on a beach. Then for a little there was stillness again, and the darkness thinned ever so little, so that I believed that I must be seeing at least fifty yards. But I wasn't, for when the duck began I could only hear the beat of their wings, though I knew that they were flying low.

There was another spell of eerie quiet, and then it seemed that the world was changing. The clouds were drifting apart, and I suddenly saw a brilliant star-sown patch of sky. Then the whole horizon turned from velvet-black to grey, grey rimmed in the east with a strip of intense yellow light. I looked behind me and could see the outlines of the low coast, with blurs which I knew were woods, and with one church-steeple pricking fantastically into the pale brume.

It was the time for the geese, and in an instant they were on us. They came in wedge after wedge, shadowy as ghosts against the faintly flushing clouds, but cut sharp against the violet lagoon of clear sky. They were not babbling, as they do in an evening flight from the fields to the sea, but chuckling and talking low to themselves. From the sound I knew they were pink-foot, for the white-fronts make a throatier noise. It was a sight that always takes my breath away, this multitude of wild living things surging out of the darkness and the deep, as steady in their discipline as a Guards battalion. I never wanted to shoot and I never shot first; it was only the thunder of Samson's 12-bore that woke me to my job.

An old gander, which was the leading bird in one wedge, suddenly trumpeted. Him Samson got; he fell with a thud five yards from my head, and the echo of the shot woke the marshes for miles. It was all our bag. The birds flew pretty high, and Peter John had the best chance, but no sign of life came from his trench. As soon as the geese had passed, and a double wedge of whistling widgeon had followed very high up, I walked over to investigate. I found my son sitting on his mud rampart with a rapt face. 'I couldn't shoot,' he stammered; 'they were too beautiful. To-morrow I'll bring Morag. I don't mind hawking a goose, for that's a fair fight, but I won't kill them with a gun.' I respected his feelings, but I thought him optimistic, for, till he had learned to judge their pace, I was pretty sure that he would never get near them.

We had a gargantuan breakfast, and then tumbled into bed for four hours. After luncheon we went out on the sand dunes with the falcon, where Peter John to his joy saw a ruff. He wouldn't fly Morag, because he said it was a shame to match a well-fed bird of prey against the thin and weary waders which had flown from the Baltic. On our road back we met Smith, who had been for a long walk, and I introduced Peter John. The two took to each other at once, in the way a shy man often makes friends with a boy. Smith obviously knew a good deal about birds, but I wondered what had been his observation ground, for he was keenly interested in ducks like teal and widgeon, which are common objects of the seashore, while he spoke of rarities like the purple sandpiper as if they were old acquaintances. Otherwise he was not communicative, and he had the same sad, watchful look that I had noticed the night before. But he brightened up when I suggested that he should come with us next morning.

That evening's flight was a wash-out. The wind capriciously died away, and out of the marshes a fog crept which the gunners call a 'thick.' We tried another part of the mud-flats, hoping that the weather would clear. Clear it did for about half an hour, when there was a wonderful scarlet and opal sunset. But the mist crept down again with the darkening, and all we could see was the occasional white glimmer of a duck's wing. The geese came from the shore about half-past five, not chuckling as in the morning, but making a prodigious clamour, and not in wedges, but in one continuous flight. We heard them right enough, but we could see nothing above us except a thing like a grey woollen comforter. At six o'clock we gave it up, and went back to supper, after which I read King Solomon's Mines aloud to Peter John before a blazing fire, and added comments on it from my own experience.

I thought that the weather was inclining to frost and had not much hope for next morning. But the gale had not finished, and I was awakened to the rattle of windows and the blatter of sleet on the roof. We found Smith waiting for us with Samson, looking as if he had been up for hours or had not slept, for his eyes were not gummy like Peter John's and mine. We had a peculiarly unpleasant walk over the crab grass, bent double to avoid the blizzard, and when we got to the mud our hands were so icy that they could hardly grip the coal-shovels. Smith, who had no gun, helped Peter John to dig his 'grave,' the latter being encumbered by Morag, who needed some attention. Never was an angrier bird, to judge by her vindictive squeaks and the glimpses I had in the fitful torchlight of her bright, furious eyes.

We had a miserable vigil, during which the sleet died away and the wind slightly abated. My hole was close to a creek, and I remember that, just as dawn was breaking, the shiny, water-proof head of a seal popped up beside me. After that came the usual ritual — the thunderous flocks of waders, the skeins of duck, and then in the first light the wedges of geese, this time mainly white-fronts. They were a little later than usual, for it must have been half-past seven before they came, and well after eight before they had passed.

The guns did nothing. Samson never fired, and though I had two shots at the tail birds of a wedge, I was well behind them. The birds were far out, and there was something mightily wrong with the visibility. . . . I was just getting up to shake the mud out of my boots when I squatted down again, for I was the spectator of a sudden marvellous sight. Smith, who shared the hole with me, also dropped on his knees.

Peter John had flown Morag, and the falcon had picked a gander out of a wedge and driven him beyond the echelon. The sky had lightened, and I saw the whole drama very clearly. Morag soared above her quarry, to prepare for her deadly stoop, but the goose had been at the game before and knew what to do. It dropped like a stone till it was only a couple of yards above the mud, and at that elevation made at its best pace for the shore. Fifty feet or so above it the falcon kept a parallel flight. She had easily the pace of the goose, but she did not dare to strike, for, if she had, she would have killed her prey, but, with the impetus of her stoop, would have also broken her own neck.

I have watched sensational horse-races and prize-fights in my time, but I have never seen anything more exciting than the finish of that contest. The birds shot past only about ten yards to my right, and I could easily have got the white-front, but I would as soon have shot my mother. This was a show in which I had no part, the kind of struggle of two wonderful winged things that had gone on since the creation of the world. I fairly howled in my enthusiasm for the old goose. Smith, too, was on his feet on the top of the rampart yelling like a dervish, and Peter John was squelching through the mud after the combatants. . . .

The whole business can scarcely have lasted a full minute, for the speed was terrific; but I seemed to be living through crowded hours. The white-front turned slightly to the left, rose a little to clear a hillock in the crab grass, and then the two became mere specks in the distance. But the light was good enough to show us the finish. The lower speck reached a pinewood and disappeared, and the upper speck was lost against the gloom of the trees. The goose had won sanctuary. I found myself babbling, 'Well done — oh, well done!' and I knew that Peter John, now frantically waving the lure, would be of the same mind.

Suddenly my attention was switched on to the man Smith. He was sitting in the mud, and he was weeping — yes, weeping. At first I thought it was only excitement, and wasn't much surprised, and then I saw that it was something more. I gave him a hand to help him up, and he clutched my arm.

'It is safe,' he stammered. 'Tell me, it is safe?'

'Safe as the Bank,' I said. 'No falcon can do anything against a bird in a wood.'

He gripped me harder.

'It is safe because it was humble,' he cried. 'It flew near the ground. It was humble and lowly, as I am. It is a message from Heaven.'

Then he seemed to be ashamed of himself, for he apologized for being a fool. But he scarcely spoke a word on the way back, and when I got out of bed in time for luncheon, Mrs. Pottinger brought me the news that he had left the Rose and Crown. . . . That moment on the mudflats had given me a line on Smith. He was a hunted man, in desperate terror of some pursuer and lying very low. The success of the old white-front had given him hope, for its tactics were his own. I wondered if I should ever meet him again.



CHAPTER 3

THE TABLET OF JADE

The next chapter in this tale came at the end of March when the Clanroydens stayed with us at Fosse for a long week-end. Sandy, after his return from South America and his marriage, had settled down at Laverlaw as a Scots laird, and for the better part of a year you couldn't dig Barbara and him out of that heavenly fastness. Then came a crisis in the Near East on which he felt called upon to hold forth in the House of Lords, and gradually he was drawn more and more into public affairs. Also Barbara took a long time to recover from the birth of her daughter, and had to be much in London within reach of doctors. The consequence was that Mary and I saw a good deal of the Clanroydens. Mary was one of the daughter's godmothers, and Lady Clanroyden stayed at Fosse with us most of the time that Sandy was in China as chairman of an international Commission. He had only returned from the Far East at the end of February.

It was the most perfect kind of early spring weather. In February we had a fortnight's snow, so the ground was well moistened and the spring full, and in the first week of March we had drying blasts from the north-east. Then came mild south-west winds, and a sudden outburst of life. The blackthorn was in flower, the rooks were busy in the beeches, the elms were reddening, and the lawns at Fosse were framed in gold drifts of daffodils. On the Friday after tea Sandy and I went for a walk up on to the Sharway Downs, where you look east into the shallow Oxfordshire vales and north over ridge upon ridge of green, round-shouldered hills. As the twilight drew in there was a soft bloom like peach-blossom on the landscape, a thrush was pouring out his heart in a bush, and the wild cry of lapwings, mingled with the babble of young lambs, linked the untamable with our comfortable human uses.

Sandy, as he sniffed the scents coming up from the woods and the ploughlands, seemed to feel the magic of the place.

'Pretty good,' he said. 'England is the only really comfortable spot on earth — the only place where man can be utterly at home.'

'Too comfortable,' I said. 'I feel I'm getting old and soft and slack. I don't deserve this place, and I'm not earning it.'

He laughed. 'You feel like that? So do I, often. There are times at Laverlaw when it seems that that blessed glen is too perfect for fallen humanity, and that I'm not worthy of it. It was lucky that Adam was kicked out of Paradise, for he couldn't have enjoyed it if he had remained there. I've known summer mornings so beautiful that they depressed me to my boots. I suppose it is proper to feel like that, for it keeps you humble, and makes you count your mercies.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'It's not much good counting your mercies if you feel you have no right to them.'

'Oh, we've a right to them. Both of us have been through the hards. But there's no such thing as a final right. We have to go on earning them.'

'But we're not. I, at any rate. I'm sunk in cushions — lapped about in ease, like a man in a warm bath.'

'That's right enough, provided you're ready to accept the cold plunge when it comes. At least that's the way I look at it. Enjoy your comforts, but sit loose to them. You'll enjoy them all the more if you hold them on that kind of tenure, for you'll never take them for granted.'

We didn't talk much on the way home, for I was meditating on what Sandy had said and wondering if it would give me that philosophy for advancing age which I was seeking. The trouble was, that I couldn't be sure that I would ever be willing to give up my pleasant ways. Sandy would, for he would always have open ears, but I was getting pretty dull of hearing.

That night at dinner he was in his best form. Till last year he had never been farther east than India, though he knew the Near and Middle East like a book, and he was full of his new experiences. Sandy rarely talked politics, so he said nothing about the work of his Commission, but he revelled in all the whimsies and freaks of travel. Adventures are to the adventurous, and his acquaintance was so colossal that wherever he went he was certain to revive old contacts. He had something to tell me about common friends whom I had long lost sight of, and who had been washed up like driftwood on queer shores.

'Do you remember a man called Haraldsen?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said. 'I once knew a Haraldsen, a Dane. Marius Eliaser Haraldsen.'

He nodded. 'That's the chap.'

It was odd to hear that name spoken, for though I had not thought of it for years, just lately it had come back to my memory, since it was in a way connected with Lombard.

'I haven't seen him for a quarter of a century, and he was an old man then. What's he doing? Did you run across him?'

'No. He is dead. But I knew him at the end of the War — and after. I've got something to tell you about Haraldsen, and something to show you.'

After dinner we sat round the fire in the library, and Sandy went up to his bedroom and brought down a small flat object wrapped in chamois leather. 'First of all, Dick,' he said, 'what do you remember about Haraldsen?'

I remembered a good many things, especially a story into which Lombard came. But since I wanted to hear what Sandy had to tell, I only said that I had known him in Rhodesia as a rather lucky speculator in gold-mining propositions. He had been a long time in South Africa, and was believed to have made a pot of money in the earlier days of the Rand. But he was always looking for new fields, and might have dropped some of it in his Rhodesian ventures. When I had last seen him he had been exploring north of the Zambezi, and had a dozen prospectors working for him in the bend of the Kafue.

'Yes,' said Sandy. 'That was Haraldsen. Let me tell you something more about him. He was the professional gold-seeker in excelsis, with a wonderful nose for the stuff and the patience of Buddha. But he wasn't the ordinary treasure-hunter, for he had a purpose which he never lost sight of. He was a Dane, as you say, a native of Jutland, and he was bred a mining engineer. He was a pretty good mineralogist, too. But he was also, and principally, a poet. His youth was before the days of all this Nordic humbug, but he had got into his head the notion that the Northern culture was as great a contribution to civilization as the Greek and Roman, and that the Scandinavian peoples were destined to be the true leaders of Europe. He had their history at his fingers' ends, and he knew the Sagas better than any man I've ever met — I'm some judge of that, for I know them pretty well myself. He had a vision of a great Northern revival, when the spirit of Harald Fairhair would revive in Norway, and Gustavus Adolphus and Charles XII. would be reborn in Sweden, and Valdemar the Victorious in Denmark. Not that he wanted any conquests or federations — he wasn't interested in politics: his ideal was a revival of the Northern mind, a sort of Northern Renaissance of which he was to be the leader. You remember what a tough bird he was in any practical question, but how he could relax sometimes and become the simplest of souls when you pressed the right button.'

I certainly remembered one instance when Haraldsen had talked to me about a house he was building in a little island somewhere in the north, and had rhapsodized over it like a boy. Otherwise he was regarded as rather a hard citizen.

'Well, for his purpose he wanted money, and that would be difficult to come by if he stayed at home. So he started out like the gooseherd in Hans Andersen in search of fortune — a proper big fortune, for he had a lot to do with it. Somehow he drifted to Egypt, and he was one of the prospectors that Ismail sent out to look for an El Dorado in the Sudan. At that time he must have been in his early twenties. Then by way of Abyssinia and Madagascar he moved south, until he fetched up in Mozambique, where he started out to look for the Queen of Sheba's gold-mines.

'He wasted a lot of time in that barren game, and more than once nearly had his throat cut, and then he was lucky enough to turn up on the Rand when that show was beginning. He did well — exceedingly well in a way, but not enough to satisfy him. He had still to find his own private special Golconda. So he went north into Rhodesia, where you met him, and farther north into the Eastern Congo. And then he decided that he had had enough of Africa, and would try Asia.'

'So that's where he went,' I said. 'The old hero! When I knew him he was nearer sixty than fifty.'

'I know. He was as tough as one of his own Saga-men. Well, he had a good many adventures in Asia — principally in Siberia and in the country east and south of the Caspian. When I came across him in Persia early in 1918 he was rather the worse for wear. You remember what a big fellow he was, with his enormous long arms and his great shoulders? When I met him he wasn't much more than a framework, and his clothes hung on him like the rags on the props of a scarecrow. But he wasn't ill, only indecently lean, and he was quite undefeated. He was still hunting for his Ophir.'

'That must have been during the War,' I put in. 'How on earth was he allowed to wander about in those parts?'

'He wasn't. He simply went — there were more of those uncharted libertines in the war zones than people imagined. You see, he was an impressive old gentleman, and he had money, and he knew the ropes — all the many ropes. He travelled in some style, too, with servants and a good cook and an armed escort who were more afraid of him than of any possible enemies. He wasn't a business man for nothing. I had about a week of his company, and in the cool of the morning, when

we ate white mulberries together in the garden, he told me all about himself. He spoke to me freely, for we were two civilized men alone in the wilds, and he took a fancy to me, for I knew all about his blessed Sagas. How did he impress you, Dick, when you knew him?’

‘I liked him — we all did, but we were a little puzzled about what he was after. We thought that a Rand magnate of well over fifty would be better employed enjoying himself in Europe than in fossicking about in the bush. He was very capable and ran his outfit beautifully. You would have had to rise uncommonly early to get the better of old Haraldsen.’

‘He must have changed before I met him,’ said Sandy. ‘In Africa you have to fight hard to prevent matter dominating mind, but in Asia the trouble is to keep mind in reasonable touch with matter. Haraldsen, when I knew him, was about as much mystic as gold-hunter. He told me about his past life, as if it were a thing very far away. I mentioned your name, I remember, and he recollected you, but didn’t seem greatly interested in anything that happened in Africa. He had a son somewhere in Europe, but he said very little about him — also a house, but I never discovered where. What filled his thoughts was this treasure which he was going to find some day, and which had been waiting for him since the foundation of the world. I gathered that he was a rich man, and that he was not looking for mere wealth. He told me about his dreams for the future of the Northern races, but rather as if he were repeating a lesson. The fact was that to find his Ophir had become for him an end in itself, quite apart from the use he meant to make of it. You sometimes find that in old men who have led a strenuous life. They become monomaniacs.’

‘Did he find it?’ I asked.

‘Not in Persia. The Middle East at that time wasn’t propitious for treasure-hunting. You must understand that Haraldsen wasn’t looking for gold in the void. He was proceeding on a plan, and he had his data as carefully marshalled as any Intelligence Department. He was following the reports of a whole host of predecessors, whose evidence he had collected and analysed — chiefly the trail of old caravan-routes along which he knew that gold had been carried. Well, he failed in Persia, and the next I heard of him was in Sinkiang — what they used to call Chinese Turkestan. I was in India then, keeping a watchful eye on Central Asia, and my old friend managed to give me a good deal of trouble. He got into Kashgar, and we had the deuce of a job getting him out. Sinkiang at that time was a kind of battleground between Moslem home-rulers and Soviet emissaries, with nobody to keep the peace except some weak Chinese officials and a ragtime Chinese army. However, in the end it was arranged that he should come to India, and I was looking forward to welcoming him at Simla, when news came that the Tungans had won, and that the garrison and the foreigners had been booted out and were fleeing eastward to China. I decided that it was all up with Haraldsen. He would never make the two thousand miles of desert that separated Sinkiang from China. I wrote something pious in my diary about the foolishness of treasure-hunting.’

‘Poor old chap!’ I murmured. ‘It was the kind of end he was bound to have.’

‘It wasn’t the end,’ said Sandy. ‘That was twelve years ago. Haraldsen is dead, but after he left Sinkiang he lived for ten years. He must have been eighty when he died, so he had a goodish run for his money. Moreover, he found his Ophir.’

‘How do you know?’ I asked excitedly.

‘It’s a queer story,’ said Sandy, and he took the object in his hands out of its chamois-leather wrappings. It was a tablet, about eight inches by six, of the most beautiful emerald jade I have ever seen. Sandy handed it to Mary, who handed it to me. I saw that it was covered on both sides with spidery marks, but if it was any known language it was one I couldn’t read. Mary, who loved all jewels, exclaimed at its beauty.

‘I got that in Peking,’ he said. ‘There were times when we weren’t very busy, and I liked to go foraging about the city in the sharp, bright autumn afternoons. There was one junk-shop up near the An Ting gate where I made friends with the owner. He was an old Mohammedan from Kansu whose language I could make a shot at talking, and his place was an education in every corner and century of Asia. In the front, which was open to the street, there was a glorious muddle of saddlery and rugs and palanquins and bows and arrows and furs, and even a little livestock like red desert-hawks in bamboo cages. As you went farther in the stock got smaller in size, but more valuable, things like marvellously carved walking-sticks, and damascened swords, and mandarin hats, and temple furniture, and every sort of lacquer. Some outlandish things, too, like an ordinary English grandfather’s clock marked ‘London, 1782.’ At the very back was the inner shrine which the old man only took you into when he knew all about you. It smelt of scented woods and spices and the dust of ages, and it was hard to find your way about in it with no light but the owner’s little green lamp. Here were the small

precious things, some on shelves, some in locked cabinets, and some in cheap glazed cases of deal. There was everything, from raw Bhotan turquoises to mandarin's buttons of flawed rubies, from tiny celadon cups to Ming bowls, from ivory Manchu combs to agate snuff-boxes. I was looking for something for Barbara when I found this.

'I always liked good jade, and even in that dusk I saw that this was a fine piece. The old fellow let me take it into the light in the front shop, and I had no doubts about it. It was an exquisite bit of the true imperial stone, with the famous kingfisher's-back colour. As you see, one side is covered with hieroglyphics which I can't read. The other side has also an inscription, which at first I took to be in the same jargon. I asked the shop-keeper what the writing meant, and he shook his head. It was some hieratic language, he thought, which the monks used on the Tibetan border.

'I took a tremendous fancy to the piece, and we chaffered over it for the better part of an afternoon. In the end I got it at quite a reasonable price — reasonable, that is, for jade, which would keep its value in China if the bottom dropped out of everything else. I think that the only reason why it was unsold was its size, which made it too clumsy for personal adornment, and because of the inscriptions on it which made it hard to fashion it into an ordinary jewel. The old fellow was doubtful about its provenance. From the quality of the stone he thought that it should have come from Siberia, from the Lake Baikal neighbourhood, but at the same time he was positive that the inscriptions belonged to the south-west corner of China. He couldn't read them, but he said he recognized the characters.

'That night in my hotel, when I examined the tablet by the light of a good lamp, I got the surprise of my life. The close lettering on one side, all whorls and twists, I could make nothing of. But on the other side the few lines inscribed were perfectly comprehensible. They consisted of a Latin sentence, a place-name, and a date. The Latin was "Marius Haraldsen moriturus haec scripsit thesauro feliciter invento"—"Marius Haraldsen, being on the point of death and having happily found his treasure, has written these words." The place-name was Gutok. The date was the fifteenth of October the year before last. What do you think of that for a yarn?'

I looked at the translucent green tablet in which the firelight woke wonderful glints of gold and ruby. I saw the maze of spidery writing on one side, and on the other the Latin words, not very neatly incised — probably with a penknife. It seemed a wonderful thing to get this news of my old friend out of the darkness four thousand miles from where I had known him. I handled it reverently, and passed it back to Sandy. 'What do you make of it?' I asked.

'I think it's simple,' he said. 'I raced back next morning to the old man to find out how he had got hold of it. But he could tell me nothing. It had come to him with other junk — he was always getting consignments — some caravan had picked it up — bought it from a pedlar or a thief. Then I went to the Embassy, and one of the secretaries helped me to hunt for Gutok. We ran it to earth at last — in a Russian gazetteer published just before the War. It was a little place down in the province of Shu-san, where a trade-route sent a fork south to Burma. An active man with proper backing could have reached it in the old days from Shanghai in a month.'

'Are you going there?' I asked.

'Not I. I have never cared about treasure. But I think we can be certain what happened. Haraldsen found his Ophir — God knows what it was — an old mine or an outcrop or something — anyhow, it must have been the real thing, for he knew too much to make mistakes. But he discovered also that he was dying. Now Gutok is not exactly a convenient centre of transport. He probably wrote letters, but he couldn't be certain that they would ever get to their destination. Two years ago all that corner of Asia was a rabble of banditry and guerrillas. So he adopted the sound scheme of writing poorish Latin on a fine bit of jade, in the hope that sooner or later it would come into the hands of some one who could construe it and give his friends news of his fate. He probably entrusted it to a servant, who was robbed and murdered, but he knew that the jade was too precious to disappear, and he was pretty certain that it would drift east and fetch up in some junk-shop in Peking or Shanghai. That was rather his way of doing things, for he was a fatalist, and left a good deal to Providence.'

'Yes, that was the old chap,' I said. 'Well, he has won out. You and I were his friends, and we know when and where he died and that he had found what he was looking for. He'd have liked us to know the last part, for he wasn't fond of being beaten. But his treasure wasn't much use to him and his Northern races. It's buried again for good.'

'I don't know,' said Sandy. 'I'm fairly certain that that spidery stuff on the other side is an account of how to reach it. It was done at the same time as the Latin, either by Haraldsen himself or more likely by one of his Chinese assistants. I can't read it, but I expect I could find somebody who can, and I'm prepared to bet that if we had it translated we should know just what Haraldsen discovered. You're an idle man, Dick. Why not go out and have a shot at digging it up?'

‘I’m too old,’ I said, ‘and too slack.’

I took the tablet in my hands again and examined it. It gave me a queer feeling to look at this last testament of my old friend, and to picture the conditions under which it had been inscribed in some godless mountain valley at the back of beyond, and to consider the vicissitudes it must have gone through before it reached the Peking curio-shop. Heaven knew what blood and tears it had drawn on its road. I felt too — I don’t know why — that there was something in this for me, something which concerned me far more closely than Sandy. As I looked at my pleasant library, with the fire reflected from the book-lined walls, it seemed to dislimn and expand into the wild spaces where I had first known Haraldsen, and I was faced again by the man with his grizzled, tawny beard and his slow, emphatic speech. I suddenly saw him as I remembered him, standing in the African moonlight, swearing me to a pact which I hadn’t remembered for twenty years.

‘If you are not sleepy, I’ll tell you a story about Haraldsen,’ I said.

‘Go on,’ said Sandy, as he lit his pipe. He and Mary are the best listeners I know, and till well after midnight they gave their attention to the tale which is set down in the next chapter.



CHAPTER 4

HARALDSEN

In the early years of the century the land north of the Limpopo River was now and then an exciting place to live in. We Rhodesians went on with our ordinary avocations, prospecting, mining, trying out new kinds of fruit and tobacco, pushing, many of us, into wilder country with our ventures. But the excitement did not all lie in front of us, for some of it came from behind. Up from the Rand and the Cape straggled odd customers whom the police had to keep an eye on, and England now and then sent us some high-coloured gentry. The country was still in many people's minds a no-man's-land, where the King's writ did not run, and in any case it was a jumping-off ground for all the wilds of the North. In my goings to and fro I used to strike queer little parties, often very ill-found, that had the air of hunted folk, and were not very keen to give any information about themselves. Heaven knows what became of them. Sometimes we had the job of feeding some starving tramp, and helping him to get back to civilization, but generally they disappeared into the unknown and we heard no more of them. Some may have gone native, and ended as poor whites in a dirty hut in a Kaffir kraal. Some may have died of fever or perished miserably of thirst or hunger, lost in the Rhodesian bush, which was not a thing to trifle with. In the jungles of the middle Zambezi and the glens of the Scarp and the swamps of the Mazoe and the Ruenya there must have been many little heaps of bleached and forgotten bones.

I had come back from a trip to East Africa, and in Buluwayo to my delight I met Lombard, with whom I had made friends in the Rift valley. He had finished his work with his Commission, and was on the road home, taking a look at South Africa on the way. He had come by sea from Mombasa to Beira, and was putting up for a few days at Government House. When he met me he was eager to go on trek, for he had several weeks to spare and, since I was due for a trip up-country, he offered to go with me. My firm wanted me to have a look at some copper indications in Manicaland, north of the upper Pungwe in Makapan's country. Lombard wanted to see the fantastic land where the berg and the plateau break down into the Zambezi flats, and he hoped for a little shooting, for which he had had no leisure on his East African job. My trip promised to be a dull one, so I gladly welcomed his company, for to a plain fellow like me Lombard's talk was a constant opening out of new windows.

In the hotel at Salisbury we struck a strange outfit. It was a party of four, an elderly man, a youngish man, and two women. The older man looked a little over fifty, a heavily built fellow, with a square face and a cavalry moustache and a loud laugh. I should have taken him for a soldier but for the slouch of his shoulders, which suggested a sedentary life. He spoke like an educated Englishman — a Londoner, I guessed, for he had that indefinable clipping and blurring of his words which is the mark of the true metropolitan. The younger man was an American from his accent, and at the first glance I disliked him. He was the faux bonhomme, if I knew the breed, always grinning and pawing the man he spoke to, but with cold, cunning grey eyes that never smiled. We were not a dressy lot in Rhodesia, and the clothes of these two cried out like a tuberosa in a cottage window. They wore the most smartly cut flannels, and soft linen collars, which were then a novelty, and they had wonderful buckskin shoes. The cut of their jib was not exactly loud, but it was exotic, though no doubt it would have been all right at Bournemouth. Even Lombard, who was always neat in his dress, looked shabby by contrast.

The women were birds of Paradise. They were both young, and rather pretty, and they were heavily rouged and powdered, so that I wondered what their faces would be like if the African sun got at them. They wore garden-party clothes, and in the evening put themselves into wonderful fluffy tea-gowns. They seemed to belong to a lower class than their male escort, for they had high vulgar voices and brazen Cockney accents. The party, apparently, had money to burn. They made a great outcry about the food, which was the ordinary tinned stuff and trek-ox, but they had champagne to all their meals, and champagne was not a cheap beverage in Salisbury.

I had no talk with any of them except the young fellow. He was very civil and very full of questions, after he had mixed me a cocktail which he claimed was his own patent. He and his friends, he said, were out to cast an eye over the Rhodesian proposition and sort of size-up what kind of guy the late C. J. Rhodes had been. Just a short look-see, for he judged they must soon hurry home. He talked a ripe American, but I guessed that it was not his native wood-notes, and sure enough I learned that he was a Dane by birth, name of Albinus, who had been some years in the States. He mentioned Montana, and I tried to get him to talk about copper, but he showed no interest. But he appeared curiously well-informed about parts of

Rhodesia, for he asked me questions about the little-known north-eastern corner, which showed that he had made some study of its topography.

Lombard had a talk with the elder man, but got nothing out of him, except that he was an Englishman on a holiday. 'Common vulgar trippers,' said Lombard. 'Probably won some big sweepstake or had a lucky flutter in stocks, and are now out for a frolic. Funny thing, but I fancy the old chap tries to make himself out a bigger bounder than God meant him to be. When he is off his guard he speaks almost like a gentleman. The women! Oh, the eternal type — Gaiety girls — salaried compagnons de voyage. The whole crowd make an ugly splash of aniline dye on this sober landscape.'

We were to be off at dawn next morning. Before turning in I went into the bar for a drink, and there I met a policeman I knew — Jim Arcoll, who was a famous name anywhere north of the Vaal River. I didn't ask him what he was doing there, for that was the kind of question he never permitted, but I told him my own plans. He knew every corner of the country like his own name, and, when he learned where we were going, he nodded. 'You'll find old Haraldsen up there,' he said. 'He's fossicking somewhere near Mafudi's kraal. Give him my love if you see him, and tell him to keep me in touch with his movements. It's a rough world, and he might come by a mischief.'

Then he jerked his thumb to the ceiling.

'You've got a gay little push upstairs,' he said.

'I've only Lombard — the man you met in Buluwayo!' I replied.

'I didn't mean your lot. I mean the others. The two dudes with the pretty ladies. Do you know who the older man is? No less than the illustrious Aylmer Troth.'

People have long ago forgotten the Scimitar case, but a year before it had made a great stir in England. It was a big financial swindle, with an ugly episode in it which might have been suicide, or might have been murder. There was a famous trial at the Old Bailey, and five out of the twelve accused got heavy terms of penal servitude. One of the chief figures had been a well-known London solicitor called Troth, who was the mystery man of the whole business. He had got off after a brilliant defence by his counsel, but the judge had been pretty severe in his comments and a heavy mist of suspicion remained.

'Troth!' I said. 'What on earth is he doing here? I thought the chap upstairs looked too formidable for the ordinary globe-trotter.'

'He is certainly formidable. As for his purpose, ask me another. We've nothing against him. Left the court without a stain on his character and all that. All the same, he's a pretty mangy lad, and we have instructions to keep our eye on him till he gets on to the boat at Beira or Capetown. I don't fancy he's up to any special tricks this time. With his pretty love-birds he carries too heavy baggage for anything very desperate.'

Some days later, after a detour westward to pick up part of my outfit, we were on the hills between the Pungwe and the Ruenya. I thought that we had said good-bye to Troth and his garish crew, and had indeed forgotten all about them, when suddenly one noon, when we off-saddled at a water-hole, we struck them again. There were the four sitting round a fire having luncheon. The men had changed their rig, and wore breeches and leggings and khaki shirts, with open necks and sleeves rolled up, very different people from the exquisites of the hotel. Albinus looked a workmanlike fellow who had been at the game before, and even Troth made a presentable figure for the wilds. But the women were terrible. They too had got themselves up in breeches and putties and rough shirts, but they weren't the right shape for that garb, and they had a sad raddled look like toy terriers that had got mixed up in a dog-fight. The sun, as I had anticipated, was playing havoc with their complexions.

The four did not seem surprised to see us, as indeed why should they, for they were on the regular trail into Makapan's country, and a fair number of people passed that way. They were uncommonly forthcoming, and offered us drinks, of which they had plenty, and fancy foods, of which they had a remarkable assortment. They seemed to be in excellent spirits, and were very full of chat. Troth was enthusiastic about everything — the country and the climate, and the delight of living in the open, of which, he lamented, a busy man like himself had never before had a chance. Alas, they could only have a few days of this Paradise, and then they must make tracks for home. No, they were not hunting; they had shot nothing but a few guinea-fowl for the pot. He wished that he wasn't such a rotten bad naturalist, or that he had somebody with him to tell him about the beasts and birds. Altogether you couldn't have met a more innocent Bank Holiday tripper. The girls too spoke their piece very nicely, though I couldn't believe that they were really enjoying themselves. Albinus said little, but he

was very assiduous in helping us to drinks.

I asked if we could do anything for them, but they said they were all right. They proposed to have a look at a place called Pinto's Kloof, which they had been told was a better view-point than the Matoppos, and then they must turn back. It seemed odd that a man with Troth's antecedents should be enjoying himself in this simple way, and Albinus didn't look as if he had any natural taste for the idyllic, nor the high-coloured ladies. But I must say they kept up the part well, and Troth's last word to me was that he wished he was twenty years younger and could have a life like mine. He said it as if he meant it.

When we had ridden on, Lombard observed that he thought that they were anxious to make themselves out to be greater novices and greenhorns than they really were. 'I caught a glimpse of their ironmongery,' he said, 'and there was more there than scatter-guns. I'll swear there were rifles — at least one Mauser and what looked like an express.'

I nodded.

'I noticed that too,' I said. 'And did you observe their boys? Two they may have hired in Salisbury, but there was a half-caste Portuguese whom I fancy I've seen before, and who didn't want to be recognized. He dodged behind a tree when he saw me. Arcoll is right to keep an eye on that lot. Not that I see what mischief they can do. This part of the world can't offer much to a shady London solicitor and an American crook.'

Three days later we were well into Makapan's country and I had started on my job, verifying the reports of our prospectors in a land of little broken kopjes right on the edge of the Scarp. I had with me a Cape half-caste called Hendrik, who was my general factotum, and who looked after the whole outfit. There was nothing he could not turn his hand to, hunting, transport-riding, horse-doctoring, or any job that turned up: he was a wonderful fellow with a mule team, too, and he was the best cook in Africa. We had four boys with us, Mashonas whom I had employed before. Lombard spent his time shooting, and, as it was a country where a man could not easily get lost if he had a compass, I let him go out alone. He didn't get much beyond a few klipspringer and bushbuck, but it was a good game area, and he lived in hopes of a kudu.

Well, one evening as we were sitting at dinner beside our fire, I looked up to see Peter Pienaar standing beside me. It was not the Peter that you knew in the War, but Peter ten years younger, with no grey in his beard, and as trim and light and hard as an Olympic athlete. But he had the same mild face, and the same gentle sleepy eyes that you remember, and the same uncanny quietness. Peter made no more noise in his appearances than the change from night to morning.

I had last heard of him in the Kalahari, which was a very good reason why I should expect to find him next on the other side of Africa. He ate all the food we could give him and drank two bottles of beer, which was his habit, for he used to stoke up like a camel, never being sure when he would eat or drink again. Then he filled a deep-bowled pipe with the old Transvaal arms on it, which a cousin had carved for him when a prisoner of war in Ceylon. I waited for him to explain himself, for I was fairly certain that this meeting was not accidental.

'I have hurried to find you, Dick,' he said, 'for I think there is going to be dirty work in Makapan's country.'

'There's sure to be dirty work when you're about, you old aasvogel,' I said. 'What is it this time?'

'I do not know what it is, but I think I know who it is. It is friends of yours, Dick — very nasty friends.'

'Hullo!' I said. 'Was it Arcoll who sent you? Are you after the trippers that we found on the road last week?'

'Ja! Captain Jim sent me. He said, "Peter, will you keep an eye on two gentlemen and two ladies who are taking a little holiday?" He did not tell me more, and he did not know more. Perhaps now he knows, for I have sent him a message. But I have found out very bad things which Captain Jim cannot stop, for they will happen quickly. That is why I have come to you.'

'But those four tourists can't do anything,' I said. 'One I know is a crook, and I think the other is, and they've got an ugly Portuguese with them that I swear I've seen before. But that's only three, and they are cumbered with two women.'

'The vrows have gone back to the town,' said Peter solemnly. 'They will wait quietly there till the others return. They will make the whole thing seem innocent — naughty, perhaps, but innocent. But the three you speak of are not the only ones. By this time they have been joined by others, and these others are very great scoundrels. You say, how do I know? I will tell you. I am at home in Makapan's country and Makapan's people do what I ask them. They have brought me news which is surer and speedier than Captain Jim can get. There is very bad mischief brewing. Listen, and I will tell you.'

The gist of Peter's story was that after they had got rid of the women Troth and Albinus had moved down from the scarp into the bush-veld. The third, the Portuguese, Peter knew all about. His name was Dorando, and Peter had come

across his tracks in many queer places; he had done time for I.D.B. and for selling illicit liquor, and was wanted in Mozambique on a variety of charges from highway robbery to cold-blooded murder. An odd travelling companion for two innocent sight-seeing tourists! Down in the flats the three had been joined by two other daisies, one an Australian who had been mixed up in the Kruger Treasure business, and one a man from the Diamond Fields called Stringer. I opened my eyes when I heard about the last, for Jim Stringer was an ill-omened name at that time in South Africa. He was the typical 'bad man,' daring and resourceful and reputed a dead shot. I was under the impression that he had been safely tucked away for his share in a big Johannesburg burglary.

'He came out of tronk last month,' said Peter, 'and your friends must have met him as they came up-country and arranged things. What do you say, Dick? Here are three skellums that I know well, and your two friends who are not good people. They have with them four boys, Shangaans whom I do not know, but they are Makinde's people, and Makinde's kraal is a dirty nest. What are they after, think you? They are not staying in the flats. They have already moved up into the Berg, and they are moving fast, and they are moving north. They are not looking for gold, and they are not hunting, and they are not admiring the scenery. Where are they going? I can tell you that, for I found it out before they joined Jim Stringer. The two English do not drink, or if they drink they do not babble. But Dorando drinks and babbles. One of Makapan's people, who is my friend, was their guide, and he heard Dorando talk when he was drunk. They are going to Mafudi's kraal. Now who is at Mafudi's kraal, Dick? They do not want to see old Mafudi in his red blanket. There is somebody else there.'

'Haraldsen!' I exclaimed.

'Ja! The Baas.' Peter always called Haraldsen the Baas, for he had often worked for him, as guide and transport-rider, and Haraldsen had more than once got him out of scrapes. Peter was a loyal soul, and if his allegiance was vowed to anyone alive it was to the old Dane.

'But what on earth can they have to do with Haraldsen?' I demanded.

'I do not know,' he said; 'but they have got it in for the Baas. Consider, Dick. He is not a young man, and he is up there alone, with his little band of Basutos and the Dutchman Malan, who is clever but not a fighter, for he has but the one arm. The Baas is very rich, and he is believed to know many secrets. These skellums have some business with him and it will not be clean business. Perhaps it is an old quarrel. Perhaps he has put it across your friends Troth and Albinus in old days. Or perhaps it is just plain robbery, and they mean to make him squeal. He cannot have much money with him, but they may force him to find them money. I do not know, but I am certain of one thing, that they mean to lay hands on the Baas — and he will not come happily out of their hands — perhaps not alive.'

I was fairly flabbergasted by Peter's tale. At first I thought he was talking through his hat, for we were civilized folk in Rhodesia, and violence was more or less a thing of the past. But Peter never talked wildly, and the more I thought of it the less I liked it. Five desperadoes up in that lonely corner could do pretty much what they pleased with Haraldsen and his one-armed assistant. I remembered the old fellow's reputation for having hunted gold all his life and having struck it in a good many places. What more likely than that some hungry rogues should try to get him alone in the wilds and force out of him either money or knowledge?

'What do you mean to do?' I asked.

'I am going straight to Mafudi's,' said Peter. 'And I think you are coming with me, Dick.'

Of course I couldn't refuse, but I felt bound to go cautiously. Would it not be better to get Arcoll and the police? I didn't relish the notion of a private scrap with people who would certainly not stick at trifles. Besides, could we do any real good? Haraldsen and Malan might be ruled out as combatants, and we three would be up against five hefty scallywags.

Peter overruled all my objections in his quiet way. Arcoll was a hundred miles off. A native runner had been sent to him, but it was impossible for him to arrive at Mafudi's in time, for Troth and his little lot would be there by tomorrow morning. As for being outnumbered, we were five honest men against five rascals, and in all rascals he believed there was a yellow streak. 'I can shoot a little,' he said, 'and you can shoot a little, Dick.' He turned inquiringly to Lombard.

'I can loose off at any rate,' said Lombard. He was looking rather excited, for this adventure was a piece of luck he had not hoped for.

The upshot was that we had no rest that night. I sent off one of my boys with another message for Arcoll, giving him more details than Peter had given him, and suggesting a road in by the northwest which I feared he might not think of. I

left Hendrik and the mules and the rest of the outfit to come on later — and I remember wondering what kind of situation they would find when they reached Mafudi's. The three of us took the road just after ten o'clock. Peter's boy accompanied us, a tough little Bechuana from Khama's country.

I had travelled the route several times before, and Peter knew it well, but in any case it was not hard to find, for it kept to the open ground near the edge of the scarp, bending inland only to avoid the deep-cut kloofs. There was a wonderful moon which made the whole landscape swim in warm light — an African moon, which is not the pale thing of the north, but as masterful as the sun itself. When it set we were on high ground, a plateau of long grass and thorns, with the great hollow of the lower veld making a gulf of darkness on our right. The road was easy enough to follow, and when dawn came with a rush of gold and crimson out of the east we were close to the three queer little peaks between which lay Mafudi's kraal.

We went straight to Haraldsen's camp, which was about half a mile from the kraal on one of the ridges. It was the ordinary prospector's camp of which at that time you could have found a score or two in Rhodesia, but more professional than most, for Haraldsen had the cash with which to do things properly. Gold is not my pidgin, but the heaps of quartz I passed looked healthy. He had struck an outcrop which he thought promising, and was busy tracing the run of the reef, having sunk two seventy-foot shafts about a quarter of a mile apart. But I wasn't concerned with old Haraldsen's operations, but with Haraldsen himself. We had been sighted by his boys, and he stood outside his tent awaiting us, a figure like a patriarch with the sun on his shaggy head.

While our breakfast coffee was being made I told him our story, for there was no time to lose, since Peter calculated that Troth and his lot, by the road they were coming, could not be more than five miles off. Haraldsen had a face so weathered and set in its lines that it didn't reveal much of his thoughts, and he had grey eyes as steady as a good dog's. But the mention of Troth woke him up and the name of Albinus didn't please him. He seemed to be more worried about them than about the other scallywags.

'Troth I know,' he said in his deep voice and his precise accent, for he always spoke English as if he had got it from old-fashioned books. 'He is a great scoundrel and my enemy. Once — long ago — he was my partner for a little. He does not like me, and he has a reason, for I most earnestly laboured to have him put in tronk. He comes now like a ghost out of the past, and he means evil.' Of Albinus, he would only say that his father had had a great devil in him, and that he did not think that the devil had been exorcized in the son.

He had not the smallest doubt that the gang were after him, but he didn't explain why. All he said was, 'They will try to make me do their will, and if I do not consent they will kill me. Unless, indeed, I first kill them.'

I tried as usual to put the common sense of it. 'If they find us with you,' I said, 'they won't dare to do anything. A quiet murder might be in their line, but they won't want to fight a battle.'

But Haraldsen shook his head. He knew Troth, he said, and he knew about Albinus. He must have laid these gentry out pretty flat some time or other for them to have such a murderous grudge against him, or else he knew the depth and desperation of their greed. But what impressed me most was Peter's view. He knew about Stringer and Dorando, and was clear that they would not go home without loot. They would not think of consequences, for they could leak away into the back-world of Africa.

I was never one for a fight except in the last resort, so I proposed that Haraldsen should take his best horse and make a bolt for it, leaving us to face the music, since there was nothing much to be got out of Peter and Lombard and myself. But Haraldsen wouldn't hear of this. 'If I flee,' he said, 'they will find me later and I shall live with a menace over my head. That I will not face. Better to meet them here and have done with it.'

That was all very well, but I wasn't keen on being mixed up in any Saga-battle. I asked him if his boys were any use. 'None,' he said. They are Mashonas and are timid as rabbits. Besides, I will not have them hurt.'

'What about Mafudi's men?' I asked.

It was Peter who answered. 'Mafudi is always drunk, and also very old. Once his people were warriors, but now they have no guns. They will not fight.'

'Well, then, it's the five of us — and one of us crippled — against the five of them.'

But it was worse than that, for it appeared that Malan had a bad go of fever and might be counted out. Also Haraldsen had run out of ammunition and had sent a boy off to get a fresh supply, and as his rifles were Mannlichers and ours

Mausers we could do nothing to help him out. This seemed to me fairly to put the lid on it, but Peter did not lose his cheerfulness. 'We must make a plan,' he said — a great phrase of his; and he delicately scratched the tip of his left ear, which was always a sign that his mind was working hard.

'This is my plan,' he said at last. 'We must find a place where we can defend ourselves. Captain Arcoll will be here today — or perhaps to-night — at any rate not later than tomorrow. We cannot fight these skellums on fair terms in the open, but in a strong fort we may beat them off for perhaps twelve hours, perhaps more.'

'But where is your fort?' I asked. As I looked round the bright open place, the jumble of kopjes with the green of Mafudi's crops in the heart of it, I didn't see much hopes of a refuge we could hold. It was all open and bare, and we hadn't time to dig trenches or build a scherm.

'There is the Hill of the Blue Leopard,' said Peter, using a Mashona word. 'It is above the kraal — you can see the corner of it beyond that ridge. It is a very holy place where few go but the priests, and it has round it a five-foot hedge of thorns and a big fence of stakes. I do not know what is inside except a black stone which fell from heaven. It is there that the young men must watch during the Circumcision. If we get in there, Dick, I think we could laugh at your friends for a little — long enough to give Captain Arcoll time to get here. There is another thing. If the skellums were strong enough to break in, I think that Mafudi's men might be very angry. It is true that they have no guns, but very angry men can do much with knobkerries and axes.'

'But they'll never let us enter,' I protested.

'Perhaps they will. I will try. I have always been good friends with Mafudi's folk.' And without another word he strode off in the direction of the kraal.

I was doubtful about his success, for I knew how jealous the natives were of their sacred places, especially the Mashonas, who have always been in the hands of their priests. Still I knew that Peter had an amazing graft among the tribes, for he was not the kind of man who damned them all as niggers. People used to say that he was the only white man who had ever been present at the great Purification Dance of the Amatolas. It was a nervous business waiting for his return, for he took a long time about it. I made Haraldsen collect his valuables, and we prepared a sort of litter for Malan, who was at that stage of fever when a man is pretty well unconscious of his surroundings. Always I kept my eye on the corner of the kloof where any moment Troth and his gang might be expected to appear.

But they did not come, and at last Peter did. He had succeeded in persuading the elders of the tribe to let us inside the sacred enclosure. He did not tell me what arguments he had used, for that was never his way; he presented the world with results and left it to guess his methods. We bundled up our traps in a mighty hurry, for there was no time to lose, hoisted Malan into his litter, and told Haraldsen's boys to take the horses up into the berg and to lie low till we sent for them. In the kraal, in the open space in the centre of the kyaas, we were met by most of Mafudi's people, all as silent as the tomb, which is not common among Kaffirs. We had to have water poured on our heads — what the books call a lustration — and to have little dabs of green paint stuck on our foreheads. Peter's Bechuana boy was not allowed to be of our party, only the white men. Then we were solemnly conducted up a narrow bush road to the Hill of the Blue Leopard, and as we started there was a great 'Ouch,' a sound like a sigh, from all the natives. There was a kind of cattle-gate in the wall of the scherm, which a priest ceremonially opened, and the four of us and Malan in his litter passed into the holy place.

At first sight it looked as if we had found a sanctuary. The hill was perhaps a hundred feet high, and most of it was covered with thick bush, except a bald cone at the top where the sacred stone lay. The bush was mostly waak-embeetje thorn and quite impenetrable, but it was seamed and criss-crossed by dozens of little paths, worn smooth like a pebble by ages of ceremonial. One of the items in the Circumcision rite was a kind of demented hide-and-seek in this maze. Around the foot of the hill, as I have said, was a dense quickset scherm which it would have taken a regiment to hack through. The only danger-point was the gate, and I thought that in case of trouble two of us might manage to hold it, for I didn't envy the job of the men who tried to rush it in the face of concealed rifles. Anyhow, we could hold it long enough, I thought, to give Arcoll time to turn up. Indeed, I had hopes that Troth and his gang would miss us altogether. They would find Haraldsen's camp deserted and conclude that he had moved on.

In every bit of my forecast I was wrong. In the first place our enemies came round the edge of the kloof in time to see the movement of Mafudi's people toward the little hill, and if they didn't guess then what had happened, they knew all right when they got to Haraldsen's camp. For his boys had been too slow over the job of scattering into the woods. One of

them they caught, and, since they meant business and were not fastidious in their methods, they soon made the poor devil blab what he knew or guessed. The consequence was that half an hour after we were inside the scherm the others were making hell in Mafudi's kraal. I had found a lair well up the hill where I could spy out the land, and I saw that Troth's party was bigger than I had supposed. I made out Troth and Albinus, their natty outfit a little the worse for wear, and the trim figure of Dorando, and Jim Stringer's long legs. They had left their natives behind, but they had four other white men with them, and I didn't like the cut of their jib. They were eight to our four, odds of two to one. I called Peter up beside me, and his eyes, sharp as a berghaan's, examined the reinforcements. He recognized the Australian and one other, a Lydenburg man whose name he mentioned and then spat. 'I think we must fight, Dick,' he said quietly. 'The greed of these men is so great that it will make them brave. And I know that Dorando and Stringer are bad, but not cowards.'

I thought the same, so I started out to make my dispositions, for I had learned some soldiering in the late war. Haraldsen I kept out of sight, for his life was the most valuable of the lot, and besides I meant to pretend that we knew nothing about him. Peter, who was far the best shot among us, I placed behind a rock where he had a good view of the approaches. I told him not to shoot unless they tried to rush the gate, and then to cripple if possible and not kill, for I didn't want bloodshed and a formal inquiry and screeds in the papers — that would do no good to either Haraldsen or me. Lombard and I took our stations near the gate, which was a solid thing of log and wattle jointed between two tree trunks. We had a rifle and a revolver apiece; but I would have preferred shot-guns. I could see that Lombard was twittering with excitement, but he kept a set face, though he was very white.

The affair was slow in beginning. It was after midday before Dorando and Stringer appeared on the track that led up from the kraal. They had a handkerchief tied to a rifle muzzle by way of a white flag. I halted them when they were six yards from the gate, and asked what they wanted.

Butter wouldn't have melted in their mouths. They had come to see Mr. Haraldsen, who was a friend of theirs — to see him on business. They understood that he was on the hill. Would he step out and come down to luncheon with them? They were kind enough to include me in the invitation.

I said that I knew nothing about Mr Haraldsen, but that I knew a good deal about them. I proposed another plan: let them leave their guns where they stood, and come inside the scherm and take a bite with us. They thanked me, and said they would be delighted, and moved to the gate, but they did not drop their rifles, and I saw the bulge of revolvers in their pockets. 'Stop,' I shouted. 'Down guns or stay where you are,' and Lombard and I showed our pistols.

'Is that a way to talk to gentlemen?' said Dorando with a very ugly look.

'It's the way to talk to you, my lads,' I said. 'I've known you too long. Strip yourselves and come inside. If not, I give you one minute to get out of here.'

Dorando was livid, but Stringer only smiled sleepily. He was the more dangerous of the two, for he was mighty quick on the draw and didn't miss. He had a long thin face, and few teeth, which made his mouth as prim as a lawyer's. I kept my eye on him, having whispered to Lombard to mark Dorando. But they didn't try to rush us, only said a word to each other and turned and went back. That was the end of the first bout.

All afternoon nothing happened. The heat was blistering, and as there was no water on the hill and we had nothing liquid but a flask of brandy, we suffered badly from thirst. Malan babbled in his fever, and Haraldsen, who was in the shade beside him, went to sleep. Old Haraldsen had been in so many tight places in his life that he was hard to rattle. Little green lizards came out and basked in the sun on the tracks, widow-birds flopped among the trees, and a great ugly aasvogel dropped out of the blue sky and had a look at us. The whole land lay baking and still, and down in the kraal there was not a sound. There was nobody in the space between the huts, not a child or a chicken stirred, and we might have been looking down at a graveyard.

Suddenly from one of the kyas there came a cry as of some one in deadly pain. In the hot silence it had a horrible eeriness, for it sounded like a child's scream, though I knew that a Kaffir in pain or terror often gives tongue like an infant. I saw Lombard's face whiten.

'Oughtn't we to do something?' he croaked, for his mouth was dry with thirst.

'We can't,' I told him. 'I don't know what these swine are up to, but it will soon be our turn. Our only hope is to sit tight.'

When the twilight began to fall Peter descended from his perch. Being higher up the hill he had had a better view and

he brought news.

‘The stad is quiet,’ he told us. ‘All Mafudi’s people are indoors, for they have been told that they will be shot if they show their faces. Of the others, two are on guard and the rest have not been sleeping. They have been pulling down a kya to get the old straw from the roof, and they have been down at the byres where the hay is kept. As soon as it is dark they will be very busy.’

‘Good God!’ I cried, for I saw what this meant. ‘They mean to burn us out.’

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘They are clever men. The moon will not rise till nine o’clock. Soon it will be black night, and we cannot shoot in the dark. There are eight of them, and of us only four. At this time of year there is no sap in the thorns, so they will burn like dry tinder. The gate will no longer matter. They can fire this scherm at six places, and we cannot watch them all. We are in a bad fix, Dick.’

There was no doubt about that. At infighting those scallywags — leaving out Troth and Albinus, whom I knew nothing about — were far more than our masters. If Peter was right, our sanctuary would very soon be a trap. I summoned Haraldsen, and the four of us had a solemn council. We couldn’t hold the place against fire, and we couldn’t escape, for the gaps made by the flames would all be watched, and likewise the gate.

‘Have you any plan?’ I asked Peter.

He shook his head, for even he was at the end of his resources.

‘We can only trust in God,’ he said simply, and his mild quizzical face was solemn. ‘Perhaps Jim Arcoll may come in time.’

Haraldsen said nothing. He had no weapon, so I offered him my rifle. But he preferred to take an axe which Peter had insisted on bringing from the camp, and he swung it round his head, looking like some old Viking. I apologized to Lombard for having got him into such a hole, but he told me not to worry. That cry from the kraal had stripped him of all nervousness or fear. He was thinking only of what mischief he could do to the eight devils at the foot of the hill.

The short mulberry gloaming faded out of the sky, and night came down on the world like a thick black shawl. I had sent Lombard and Peter up to the summit where they could get early news of what was happening, for I knew that an attempt would be made to fire the scherm in several places at once. I stayed at the gate, and Haraldsen for some reason of his own insisted on staying beside me. We moved the sick Malan out into the open, for I feared that the firing of the scherm might kindle all the bush on the hill.

I can’t say that I enjoyed the hour we had to wait. I saw no chance for us, short of a miracle, and the best we could hope for was a good scrap and a quick death. You may ask why we didn’t parley with our enemies to gain time. The answer is that we were convinced that they meant black murder if we gave them half a chance; at least they meant to do in Haraldsen, and we couldn’t allow that. Haraldsen himself had wanted to be let out and to go down and face them alone, but Peter and I told him not to be a fool.

The crisis came, as such things do, when I wasn’t expecting it. Suddenly I saw a red glow in the night, apparently on the other side of the hill. The glow spread, which must mean that other fires had been started. There was a rifle shot, which I assumed to be Peter’s, and then Lombard stumbled down with the news that the scherm was burning in four places. The next thing I knew was that there was a big burst of flame about five yards from me, and at the same moment faces appeared in the gate. I fired at one, there was an answering crackle of shots, and I felt a raw pain in my left shoulder. Then I saw the gate in a sheet of flame, for the wattles had been fired.

After that there was a wild confusion. I found an ugly face close to me, fired at it, and saw it go blind. That was the man from Lydenburg, for we found the body later. I saw other figures in the gap, and then I saw an extraordinary sight. Haraldsen, looking like a giant in the hellish glow, had leaped forward and was swinging his axe and shouting like a madman. The spectacle must have confounded the attackers, for they made wild shooting. He had a bullet through one pocket and another through his hair, but he got none in his body. I saw him jump the blazing remnant of the gate and bring his axe down on somebody’s head. And then he was through them and careering out into the dark.

I was pretty dazed and wild, and I decided that it was all up now, when suddenly the whole business took a new turn. Above the crackle and the roar of the flames I heard a sound which I had not heard since the Matabele Rising, the deep throaty howl of Kaffirs on the war-path. It rose to heaven like a great wind, and I clutched at my wits and realized what had happened. Mafudi’s men were up. They had been like driven cattle all day, but this outrage on their sacred place had

awakened their manhood. Once they had been a famous fighting clan and the old fury had revived. They were swarming like bees round the scherm, and making short work of our assailants. The Kaffir sees better in the dark than a white man, and a knobkerrie or an axe is a better weapon in a blind scrap than a gun. Also there were scores of them, the better part of a hundred lusty savages, mad with fury at the violation of their shrine.

There was nothing I could do except join Peter and Lombard on the top. But there was no sign of them there, for they had each made for one of the burning gaps to do what they could to hold the fort. As a matter of fact the fires at no place had gone far enough to make an opening, so none of our assailants had got inside the scherm. Pandemonium was in full blast around it, where some of Mafudi's men were rounding up Troth's lot and the rest were beating out the flames. This latter wasn't an easy job and the moon was up before it was over. I simply sat on the bald crest beside the sacred stone and waited. This was no work for me. Peter and Lombard were somewhere on the hill, but it was impossible to find them in that dark maze. The noise of native shouting soon died away, so I realized that they had finished their business. The fires were all mastered except one that kept breaking out afresh. Then over the rim of the horizon rose the moon, and the world was bright again. I was just starting out to look for the others when I heard the jingle of bridles and the clatter of hoofs and knew that Arcoll's police had arrived at last.

Arcoll made a fine bag of miscreants — five, to be accurate, who were firm in the grip of Mafudi's people. Three were dead — the man from Lydenburg whom I shot, one of the new fellows whose skull Haraldsen split with his axe, and, as the fates would have it, Troth himself. Peter had got Troth at the very start, when he showed up for a second in the gleam of the first fire. There he lay with his neat London outfit punctured by Peter's bullet, a home-bred hound among jackals, but the worst jackal of the pack.

'That's a pleasant yarn,' said Sandy. 'Old Haraldsen told me a good many of his adventures, but not that one. It had the right sort of ending.'

'That wasn't quite the end,' I said. 'Haraldsen had burst through the ring into the arms of Mafudi's men, who knew him well and recognized him and kept him out of danger. But as soon as Arcoll arrived and took charge the old man got busy. He had been berserk at the gate, and now he seemed to be 'fey.' He said there was something still to do, and he insisted on Peter and Lombard and me accompanying him to the top of the Hill of the Blue Leopard. There he made us a speech, looking more like an old Norseman than ever. He said that we were his blood-brothers, who had been ready to stand by him to the end. But the end hadn't come, though Troth was dead and the others would soon be in quod. There was a legacy of ill will that would follow him to his last day, and the dead Troth would leave it as a bequest to his successors. So he wanted the three of us to swear that if he called for us we would come to his aid wherever in the world we might be. More, we must be ready to come to his son's help, for he considered that this vendetta might not end with his own life, and we were to hand on the duty to our own sons. As none of us was married that didn't greatly worry us.

'It was like something out of one of his Sagas. There we stood above the silvered bush on rocks which were like snowdrifts in the strong moonlight. We took his right hand in turn in ours and put it to our foreheads, and then we raised our right arms and repeated a mad formula about dew and fire and running water. . . . Lord, how it all comes back — that white world, and the smell of charred bush, and the pain in my shoulder, and Lombard, who had had about as much as he could stand, whimpering like a scared dog!'

'Well, he's dead now,' said Sandy, 'and your oath is finished, for it's not likely that his son will trouble you. Heigh-ho! The old wild days have gone. Peter long ago entered Valhalla. What about the third — Lombard, I think you called him?'

'Curiously enough,' I said, 'I met him last autumn. He's not thinking about any Saga oath nowadays. He is bald and plump and something in big business.'



CHAPTER 5

HARALDSEN'S SON

The Clanroydens went off to Laverlaw for a fortnight, Sandy to fish his Border burns, and Barbara to attend to her garden, and I was settling down to my farming, when I got a letter from Lombard. I had heard nothing of him since our meeting in the train the previous autumn. He had not invited me for a week-end as he had suggested — at which I rejoiced, for I would have had to invent some excuse for refusing; nor had he repeated his proposal to lunch together in London.

His letter began with apologies for this neglect; he had been very busy all winter and had had to make two trips abroad. But now he wanted to see me — wanted to see me urgently. Was there any chance of my being in town in the coming week, and if so, could we meet? He would keep any appointment, but he suggested luncheon and then going back to his office to talk. I couldn't imagine what he had to say to me, and I had an unpleasant suspicion that he wanted me for one of his financial ventures, but, as I had to go to London on other business, I had no grounds for declining. So I wired asking him to lunch at my own club, a quiet place with a smoking-room on the top floor which we could have to ourselves.

Lombard was looking worried, and he had also a heavy cold. His ruddy face had gone white, his eyes watered, and his voice was like a cracked tin-can. He had been drenched golfing, he told me, and the east wind had done the rest. But his bodily ailment was the least of his troubles, and I had the impression that this plump, four-square personage had been badly shaken. At luncheon I made him drink hot whisky-and-water, but he only picked at his food, and had very little conversation. There was something on his mind, and I was glad when I got him to the upper smoking-room, settled him in an armchair, and told him to get on with it.

His first question startled me.

'Do you remember a chap called Haraldsen?' he asked. 'Thirty years ago in Rhodesia? The time I went on trek with you when I was on my way home?'

'I do,' I said. 'Oddly enough I was talking about him last week.'

'Well, I've seen him.'

'Then you've seen a ghost,' I replied; 'for he is dead.'

He opened his rheumy eyes.

'I don't mean the old man — I mean his son. But how do you know that Haraldsen is dead? The young one doesn't know it.'

'Never mind,' I said. 'It's too long a story to tell you now, but it's a fact. What about the young one? I knew there was a son, but I never heard anything about him. What sort of age?'

'Over thirty. Perhaps nearer forty. He wrote to me and asked for an interview — found my name in the telephone-book — didn't say what he wanted. I thought he might have something to do with a Swedish wood-pulp proposition, for I've been doing a little in that line lately, so I agreed to see him, though I was very busy. I had completely forgotten the name, and it never suggested Rhodesia.'

He stopped, and then broke out quite fiercely. 'Why on earth should it? It's all more than thirty years ago, and I've long ago buried the callow boy who went vapouring about Africa. Hang it all, I've made a position for myself. Next year I hope to be a Director of the Bank of England. I've my reputation to consider. You see that, don't you?'

I didn't know what he was driving at, but it was plain that Lombard was no longer the sleek suburbanite. Something had jostled him out of his rut.

'But there was nothing in the old Haraldsen business to hurt your credit,' I said. 'So far as I remember, you behaved well. There's no skeleton in that cupboard.'

'Wait till you hear,' he replied dismally. 'This chap came to my office, and he told me a dashed silly story. Oh, a regular blood-and-thunder yarn of how he was in an awful mess, with a lot of crooks out gunning for him. I didn't follow him very clearly, for he was in a pitiable state of nerves, and now and then lost command of the English language altogether. But the gist of it was that he was in deadly danger, and that his enemies would get him unless he found the right kind of friends. I

don't know how much was true, but I could see that he believed it all. There must be some truth in it, for he didn't look a fool, and I'll swear that he's honest.'

He stopped, and I waited, for I guessed what was coming.

'He asked me to help him,' Lombard continued, 'though God knows what he thought I could do. I'm not a Cabinet Minister or a Chief of Police. Did you ever hear anything more preposterous?'

'Never,' I said heartily — and waited.

'He had got it into his head that he had some claim on me. Said I once helped his father in a tight place, and that his father had sworn me to stand by him if called upon — or by his son. Apparently the old man had put it all down in writing, and this Haraldsen had the document.'

'Well, it's not the kind of thing you could sue on,' I said cheerfully.

'I know that. . . . But, I say, Hannay, do you remember the occasion?'

'Perfectly. We stood on the top of a kopje in the moonlight, and the old boy swore us by one of his Viking oaths. Oh, I remember it all right.'

'So do I,' said Lombard miserably. 'Well, what the devil is to be done about it?'

'Nothing,' I said stoutly. I had sized up Lombard, and I realized that to expect this sedentary middle-aged fellow to take a hand in a wild business was beyond all reason. My old liking for him had returned, and I didn't want him to have an uneasy conscience. But what puzzled me was why young Haraldsen had gone to him. 'There were three of us in it,' I said. 'You and I and Peter Pienaar. Peter is in a better world, but I'm still to the fore. Why didn't he tackle me? I had much more to do with his father than you had.'

'Perhaps he didn't think of you as a major-general with a title. He probably heard my name in the City. Anyhow, there we are, and an infernal worrying business it is.'

'My dear chap, you needn't worry,' I said. 'We have all been foolish in our young days, and we can't be expected to go on living up to our folly. If I had made a pact with a man when I was twenty-one to climb Everest, and he turned up today and wanted to hold me to it, I should tell him to go to blazes. But I should like to hear more of young Haraldsen's yarn.'

'I didn't get it quite straight,' he replied, 'for the fellow was too excited. Besides, I didn't try to, for I could think of nothing except that ridiculous performance in Rhodesia. But I jotted down one or two names he mentioned, the names of the people he was afraid of.' From his pocket he took a sheet of notepaper. 'Troth,' he read, 'Lancelot Troth. And a name which may be Albius or Albion — I didn't ask him to spell it. Oh, and Barralty — you know, the company-promoter that came down in the Lepcha goldfield business.'

This made me open my eyes. 'God bless my soul, but Troth is dead. You know that yourself, for you saw old Peter Pienaar account for him. Your second name is probably Albinus — you must remember him too. If he's still alive I can't think what the Devil is waiting for. Barralty I know nothing about. I tell you what, Lombard, this all sounds to me like sheer hallucination. Young Haraldsen has come on Troth and Albinus in his father's papers, and has let himself be hagridden by ghosts from the past. Most likely the man is crazy.'

He shook his head. 'He didn't impress me that way. Scared if you like, but quite sane. Anyhow, what do you advise me to do about it? He made an appeal to me — he was almost weeping — and I had to promise to give him an answer. My answer is due tomorrow.'

'I think you had better turn the thing over to me,' I said. 'I've had some news lately about old Haraldsen, and I'd like to meet his son. Have you got his address?'

'I know how to get on to him. He's desperately secretive, but he gave me a telephone number which I could ring up and leave a message for a Mr. Bosworth.'

'Well, send the message. I must go home tomorrow, but to-night I'm free. Tell him to dine with me here to-night at eight. Give him my name, and mention that I was deeper in the old business than you were. If the thing's genuine, he is bound to have some record of me. If it's bogus, he'll never turn up.'

'What will you do with him?' he asked.

'I'll cross-examine him and riddle out the business. I know enough about old Haraldsen to be able to cross-examine with some effect. I suspect that the whole thing is a lunatic's fancy, for there's a good deal of lunacy in the Northern races.'

In that case, you and I will be able to go to bed in peace.'

'But if it's serious?' he asked, and his face showed that he had not much doubt about that.

'Oh, if there's anything in it, I suppose I must take a hand. After all, I was a pretty close friend of his father, which you never were. You needn't worry about the Moonlight Sonata stuff, for I put nothing on that. That was only old Haraldsen's taste for melodrama. Consider yourself as clean out of the affair, like Peter Pienaar. You've been a responsible citizen for the better part of thirty years, with a big business to manage and a settled life and all the rest of it. No sane man would expect you to butt into a show of this kind. Besides, you'd be no sort of good at it. I've settled down, too, but I've led a different kind of life from you, and crime is a little bit more in my line. I've made several excursions into the under-world, and I know some of the ropes.'

There was an odd change in his face, which had hitherto registered only anxiety. I could have sworn that he was getting cross.

'If you were in my position, would you take that advice?' he asked in a flat voice.

'Most certainly I should,' I replied.

'You're a good fellow, Hannay,' he said, 'and you mean well. But you're a damned liar. If you were in my position, you'd do nothing of the kind, and you'd have the blood of anybody who advised you to. I can see what you take me for — I could see it in your eyes when we foregathered in the train. You believe I'm a fatted calf that has made a success in the City, and thinks only of his bank balance and his snug house, and his Saturday's golf. You believe that I'm the sort of herring-gutted creature that would take any insult lying down, or at the best run round to my solicitors. Well, you're wrong. I've had a soft life compared to you, but it hasn't been all fur-lined. I've had to take plenty of risks, and some of them mighty big ones. I had no wish to see you again after we met last autumn, for I saw that you despised me, and I didn't see how I could ever get you to change your mind. You're right in some ways. I'm a bit flabby and out of training in body and mind. But by God you're wrong about the main thing. I've never gone back on my word or funk'd a duty. And I'm not going to begin now. If there's anything in Haraldsen's story, my promise stands, and I'm in the business up to my neck, the same as you. If you don't agree to that, then you'll jolly well stand out, and I'll take it on myself.'

I felt the blood surging to my cheeks. Lombard had got up from his chair, and I had done the same, and we stood staring at each other across the hearth-rug. I saw in his face what I had missed altogether on the last occasion we met, a stubborn resolution and a shining honesty. In spite of his baldness and fleshiness and bleared eyes and snuffling, he looked twenty years younger. I recognized in him the boy I had known in Equatoria, and I felt as if I had suddenly recovered an old friend.

'Never mind what I thought,' I said. 'If I thought as you say I did I made a howling mistake and I grovel in apologies. We've picked up our friendship where we left it at Mafudi's kraal, and we'll see this thing through together.'

All the anger had gone out of his face.

'Mafudi,' he repeated. 'Yes, that's the name. I couldn't get to sleep last night for trying to remember it.'

I had two things to think about that evening. One was the revelation I had had of the true Lombard. That gave me extraordinary pleasure, for it seemed to remove the suspicion I had had all winter that I was myself old and stale and that all my youth had gone. If the fire still burned in this padded City magnate, it could not have died altogether in me. The second thing was Haraldsen, and I confess I felt solemn when I reflected that the week before Sandy Clanroyden had brought news of him out of the remotest East, news acquired by the wildest of chances. I had an eerie sense that this was all a sort of preparation engineered by Providence.

Lombard telephoned to me that 'Mr. Bosworth' would come to my club at eight o'clock. There was nobody in the smoking-room as I waited for my guest, and I remember trying to imagine what kind of fellow I should meet, and to reconstruct a younger version of old Haraldsen.

I got one of the shocks of my life when he appeared. For it was the man Smith, whom Peter John and I had met in the Rose and Crown at Hanham.

His surprise when he saw me was quite equal to mine.

'You!' he cried. 'Oh, thank God, I have found you. I never dreamed. . . .'

'You heard my name at Hanham,' I said.

‘Ah, but I was looking for a South African engineer called Dick Hannay. In you I saw only an English general and a grandee. I took to you then — I do not know when I have so taken to a man, for I saw that you were wise and kind. But I did not imagine that you were my Dick Hannay.’

‘Well, I am,’ I said. ‘I’ve seen Lombard, so two of your father’s friends are with you. The third, the pick of the bunch, is dead.’

‘You will stand beside me?’ he stammered.

‘Certainly,’ I said. ‘You may count us both in. Lombard told me that this afternoon.’

It was wonderful to see the effect these words had on him. As I have said, he was a very big fellow, but he slouched as if he were afraid of his size, and he had a shy, confused manner, like a large thing trying to hide behind something too small to cover it. He had cut an odd enough figure at Hanham, but in London he was clean out of the picture. When he entered the room my impression had been of a being altogether maladjusted to his environment, out of focus, so to speak, built on a wrong scale. But with his recovery of confidence he became almost normal, and I saw that the bucolic impression I had got of him was false. In his old-fashioned dinner-jacket he was more like a scholar than the farmer I had taken him for. His brow was broad and high, and his eyes had the unmistakable look of having peered a good deal over white paper.

At dinner he told me his story. He had not seen his father for eight years, or heard from him for three years, but it was clear that the old man was the dominant influence in his life. He had been brought up from childhood on a plan. While the elder Haraldsen was ranging the world the younger stayed in Europe, preparing himself for the task for which the former was laying up a fortune. He was to be the leader of the Northern peoples to a new destiny, and from a small boy he was put into the strictest training. First he was to be a master of all Northern learning, and imbibe its spirit. Then he was to know every corner of the North and every type of Northman. After that he was to have a first-class business education and learn how to handle big affairs. The old man’s ambition for his son seemed to have been a kind of blend of Sir Walter Scott and Bismarck and Cecil Rhodes.

Of course, it didn’t work — that kind of scheme never does. The young Valdemar (his Christian name was Valdemar) went stolidly through an immense curriculum, for he was clay in his father’s hands, but the result was not the Admirable Crichton of the old man’s dreams. He went to college in Denmark and Germany; he did two years in a Copenhagen bank; he travelled from Greenland in the west to the White Sea in the east, and even got as far as Spitzbergen, and there were not many places in Scandinavia and its islands on which he had not turned his unseeing eyes. But he did it all as a round of duty, for he had not a spark of his father’s ardour. A scholar indeed he became, and a keen naturalist, but nothing more. He wanted a quiet life, and the future of the Northern races was no more to him than a half-forgotten fairy tale.

So at twenty-six there was Valdemar Haraldsen, sound in wind and limb, stuffed with much curious learning, but with no more ambition than a mole. I gathered that the old man had been disappointed, but had made the best of it. His son was young, so there was still hope, for there must be some fruit from so arduous a sowing. It seemed that his mother had come out of the Norland Isles, the daughter of a long line of what they called King’s Yeomen there. She had inherited an island, and there the elder Haraldsen, on one of his longer sojourns in Europe, had built a house. He seemed to have made a minor hobby of it, for he had spent a good deal of money and filled it with Northern furniture and antiques. He agreed to Valdemar settling down there, after the boy had married with his consent, for no doubt he thought that the genius loci would have something to say to him. But the marriage had soon a tragic ending, for the young wife died with her first child.

I asked about the child.

‘She lives and is well,’ he said. ‘She is now in her thirteenth year. She is at a school in England.’

He had stayed on in his lonely isle, and I gathered had become a good deal of a recluse, rarely coming south, and filling his time with his hobbies, which were principally natural history and an inquiry into the interaction of the old Norse and Celtic peoples.

‘But I was happy,’ he said in his gentle voice. ‘I was indeed always anxious about my father, who did not come to me and would not permit me to go to him. But I had my girl Anna with me till she was of age for school, and I had my house and my books and my little kingdom. And I had good health and a quiet mind.’

‘You’re well off?’ I asked.

A pained look came into his eyes, as if his mind had been engaged with pleasant things and now saw something hideous.

‘I believe I am very rich,’ he said slowly. ‘I do not know how rich, for money has never interested me. There are bankers in Copenhagen who look after these things for me, and they tell me I need not stint myself.’

I thought what bad luck it was on old Haraldsen to go on piling up a fortune for a son who never wanted to hear how much it was.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I think I’ve got the lay-out. You’ve been squatting peacefully up in your island while your father has been gold-digging in the ends of the earth. What has happened now? What is the trouble?’

‘The trouble,’ he said slowly, and his eyes were full of pain again, ‘is that I have lost my quiet mind.’

Then he told me, with long stops when he seemed to be hunting for words, the following story.

Two years before he had had a letter from a London firm of solicitors who said that they wrote on behalf of a client who had a claim on his father, and asked for his father’s address. He replied that he did not know where his father was, and thought no more about it. Then came a second letter, asking whether the old man was alive or dead, and Haraldsen duly replied that he couldn’t be sure, but hoped for the best. After that he was informed that an action at law would be begun, and that, if his father did not appear, an attempt would be made to have his death presumed, so that recourse might be had against his estate. I didn’t quite get the hang of the argument, for Valdemar was not very clear himself. The correspondence was all perfectly civil in tone, but the last letter gave him a nasty shock, for the solicitors disclosed that their client was a Mr. Lancelot Troth.

Now Valdemar had a great quantity of his father’s papers, which he had been at pains to read and arrange, and among them were records of his old days in Africa, and especially of his early work on the Rand. The name of Troth appeared in some of them. Troth had been the old man’s partner at one time and had tried to swindle him. There had been a terrific row, and Troth had cleared out, but Haraldsen had been certain that he would come back again and make mischief. He took the trouble to write out a detailed statement of the case, and Valdemar said that it left the impression on him that while Troth was no doubt a rogue, he might have had some kind of a grievance, and that his father’s conscience was not quite easy about the business.

Among the papers, too, was a full account of the affair at the Hill of the Blue Leopard, and of how he had sworn three men, Lombard, Peter Pienaar, and myself, to stand by him or his son, if there was any further trouble on that score. The funny thing was that he did not mention that Troth had been killed. He seemed to have the Saga notion that a vendetta went on from generation to generation, and that Troth’s son, if he had one, might make things unpleasant for his own son. He mentioned Albinus too, who had apparently been a subordinate figure in the first row on the Rand, but a leader at Mafudi’s.

So when Valdemar saw the name of Troth in the solicitors’ letter he began to feel uncomfortable. I gathered that his father had been very solemn about the affair, and had gone out of his way to warn his son. Valdemar did his best to put the thing out of his head, but not with much success. And then he got a letter signed Lancelot Troth which had effectively scared him. The lawyers’ correspondence had been, so to speak, only ranging shots, and now the guns started in earnest.

The writer said that his father had been grievously wronged by the old Haraldsen, and that he demanded restitution. If the old man was dead, or lost to the world, the son must pay, for he had ascertained that he was very rich. There need be no unpleasantness, if the writer were fairly treated, for he was convinced that his claim must be patent to any reasonable man. He suggested that a meeting should be arranged in Copenhagen or London, to which Valdemar could bring one adviser, while he, Troth, would bring his partner, Mr. Erick Albinus, who was a party to his claim. There was no talk now of any legal action. It was a straight personal demand to stand and deliver.

Valdemar was mightily put out, and, not being a man of the world, would in all likelihood have done something silly — seen Troth, agreed to his terms, and so put himself in his power for the rest of his life. But luckily he met an Englishman who came up that summer to fish in the Norlands, and in the course of conversation asked him some vague questions, in which he managed to mention Troth’s name. The Englishman was a well-known barrister whose practice was largely at the Old Bailey, and he could tell him a good deal about Troth, though he had never heard of Albinus. Troth had succeeded to his father’s business as a solicitor, and bore a pretty shady repute. The fisherman described him as one who didn’t stick at trifles, but had so far been clever enough to keep on the sunny side of the law. He was believed to be at the moment in the environs of Queer Street, for he was mixed up with Barralty in the Lepcha Reef flotation, and that was beginning to look ugly. ‘I hate the fellow,’ said the Englishman, ‘but I wouldn’t go out of my way to cross him. He has an eye like a gunman’s,

and a jowl like a prizefighter.'

That talk opened Valdemar's eyes to the dangers of his position. He had sense enough to see that it was a case of large-sized blackmail, and that any sum he paid would only be a lever for further extortions till he was bled white. He went off his sleep, and worried himself into a fever, for he couldn't decide what his next step should be.

While he was still cogitating he got a second letter from Troth. Mr. Haraldsen need not trouble to come south, for the writer was about to pay a visit to the Norlands in his friend Mr. Barralty's yacht. He proposed a meeting in Hjalmarshavn some three weeks ahead.

This screwed Valdemar up to the point of action. Alone on his island he was at the mercy of any gang of miscreants that chose to visit him. His ignorance of the world made him imagine terrible things. He hungered for human society, for a crowd in which he could hide himself. So he buried his papers and some of the things he most valued, shut up his house, left the island to the care of his steward, and along with his daughter fled from the Norlands. He left an address in Copenhagen for forwarding letters, but he did not mean to go there, for he was known in Denmark and would be recognized. He determined to go to London, where he would be utterly obscure.

Troth and his friend duly arrived in the Norlands. They visited the Island of Sheep — this was the name of Valdemar's place — and, when they found it empty, pretty well ransacked the house, just like so many pirates from the sea. But they did no mischief, for they were playing a bigger game. Valdemar heard of this from his steward, his letter going first to his bank in Copenhagen, then to a friend in Sweden, and finally to his English address. He placed his child in an English school, and took to wandering about the country, calling himself Smith and other names, and never staying long in one place. He heard of the crash of the Lepcha Reef and Barralty's difficulties, and realized that this would make the gang keener than ever on his scent. He had letters from Troth — three I think — and the last fairly put the wind up. 'You have refused to meet me frankly,' said Troth, 'and you have run away, but don't imagine you can escape me. I will follow you till I track you down, though I have to give up my life to the job, and the price you will have to pay will double with each month I have to wait.' It was brigandage now, naked brigandage.

I am not sure that I believed all this tale, but there was one thing I couldn't doubt — Valdemar believed it, and was sweating with terror. That big man, who should have marched stoutly through life, had eyes like a hunted deer's.

'What an infernal nuisance for you!' I said. 'You can't go home, because of the threats of those scallywags! Well, anyhow, you're safe enough here, and can have an easy mind till we think out some plan.'

'I am not safe here,' he said solemnly. 'At first I thought that no one knew me in England. But I was wrong. They have had descriptions of me — photographs — from the Norlands and from Copenhagen. They have found people who can identify me. . . One day in the street I saw a barber from Denmark who has often shaved me, and he recognized me, and tried to follow me. He is a poor man and would not have come here on his own account. He has been brought to London. The net is drawing in on me, and I know from many small things that they are very close on my trail. I change my dwelling often, but I feel that I cannot long escape them. So I am very desperate, and that is why I have sought out my father's friends.'

He sat huddled in his chair, his chin sunk on his breast, the image of impotence and despair. I realized that Lombard and I were going to have a difficult job with him. I had an uneasy suspicion, as I looked at him, that his story might be all moonshine, the hallucination of a lonely neurotic, and I wished I had never heard of him. Keeping a promise was one thing, but nursing a lunatic was quite another.

'It is not only for myself I fear,' he said in a leaden voice. 'There is my little daughter. I dare not visit her in case they follow me. They might kidnap her, and then I should assuredly go mad.'

To that I had nothing to say, for the mention of kidnapping always made me windy. I had had too much of it in the affair with Medina, which I have already written about.*

'There is my father, too,' he went on. 'He may at any moment go to the Norlands or come to England, and I cannot warn him.'

'You needn't worry about that,' I said gently. 'Your father died two years ago — at a place called Gutok, in Chinese Tibet.' And I repeated briefly what Sandy Clanroyden had told me.

You never saw such a change in a man. The news seemed to pull him together and put light into his eyes. To him, apparently, it was not a matter of grief, but of comfort.

‘Thesauro feliciter invento,’ he repeated. ‘Then he succeeded — he has died happy. I cannot sorrow for him, for he has greatly ended a great life.’

He put his chin on his hand and brooded, and in that moment I was possessed by one of those queer irrational convictions which I have always made a habit of accepting, for I have never found them wrong. This Valdemar Haraldsen was as sane as myself, and he was in deadly peril. I believed implicitly every word of his tale, and my duty to help him was plain as a pikestaff. My first business must be to tuck him away comfortably somewhere out of the road.

I asked him where he was living and if he was sure he had not been followed here. He said that he had only moved into his new quarters two days before, and was pretty certain that he was safe for the moment. ‘But not for long,’ he added dismally.

‘Well, you must clear out,’ I said. ‘Tomorrow you pack your kit. You are coming to stay with me for a little. I will go down by an earlier train, for we shouldn’t be seen together. Put on your oldest clothes and travel third-class — I’ll send my keeper to meet you, and he’ll bring you up in the old Ford. Your name is still Bosworth.’

I fixed up a train, offered him a whisky-and-soda, which he declined, and saw him shamble off in the direction of his Bayswater lodgings. He looked like a store-farmer who had borrowed an ancient suit of his father’s dress-clothes, and that was the rôle I wanted him to play. Then I rang up Macgillivray in his Mount Street rooms, found that he was at home, and went round to see him.

- In The Three Hostages.



CHAPTER 6

SUNDRY DOINGS AT FOSSE

I found Macgillivray reading Greek with his feet on the mantelpiece and the fire out. He was a bit of a scholar and kept up his classics. Of all my friends he was the one who had aged least. His lean, dark head and smooth, boyish face were just as I remembered them twenty years ago. I hadn't seen him for months, and he gave me a great welcome, rang for beer to which he knew I was partial, and settled me in his best armchair.

'Why this honour?' he asked. 'Is it friendship or business? A sudden craving for my company, or a mess you want to be helped out of?'

'Both,' I said. 'But business first.'

'A job for the Yard?'

'No-o. Not just yet, anyhow. I want some information. I've just got on the track of a rather ugly affair.'

He whistled. 'You have a high standard of ugliness. What is it?'

'Blackmail,' I said.

'Yourself? He must be a bold blackmailer to tackle you.'

'No, a friend. A pretty helpless sort of friend, who will go mad if he isn't backed up.'

'Well, let's have the story.'

'Not yet,' I said. 'It's a private affair which I would rather keep to myself for a little till I see how things shape. I only want an answer to a few questions.'

He laughed. 'That was always your way, Dick. You "keep your ain fish-guts for your ain sea-mews," as they say in Scotland. You never let in the Yard till the fruitiest episodes are over.'

'I've done a good deal for you in my time,' I said.

'True. And you may always count upon us to do our damndest.'

Then he suddenly became serious.

'I'm going to talk to you like a grandfather, Dick. You're not ageing properly.'

'I'm ageing a dashed sight too fast,' I said.

'No, you're not. We're all getting old, of course, but you're not acquiring the virtues of age. There's still an ineradicable daftness about you. You've been lying pretty low lately, and I had hoped you had settled down for good. Consider. You're a married man with a growing son. You have made for yourself what I should call a happy life. I don't want to see you wreck it merely because you are feeling restless. So if it's only a craze for adventure that is taking you into this business, my advice to you as a friend is to keep out of it.'

He picked up the book he had been reading.

'Here's a text for you,' he said. 'It is Herodotus. This is the advice he makes Amasis give to his friend Polycrates. I'll translate. "I know that the Gods are jealous, for I cannot remember that I ever heard of any man who, having been constantly successful, did not at last utterly perish." That's worth thinking about. You've been amazingly lucky, but you mustn't press your luck too far. Remember, the Gods are jealous.'

'I'm not going into this affair for fun,' I replied. 'It's a solid obligation of honour.'

'Oh, in that case I have no more to say. Ask your questions.'

'Do you know anything about a fellow called Albinus, Erick Albinus? A man about my own age — a Dane by birth who has lived in America and, I should think, in many parts of the world? Dabbles in finance of a shady kind.' I gave the best description I could of how Albinus had looked thirty years ago, and what his appearance today might be presumed to be.

Macgillivray shook his head. 'I can't place him. I'll have our records looked up, but to the best of my knowledge I don't know anybody like him. I certainly don't remember his name.'

'Well, then, what about a man called Lancelot Troth?'

'Now we're getting on familiar ground,' he said. 'I know a good deal about Troth. The solicitor, I suppose you mean? He belongs to a firm which has been going on for several generations and has never been quite respectable. The father was a bit of a rogue who died years ago somewhere in Africa. That was before my time, but in the last ten years we have had to keep an eye on the activities of the son. He operates on the borderland of rather dubious finance, but so far he has never quite crossed the frontier, though sometimes he has had to be shepherded back. Company promotion is his chief line, and he is uncommonly clever at taking advantage of every crack in our confused company law. I thought we had him the other day over the Lepcha business, but we were advised that a prosecution would fail. He has several side lines — does a good deal of work for Indian rajahs which may now and then be pretty shady — made a pot of money over greyhound-racing in its early days — a mighty gambler, too, they tell me, and fairly successful. Rich! So-so. Flush one day and hard up the next — he leads the apolaustic life, and that's an expensive thing nowadays.'

I asked about his appearance and Macgillivray described him. A man in his early forties, strongly made, with the square, clean-shaven face of his profession. Like a cross between a Chancery barrister and a Newmarket trainer.

'He doesn't make a bad impression at first sight,' he added. 'He looks you in the face and he has rather pleasant eyes. On the occasions when I've met him I've rather liked him. A tough, no doubt, but with some of the merits of the breed. I can imagine him standing stiffly by his friends, and I have heard of him doing generous things. He's a bit of a sportsman too — keeps a six-ton cutter, and can be seen on a Friday evening departing in old clothes from his City office with his kit in a pillow-case. If your trouble is blackmail, Dick, and Troth is in it, it won't be the ordinary kind. The man might be a bandit, but he wouldn't be a sneak-thief.'

Then I spoke the name of Barralty, and when he heard it Macgillivray's attention visibly quickened. He whistled, and his face took on that absent-minded look which always means that his brain or his memory is busy.

'Barralty,' he repeated. 'Do you know, Dick, you've an uncommon knack of getting alongside interesting folk? Whenever you've consulted me it has always been in connection with gentry about whom I was pretty curious myself. Barralty — Joseph Bannatyne Barralty! It would take a cleverer man than me to expound that intricate gentleman. Did you ever see him?'

I said No — I had only heard of him for the first time that day.

'How shall I describe him? In some lights he looks like a half-pay colonel who inhabits the environs of Cheltenham. Tallish, lean, big-nose, high cheek-bones — dresses generally in well-cut flannels or tweeds — age anything round fifty. He has a moustache which has gone grey at the tips, and it gives him a queer look of innocence. That's one aspect — the English country gentleman. In another light he is simply Don Quixote — the same unfinished face, the same mild sad eyes and general air of being lost that one associates with the Don. That sounds rather attractive, doesn't it? — half adventurer, half squire? But there's a third light — for I have seen him look as ugly as sin. The pale eyes became mean and shallow and hard, the rudimentary features were something less than human, and the brindled moustache with its white points looked like the tusks of an obscene boar. . . . I dare say you've gathered that I don't much like Mr. Barralty.

'But I don't understand him,' he went on. 'First of all, let me say that we have nothing against him. He came down in the Lepcha business, but there was never any suggestion against his character. He behaved perfectly well, and will probably end by paying every creditor in full, for he is bound to come on top again. He has had his ups and downs, and, like everybody in the City, has had to mix with doubtful characters, but his own reputation is unblemished. He doesn't appear to care for money so much as for the game. Yet nobody likes him, and I doubt if many trust him, though every one admits his ability. Now if you find a man unpopular for no apparent reason, it is generally safe to assume some pretty rotten patch in him. I assume the patch all right in Barralty's case, but I'm hanged if I can put my finger on it, or find anything to justify my assumption except that now and then I've seen him look like the Devil.'

I asked about his profession.

'He's a stockbroker — a one-man firm which he founded himself. His interests? Not financial exclusively — indeed, he professes to despise the whole money-spinning business. Says he is in it only to get cash for the things he cares about. What are these? Well, yachting used to be one. In the days of his power he had the Thelma — six hundred tons odd — that might be the original link with Troth. Then he's a first-class, six-cylindere, copper-bottomed highbrow. A gentlemanly Communist. An intellectual who doesn't forget to shave. The patron of every new fad in painting and sculpting and writing. Mighty condescending about all that ordinary chaps like you and me like, but liable to enthuse about monstrosities,

provided that they're brand-new and for preference foreign. I should think it was a genuine taste, for he has that kind of rootless, marginal mind. He backs his fancy too. For years he has kept the — going (Macgillivray mentioned a peevishly superior weekly journal), and he imports at his own expense all kinds of exponents of the *dernier cri*. His line is that he despises capitalism, as he despises all orthodoxies, but that as long as the beastly thing lasts, he will try to make his bit out of it, and spend the proceeds in hastening its end. Quite reasonable. I blame nothing about him except his taste.'

'Isn't he popular with his progressive lot?' I asked.

Macgillivray shook his head. 'I should doubt it. They flatter him when necessary, and sponge on him, but I'm pretty certain they don't like him.'

I asked if all this intelligentsia business might not be a dodge to help Barralty's city interests. It made him a new type of financier, and simple folk might be inclined to trust a man who declared that his only object in getting money was to prevent anybody, including himself, piling it up in the future.

Macgillivray thought that there might be something in that.

'He's a cautious fellow. His name is always being appended to protests in the newspapers, but he keeps off anything too extreme. His line is not the fanatic, but the superior critic of human follies. He does nothing to scare the investor. . . . Well, I'll keep an eye on him, and see if I can find out more about his relations with Troth. And the other fellow — what's his name — Erick Albinus? You've given me an odd triangle.'

As I was leaving, Macgillivray said one last thing, which didn't make much impression at the time, but which I was to remember later.

'I should back you against the lot, Dick. They're not natural criminals, and their nerve might crack. The danger would be if they got into the hands of somebody quite different — some really desperate fellow — like yourself.'

I went down to Fosse next morning by the early train, and Haraldsen duly arrived at midday. He put up with my keeper Jack Godstow, who had a roomy cottage in which I reserved a couple of rooms for bachelor guns when Fosse was overcrowded during a big shoot. I hunted him up after tea, and we went for a walk on the Downs.

My impression of the day before was confirmed. Haraldsen was as sane as I was. Whatever his trouble was, it was real enough, and not a mental delusion. But he was in an appalling condition of nerves. He was inclined to talk to himself under his breath — you could see his lips moving, and he had a queer trick of grunting. When we sat down he kept twitching his hands and fussing with his legs, and he would suddenly go off into an abstraction. He admitted that he had been sleeping badly. I was distressed by his state, for he was a fifty per cent. sicker man than he had been at Hanham in January. I discovered that he had two terrors: one that something very bad might at any moment happen to himself or his daughter — especially his daughter. The other was that this miserable thing might simply drag on without anything happening, and that he would be shut off for ever from his beloved home in the north.

I did my best to minister to his tattered nerves. I told him that he was perfectly safe with me, and that I wouldn't let matters drag on — Lombard and I would take steps to clear them up. I encouraged him to talk about his Island of Sheep, for it did him good to have something pleasant to think about, and he described to me with tremendous feeling the delight of its greenery and peace, the summer days when it was never dark, the fresh, changing seas, the tardy, delicate springs, the roaring, windy autumns, the long, snug, firelit winters.

I impressed upon him that for the present he must lie low. He would have the run of the house and the library, and Mary and I would see a lot of him, but to the countryside he must be an invalid friend of a friend of mine, who had come to Fosse for quiet and mustn't be disturbed. Jack Godstow would take him out fishing and show him the lie of the land. I gathered that he had some belongings scattered up and down London which he would like to have beside him, and I said that I would arrange for Lombard to collect them quietly and send them on. But I chiefly told him to be quite assured that this persecution was going to be brought to an end, for I saw that it was only that hope which would soothe him.

I spoke confidently, but I hadn't a notion how it was to be done. Haraldsen's safety depended on his being hidden away — I was quite clear about that — so we couldn't draw the fire of his enemies so as to locate them. About these enemies I was wholly in the dark. An Americanized Dane, a shady sporting solicitor, a highbrow financier who looked like Don Quixote and had just crashed; it didn't sound a formidable combination. I had only met one of them, Albinus, and about him I only knew the episode at Mafudi's kraal; Macgillivray rather liked Troth, and Barralty sounded unpleasant but ineffective. Yet the three were engaged in something which had put the fear of death on a very decent citizen, and that had

to be riddled out and stopped. There was nothing to do but to wait on developments. That night I wrote a long letter to Lombard, telling him the result of my talk with Macgillivray, asking him to keep his ears open for any news which would connect the three names, and warning him that I might summon him at any moment. As we went to bed I told Mary that I had not much to do for the next few weeks, and that I meant to devote them to getting Haraldsen back to an even keel.

But next day I had news which upset all my plans. Peter John at school was stricken with appendicitis, and was to be operated on that day. Mary and I raced off at once and took rooms near the nursing-home. The operation went off well, and after two days, which were purgatory to me and hell to Mary, he was pronounced to be out of danger. He made an excellent quick recovery, being as healthy as a trout, but it was a fortnight before he was allowed up, and three weeks before he left the home. Then, since the weather was hot, we took him to a seaside place on the East coast for a couple of weeks, so it was not till the beginning of June that we returned to Fosse.

Meanwhile I had heard nothing about Haraldsen. Lombard and Macgillivray had both been silent, and Jack Godstow had only reported weekly that the gentleman was doing nicely and was looking forward to the May-fly season. When I got back to Fosse I expected to find him rested and calmed and beginning to put on flesh, for all these weeks he had been deep in country peace and must have felt secure.

I found exactly the opposite. Haraldsen looked worse than when I had left him, leaner, paler, and his eyes had more of a hunted look than ever. He had little to say to me except to repeat his thanks for my kindness. No, he had not been disturbed; nothing had happened to alarm him; he was quite well and had got back a bit of his appetite, he thought; he wasn't sleeping so badly. But all the time his eyes were shifting about as if he expected any moment to see something mighty unpleasant, and he started at every noise. He was the very model of a nervous wreck.

I had a long talk about him with Jack Godstow. I won't attempt Jack's dialect, for no words could reproduce the odd Cotswold lilt and drawl, and the racy idiom of every sentence. The gist of his report was that Mr. Haraldsen was a difficult one to manage, since he never knew his own mind. He would make a plan to fish the evening rise, and then change it and start out at midnight when there was nothing doing. He didn't like the daylight no more than an owl, and he didn't like other folks neither, and would get scared if he saw a strange face. He was always asking about new folk in the neighbourhood, but Lord bless you, said Jack, new folk didn't come this way, except for an odd hiker or two, and the extra hands for the hay harvest, and the motor gentry on the Fosse Way. The gentleman needn't worry himself, and he had told him so, but it was no good speaking. I explained to Jack that my friend was a sick man, and that part of his sickness was a dread of strange faces. Jack understood that and grinned. 'Like that new 'awk of Master Peter John's,' he said.

The mention of Peter John gave me an idea. The boy was not going back to school that half, and was settling down to a blissful summer at Fosse before he went north to Sandy Clanroyden at Laverlaw. He had six little kestrels sitting all day on the lawn, and Morag on her perch in the Crow Wood, and a young badger called Broccoli that rootled about in the stable straw and gave him heart disease at night by getting down into the entrails of the greenhouses. He was still under a mild doctor's régime, but was picking up strength very fast. Haraldsen had taken to him at Hanham, and I thought that his company might be wholesome for him. So I asked him to take on the job of being a good deal with my guest, for everything about Peter John suggested calm nerves and solid reason. There was something else in my mind.

'Mr. Haraldsen is an invalid,' I said, 'and must keep quiet. He has been through rather a beastly experience, which I'll tell you about some day. It's just possible that the experience isn't over yet, and that some person or persons might turn up here who wouldn't be well disposed to him. I want you to keep your eyes very wide open and let me know at once if you see or hear anything suspicious. By suspicious I mean something outside the usual — I don't care how small it is. We can't afford to take any chances with Mr. Haraldsen.'

Peter John nodded and his face brightened. He asked no questions, but I knew that he had got something to think about.

Nothing happened for a week. The boy did Haraldsen good; Mary and I both noticed it, and Jack Godstow admitted as much. He took him to fish in the early mornings both in our little trout stream and in the Decoy ponds. He took him on the Downs in the afternoon to fly Morag. He took him into the woods after dinner to watch fox cubs at play, and try to intercept Broccoli's cousin on his way from his sett. Haraldsen began to get some colour into his face, and he confessed that he slept better. I don't know what the two talked about, but they must have found common subjects, for I could hear them conversing vigorously — Peter John's slow, grave voice, and Haraldsen's quicker, more staccato speech. If we were

making no progress with Haraldsen's business we were at any rate mending his health.

Then one evening Peter John came to me with news.

They had been out hawking with Morag on the Sharway Downs, and on their way home had met a young man on horseback. At first Peter John had thought him one of the grooms from the Clipperstone Racing Stables exercising a horse, but as they passed he saw that the rider was not dressed like a groom. He wore white linen breeches, a smartly cut flannel coat, and an O.E. tie. He had taken a good look at the falconers, and the impression left by him on Peter John was of a florid young man with a small dark moustache and slightly projecting upper teeth. To their surprise they met him again, this time apparently in rather a hurry, for he was going at a quick trot, and again he scrutinized them sharply. Now, said my son, that meant that he had made a circuit by the track that led to Sharway Lodge Farm, and cut through the big Sharway Wood — not an easy road, and possible only for one who knew the country. Who was this young man? Did I know anybody like him, for he had never seen him before? Why was he so interested in the pair of them?

I said that he was no doubt a stranger who was intrigued by the sight of the falcon, and wanted to have another look at it.

'But he didn't look at Morag,' was the answer. 'It was Mr. Haraldsen that interested him — both times. You might have thought that he knew him and wanted to stop and speak.'

'Did Mr. Haraldsen recognize him?' I asked, and was told No. He didn't know him from Adam, and Peter John, not to alarm him, had pretended he was one of the racing-stable people.

Two days later I had to be at Gloucester for the Agricultural Show. When I was dressing for dinner in the evening Mary was full of the visitors she had had that afternoon at tea.

'The Marthews, no less!' she said. 'I can't think what brought them here, for Caythorp is thirty miles off and I scarcely know them. Claire Marthew was a god-daughter of one of my Wymondham aunts — I used to meet her here in the old days when she was Claire Serocold and a very silly affected girl. She hasn't improved much — her face lacquered like a doll's, and her eyes like a Pekinese, and her voice so foolish it made one hot to hear it. She's by way of being uncommonly smart, and she babbled of grandees. But she was amiable enough, though I can't explain this sudden craving for my society. She brought her whole party with her — in several cars — you never saw such a caravan. Mostly women who had to be shown the house and the garden — I wish I were a better show-woman, Dick, for I become paralysed with boredom when I have to expound our possessions. There was one extraordinarily pretty girl, a Miss Ludlow — a film actress, I believe, who was content to smile and look beautiful. There were a couple of young men, too, who didn't say much. I told Peter John to look after them, and I think he took them to see the hunters at grass, and Morag, and Broccoli. By the way, I haven't seen him since. I wonder what he's up to?'

Peter John was very late for dinner. In theory he should have been in bed by nine, but it was no good making rules for one whose habits, in summer at any rate, were largely nocturnal. At ten o'clock, when I was writing letters in the library, he appeared at my side.

'Did my mother tell you about the people who came to tea?' he asked. 'There was a flock of them, and one was the man that Mr. Haraldsen and I met on Tuesday — the chap on horseback who wanted to have another look at us.'

'What was his name?' I asked.

'They all called him Frankie. My mother thinks it was something like Warrender — but not Warrender. I took him to see the horses, and he asked a lot of questions.'

'Wasn't there another man?' I asked.

'Yes, but he didn't count. He was a sort of artist or antiquarian, and couldn't be got away from the tithe-barn. It was this Frankie chap that mattered. He made me take him all over the place, and he asked me all sorts of questions about who lived here, and what their jobs were, and who our friends were, and if many people came to stay with us. It would have been cheek in anybody else, but he did it quite nicely, as if he liked the place enormously and wanted to know all about it. But you told me to look out for anything suspicious, and I thought him a bit suspicious.'

'And that isn't the end,' he went on. 'Frankie didn't go off with the rest. He started with them in a little sports car of his own, but he turned off at the lodge gate and tucked away his car in the track that leads to the old quarry. I was following him and saw him skirt the water-meadow and have a look at the back of Trimble's cottage. Then he moved on to Jack's, and lay up in the hazel clump behind it, where he could get a good view. I nipped in by the side door, and luckily caught

Mr. Haraldsen, who was just starting out, and told him to stick indoors. Frankie was so long in the clump that I got tired of waiting and decided to flush him, so I made a circuit and barged in beside him, pretending I had lost Broccoli. He took it quite calmly, and said he was a keen botanist and had stayed behind to look for some plant that he had heard lived here. But he didn't want to stay any longer, so I saw him to his car, and he socked me two half-crowns, and then I went back to give the "All Clear" to Mr. Haraldsen.'

I told Peter John that he had done very well, and had better get off to bed. His story had disquieted me, for this Frankie man had clearly been interested in Haraldsen, and it looked as if he had spotted his lair. That wasn't difficult, for, if there was anybody at Fosse who was not staying in the house, Jack's cottage was the only one big enough for a guest. I cross-examined Mary about Frankie, but she could tell me little. He had seemed a very ordinary young man, with pleasant manners and a vacant face — she remembered his prominent teeth. But she had got his name — not Warrender, but Varrinder. 'He's probably the son of the snuffy old Irish peer — Clongelt? — Clongelly? — who was said to be a money-lender in Cork Street.'

It was, I think, three days later that Sandy Clanroyden came to visit us. He wired that he wanted exercise, and proposed that I should meet him at a distant railway station, send his kit back in the car, and walk with him the fifteen miles to Fosse. We had a gorgeous walk through the blue June weather, drank good ale at the little pubs, and dropped down from the uplands nearly opposite our lodge gates, where a wild field of stunted thorns formed the glacis of the hills. We had a clear view of a patch of highway, where two men were getting into a little sports car.

Sandy sank to the ground as if he had been shot. 'Down, Dick,' he commanded, and, after a long stare, fixed in his eye the little single glass which he used for watching birds. All I saw was two young men, who seemed to be in rather a hurry. One was hatless, and the other had his hat pulled far down on his head. At that distance I couldn't be sure, but I had the impression that both were a little the worse for wear, for their flannel suits didn't seem to hang quite right on them.

When they had gone, Sandy pocketed his glass and grunted. He didn't say one word till we reached the house and were being greeted by Mary. Instead of replying to her inquiries about Barbara, he asked, like a cross-examining counsel, if she had had any visitors at Fosse that afternoon.

'Oh yes,' she said. 'The Varrinder youth, who came with the Matthews, turned up again. I told you about him, Dick. He's a great botanist, and there is something very rare here, which he wanted to show to his friend. He said that on his last visit he had found the dwarf orchis.'

Sandy whistled. 'Not very clever,' he said. 'Ustulata is impossible on this soil. Who was his friend?'

'A Frenchman, a Monsieur Blanc. Mr. Varrinder called him Pierre.'

'Describe him.'

Mary wrinkled her brows. 'A man about thirty-five or forty, I should say. Very slim and elegant and beautifully dressed. A queerly shaped head that rose to a peak, rather like a faun's — clean-shaven, and with the kind of colour that people get from living in hot climates. His chin was paler than the rest of his face, so I expect he once had a beard. They wouldn't stay to tea — only wanted permission to explore the home woods.'

'Did Peter John see them?' I asked.

'I don't know. He has been out for the whole day, but he's back now, for I heard his bath running.'

As I was showing Sandy his room he said solemnly, 'We must have a long talk after dinner, Dick.'

'We must,' I said. 'I have a good deal I want to tell you.'

'And I have something rather startling to tell you,' he replied.

That night I brought Peter John into our conference, for I judged that he had better know everything. I began by going fully into the Haraldsen business, of which, of course, Sandy knew nothing. I told him of my talk with Lombard, and my talks with Haraldsen himself, and my conviction that the man was not dreaming, but was really in danger. I repeated what Macgillivray had told me about Troth and Barralty. I explained that I had thought it best to bring him down to Fosse, which seemed to me a safe hiding-place. Then I recounted what had happened since he came here, his growing restlessness and misery, which Peter John seemed to be in the way of curing, and finally the episode of young Varrinder. I said that I hadn't liked the business of that youth, for he appeared to have a morbid interest in Haraldsen, and I told of his lying up behind Jack's cottage, and I added that I liked less his coming here today with his tale of a bogus orchis. 'Do you know anything about him?' I asked.

‘Not much,’ said Sandy. ‘I’ve heard of him. He’s reputed to be something of a waster, gambles high at Dillon’s, and so forth. But I can tell you a good deal about his friend Monsieur — Pierre — Blanc.’ Sandy repeated the name slowly as if each syllable had its flavour.

‘Listen, Dick,’ he said, ‘and you, Peter John, though you’ll have to get your father to explain a lot afterwards. I’ve told you pretty fully the story of what happened in Olifa two years ago.* You remember that the Gran Seco was a sort of port of missing ships, where all kinds of geniuses and desperadoes who had crashed their lives were inspanned in Castor’s service. They were like the servants of the Old Man of the Mountain in the Crusades, and drugged themselves into competence and comfort. Well, you know what happened. The gang — they called themselves the Conquistadores — was cleaned out. Some were killed in our final scrap, and the rest were bound to die slowly when they were deprived of their dope. There was one of them, almost the boldest, called Jacques D’Ingraville, who had been in his day a famous French ace. He was as big a blackguard as the others, but more wholesome, for, though he doped, his work in the air kept his body from becoming quite so sodden. I was never very sure what became of him in the end. We had no certain news of his death in the fight at Veiro, but there was a strong probability that he had stopped a bullet there, and anyhow, I knew that his number was up, since the supply of astura was cut off. I pictured him creeping to some hole in South America or Europe to die.

- The tale of Lord Clanroyden’s doings in Olifa will be found in *The Courts of the Morning*.

‘Well, I was wrong,’ he continued. ‘Alone of those verminous Conquistadores — almost certainly alone — D’Ingraville lives. And I should say that he had recovered. He looked quite a fit man when I saw him this evening.’

Nobody spoke for a little. To me the whole affair suddenly began to wear a blacker complexion. It wasn’t so much the appearance of D’Ingraville, for I had always suspected that Troth and Barralty and Albinus were not the whole of the gang. It was the fact that they had managed to trace Haraldsen here in spite of all our care. I reckoned that they must be far cleverer and more powerful than I had believed, and that my job of standing by Haraldsen was going to be a large-sized affair. I suddenly felt very feeble, and rather timid and old. But the sight of Sandy’s face cheered me, for instead of being worried it was eager and merry.

‘Who are in with you, Dick?’ he asked. ‘Only Lombard? Well, I think I must make a third. Partly because I’ve been funnily mixed up with Haraldsen, for Fate made me his father’s legatee. The jade tablet was put in my hands for a purpose. Partly because of Monsieur le Capitaine Jacques D’Ingraville, alias Pierre Blanc. He’s too dangerous a lad to be left at large. I haven’t finished my Olifa job till I have settled with him. The time, I think, has come for me to take a hand.’

He got up and found himself a drink. I looked at him as he stood half in the dusk, with the light of a single lamp on his face — not much younger than me, but as taut as a strung bow and as active as a hunting leopard. I thought that Haraldsen’s enemies had unloosed a force of pretty high velocity. Peter John must have thought the same. He had listened to our talk with his eyes popping out of his head, and that sullen set of his face which he always wore when he was strongly moved. But as he looked at Sandy his solemnity broke into a smile.

‘I go up to town tomorrow,’ said Sandy, ‘and I must get busy. I want a good deal more information, and I have better means of getting it than Macgillivray. I wish I knew just how much time we have. The gang are on Haraldsen’s track — that’s clear — but the question is, have they located him? The Varrinder lad can’t be sure, or he wouldn’t have come back twice... Of course they may have done the business today. I wonder how far they got this evening?’

Peter John spoke. ‘They didn’t get very far. They couldn’t. You see, they both fell into the Mill pool.’

Sandy took his pipe from his mouth and beamed on the boy. ‘They fell into the Mill pool? Explain yourself, my son.’

‘I spotted them when they arrived,’ said Peter John, ‘and I knew they would be a little time in the house anyhow, so I nipped off and warned Mr. Haraldsen to keep cover. When they came out I trailed them. They went through the garden to the High Wood, but I was pretty certain that they meant to go to the hazel clump behind Jack’s cottage. To get there they had to cross the Mill lead by the plank bridge just above the pool. The stone at the end of the bridge isn’t safe unless the planks are pushed well up the bank. So I loosened it a bit more, and pulled down the planks so that they rested on it.’

‘Well?’ Sandy and I demanded in one breath.

‘They both fell into the pool, and it’s pretty deep. I helped to pull them out and asked them to come up to the house to change. They wouldn’t, for they were very cross. But Mr. Varrinder socked me another five bob.’

CHAPTER 7

LORD CLANROYDEN INTERVENES

Sandy departed next morning, and, as usual, was not communicative about his plans. I wanted him to see Haraldsen, but he said that there was no need, and that the sooner he was in London the better. He asked for Lombard's address and a line of introduction to him, and his only instruction was to keep Haraldsen safe for the next week. He suggested that to look after him might be made a whole-time job for Peter John.

Peter John took on the task joyfully, for here was something after his own heart. He worshipped Sandy, and to be employed by him thrilled him to the marrow. Besides, he had struck up with Haraldsen one of those friendships that a shy, self-contained boy very often makes with a shy man. Haraldsen came twice to dinner during the week after Sandy left, and there was no mistake about the change for the better in his condition. He spoke of his daughter at school without the flicker of fear in his eyes which had distressed me. He was full of questions about our small woodland birds, which were mostly new to him, and to which Peter John was introducing him. He was even willing to talk about his Island of Sheep without a face of blank desolation.

Then on the morning of Midsummer Day I got a shock on opening my Times. For on the leader page was a long letter from Sandy, and it was headed, 'The late M. E. Haraldsen.'

It told the story of the jade tablet and of how he had picked it up in a Peking junk-shop. He quoted the Latin in which Haraldsen had said good-bye to the world, but he didn't mention the place where the words had been written. The letter concluded as follows:

'Marius Haraldsen was known to many as one of the most successful prospectors and operators in the early days of the South African gold-fields. But his friends were aware that he was more than an ordinary gold-seeker. He had great dreams for his own Northern peoples, and his life was dedicated, as in the case of Cecil Rhodes, to building up a fortune for their benefit. He must have made great sums of money, but he always cherished the dream that before his death he would find a true Ophir which would enable him to realize fully his grandiose plans. I met him on this quest in the Middle East and others have met him elsewhere. He was no casual prospector, but, with ample means and the most scientific methods, was engaged in following up the trail of earlier adventurers.

'Now it would seem that before his death he had made good on the biggest scale. The jade tablet in my possession tells us that he had found his treasure. The inscription on the obverse no doubt contains the details, for Marius Haraldsen was above all things a practical man, and did not leave a task half finished. The writing is difficult, but when it is translated, as I hope it will shortly be, the world will know something of what may well prove an epoch-making discovery.

'Meantime, I thought that this interim report might give satisfaction to the surviving friends of a great man and an intrepid adventurer.'

The thing was signed 'Clanroyden,' and dated from Laverlaw, and the Times had as its fourth leader a pleasant little essay on the survival power of material objects and the ingenious ways of Providence.

I pondered long over that letter. The first thing that struck me was that it was not written in Sandy's usual fastidious style. It was frank journalism, and must be meant to appeal to a particular audience.

My second reflection was that I knew what that audience was. It was the gang who were persecuting Haraldsen's son. Sandy, in so many words, told them that the old man had brought off his great coup, and that the Haraldsen fortune was potentially far bigger than any of them had dreamed. Here was a new strong scent for the pack.

My last thought was that Sandy had now put himself into the centre of the hunt. Any one reading that letter must assume that he knew all about the Haraldsen family and its affairs. He wrote himself down as the possessor of what might be worth millions — he professed confidence about the meaning of the writing on the tablet and the certainty of its being translated. . . . His purpose was clear. It was to draw off the hounds.

I wired to him at once at his London club asking when I could see him, but I got no answer. Instead I had a telegram in the afternoon from Lombard requesting me to come at once to his country house. The telegram concluded: 'Lock up carefully behind you,' and that could only have one meaning. I brought up Haraldsen to stay at the Manor, with

instructions to Mary and Peter John not to let him out of their sight, and by five o'clock I had started in the car for Surrey.

I reached Lombard's house about half-past seven. It was on the skirts of an old-fashioned village which had become almost a London suburb by the building of a ring of big villas round it. The house wasn't bad of its kind, a pseudo-Georgian edifice of red brick with stone facings, and its six acres or so of ground had been shaped into a most elaborate garden. There was a sample of everything — miniature park, lily pond, water-garden, pergolas, arbours, yards of crazy paving; and he must have kept a largish staff of gardeners, for the place was blazing with flowers and manicured to the last perfection. Fosse was a shabby, old farm-house compared to it. It was the same indoors. Everything was shining white enamel, and polished wood, and glowing brass and copper. Some of the pictures looked to me good, but they were over-varnished and too pretentiously framed. There was overmuch glitter about the place, the masses of cut flowers were too opulent, the red lacquer was too fresh, there was no sober background to give the eye relief.

In the drawing-room I found the Lombards, and I recognized the inspiration which had created this glossiness. His wife, whom I had caught a glimpse of at the station in the preceding autumn, proved to be the most sumptuous of Lombard's possessions. She was dressed, I remember, in white and purple, and she had a wonderful cluster of orchids at her breast. As a girl she must have been lovely, and she was still a handsome woman of the heavy Madonna type — a slightly over-coloured Madonna. Being accustomed to slim people like Mary and Barbara Clanroyden and Janet Raden, I thought her a little too 'fair of flesh,' in the polite phrase of the ballads. I learned afterwards that she had been a tempestuous beauty, and well-dowered as well, for it was his marriage that first launched Lombard on his career.

'We are not to wait,' she told me. 'The fourth of our little party may be late. And we are not to use names, please, at table. Barton (that was the butler) is a confidential person, but it is not desirable that anybody else should know who is dining here. So you are to be Dick, please, and the fourth will be Sandy. These are Lord Clanroyden's own instructions.'

Dinner was announced, and I hadn't been seated five minutes at the table before I had Mrs. Lombard placed. She was a warm-hearted woman, without much brains, but with certain very definite tastes, and she dominated her environment. She was deeply in love with Lombard and he with her, and, since they had no children, each had grown into the other's ways. He had been swallowed up in the featherbed of her vast comfortableness, but she in turn had caught a spark from him, for she had a queer passion for romance, which I don't think she could have been born with. She amazed me by the range and variety of her not very intelligent reading, she had odd sensitive strains in her, and she sat in her suburban paradise expectant of marvels. Lombard had probably not told her very much about the present business, but he had told her enough to thrill her. I found her eyes looking at me sometimes just like an excited child, and I could see that she anticipated the coming of Sandy almost with awe. A few people no doubt knew my name, but half the world knew Sandy's.

He did not appear till the June twilight filled the big french windows, through which he slipped as if he had been a guest staying in the house. Barton and a footman were in the room at the time, and Mrs. Lombard behaved as if he were an old friend. 'So glad to see you at last, Sandy,' she said. 'I hope you had a pleasant journey.'

'Pleasant but longish,' he said. 'The air is the best route on a summer night. What a jolly place! I never smelt such roses.'

'Have you come from Laverlaw?' I asked when we were alone.

'No, only from London. But I didn't think it wise to come direct. I've been half round the southern counties, and I did the last stage on a bicycle — from Heston. You must give me a lift back there in your car, Dick.'

Sandy made an excellent meal and set himself to draw out Mrs. Lombard. I could see that he was asking himself the same question that I had asked, what part she played in her husband's life; and I think that he reached the same conclusion. She was not going to make any difficulties. Soon he had her talking about all her interests, the pleasantness of the neighbourhood, her brief season in London, her holiday plans — it was to be the Pyrenees, but her husband might not get away till later in the summer. He looked on her with favour, for her kindness and comeliness were manifest, and the embarrassment left her eyes as she spoke to him, not as a notable, but as a sympathetic human being. She had a delicious voice, and her prattle was the most soothing thing conceivable. It explained Lombard's smug contentment with his life, but it convinced me that in that life the lady was not an active force. She would neither spur nor impede him.

In the library after dinner I got my notion of Lombard further straightened out, for the room was a museum of the whole run of his interests. Sandy, who could never refrain from looking round any collection of books, bore me out. The walls on three sides were lined to the ceiling with books, which looked in the dim light like rich tapestry hangings.

Lombard had kept his old school and college texts, and there was a big section on travel, and an immense amount of biography. He had also the latest works on finance, so he kept himself abreast of his profession. But the chief impression left on me was that it was the library of a man who did not want the memory of any part of his life to slip from him — a good augury for our present job.

‘I’ve burned my boats, as you saw from the Times this morning,’ said Sandy. ‘I dare say you guessed the reason. The pace was becoming too hot — for Haraldsen.’

‘How about yourself?’ said Lombard.

‘I have better wind and a better turn of speed,’ was the answer. He filled his pipe, and sat himself crosswise in an armchair with his legs dangling over an arm.

‘What do you make of Haraldsen, Dick?’ he asked. ‘Apart from his father and all that, is he worth taking trouble about?’

‘Yes,’ I said firmly. ‘I have come to like him enormously. He is a high-strung being and has gone through a very fair imitation of hell, but there’s no crack in his brain, and I’m positive there is none in his character.’

‘Apart from the old man, and your promise, and one’s general dislike of letting the Devil have the upper hand, you think he’s worth saving?’

‘Most certainly I do.’

‘Good,’ said Sandy. ‘I asked, because this affair looks like being infernally troublesome, and it is as well to be sure about the principal personage. . . . Well, I haven’t let the grass grow under my feet since I saw you last. I’ve seen Macgillivray, who didn’t know much, but gave me some hints that were more useful than he imagined. Lombard here has been doing good work on the Barralty trail — by the way, the reason why I’ve been so melodramatic about coming here to-night is that Lombard must be kept free from suspicion as long as possible, or half his usefulness goes. I’m deeply suspect by this time; so are you, Dick; but Lombard has still a clean sheet. And I can assure you that the people we are up against are very active citizens. Chiefly, I’ve been busy with some of my old channels — very nearly silted up, some of them were, and one way and another I’ve convinced myself that Haraldsen is the quarry of a very dangerous and desperate gang. The most dangerous kind, for they range from stolid respectability down to the dirtiest type of criminal. They have every weapon in their armoury, and they are organized like an American football team.’

‘Hold on,’ I said, much impressed, for Sandy didn’t use words like ‘dangerous’ or ‘desperate’ very readily. ‘I don’t quite see their purpose. I can understand a vulgar attempt to blackmail a simple Norlander. But isn’t this organization you speak of a bit too elaborate, like using a steam-hammer to crack a nut?’

‘No,’ was the reply, ‘for the possible reward is immense. Quite apart from what my jade tablet may have to contribute, old Haraldsen’s fortune was very large. Those blackguards could milk his son to the tune of hundreds of thousands of pounds, if not millions. Lombard has been good enough to verify that.’

‘It took some doing,’ said Lombard; ‘but I had a pull with the Scandinavian banks. Haraldsen holds the bulk of the preference stock in’ — he mentioned some famous companies — ‘and he has ludicrous balances on current account.’

Sandy nodded. ‘There’s no doubt then about the bigness of the prize. And it should have been easy fruit. They had only to get hold of Haraldsen, a shy, unworldly recluse, to strip him bit by bit of his possessions — all by proper legal process. The man’s a baby in these things. I can see him in Troth’s hands assigning great blocks of his gilt-edged stuff — for consideration, of course, such as a holding in some of Barralty’s shaky concerns. Then there would be a little peace for him, and then another cut at the joint. All very simple and pleasant, if ugly snags like us three hadn’t got in the way. We won’t be popular in certain quarters.’

‘Have you a line on the gang?’ I asked.

‘So-so,’ he said. ‘I know a good deal about Troth, not all to his disadvantage. He has his enemies and plenty of critics, but he has also his friends. A sharp practitioner, of course, but there’s more in his persecution of Haraldsen than mere greed. I haven’t got the facts quite straight yet, but at the back there is some kind of family vendetta, which he inherited from his father. The elder Troth and the elder Haraldsen were once partners on the Rand, and I gather that they were together in a big venture which turned out well. Troth did something dirty, and Haraldsen kicked him out, as apparently he was justified in doing under their contract. But Troth thought that he had been badly treated and was entitled to his share in the profits of the big coup, and he was determined to make Haraldsen disgorge. That was the reason of the scrap on the

Rhodesian hills you told me about. Troth believed that he was trying to get what belonged to him, and his son is on the same tack. Also, I suppose, Albinus.'

'Have you got in touch with Albinus?' I asked.

'Yes, and it wasn't hard. He's quite a prominent figure in his own line. He has lived for the last two years in a fashionable West-End hotel, and done himself pretty well. He seems to be comfortably off, for, though he does a little in the City, he spends most of his time amusing himself — races a bit and patronizes the drama, and entertains lavishly. Quite a popular citizen. I had him pointed out to me at Epsom — a fellow a little more than your own age, Dick, who has kept his figure as well as you have, but far better dressed than you could ever hope to be. His hair has gone grey, and he has the air of a retired cavalry colonel. I didn't care for his looks, for I don't like a face that is perpetually smiling while the eyes never change, but people don't seem to mind him. He's a member of —.' And he mentioned a highly respectable club. 'They say his finances are dicky.'

Lombard nodded. 'I heard for a fact that his bank has pulled him up about his overdraft. He has been too thick with Barralty.'

'Ah! Barralty!' Sandy's face took on that look of intense absorption which meant that his interest was really awakened. 'There's the puzzler. I can place Troth and Albinus — they're types — but Barralty is his own species and genus. I've been collecting data about him and it's mighty interesting. It's going to take us a long time to get the measure of that lad. But I've managed to see him — from a distance, and I confess I was fascinated.'

Sandy laughed.

'I got a young friend to take me to a party — golly, such a party! I was a French artist in a black sweater, and I hadn't washed for a day or two. A surréaliste, who had little English but all the latest Paris studio argot. I sat in a corner and worshipped, while Barralty held the floor. It was the usual round-up of rootless intellectuals, and the talk was the kind of thing you expect — terribly knowing and disillusioned and conscientiously indecent. I remember my grandfather had a phrase for the smattering of cocksure knowledge which was common in his day — the "culture of the Mechanics' Institute." I don't know what the modern equivalent would be—perhaps the "culture of the B.B.C." Our popular sciolism is different — it is a smattering not so much of facts as of points of view. But the youths and maidens at this party hadn't even that degree of certainty. They took nothing for granted except their own surpassing intelligence, and their minds were simply nebulae of atoms. Well, Barralty was a king among those callow anarchists. You could see that he was of a different breed from them, for he had a mind, however much he debased it. You could see too that he despised the whole racket.'

'What is he like?' I asked, for I had never had him properly described to me.

'Quite ordinary, except for his eyes. His pupils don't appear to be quite in the centre of the eyeballs, but rather high up, so he has always the air of looking over your head. And those pupils are intensely bright. An impressive face, but the more repellent the more you look at it. I have only begun my study of Mr. Barralty, but I have reached one firm conclusion. The man is inordinately, crazily ambitious. He has to assert himself even if it is only to be a Pope among the half-baked. I should say that he had about as much morals as a polecat, but he has what often does fairly well as a substitute, worldly wisdom. He is a cautious fellow, and up to now he has kept his feet on a very slippery floor, at least as far as repute goes. He wants to keep that repute, but he must have money, great quantities of money, so that he can prove to the world that a fastidious and cynical intellectual can beat the philistines at their own game. It's one version of the Grand Manner that our ancestors used to talk about. Do you follow me? Do you see how tempting the Haraldsen affair must be to him? Here is something quite secret and far away from the ordinary swim, which promises immense loot and not a word said. I think we can be certain that he is the brain in the enterprise and will get the biggest share. And that he won't stick at trifles. I can imagine Troth having scruples, but not Barralty.'

Sandy's tone was so grave that for a moment there was silence. Then I felt bound to put in a word of caution.

'You realize,' I said, 'that we are taking all this story of a plot on Haraldsen's word?'

'I do,' he said. 'That's why we must go slowly and wait on developments.'

'And the other two,' I said. 'We have nothing to link the young Varrinder and your Conquistador friend with the business except that they seem to have come sniffing round Haraldsen.'

'True,' was the answer. 'On that point we have no evidence, only suspicions. Therefore we must go very cannily. But not too cannily, or we may be caught. Who was it said that behind every doubt there lurked an immoral certainty? We must

take suspicions for facts till they are disproved, for I don't think that in this affair we can afford to give away any weight. I'm coming in, partly because I don't like the Devil to score, and partly because I'm pretty certain that D'Ingraville is in it, and I have a rendezvous with D'Ingraville as long as he is above the sod. Therefore I'm going to follow my instinct and treat the thing seriously from the start. Our immediate duty is to safeguard Haraldsen.'

'Your Times letter today will help,' I said.

'It is a step in the right direction. But only a step. We must make it impossible for those blackguards to get at his money. So Lombard and I have made certain arrangements. To-morrow morning he goes back with you to Fosse with a bagful of papers which Haraldsen will sign. I assume that he'll agree, for it's the only way. We're making a trust of his possessions, with several most responsible trustees, and he must give Lombard his power of attorney. He will have enough free income for his modest needs, but till the trust is revoked he won't be able to touch the capital. That means that there can be no coercion on him to part with his fortune without considerable delays and a good many people knowing about it.'

'That sounds common sense,' I said. 'But will the gang that is after him ever discover it?'

'I shall take steps to see that they are informed,' he replied. 'I want to get them off his trail and gunning for me. My Times letter will have put them on my track. By the way, I propose presently to announce in the same admirable newspaper that I intend to present old Haraldsen's jade tablet to the British Museum.'

'Whatever for?' I asked.

Sandy grinned in his impish way. 'More ground bait. They won't believe it. They'll think it's a dodge to put them off the scent. They'll think too that something has happened to rattle me, which is what I intend. I don't want them to consider me too formidable. They'll fumble for a little and make one or two false casts, but soon I shall have the pack in full cry.'

It seemed to me that Sandy was going a little beyond the mark in his quixotry, and I told him so. His face was so lit up and eager that I thought it was simply another ebullition of the boy in him that could not die, and I reminded him he was a married man. That at once made him grave.

'I know, Dick,' he said. 'I've thought of that. But Barbara would be the first to agree. It isn't only saving Haraldsen, poor devil, though that is a work of necessity and mercy. It's putting a spoke in D'Ingraville's wheel, for if that sportsman is left on the loose there will be hell to pay for others than Haraldsen. You needn't worry about me, for as I've told you, they're bound to fumble at the start. They won't know what to make of me, and, if I may say it modestly, they may be a little worried. Presently, they'll pull themselves together, but not just yet. I must put in a week or two in London. I'll stay at the club, which I don't fancy they'll attempt to burgle. Violence won't be their line, at least not at the start. You see, I must get a line on D'Ingraville to make sure.'

I asked him how he proposed to get that, and he said 'Varrinder. I have found out a good deal about that lad, and I think I may make something of him. He's still only a novice in crime, and his nerve isn't steady. I fancy he may be turned into what the French police call an *indicateur*, half-*apache* and half-*informer*. We shall see. And meantime, Dick, I have a whole-time job for you. You are responsible for Haraldsen.'

He spoke the last sentence in the tone of a general giving orders to his staff. There was nothing boyish now about his face.

'Haraldsen,' he said, 'is the key of the whole business. I can't think how on earth he has escaped them so long. Probably his blundering simplicity. If he had been cleverer most likely they would have caught him. Well, we can't afford to let them catch him. God knows what might happen if they got a weak-nerved fellow into their clutches! Apart from what he might be made to suffer there's a good chance that they might win, for a trust can be revoked, and I can imagine a shattered Haraldsen giving them all the legal authority they want. He's our Achilles-heel, and we must guard him like a child. And there's the daughter, too, the little girl at school — I'm not easy about her if her father is left anywhere in the neighbourhood. It's a queer business to have as our weak point a neurotic Viking. All the same, I've a notion that in the last resort Haraldsen might surprise us — might go clean berserk and turn and rend them. I don't know him, but I remember the old man.'

'You mean that Fosse isn't safe?' I asked.

'Just that. It is almost certain that they have their eyes on it already, and even if they haven't they soon will have. It doesn't do to underrate the intelligence of that crowd. The place is not much more than seventy miles from London on a knuckle of upland accessible from every side — with a trunk road close to your gates, and hikers and tourists thick around

it all summer. You're as defenceless as an old sow basking in the sun. Your own people are trusty, but your frontiers are too wide to watch. You must get yourself into a sanctuary, and there's one place only that fills the bill.'

I asked its name, but I had already guessed the answer.

'Laverlaw,' he said. 'I want you to shift your camp there at once — you and Mary and Peter John and Haraldsen. You'll only be antedating your yearly visit by a few weeks. There's nothing to keep you in the south, is there?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'But are you sure it's wise? They're still doubtful about Fosse, but now that you're in the business, they will be certain about Laverlaw.'

'I mean them to be,' he replied. 'The fight must come, and I want to choose my own ground for it. Fosse is hopeless — Laverlaw pretty well perfect. Not a soul can show his face in that long glen of mine without my people knowing it. Not a stray sheep can appear on my hills without my shepherds spotting it. Not the smallest unfamiliar thing can happen but it is at once reported. Haraldsen will be safe at Laverlaw till we see how things move. You remember in the Medina business that I advised you to get straight off to Machray? Well, Laverlaw is as good as any Highland deer forest — better, for there are more of my own folk there. So, Dick, you've got to move to Laverlaw at once — as inconspicuously as possible, but at once. I've warned Babs, and she's expecting you.'

I saw the reason in Sandy's plan, but I wasn't quite happy. For I remembered what he seemed to have forgotten, that when I went to Machray to keep out of Medina's way I had had an uncommonly close shave for my life.



PART II

LAVERLAW

CHAPTER 8

SANCTUARY

Laverlaw, Mary used to say, was her notion of the end of the world. It is eight miles from a railway station and the little village of Hangingshaw, and the road to it follows a shallow valley between benty uplands till the hills grow higher, and only the size of the stream shows that you have not reached the glen head. Then it passes between two steep hillsides, where there is room but for it and the burn, rounds a corner, and enters an amphitheatre a mile or two square, bounded by steep heather hills, with the Lammer Law heaving up its great shoulders at the far end. The amphitheatre is the park of the castle, mountain turf, diversified with patches of the old Ettrick Forest and a couple of reedy lakes. The house stands at the junction of four avenues of ancient beeches — the keep thirteenth century, most of it late sixteenth century, and nothing more modern than the Restoration wing built by Bruce of Kinross. There are lawns and pleasaunces and a wonderful walled garden, and then you are among heather again, for the moorlands lap it round as the sea laps a reef.

All the land for miles is Sandy's, and has been in his family for centuries, and though there is another property — Clenry Den, in Fife, from which, by an absurd eighteenth-century transformation, they take their title of Clanroyden — Laverlaw has always been their home. From Hangingshaw southward there are no dwellings but hill-farms and shepherds' cottages. Beyond the containing walls of the valley lie heathy uplands hiding an infinity of glens and burns, nameless except to herds and keepers and the large-scale Ordnance map. The highway stops short at the castle, and beyond it a drove road tracks the ultimate waters of the Laver, and makes its way, by a pass called the Raxed Thrapple, to the English Border. The place is so perfect that the first sight of it catches the breath, for it is like a dream of all that is habitable and gracious; but it is also as tonic as mid-ocean and as lonely as the African veld.

I took Haraldsen and Peter John from Fosse by road, while Mary with maid and baggage and Jack Godstow travelled by rail by way of London. I had always made a practice of taking my keeper Jack to Laverlaw on our annual visits, partly that he might act as my loader at grouse-drives, and partly to give him a holiday in a different sort of world. Also he made a wonderful gillie and companion for Peter John. Jack was a living disproof of the legend that the English countryman is not adaptable. He was in bone and fibre a Cotswold man, and yet wherever he went he met friends, and he had a knack of getting right inside whatever new life he was introduced to. There was something about him that attracted good will — his square face with little greying side whiskers, and his steadfast, merry, brown eyes.

So in the first days of July there was a very pleasant party at Laverlaw — Barbara Clanroyden and her daughter, Mary, Haraldsen, Peter John, and myself. But there was no Sandy. I gave him a lift to the aerodrome that night we met at Lombard's house, and since then I had seen nothing of him. I had an address in London, not a club but a bank, to which I wrote to report our arrival, but for days I had no word from him. He was publicly supposed to be at Laverlaw, for the press had announced his arrival there and his intention of staying for the rest of the summer. The Scotsman and the local papers chronicled his presence at local functions, like the Highland Show, the wedding of a neighbour's daughter, and a political fête at a house on the other side of the shire. But I was certain that he had never left London, and when I met his factor by chance and asked for information, I found that gentleman as sceptical as myself. 'If his lordship had come north I would have seen him,' he said, 'for there's some important bits of business to put through. These newspapers are oftener wrong than right.'

In a week the place had laid such a spell on us that Fosse was almost forgotten, and the quiet of the glen seemed to have been about us since the beginning of time. The post came late in the afternoons, bringing the papers, but my day-late Times was rarely opened, and I did my scanty correspondence by post cards and telegrams. It was still, bright weather with a light wind from the east, and all day we were out in the strong sunshine.

If we saw no strangers there was a perpetual interest in our little colony itself. There were the two keepers, Sim and

Oliver, both long-legged Borderers whose forbears had been in the same glen since the days of Kinmont Willie, and who now and then in their speech would use phrases so vivid and memorable that I understood how the great ballads came to be written. There was the head shepherd Stoddart — Sandy kept one of the farms in his own hands — a man tough and gnarled as an oak-root, who belonged to an older dispensation. He had the long stride and the clear eye of his kind, and his talk was a perpetual joy to us, for in his soft, lilting voice he revealed a lost world of pastoral. Under his tuition I became quite learned about sheep, and I would accompany him when he 'looked the hill,' and thereby got the hang of a wide countryside. Also to my delight I found Geordie Hamilton, the Scots Fusilier who had been my batman in the War. He had been mixed up with Sandy in his South American adventure, and had been installed at Laverlaw as a sort of 'Laird's Jock,' a factotum who could put his hand to anything, and whose special business it was to attend his master out-of-doors, much what Tom Purdey was to Sir Walter Scott. Geordie had changed little; his stocky figure and his mahogany face and sullen blue eyes were the same as I remembered; but above the ears there was a slight grizzling of the shaggy dark hair.

The days passed in a delightful ease. We walked and rode over the hills, and picnicked by distant waters. The streams were low and the fishing was poor, though Peter John did fairly well in the lochs, and got a three-pounder one evening in the park lake with the dry fly. It was only a month to the Twelfth, so Morag the falcon was not permitted on the moors, but he amused himself with flying her at pigeons and using her to scare the hoodies. The months at Laverlaw had made Barbara well again, and she and Mary, with their clan about them, were happy; even Sandy's absence was not much of a drawback, for his way was the wind's way, and any hour he might appear out of the void. It was lotus-eating weather in a land which might have been Tir-nan-Og, so remote it seemed from mundane troubles. When I gave a thought to my special problem it was only to remind myself that for the moment we were utterly secure. The pedlar who took the Laverlaw round from Hangingshaw had his coming advertised hours in advance; the baker's and butcher's carts had their fixed seasons and their familiar drivers; and any stranger would be noted and talked over by the whole glen; while, as for the boundary hills, the shepherds were intelligence-officers who missed nothing. All the same I thought it wise to warn the keepers and Stoddart and Geordie Hamilton that I had a private reason for wanting to be told in good time of the coming of any stranger, and I knew that the word would go round like a fiery cross.

We were all lapped in peace, but the most remarkable case was Haraldsen. It may have been the stronger air, for we were four hundred miles farther north, or the belief that here he was safe, but he lost his hunted look, he no longer started at a sudden sound, and he could talk without his eyes darting restlessly everywhere. He began to find an interest in life, and went fishing with Peter John and Jack, accompanied the keepers and Stoddart on their rounds, and more than once joined me in a long stride among the hills.

It was not only ease that he was gaining. The man's old interests were reviving. His Island of Sheep, which he had been shutting out of his thoughts, had returned to his mind while he was delighting in the possessions of another. Laverlaw was so completely a home, that this homeless man began to think of his own. I could see a longing in his eyes which was not mere craving for safety. As we walked together he would talk to me of the Norlands, and I could see how deep the love of them was in his bones. His mental trouble was being quieted by the renascence of an old affection. Once in the late afternoon we halted on the top of the Lammer Law to drink in the view — the glen of the Laver below us with the house and its demesne like jewels in a perfect setting, the far blue distances to the north, and all around us and behind us a world of grey-green or purple uplands. He drew a long breath. 'It is Paradise,' he said; 'but there is one thing wanting.' And when I asked what that was, he replied, 'The sea.'

Yet at the back of my head there was always a slight anxiety. It was not for the present but for the future. I did not see how our sanctuary could be attacked, but this spell of peace was no solution of the problem. We could not go on living in Laverlaw in a state of mild siege. I had no guess at what Sandy was after, except that he was unravelling the machinations of Haraldsen's enemies; that knowledge was no doubt essential, but it did not mean that we had defeated them. We were only postponing the real struggle. My one solid bit of comfort was that Haraldsen was rapidly getting back to normal. If he went on as he was going, he would soon be a possible combatant in any scrap, instead of an embarrassment.

Then one day that happened which woke all my fears. I had told Peter John that Haraldsen was in danger, and warned him to be very much on the watch for anything or anybody suspicious. This was meat and drink to him, for it gave him a job infinitely more attractive than the two hours which he was supposed to devote to his books every morning. I could see him cock his ears whenever Sim or Geordie had any piece of news. But till this particular day nothing came of his watchfulness.

It was the day of the sheep-clipping at the Mains of Laverlaw, the home farm. The two hill hirsels had been brought down to the valley the night before, and were penned in great folds beside the stream. Beyond was a narrow alley which admitted them in twos and threes to a smaller fold where the stools of the shearers were set up. At dawn the men had assembled — Stoddart and his young shepherd, whose name was Nickson, and the herds from the rest of the Laverlaw estate, many of whom had walked a dozen moorland miles. There were the herds of the Lanely Bield, and Clatteringshaws, and Drygrain, and Upper and Nether Camhope, and the two Lammers, and a man from the remotest corner of Sandy's land, the Back Hill of the Cludden, who got his letters only once a fortnight, and did not see a neighbour for months. And there were dogs of every colour and age, from Stoddart's old patriarch Yarrow, who was the doyen of the tribe, to slim, slinking young collies, wild as hawks to a stranger, but exquisitely skilled in their trade and obedient to the slightest nod of their masters. On this occasion there was little for them to do; it was their holiday, and they dozed each in his owner's shadow, after a stormy morning of greetings with their kind.

We all attended the clipping. It was a very hot day, and the air in the fold was thick with the reek of sheep and the strong scent of the keel-pot, from which the shorn beasts were marked with a great L. I have seen a good deal of shearing in my time, but I have never seen it done better than by these Borderers, who wrought in perfect silence and apparently with effortless ease. The Australian sheep-hand may be quicker at the job, but he could not be a greater artist. There was never a gash or a shear-mark, the fleeces dropped plumply beside the stools, and the sheep, no longer dingy and weathered but a dazzling white, were as evenly trimmed as if they had been fine women in the hands of a coiffeur. It was too smelly a place for the women to sit in long, but twenty yards off was crisp turf beginning to be crimsoned with bell-heather, and the shingle-beds and crystal waters of the burn. We ended by camping on a little hillock, where we could look down upon the scene, and around to the hills shimmering in the heat, and up to the deep blue sky on which were etched two mewing buzzards.

We had our luncheon there, when the work stopped for the midday rest, and Haraldsen and I went down afterwards to smoke with the herds. The clipping meal at Laverlaw was established by ancient precedent. There was beer for all, but whisky only for the older men. There were crates of mutton-pies for which the Hangingshaw baker was famous, and baskets of buttered scones and oatcakes and skim-milk cheese. The company were mighty trenchermen, and I observed the herd of the Back Hill of the Cludden, to whom this was a memorable occasion, put away six pies and enough cakes and cheese to last me for a week.

After that we went home, but Peter John stayed behind, for he had decided to become a sheep-farmer and was already deep in the confidence of the herds. In the afternoon I took Haraldsen to visit the keep of Hardriding ten miles off, an ancient tooth of masonry on a crag by a burn. I remember thinking that I had never seen him in better spirits, for his morning at the clipping seemed to have cheered him by its spectacle of decent, kindly folk.

When we got back just before dinner I found Peter John waiting for me with a graver face than usual.

There had been visitors, it appeared, at the clipping that afternoon. One was Little, the auctioneer from Laverkirk. That was to be expected, for 'Leittle,' as the countryside pronounced his name, was a famous figure in the shire, a little red-faced man with a gift of broad humour, whose jokes in the sale-ring were famous through the Lowlands. But he had also a rough side to his tongue, and this, with his profound knowledge of black-faced sheep, made him respected as well as liked. He was a regular guest at the Laverlaw clippings, and was a special friend of Stoddart's. But he had brought a friend with him whom nobody had met before. Peter John described him carefully. An average-sized man, quite young, with a small, well-trimmed moustache like a soldier. He wore riding breeches and cloth gaiters, and a check cap, and carried a shooting-stick. He was Scotch and spoke broadly, but not in the local fashion — Stoddart thought he must come from Dumfries way. His name was Marcus, and Little had introduced him as a rising dealer whom they would soon hear more of, and who was on holiday, taking a look at the Laver Water flocks. He seemed to know a lot about Cheviot sheep.

'Well, he sounds harmless enough,' I said, when I had heard his story. 'A dealer is the kind of fellow you'd expect at a clipping, and if Little brought him he must be all right.'

But I could see from the boy's face that he was not satisfied.

'I didn't much like him,' he said. 'He was too soft-spoken, and he wanted to know too much. Geordie Hamilton said he would "speir the inside out of a whelk." He asked all about who was staying here, and if Lord Clanroyden was still here. He said a lot of nice things about Lord Clanroyden which Mr. Stoddart thought cheek. Mr. Stoddart thought he wanted

something out of him.'

'There's nothing in that,' I said. 'That's the habit of dealers. He probably wants to buy the Mains hogs before they're sent to Laverkirk. Was that the only thing that made you suspicious?'

'No-o,' he said slowly. 'There was another thing. He behaved rather queerly about me. I was sitting behind the keel-pot cutting a whistle, and I heard all his talk with Mr. Stoddart and Mr. Nickson. I saw that he had noticed me when he arrived. He pretended not to know we were staying in this house, and when Mr. Stoddart said that you were here he looked surprised, and asked was that the General Hannay that he had heard about in the War? And then he said suddenly, "Sir Richard's boy's here. I would like to have a crack wi' him," and Mr. Stoddart had to introduce us. That showed that he must have known all about us before, and that I was your son.'

'That was odd,' I admitted, rather impressed by Peter John's shrewdness. I asked what he had talked to him about, and he told me just ordinary things — what school he was at, what he thought of Scotland, what he was going to do when he grew up — and that he had laughed when he heard of the sheep-farming plan. Stoddart had given the two visitors a drink, and after an hour's stay they had gone down the valley in Little's car.

I said that I didn't think there was any real cause to worry. But Peter John was obstinate, and then he added that which really alarmed me.

'I thought I had better do something about it,' he said, 'so I asked Mr. Sprout — he's the young shepherd at Nether Laver and lives nearest to Hangingshaw — to try to find out when he got home if this Mr. Hircus had been in the village before. Do you know what he told me? That he had been there for three days, and had been staying with Miss Newbigging at the post office. He said he had been to a lot of farms, and had bought the short-horn bull at Windyways that got the second prize at the Highland Show.'

That word 'post office' alarmed me. It was the very place a man would choose for his lodgings if he wanted to make private inquiries. There was no inn in Hangingshaw, and the post office was the natural centre for a big countryside. Also Miss Newbigging, the postmistress, was a most notorious old gossip, and lived to gather and retail news.

'So I thought I'd better ask Geordie Hamilton to go down there' (in this case alone Peter John dropped his habit of 'mistering' everybody, for it was impossible to call Geordie otherwise than by his Christian name). 'He went off on his bicycle after tea. I thought he was the best man for the job, for he's a great friend of Miss Newbigging.'

'That was right,' I said. 'So far I give you good marks. I'll have a talk to Geordie in the morning.'

I dressed for dinner with a faint uneasiness at the back of my head. It was increased when, just as we were drinking our coffee, I was told that Geordie Hamilton wanted to see me urgently. I found him in the gun-room with a glowing face, as if he had made some speed on his bicycle from Hangingshaw in the warm evening.

'Yon man Hircus, sirr,' he began at once. 'Actin' under instructions from Maister Peter John I proceeded to Hangingshaw and had a word wi' Miss Newbiggin'. Sprout was speakin' the truth. Hircus is no there noo, for he gaed off in the car wi' Leittle the auctioneer, him and his pockmanty. But he's been bidin' there the last three days and — weel, sirr, I dinna like the look o' things. I didna like the look o' the man, for he was neither gentry nor plain folk. And gude kens what he's been up to.'

Geordie proceeded with his report, delivered in the staccato fashion of the old Scots Fusilier days. He had found Miss Newbigging alone and had had a friendly cup of tea with her. 'Yon's an awfu' ane to speak,' he said. 'She has a tongue on her like a pen-gun.' The post mistress had been full of her late lodger, and had described him as a 'fine, couthy, cracky body.' He was Galloway bred, but had been a lot in the north of England, and his big market was Carlisle. He told her that he wanted to get in touch with the farmers in these parts, which he said were the pick of the Borders. 'He was aye rimin',' said Miss Newbigging, 'about this bonny countryside and the dacent folk that bode in it.' She had been glad to answer his questions, for he was bringing trade into the parish. When asked if he had been curious about Laverlaw, she had replied that he had, just as every one would be curious about the Big House. He seemed to know all about Lord Clanroyden and to have a great opinion of him. 'I telled him that his lordship was supposed to be in residence, but that I hadna clapped eyes on him for months. But says I, that's naethin new, for his lordship comes and gangs like a bog-blitter, though I whiles think that he should pay mair attention to his leddy wife, and her no that strong.' But Miss Newbigging had been positive that she had never given him the names of the party now at Laverlaw. 'Though he might have read them on the letters,' she had added.

On further examination Geordie discovered that Marcus had been what the postmistress called 'a usefu' man about the house.' He had helped her every day to sort out the mail, both the incoming and the outgoing. He had often been jocose about the former. 'Here's ane to Sundhope frae the Bank,' he would say. 'That'll be about the over-draft for the beasts he bocht at Kelso. And here is a bundle for her leddyship. It's bigger than I get mysel' after the back-end sales. But I see there's twa leddyships, Liddy Clanroyden and Liddy Hannay. There's walth o' rank the noo up the Laver Water.'

This had roused Geordie's interest. He asked if Marcus had made a point of looking at the outgoing letters. Miss Newbigging had replied: 'He did, now I come to think o't. I was aye tellin' him there was nae need, for the hale lot gangs to Laverkirk to be sorted. But he was a carefu' man, and he had time on his hands, and he would set them out in wee packs as if he was playin' at the cards. "That's for Embro", he would say, "an that's for the West country, and that heap's for England." He was aye awfu' interested in the English letters, comin' as he did frae Carlisle.'

Geordie, having learned all he wanted, had taken his departure after compliments. Now he sat before me with his shaggy brows drawn down. 'Ye telled me, sirr, to let naething gang by me, however sma,' and there's just a chance that there's mischief here. Haircus doesna ken wha's writin' to the folk in this house, but he kens a wheen o' the names that the folk here write to.'

That was precisely the point, and at first I thought that it did not matter. And then, when Geordie had gone, I suddenly remembered that though we were in a sanctuary our party was not complete. There was one absentee, one sheep outside the fold. Not Sandy — he could very well look after himself. It was Haraldsen's child, his daughter Anna.

I started out to look for Haraldsen, but he had gone off with Peter John to dap for trout in the park lake. It was nearly eleven o'clock before they returned, and, as they entered the lit hall from the purple gloom which is all the night that Laverlaw knows in early July, I thought what a miracle recent weeks had wrought in Haraldsen's appearance. He held his head up, and looked you straight in the face, and walked like a free man. When I called to him he was laughing like a care-free boy at the figure Peter John cut in Sandy's short waders. It struck me that it was just in this recovered confidence that our danger lay.

He had often told me about his daughter Anna. She was at a well-known boarding-school for girls in Northamptonshire, called Brewton Ashes, under the name of Smith, the name he had taken when he sought refuge in England. At first he had looked after her in her holidays, and taken her to dismal seaside resorts which he had heard well spoken of. But as his dread of pursuit grew he had dropped all this, and had not seen her for nearly a year. It had been arranged that one of the mistresses, to whom she was attached, should look after her in the holidays, and Haraldsen must have paid for pretty expensive trips for the two, since it was the only way he could make up to the child for his absence. He had always been very careful about letters, writing to her not direct, but through his bank, and he had never dared to show himself within twenty miles of Brewton Ashes.

I turned the conversation on to the girl, being careful not to alarm him, for I didn't want to spoil his convalescence. I pretended that Peter John wanted to write and tell her about Laverlaw, and asked how it was done. He told me that there was a choice of three banks, who all had their instructions.

'It seems a roundabout way,' I said; 'but I dare say you are wise. Do you stick to it rigidly?'

'Yes. It is better so. You never know. . . . Well, to be quite honest, I have broken the rule once, and I do not intend to break it again. That was last Monday. Anna's thirteenth birthday was yesterday, and I made a mistake about the dates, for I have been so busy here that I have grown careless. I could not bear to think that she would have no message from me on that day, so I wrote direct to her at Brewton Ashes.' His smile was a little embarrassed, and he looked at me as if he expected reproaches. 'I do not think that any harm is done. This place is so far away from everybody.'

'Oh, that's all right,' I said. 'You needn't worry about that, but I think you're wise all the same to stick to your rule. Now for bed. Lord, it's nearly midnight.'

But I thought it by no means all right. It was infernally bad luck that Haraldsen should have chosen to be indiscreet just at the time when the mysterious Marcus was in the neighbourhood. I told myself that the latter would make nothing of a letter addressed to a Miss Anna Smith at a country address in England. But I have never made the mistake of underrating the intelligence of the people I was up against. Anyhow, I was taking no chances. I routed out Geordie Hamilton from his room above the stables and warned him for duty. Then I wrote a letter to Sandy in London, telling him all that had happened and my doubts about Marcus. I left it to him to decide whether any steps should be taken to safeguard the girl.

Geordie was instructed to set off at once to Laverkirk, twenty miles distant, and post it there, so that it might catch the London mail — Laverkirk was on the main line to the south — and reach Sandy the following evening.

But I wasn't content with a letter. I also wrote out a telegram to Sandy in a simple cypher we had often used before — a longish telegram, for I had to explain how it was possible that the enemy might have got the girl's address. Geordie, when he had posted the letter, was to go to bed in the Station Hotel, be up betimes, and send the telegram as soon as the office was open. I had no fear of espionage in Laverkirk, which was a big bustling market-town with half a dozen post offices.

Then I went to bed with anxiety in my mind out of which I could not argue myself. The happy peace of Laverlaw had been flawed. I felt like the man in Treasure Island who was tipped the black spot.



CHAPTER 9

LOCHINVAR

Next day the heat-wave broke in a deluge, and by midday the Laver was coloured and by the evening in roaring spate. Peter John and I went out before dinner, and got a heavy basket with the worm in the pools above the park. The following morning it still drizzled, and we did well in the tributary burns with the fly known locally as the black spider. Burn-fishing has always had its charms for me, for no two casts are the same, and I love the changing scenery of each crook in the little glens. But after luncheon Peter John's soul aspired to higher things. There was a tarn six miles off in the hills called the Black Loch, a mossy hole half overgrown with yellow water-lilies and uncommonly difficult to fish. We had tried it before in a quiet gloaming and had had no luck, though we had seen big trout feeding. Sim had always declared that it only fished well after rain, when its sluggish inmates were stirred by the swollen runnels from the hills. So we set off with Oliver and Georgie Hamilton, warning Barbara that we might be late for dinner.

We did not return till half-past nine. The weather cleared, the sun came out, and the warm evening was a kind of carnival for the Black Loch trout. They took whatever we offered them, but for every five fish hooked four broke us or dropped off. We had to cast over an infernal belt of water-lilies and pond-weed, which meant a long line and a loose line. It was impossible to wade far out, for the bottom was treacherous, and once I went down to the waist. To land a fish we had to drag him by brute force through the water-weeds, and, as we were fishing far and fine, that usually meant disaster. There were two spits of gravel in the loch, and the only chance with a big one was to try to manoeuvre him towards one of these, not an easy job, since one had practically no purchase on him. Peter John, who was far the better performer, managed this successfully with two noble fellows, each nearly two pounds in weight, but he too had many failures. Nevertheless, between us we had two dozen and three fish, a total weight of just over twenty-seven pounds, the best basket that had been taken out of the Black Loch in Oliver's memory.

These two days' fishing had put everything else out of my mind, a trick fishing always has with me. As we tramped home over the dusky sweet-scented moors I had no thought except a bath and dinner. But as we approached the house I was suddenly recalled to my senses. Before the front door stood a big and very dirty car, from which a man in a raincoat had descended. He had no hat, he seemed to have a baldish head and a red face mottled with mud, and his whole air was of fatigue and dishevelment. He was in the act of helping another figure to alight, which looked like a girl. And then suddenly there was a noise in the house, and from it Haraldsen emerged, shouting like a lunatic. He plucked the girl from the car, and stood hugging and kissing her.

When we got nearer I saw that the man was Lombard, but very unlike the spruce city magnate with whom I had been lately connected. He looked tired and dirty but content, and somehow younger, more like the Lombard I remembered in Africa. 'Thank God we're here at last,' he said. 'It's been a roughish passage. . . . What do I want most? First a bath, and then food — a lot of it, for we've been living on biscuits. I've brought no kit, so you must lend me some clothes to change into.' As for Haraldsen, he went on behaving like a maniac, patting the girl's shoulder and holding her as if he thought that any moment she might disappear. 'My happiness is complete,' he kept declaring. This went on till Barbara and Mary appeared and swept the child off with them.

I provided Lombard with a suit of flannels, and we ate an enormous late supper — at least four of us did, while the other three, who had already dined, looked on. The girl Anna appeared in a pleated blue skirt and a white blouse, the uniform, I supposed, of her school. She was a tall child for her years, and ridiculously blonde, almost bleached. She had a crop of fair hair which looked white in certain lights, a pale face, and features almost too mature, for the full curve of her chin was that of a woman rather than a girl. There was no colour about her except in her eyes, and I thought that Haraldsen deserved something better than this plain, drab child. I had whispered that to Mary in the hall before supper, and she had laughed at me. 'You're a blind donkey, Dick,' she had said. 'Some day she will be a raging beauty, with that ivory skin and those sea-blue eyes.'

When we had eaten, Haraldsen went off with the women to put Anna to bed and to look after her wardrobe, for she also was kit-less. Lombard had a couple of glasses of Sandy's famous port, and when we adjourned to the smoking-room, where a peat fire was burning, he stacked himself in an armchair with an air of great content. 'First score for our side,' he

said. 'But it has been a close thing, I can tell you. Till about ten hours ago I wouldn't have given twopence for our chances. I'll have to do the devil of a lot of telegraphing tomorrow, but to-night, thank God! I can sleep in peace.'

Then he told his story, which I give in his own words.

Clanroyden (he said) had your telegram yesterday morning. There was a letter too, you tell me? Well, he hadn't had that when I left, but you seem to have explained things pretty fully in your wire. He got hold of me at once — luckily I was sleeping in town, having motored up the day before. There were one or two small matters I had to arrange before I took my holiday, and I had finished them and was going home after luncheon.

He said I must get busy — that the other side had probably got the address of Haraldsen's daughter and might be trusted to act at once. Possibly it was even now too late. I must go down to the school in Northamptonshire and fetch her back to town. He would arrange that she should stay with a great-aunt of his in Sussex Square till he made other plans. He would have gone himself, but he dared not, for he thought he was pretty closely marked, but I was still free from suspicion, and I was the only one to take on the job. He wrote me a chit to the headmistress, Miss Barlock, to say that he was Haraldsen's — Smith's, that is to say — greatest friend and managed his affairs, and that he had authority from him to bring his daughter to him in London for a few days in connection with some family business. He thought that would be enough, for the schoolmistress-woman was pretty certain to know his name, and my appearance, too, he said, was a warrant of respectability. I was to bring the girl straight to Sussex Square, where he would be waiting for me. He said he would expect me before four o'clock, but if there was any difficulty I was to wire at once, and he would send down one of the partners in the bank that paid the school fees.

I rather liked the job of saviour of youth, for I felt that I hadn't been quite pulling my weight in this business, so I started off in my car in good spirits. It was the big Bentley, which I always drive myself. I was at Brewton Ashes by eleven o'clock, a great, raw, red brick building in a fine park, which I believe was one of the seats that old Tomplin, the oil fellow, built for himself before he crashed. Well, I sent up my card to Miss Barlock, but by the mercy of God I didn't send up Clanroyden's chit with it. I was told that Miss Barlock was engaged for the moment, and was shown into a drawing-room full of school groups and prize water-colours and great bowls of fine roses. The room rather made me take to the place, for it showed that the people there knew how to grow flowers, and there's never much wrong with a keen gardener.

I waited for about ten minutes, and then Miss Barlock's door opened and three people came out. One was Anna, who looked flustered. The others were a man and a woman — a young man in a flannel suit with an O.E. tie, a pleasant-looking toothy chap with a high colour, and a middle-aged woman in a brown linen costume and big specs. A maid took the three downstairs, and I was ushered into the presence of Miss Barlock.

She was slim and grey-haired and bright-eyed, with that air of brisk competence which shy women often cultivate in self-defence. There was obviously nothing wrong with her, but I saw at a glance that she was a precisian and would be a stickler about rules. So some instinct warned me to go canny. Luckily I began by saying only that I was an old friend of Anna Smith's father, and that I had dropped in to see her and give her a message.

Miss Barlock smiled. 'It never rains but it pours,' she said. 'Dear Anna does not often have visits from friends. Her poor father, of course, has not been down for months. But this morning who should appear but Anna's cousins? They and Anna must have passed you as you came in. They brought a letter from Mr. Smith, who asked me to allow them to carry off Anna a week before the holidays begin. They propose, I think, a cruise to the Northern capitals. I readily consented, for the child has been rather wilting in the hot weather.'

At this I sat up and thought hard. It looked as if I was too late, and that the other side had got in first. I decided that it wasn't the slightest good my showing Clanroyden's chit. The others would have a water-tight case, a letter from Haraldsen himself in a good imitation of his handwriting, which perhaps Miss Barlock recognized, for she must have seen it in his early days in England. I thought how clever they had been in sending down an inconspicuous young man and a rather dowdy woman, instead of some smart female with scarlet lips and a distempered face whom the schoolmistress would have suspected. Those two were the very model of respectable country cousins. I couldn't discredit them, for if I told Miss Barlock the truth I would only discredit myself. Clanroyden's letter, even if she didn't think it a forgery, couldn't prevail against the ipsissima verba of Haraldsen. I realized I was in a cleft stick and must conduct myself discreetly. The first thing was to see Anna herself.

Miss Barlock glanced at the cards which lay on the writing table. 'Lady Bletso and her son — he is the young baronet —

propose to give Anna luncheon in the Brewton Arms at one o'clock, and then to leave for London. The morning will be occupied in packing Anna's things.' I noted a baronetage on the table which had been moved from the stand of reference books. Miss Barlock was a cautious woman and had looked up her visitors before receiving them. I wondered who the true Bletsos were. I had heard of the name in Yorkshire.

I said cordially that I was glad that Anna's relations were carrying her off for a cruise. Excellent thing, I observed fatuously, to expand the mind of the young. But, having come so far, I would like to have a talk with the child, being her father's friend, and also I had a message to her from him which I had promised to deliver. I would have liked to give her lunch, but since she was engaged for that to her cousins, might we have a short walk in the park together?

Miss Barlock saw no objection. She rang a bell and bade a maid fetch Miss Margesson. Miss Margesson, she informed me, was the girl's chief friend among the mistresses, had been given special charge of her by her father, and had on more than one occasion accompanied her abroad on holidays. Presently Miss Margesson appeared, and the sight of her gave me my first glimmer of hope. For here was one who had none of the repressions and pedantries of the ordinary schoolmistress. She was a tall girl, with a kind mouth, and clever, merry blue eyes. At all costs I must make her an ally.

'Anna Smith's packing is being attended to, Miss Margesson?' her superior asked. 'It will be completed in an hour? Very good. A car will come for her at a quarter to one to take her down to the Brewton Arms, where she will meet her cousins. Meantime, this is a friend of Anna's father who has called to see her. Will you arrange that he has a short walk with Anna in the garden? Yes, now. It cannot be long, I fear, Mr. Lombard,' she added, turning to me, 'for Anna will no doubt desire to say good-bye to her mistresses and her friends.'

Miss Margesson took me downstairs and out into a very pretty terraced garden at the back of the house. She went indoors and presently returned with Anna. For the first time I had a proper look at the child, and what I saw rather impressed me. She's not much of a beauty, as you saw, but I thought that she had an uncommon sensible little face. I don't know much about children, having none of my own, but the girl's composure struck me as remarkable. She didn't look as if she had inherited her father's nerves. The sight of her was my second gleam of hope.

There was no time to waste, so I plunged at once into my story.

'Anna, my dear,' I said, 'we've never met before, but when I was young I knew your grandfather in South Africa and he made me and another man, whose name is General Hannay, promise to stand by your father if trouble came. Your father is in great danger — has been for a long time — and now it's worse than ever. That's why he hasn't been to see you for so long. That's why you're called Smith here, when your real name is Haraldsen. That's why his letters to you always come through a bank. Now YOU are also in danger. These people Bletso, who came this morning and say they're your cousins, are humbugs. Their letter from your father is a fake. They come from your father's enemies, and they want to get you into their power. Your friends discovered the danger and sent me down to bring you away. I'm only just in time. Will you trust me and do what I ask you?'

That extraordinary child's face did not change. She heard me with the same uncanny composure, her eyes never leaving mine. Then she turned to Miss Margesson and smiled. 'What a lark, Margie!' was all she said.

But Miss Margesson didn't take it that way. She looked scared and flustered.

'What a ridiculous story!' she said. 'Say it's nonsense, Anna. Your name's Smith, all right.'

'No, it isn't,' was the placid answer. 'It's Haraldsen. Sorry, Margie dear, but I couldn't tell that even to you.'

'But — but —' Miss Margesson stammered in her uneasiness. 'You know nothing about this man — you never saw him before. How do you know he's speaking the truth? Your cousins had a letter from your father, and Miss Barlock, who is very shrewd, saw nothing wrong with it. They looked most respectable people.'

'I didn't like them much,' said Anna, and again I had a gleam of hope. 'The woman had ugly eyes behind her specs. And I never heard of any English cousins.'

'But, darling, listen to me,' Miss Margesson cried. 'You never heard of this man either. How do you know he comes from your father? How do you know he is speaking the truth? If you have any doubt, let us go together to Miss Barlock and tell her that you don't want to go on any cruise, and want to stay here till the end of the term. In the meantime you can get in touch with your father.'

'That sounds good sense,' I said; 'but it won't do. Your father's enemies now know where you are. They are very clever people and quite unscrupulous. If you don't go away with the Bletsos, they'll find ways and means of carrying you off long

before your father can interfere.'

'Rubbish,' said Miss Margesson rudely. 'Do you expect me to believe this melodrama? You look honest, but you may be half-witted. What's your profession?'

'Not one for the half-witted,' I said. 'I'm what they call a merchant-banker,' and I told her the name of my firm. That was a lucky shot, for Miss Margesson had a cousin in our employ, and I was able to tell her all about him. I think that convinced her of my bona fides.

'But what do you propose to do with Anna?' she demanded.

'Take her straight to her father.' That I had decided was the only plan. The girl would be in perpetual danger in London, now that our enemies had got on her trail.

'Do you know where he is?' she asked.

'Yes,' I said, 'and if we start at once I can get her there before midnight.'

Then it suddenly occurred to me that I had one convincing piece of evidence at my disposal.

'Anna,' I said, 'I can tell you something that must persuade you. You had a letter from your father on your birthday three days ago?'

She nodded.

'And it didn't come from London enclosed in a bank envelope. It came from Scotland.'

'Yes,' she said, 'it came from Scotland. He didn't put any address on it, but I noticed that it had a Scotch postmark. That excited me, for I have always wanted to go to Scotland.'

'Well, it was that letter of your father's that gave his enemies the clue. One of them spotted the address in a Scotch post office. Your father's friend, Lord Clanroyden, was worried, and he sent me here at once. Doesn't that prove that I'm telling the truth?' I looked towards Miss Margesson.

Her scepticism was already shaken. 'I don't know what to think,' she cried. 'I can't take any responsibility —'

Then that astonishing child simply took charge.

'You needn't, Margie dear,' she said. 'Hop back into the house and carry on. I'm going with Mr. Lombard. I believe in him. I'm going to Scotland to my father.'

'But her things are not packed,' put in Miss Margesson. 'She can't leave like this —'

'I'm afraid we can't stand on the order of our going,' I said. 'It's now just twelve o'clock, and any moment the Bletsos may turn up and make trouble. We can send for Anna's things, and in two days everything will be explained to Miss Barlock. YOU must keep out of the business altogether. The last you saw of Anna and me was in the garden, and you know nothing of our further movements. But you might do me a great kindness and send this wire in the afternoon. It's to Lord Clanroyden — you've heard of him? — he's Anna's father's chief stand-by. He told me to bring Anna to London, but that's too dangerous now. I want him to know that we have gone to Scotland.' I scribbled a telegram on a leaf from my pocket-book.

Miss Margesson was a good girl, and she seemed to share Anna's conviction. She hugged and kissed the child. 'Write to me soon,' she said, 'for I shall be very anxious,' and ran into the house.

'Now for the road,' I said. 'My car is at the front door. I'll pick you up in the main avenue out of sight of the house. Can you get there without being seen? And bring some sort of coat. Pinch another girl's if you can't find your own. The thicker the better, for it will be chilly before we get to Laverlaw.'

I picked up Anna in the avenue all right, and we swung out of the lodge gates at precisely a quarter-past twelve. Then I saw something which I didn't much like. Just outside the gates a car was drawn up, a very powerful car of foreign make, coloured yellow and black. It looked to me like a Stutz. The only occupant was a chauffeur in uniform, who was reading a newspaper. He glanced sharply at me, and for a moment seemed about to challenge us. When we had passed I looked back and saw that he had started the car and was moving in the direction of the village. I guessed that this was the Bletsos' car, and that the man had gone to seek his master. He did not look quite like an ordinary chauffeur.

That was the start of our journey. My plan was to get into the Great North Road as soon as possible — Stamford seemed the best point to join it at — and then to let the Bentley rip on the best highway in England. I didn't see how we could be seriously pursued even if that confounded chauffeur had spotted our departure. But I was all in a dither to reach

Laverlaw that night. This young Lochinvar business was rather out of my usual line, and I wanted to get it over.

Well, we got to Stamford without mishap, and after that we did a spell of over sixty to the hour. The morning had been hot and bright, but the wind had shifted, and I thought we might soon run into dirty weather. At first I had kept looking back to see if we were followed, but there was no sign of a black and yellow car, and after a little I forgot about it. Lunch was our next problem, and, as there was a lot of traffic on the road, I feared that if we looked for it in a good hotel we should be hung up. I consulted Anna, and she said that she didn't care what she ate as long as there was enough of it, for she was very hungry. So we drew up at a little place, half pub and half tea-house, at the foot of a long hill just short of Newark. While my petrol tank was being filled we had a scratch meal, beer and sandwiches for me, while Anna's fancy was coffee and buns, of which she accounted for a surprising quantity. I also bought two pounds of chocolates and a box of biscuits, which turned out to be a lucky step.

We were just starting when I happened to cast my eyes back up the hill. I have a good long-distance eyesight, and there at the top, about half a mile away, I saw a car which was unpleasantly like the Stutz I had seen at Brewton. A minute later I lost it, for some traffic got in the way, but I saw it again, not a quarter of a mile off. There could be no mistake about the wasp-like thing, and I didn't think it likely that another car of the same make and colour would be on the road that day.

If its occupants had glasses — and they were pretty certain to have — they must have spotted us. I drove the Bentley as hard as I dared, and tried to think out our position. They knew of course what our destination was. They certainly had the pace of us, for I had heard wonderful stories of what a Stutz could do in that line — and this was probably super-charged — so it wasn't likely that we could shake them off. If we stopped for the night in any town we should be at the mercy of people whose cleverness Clanroyden had put very high, and somehow or other they would get the better of me. A halt of that kind I simply dared not risk. The road before us for the next hundred miles or so was through a populous country, and I didn't believe that they would try a hold-up on it. That would be too risky with so many cars on the road, and they would not want trouble with the police or awkward inquiries. But I had driven a good deal back and forward to Scotland, and I knew that to get to Laverlaw I must pass through some lonely country. Then would be their chance. I couldn't stand up against the toothy young man and the formidable-looking chauffeur. I would be left in a ditch with a broken head and Anna would be spirited away.

My chief feeling was a firm determination to go all out to get to Laverlaw. I couldn't outwit or outpace them, so I must trust to luck. Every mile was bringing us nearer safety, and if it was bringing us nearer the northern moorlands, I must shut down on the thought. At first I was afraid of scaring Anna, but, when I saw her face whipped into colour by the wind and her bright enjoying eyes, I considered that there was no danger of that.

'You remember the car we saw at the school gates?' I said. 'The black and yellow thing? I've a notion that it's behind us. You might keep an eye on it, for I want both of mine for this bus.'

'Oh, are we being chased?' she cried. 'What fun!' And after that she sat with her head half screwed round and issued regular bulletins.

Beyond Bawtry we got into the rain, a good steady north-country downpour. We also got into a tangle of road repairs, where we had to wait our turn at several single-track patches. At the last of these the Stutz was in the same queue and I managed to get a fairly good view of it. There was no mistake about it. I saw the chauffeur in his light-grey livery coat, the same fellow who had stared at us at Brewton. The others in the back of the car were of course invisible.

Beyond Pontefract the rain became a deluge, and it was clear from the swimming roads that a considerable weight of water had already fallen. It was now between four and five, and from constant hangups we were making poor speed. The Stutz had made no attempt to close on us, though it obviously had the greater pace, and I thought I knew the reason. Its occupants had argued as I had done. They didn't want any row in this populous countryside, but they knew I was making for Laverlaw, and they knew that to get there I must pass through some desolate places. Then their opportunity would come.

In a big village beyond Boroughbridge they changed their tactics. 'The Wasp is nearly up on us,' Anna informed me, and I suddenly heard a horn behind me, the kind of terrifying thing that they fix on French racing cars. The street was fairly broad, and it could easily pass. I saw their plan. They meant to get ahead of me, and wait for me. Soon several routes across the Border would branch off and they wanted to make certain that I did not escape them. I groaned, for the scheme I had been trying to frame was now knocked on the head.

And then we had a bit of unexpected luck. Down a side street came a tradesman's van, driven by one of those hatless youths whom every motorist wants to see hanged as an example, for they are the most dangerous things on the road. Without warning it clipped over the bows of the Stutz. I heard shouting and a grinding of brakes, but I had no time to look back and it was Anna who reported what happened. The Stutz swung to the left, mounted the pavement, and came to rest with its nose almost inside the door of a shop. The van-driver lost his head, skidded, hit a lamp-post, slewed round and crashed into the Stutz's off front wing. There was a very pretty mix-up.

'Glory be,' Anna cried, 'that has crippled the brute. Well done the butcher's boy!'

But she reported that so far as she could see the Stutz had not been damaged seriously. Only the van, which had lost a wheel. But there was a crowd, and a policeman with a note-book, and I thought that the whole business might mean a hold-up of a quarter of an hour. I had a start again, and I worked the Bentley up to a steady eighty on a beautiful stretch of road. My chief trouble was the weather, for the rain was driving so hard that the visibility was rotten, and I could see little in front of me and Anna little behind.

I had to make up my mind on the route, for Scotch Corner was getting near. If I followed the main North Road by Darlington and Durham I would be for the next hundred miles in a thickly settled country. But that would take me far from Laverlaw, and I would have the long Tweed valley before I got to it. If I turned left by Brough to Appleby, I should have to cross desolate moorlands, which would give the Stutz just the kind of country it wanted. I remembered a third road, which ran through mining villages where there would be plenty of people about. It was a perfectly good road, though the map marked most of it second-class. Besides, it was possible that the Stutz didn't know about it, and, if I had a sufficient start, might assume that I had gone by either Darlington or Brough. Anyhow, unless it caught me up soon, it would be at fault. Clearly it was my best chance.

But Fate, in the shape of the butcher's boy, had not done its work thoroughly. The rain stopped, the weather cleared, there was a magnificent red sunset over Teesdale, and just as I was swinging into my chosen road with an easier mind, Anna reported that the Wasp was coming into view.

That, as they say, fairly tore it. I had not diverted the hounds and the next half-hour was a wild race, for I wanted to get out of empty country into the colliery part. I broke every rule of decent driving, but I managed to keep a mile or so ahead. The Stutz was handicapped by the softness of the surface after the rain, and by not knowing the road as I knew it. It was beginning to grow dark, and to the best of my knowledge what there was of a moon would not rise till the small hours. My only hope was that it might be possible somewhere in the Tyne valley to give the pursuers the slip. I had tramped a good deal there, in the days when I was keen about Hadrian's Wall, and knew the deviousness of the hill-roads.

I reached the mining country without mishap, and the lights of the villages and the distant glow of ironworks gave me a comforting sense of people about and therefore of protection. Beyond Consett the dark fell, and I reflected uneasily that we were now getting into a wild moorland patch which would last till we dropped down on the Tyne. Somehow I felt that the latter event would not happen unless I managed to create a diversion. I could see the great headlights of the Stutz a mile behind, but I was pretty certain that when it saw its chance it would accelerate and overhaul us. I realized desperately that in the next ten minutes I must find some refuge or be done in.

Just then we came to a big hill which shut off any view of us from behind. I saw a bright light in front, and a big car turned in from a side-road and took our road a little ahead of us. That seemed to give me a chance. On the left there was a little road, which looked as if it led to a farm-house, and which turned a corner of a fir-wood. If I turned up that, the Stutz, topping the hill behind us, would see the other car far down the hill and believe it to be ours. . . . There was no time to waste, so I switched off our lights and moved into the farm road, till we were in the lee of the firs. We had scarcely got there when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the glow of the Stutz's lights over the crest, and I had scarcely shut off my engine when it went roaring down the hill fifty yards away.

'Golly,' said Anna, 'this is an adventure! Where is the chocolate, Mr. Lombard? We've had no tea, and I'm very hungry.'

While she munched chocolate I started the engine, and after passing two broken-hinged gates we came to a little farm. There was nobody about except an old woman, who explained to me that we were off the road, which was obvious enough, and gave us big glasses of milk warm from the cow. I had out the map (luckily I had a case of them in the car with me) and I saw that a thin red line, which meant some sort of road, continued beyond the farm and seemed to lead ultimately to the Tyne valley. I must chance its condition, for it offered some sort of a plan. I reasoned that the Stutz would continue down

the hill and might go on for miles before it spotted that the other car was not ours. It would come back and fossick about to see which side-road we had taken, but there were several in the area, and it would take a little time to discover our tracks on the farm road. If it got thus far, the woman at the farm would report our coming, and say that we had gone back to the main road. I made a great pretence to her of being in a hurry to return to that road. But, when she had shut the door behind us, we crossed a tiny stack yard, found the continuation of the track trickling through a steep meadow, and, very carefully shutting every gate behind us, slipped down into a hollow where cattle started away from our lights and we had to avoid somnolent sheep.

The first part was vile, but in the end it was joined by another farm-track, and the combination of the two made a fair road, stony, but with a sound bottom. My great fear was of ditching in one of the moorland runnels. After a little it was possible to increase the speed, and, though I had often to stop and examine the map, in half an hour we had covered a dozen miles. We were in a lonely bit of country, with no sign of habitation except an occasional roadside cottage and the lights from a hillside farm, and we passed through many plantations of young firs. Here, I thought, was a place to get a little sleep, for Anna was nodding with drowsiness and I was feeling pretty well done up. So we halted at the back of a fir clump and I made a bed for Anna with the car rugs — not much of a bed, for, the weather in the south having been hot, I had only brought summer wraps. We both had some biscuits and chocolate, but the child went to sleep with her mouth full, snuggled against my side, and I wasn't long in following. I was so tired that I didn't want to smoke.

I woke about four. Every little pool left by the rain was flushed rose-pink with the reflection of the sky, and I knew that that meant dirty weather. I roused Anna, and we laved our faces in the burn, and had another go at the biscuits. The air was cold and raw, and we would have given pounds for hot coffee. The whole place was as quiet as a churchyard, not even a bird whistled or a sheep bleated, and both of us felt a bit eerie. But the sleep had done us good, and I was feeling pretty confident that we had puzzled the Stutz. It must have spent a restless night if it had been prospecting the farm roads in north Durham. My plan now was to make straight for Laverlaw and trust to luck.

We weren't long in getting to the Tyne valley near Hexham. The fine morning still held, but the mist was low on the hills, and I counted on a drizzle in an hour or two. Anna looked chilly, and I decided that we must have a better breakfast. We were on a good road now and I kept my eye lifting for an inconspicuous pub. Presently I found one a little off the road, and its smoking chimney showed us that the folk were out of bed. I turned into its yard, which was on the side away from the road, and Anna and I stumbled into the kitchen, for we were both as stiff as pokers. The landlord was a big, slow-spoken Northumbrian, and his wife was a motherly creature who gave us hot water to wash in and a comb for Anna's hair. She promised, too, bacon and eggs in a quarter of an hour, and in the meantime I bought some cans of petrol to fill up my tank. It was while the landlord was on this job that, to stretch my legs, I took a stroll around the inn to where I had a view of the highroad.

I got a nasty jar, for there was the sound of a big car, and the Stutz came racing past. I guessed what had happened. It had lost us right enough in the Durham moorlands, but its occupants had argued that we must be making for Laverlaw, and that, if we had tangled ourselves up in by-roads, we must have made poor speed during the night. They would therefore get ahead of us, and watch the road junctions for the North. There was one especially that I remembered well, where the road up the North Tyne forked from the main highway over the Cheviots by the Carter Bar. Both were possible, and there was no third by which a heavy car could make fair going. Their strategy was sound enough. If we hadn't turned into that pub for breakfast we should have been fairly caught, and if I hadn't seen them pass, in another hour we should have been at their mercy.

Yet after the first scare I didn't feel downhearted. I felt somehow that we had the game in our hands, and had got over the worst snags. I said nothing about the Stutz to Anna, and we peacefully ate an enormous breakfast. Then I had a word with the landlord about the countryside, and he told me a lot about the side-ways into the upper glens of Tyne. At eight o'clock we started again in a drizzle, and soon I turned off the main highway to the left by what I had learned was one of the old drove-roads.

All morning we threaded our way in a maze of what must be about the worst roads in Britain. I had my map and my directions from the inn, but often I had to stop and ask the route at the little moorland farms. Anna must have opened fifty gates, and there were times when I thought we were bogged for good. I can tell you it was a tricky business, but I was beginning to enjoy myself, for I felt that we had won, and Anna was in wild spirits. The sight of bent and heather intoxicated her, and she took to singing and reciting poems. The curlews especially she hailed as old friends, and shouted a

Danish poem about them. . . .

Well, that's about the end of my story. We never met the Stutz again, and for all I know it is still patrolling the Carter Bar. But I was taking no risks, and when we got into the main road up the Tyne to Liddesdale, I didn't take the shortest way to Laverlaw, which would have been by Rule Water, or by Hermitage and the Slitrig. You see, I had a fear that the Stutz, if it found no sign of us on the Carter or Bellingham roads, might have the notion of keeping watch on the approaches nearer Laverlaw. So I decided to come in on you from the side where it wouldn't expect us. The sun came out after midday, and it was a glorious afternoon. Lord, I think we must have covered half the Border. We went down Liddel to Langholm, and up the Esk to Eskdalemuir, and so into Ettrick. For most of the way we saw nothing but sheep and an odd baker's van.

Lombard finished with a cavernous yawn. He grinned contentedly. 'Bed for me,' he said, 'and for Heaven's sake let that child have her sleep out. A queer business for a sedentary man getting on in years! I'm glad I did it, but I don't fancy doing it often.'

I asked one question. 'What was the chauffeur in the Stutz like?'

'I only got a glimpse of him,' he replied; 'but I think I should know him if I saw him again. An odd-looking chap. Tall and very thin. A long, brown face, a pointed chin, and eyes like a cat's. A foreigner, I should say, and a bit of a swine.'

I remembered the man who had come to Fosse with the youth Varrinder, and whom Sandy had recognized as Jacques D'Ingraville. We had not been quite certain if he was in the Haraldsen affair, and it had been Sandy's business to find that out. Now I knew, and the knowledge disquieted me, for of this man Sandy had spoken with a seriousness which was almost fear.



CHAPTER 10

THE DOG SAMR

Anna Haraldsen's arrival made us tighten the precautions at Laverlaw. We were now all assembled there, except the laird, and he might be trusted to look after himself. Lombard showed no desire to leave. He had wound up his business affairs in anticipation of a holiday, and thought that he might as well take the first few days of it in Scotland. He wrote a long account to his wife of his journey, which he read to me with pride — certainly it was a vigorous bit of narrative; and at the end he put in something about staying on to watch events. 'That will please Beryl,' he said. 'She's very keen about this business, and will like to know that I'm doing my bit.' I asked him what events he expected, and he replied that he had a feel in his bones that things would begin to move. That was not my own view, for, short of bombs from an aeroplane, I didn't see what the other lot could do to harm us. Laverlaw was as well guarded as a royal palace.

I have mentioned that Haraldsen was becoming a cured man. Under Peter John's care he had lost nearly all his jumpiness, he ate and slept well, laughed now and then, and generally behaved like an ordinary mortal. You could see that he was homesick, for the sight of Sandy's possessions reminded him of his own. But he had altogether lost the hunted look. The coming of his daughter put the top stone on his recovery. It was as if a nomad had got together a home again. I expected him to be in a great state about the very real risk she had run; I knew that with Peter John it would have come between me and my sleep; but he never gave it a thought. Indeed, he scarcely listened when Lombard told him about it. He wrote to Miss Barlock and sent for Anna's kit, and then shut the lid on that chapter.

But it did one good to see him and the girl together. For a couple of years the two had not met each other. He talked a good deal to her of the Norlands, which she was beginning to forget, and he was always reminding her of things that had happened in the Island of Sheep. I noticed that he tried to appear interested in her stories about school, but on that subject she had better listeners in Mary and Barbara and me, and an infinitely better one in Lombard. He seemed to wish to forget all that had happened in England, as if it had been a bad dream. He reminded me one day with satisfaction that at Laverlaw we were half-way to the Norlands.

One thing was clear — for him that English chapter was closed. Haraldsen was not only a cured man, but a new man, or perhaps he had returned to what he had been before I met him. There was confidence in his voice, more vigour in his eyes, and he held himself and walked like a free man. That was all to the good, for he would be a combatant now, I hoped, instead of a piece of compromising baggage. He was beginning to assert himself, too, and I came to think that, if Lombard was right, and things started to move, Haraldsen himself might be the propelling force. He was becoming restless again, not from shaky nerves, but from some growing purpose. He and Anna had long serious palavers in Norland, and I guessed that he was trying to hammer out some line of action. He might soon take a hand in shaping his own destiny.

Peter John, his former comrade, was now wholly neglected, and Haraldsen and Anna made most of their expeditions together. I had asked myself how my son would get on with the girl, and I soon found an answer. They didn't get on at all. Peter John had never had much to do with women, except his mother, and to some small degree with Barbara Clanroyden and Janet Roylance, because they were the belongings of his friends. I did not believe that he would make friends with any kind of girl, and it soon became clear that, anyhow, Anna was not his kind. Never were there such obvious incompatibles. He talked little, and when you asked him a question it was like dropping a stone into a deep well — you had to wait for the answer. She babbled like a brook. He had a ridiculously formal style of speech — Johnsonian English, his house-master had called it whereas she revelled in every kind of slang — school slang out of novels, slang from film captions. I found her mannerisms often delightful, for she had not a complete command of English. For example, she would make unfamiliar positives from negative words, 'couth' (as the opposite of uncouth) was a favourite term of praise with her, and, contrary-wise, 'unbeautiful' a condemnation. Peter John thought them merely silly. Then she was always chaffing him, and it was about as much use chaffing Cleopatra's Needle for all the response she got. He treated her with elaborate politeness, and retired into his kennel, as an old house-dog will sometimes do when visitors bring a strange hound.

This went on for the better part of a week. Then suddenly Lombard's prophecy came true, and events quickened their pace to a run.

One afternoon all of us, except Barbara's infant, made an expedition to the shieling of Clatteringshaws, where the shepherd's only daughter — his name was Tarras — was being married to Nickson, the young herd on the home farm. It was a slack time in the pastoral year, before the autumn fairs began, and the whole Laverlaw estate turned out to the ceremony, for Nickson was popular and Tarras was one of the oldest hands on the place. The minister of Hangingshaw was to marry the couple at half-past two; after that there was to be high tea on the green beside the burn; then dancing was to follow till all hours in the big shed. Few of us had seen a Scots wedding, and, besides, Jean Tarras had been one of the Laverlaw maids, so we all set out on ponies to make an afternoon of it — except Peter John who, according to his custom, preferred to walk.

It was divine weather — just as well for the tea beside the burn — and we made a cheerful party. Anna especially was in wild spirits, and I realized for the first time those good looks about which Mary had been so certain. Now that she was in prettier clothes than her school uniform, and had been out a good deal in the sun, she had become an altogether more vivid and coloured being. Her hair had gold glints in it. Her skin had flushed to a sort of golden ivory, and her lovely eyes had become deeper by contrast. She held herself well in the saddle, and her voice rang out over the heather as sweet and true as a bell. She was riding with Mary and Lombard, and I was behind with Barbara and Haraldsen, and I couldn't help telling her father that she was an uncommonly pretty child. The fact was so patent that he didn't trouble even to look pleased.

'Where does she get her name?' I asked. 'Her mother?'

'No, my mother. Anna is a common name in the Norlands. But it is not right for her. She is no Jewish prophetess. If I had the christening of her again, it should be Nanna, who was Balder's wife.'

I remembered vaguely that Balder was some sort of Norse god, and certainly the girl looked a goddess that afternoon. Haraldsen was getting very full of Northern lore these days, for he went on in his queer staccato way to explain that a goddess's name would not do for her either — that she was more like the maidens in the Edda, who had to live in the underworld in a house ringed with fire till a hero rescued them. He ran over a string of those ladies, of whom Brynhild was the only one I recognized.

'Poor Anna,' he said. 'Perhaps she will be like the women in the Sagas, ill-fated because her men are doomed. She may be as proud and sad as Bergthora, but she will never be treacherous like Halgerda.'

I wasn't quite sure what he was talking about. I had read one or two of the Sagas on Sandy's advice, and I observed that they were gloomy anecdotes.

'They are the Scriptures of my race,' said Haraldsen. 'And they have truths from which we cannot escape, though they are sad truths. They are true for me — and for you too, Hannay, and for Lord Clanroyden, and for our kind ladies, and for your son, who is striding yonder as if he were Thor on his travels. You Scots know it too, for you have it in your sayings. There is a weird which none can escape. Fenris-Wolf is waiting in Hell for Odin himself.'

'I should let Fenris-Wolf sleep in this weather,' I told him, and he laughed.

'True,' he said. 'It is not well to think of ultimate things. There is a Norland proverb which says that few can see farther forth than when Odin meets the wolf.'

He stopped and sniffed the scents, a wonderful mingling of thyme and peat and heather blown by a light west wind over miles of moorland. 'This place is like the Norlands,' he said with abstracted eyes. 'I have smelled this smell at midsummer there, when there was a wind from the hills.'

'It's my own calf-country,' I said, 'and I'm glad to think it reminds you of yours.'

'The reminder is not all pleasure. It makes me sad also. There is another of our proverbs — I seem to be quoting many today — that strongest is every man in his own house. I am in the house of a stranger — the kindest of strangers.'

'So am I,' I said; 'but I'm not complaining.'

'But you have your home — you can reach it in a day. Anna and I have a home, but it is shut to us. She is like the poor Princess in the tale — there is a ring of flame round her dwelling.'

'Oh, we're going to put those fires out,' I said cheerfully. 'It won't be long till you're as snug in your island as Sandy in Laverlaw and me at Fosse — a dashed sight more snug, for you haven't to pay income-tax. If the worst comes to the worst, I'll come up and join you.'

A sudden queer look came into his face. He had been talking dolefully in a brisk voice, and he had been half laughing.

But now his eyes grew grave, just as his father's used to.

'I wonder if I shall ever find peace,' he said slowly. 'We Norlanders get tied up in a skein of fate from which there is no escape. Read in the Sagas, and you will see how relentless is the wheel. Hrut slays Hrap, and Atli slays Hrut, and Gisli slays Atli, and Kari slays Gisli. My father, God rest him, punishes the old Troth, and the younger Troth would punish me, and if he succeeds perhaps Anna or some child of Anna's will punish him.'

It was in a whirl of outlandish names and with Haraldsen looking as mysterious as a spae-wife that we plashed through the burn and off-saddled on the green of Clatteringshaws.

You could not imagine a pleasanter spectacle. A dozen shepherds had brought their womenfolk, and there was a big contingent of the Laverlaw servants, and an ancient horse-bus had conveyed a party from Hangingshaw village. The minister, an active young man who had got a Military Cross in the War, had come on a bicycle. Stoddart, the head-shepherd on the Mains, was the master of ceremonies, and he was busy with the preparations for tea, with Sim and Oliver as his lieutenants. Tarras welcomed us with that kindly composure which makes a Border shepherd the best gentleman on earth, for he is as sure of himself as any king. There must have been fully fifty guests. The older men were in their Sunday blacks, their regular garb for church, weddings, and funerals, but the younger wore the glen homespun, and the keepers were, of course, in knickerbockers. I noticed that every man had a black-and-white checked necktie, a thing which Sandy always wore at home and which was the Laverlaw equivalent to a tartan. The women were in bright colours, except the bride, who wore white, and I thought how female clothes had been evened up since the War. Most of the girls were fully as well-dressed as Barbara or Janet.

The ceremony in Tarras's little parlour was a suffocating business, but happily it did not last long. Then the blushing Nickson and the very demure bride disappeared up a wooden ladder to shed some of their finery, and we examined the presents laid out in the kitchen. Tarras and his wife did hosts at the tea on the green, and I have never seen a company tuck in more resolutely to more substantial viands. There were hot mutton pies, and cold mutton hams, and all that marvellous variety of cakes and breads in which Scotland has no rival, and oceans of strong tea and rich cream, and beer for those who liked it, and whisky for the elderly. Old Tarras made a speech of Welcome, and Barbara replied almost in his own accent, for the American South, when it likes, has the same broad vowels as the Border. And then, after a deal of eating and drinking, all hands set to work to remove the tables, and the company split up into groups, while youth wandered off by itself. Presently dancing would begin in the wool-shed — the fiddlers were already tuning up — and there would be supper some time in the small hours.

The ladies started for home early, and, since I wanted exercise, I sent my pony back with Geordie Hamilton. Lombard professed the same wish, and Haraldsen, who had been a silent figure at the feast, followed suit, so that Geordie departed like a horse-thief who had made a good haul. We were in no hurry, for it was less than an hour's walk home over hill turf, so we went round to the back of the cottage, where some of the older men were sitting on a rock above a small linn, smoking their pipes and talking their slow talk. I remember thinking that I had rarely had so profound an impression of peace. The light wind had dropped, and the honey-coloured bent and the blue of the sky were melting into the amethyst of twilight. In that cool, mellow, scented dusk, where the only sounds were the drift of distant human speech, and the tinkle of the burn, and the calling of wild birds, and the drowsy bleat of an old ewe, I seemed to have struck something as changeless as the hills.

The dogs were mostly congregated round Tarras's back-door, on the look-out for broken meats, and I had just taken a seat on a bank beside Stoddart when a most infernal racket started in their direction. It sounded like the father and mother of dog-fights. All of us got to our feet, but we were on the wrong side of the burn, and it took us some minutes to circumvent the linn, pass through the gates of the sheep-fold, and get to the back-door where bicycles and the Hangingshaw horse-bus were parked. For the last dozen yards we had the place in sight, where a considerable drama was going on.

The centre of it was Stoddart's dog, the patriarch Yarrow. He was about twelve years old, and in his day had been the pride of the countryside, for he had won twice at the big sheep-trials. I dare say he was an arrogant old fellow, and said nasty things to the young collies, for it isn't in dog nature to be a swell without showing it. But as Stoddart's dog he had a position of acknowledged preeminence, and at clippings and speanings and lamb sales he took precedence, and was given, so to speak, the first lick from the plate. But now he must have gone a bit too far. Every dog in the place had it in for him, and with bared teeth was intent on his massacre.

The old beast was something of a strategist. He had got into the corner where the peat-shed projected beyond the cottage wall, so that he couldn't be taken in flank or in rear, and there he was putting up a sturdy fight. He had a dozen enemies, but they had not much notion of a mass assault, for if they had come on in a wave they would have smothered him. What they did was to attack singly. A little black-and-tan dog would dart forward and leap for his neck, only to be hurled back by Yarrow's weight, for though his teeth were old and blunt, he was a heavy beast, and could have given pounds to anything else there. But some of his assailants must have got home, for he had an ear in tatters, and his neck and throat were blotched with blood.

His opponents' game was the old one of the pack, learned when their ancestors hunted on the plains of Asia. They meant to wear the old fellow down, and then rush in and finish him. Stoddart saw what they were after, and flung his stick at them, roaring abuse. I would have bet any sum that, but for us, in ten minutes the poor old beast would have been dead.

But I would have been wildly wrong, for suddenly Yarrow changed his plan, and the fight was transformed. Instead of standing on the defence he attacked. With lips snarling back over his gums, and every hair on his thick collar a-bristle, and with something between a bark, a bay, and a howl, he charged his enemies. He didn't snap — his teeth weren't good enough — he simply hurled his weight on them, using jaw and paws and every part of him as weapons of offence. Far more important, he let them see that he was out for blood. He didn't want to save his hide now, but to rend theirs. I have never seen such determination in any animal, except in African wild game. Yarrow's twelve years by Stoddart's fireside were forgotten. He was no more the household pet, the shepherd's working partner, the prize-winner at shows to be patted and stroked; he was a lightning-bolt, a tornado, a devouring fiend. . . . There was a cloud of dust and fur, and then the whole mob streaked into flight. One went between my legs, one tripped up Lombard, several felt the weight of their masters' crooks. As for old Yarrow, he had fixed his stumps in the hind-leg of a laggard, and it took Stoddart all his time to loose them.

I stopped to laugh, for it was one of the best finishes I had ever seen. Each shepherd was busy rounding up and correcting his own special miscreant, and Lombard, Haraldsen, and Peter John and I were left to ourselves. I got a glimpse of Haraldsen's face and gripped his arm, for I thought he was going to faint. He was white as paper, and shaking like a leaf. He looked just as he had done that morning on Hanham sands when the whitefront had escaped from Peter John's falcon.

Words came slowly from his pale lips. He was drawing a moral, but it was the opposite of the Hanham one. But the first words were the same.

'It is a message to me,' he croaked. 'That dog is like Samr, who died with Gunnar of Lithend. He reminds me of what I had forgotten.'

By now Stoddart had dragged Yarrow indoors to be washed and bandaged, and the other shepherds were busy with their own dogs. The gathering twilight showed that it was time for us to set out for home. Haraldsen followed us mechanically as we crossed the paddock where Tarras grew his potatoes, and the meadow where he cut his bog-hay, and breasted the long slopes which the westering sun had made as yellow as corn. He walked with great strides, keeping abreast of us, but a little to the right, as if he wished to be left alone to his gloomy Scandinavian meditations. But there was something new about him that caught my eye. He was wearing a suit of that russet colour called crotal, and it somehow enlarged his bulk. He kept his head down and poked forward, with his great shoulders hunched, and he had the look of a big brown bear out for action. There was fight and purpose in his air which before then had only been a lounging, loose-limbed acquiescence. Now there was something of old Yarrow when he had gathered himself up for the final rush.

At the watershed of the glen we stopped by consent, for the view there was worth looking at with its twenty miles of rounded hills huddling into the sunset. There was a little cairn on which Lombard and I seated ourselves, while Peter John as usual circled round us like a restless collie. Then Haraldsen spoke:

'I must leave you soon — Anna and I — at once,' he said. 'I have been too long a trespasser.'

'We're all trespassers on Sandy,' I said.

He didn't listen to me. He was in his proverbial mood, and quoted something from the Hava-mal (whatever that may be). It ran like this: 'Stay not in the same house long, but go; for love turns to loathing if a man stays long on another's floor.'

'Oh, nonsense!' I said. 'We're not here cadging hospitality. We're all in the same game, and this is part of it.'

'That is what I mean,' he answered. 'We are not playing it right. I, at any rate, have been a fool.'

We waited, for he was labouring with some thought for which he found it hard to get words. But it was only the words that were lacking, for every line of his face spoke of purpose.

He put his big hand on my shoulder.

‘In January, do you remember, on the Norfolk shore? I saw the goose escape the hawk by flying low. I thought that I too might escape by being quiet and humble. . . . I was wrong, for humility drains manhood away, but does not give safety. To-day I have seen the virtue of boldness. I will no longer be passive, and try to elude my enemies. I will seek them out and fight them, like Samr the hound.’

All three of us sat up and took notice, for this was a Haraldsen we had not met before. Except for his shaven chin he might have been his father. He had identified old Yarrow with some Saga dog, and he seemed to have got himself into the skin of an ancestor. His great nose looked like the beak of a Viking galley, and his pale eyes had the ice-blue fanaticism of the North.

‘I have been forgetting my race,’ he went on. ‘Always a weird followed us, and Fate was cruel to us. But we did not run from it or hide from it, but faced it and grappled with it, and sometimes we overthrew it. I have been a coward and I have seen the folly of cowardice. I have been sick too, but I am a whole man again. I will no longer avoid my danger, but go out to meet it, since it is the will of God. . . .’

‘Quisque suos patimur Manes.’ A voice spoke below us, but I did not know what the words meant. Lombard did, and perhaps Peter John, though I doubt it.

We turned to find Sandy. He had come quietly up the hill while we had been talking, and had been eavesdropping at our backs. He was wearing an old grey flannel suit, and looked pale, as if he had been too much indoors lately.

‘How on earth did you get here?’ I asked.

‘Flew. Archie Roylance dropped me at Chryston, and that’s only five miles off. I was just in time to kiss Jean Tarras and drink her health. . . . You were saying, when I interrupted?’ and he turned to Haraldsen.

On Haraldsen’s face there was no sign of surprise at Sandy’s sudden appearance, for he was far too full of his own thoughts.

‘I was saying,’ he replied, ‘that I will skulk no longer in a foreign country or in other men’s houses. I will go home to my own land and there will fight my enemies.’

‘Alone?’ Sandy asked.

‘If need be, alone. You have been true friends to me, but no friends can take from me the burden of my own duty.’

Sandy looked at him with that quick appraising glance of his which took in so much. I could see in his eyes that, like me, he had found something new in Haraldsen which he had not expected, and which mightily cheered him. His face broke into a smile.

‘A very sound conclusion,’ he said. ‘It’s the one I’ve been coming to myself. I’ve come up here to talk about it. . . . And now let us push on for dinner. Laverlaw air has given me the first appetite I’ve had for weeks.’



CHAPTER 11

WE SHIFT OUR BASE

That night after dinner we held a council of war, at which we all agreed that Peter John should be present. That was a comfort to him, for since Anna's coming he had been rather left out of things. Sandy, as was his habit at Laverlaw, wore the faded green coat of a Border dining club, but it didn't make him look, as it usually did, a Scots laird snug among his ancestral possessions. His face had got that special fining-down which I so well remembered, and his eyes that odd dancing light which meant that he was on the warpath again.

We had heard nothing of him for weeks, so I had a good many questions to ask.

'What have I been doing?' he said. 'Going to and fro on the earth. Trying to get a line on various gentry. My old passion for queer company has stood me in good stead, and by voluptuous curves I've been trying to get in on their flanks. One way and another I've learned most of what I wanted to know. Several of the unknown quantities I can now work out to four places of decimals. We're up against a formidable lot — no mistake about that.'

'More formidable than you thought?' asked Lombard.

'Ye-es,' he said slowly. 'But in a different way. That is my chief discovery.'

'What was your method' I asked. 'Have you been up to your old tricks?' I turned to Lombard. 'Perhaps you don't know that he's one of the best quick-change artists in the world.'

'Partly,' Sandy replied. 'I've had quite a lot of fun in the business. But I met some of them in my own name and person. We had better be clear about one thing — they know all about us. Dick they marked down long ago; and Lombard since he levanted with Miss Anna. They don't know our motive, but they realize that we are backing Haraldsen. If I've got a good deal of their dossiers, they've got plenty of ours. You'd be surprised, Dick, to know how zealously they have been searching into your tattered past, and I'm glad to think that what they found has made them fairly uncomfortable. They've been pumping, very cleverly and quietly, all your old pals like Artinswell and Julius Victor and Archie Roylance. They even got something out of Macgillivray, though he wasn't aware of it.'

'What do they make of YOU?'

Sandy laughed. 'Oh, I puzzle them horribly. I've got the jade tablet, so I'm in the thick of it, and they're gunning for me just as much as for Haraldsen. But I'm a troublesome proposition, for they understand quite well that I've taken the offensive, and they've an idea that when I fix my teeth in anything I'm apt to hang on. That's the worst of my confounded melodramatic reputation. It sounds immodest, but I've a notion that they've got the wind up badly about me, and if we had only the first lot to deal with I might make them cry off. . . . Only of course we haven't.'

'What's the new snag?' I asked.

'Patience,' he said. 'We'll go through the list one by one. First, Varrinder, the youth with the rabbit teeth. We can count him out, for he'll worry us no more. He was what I suspected — an indicateur, and at heart a funk. I laid myself out to scare Master Varrinder, and I succeeded. He was very useful to me, so far as his twittering nerves allowed him. Yesterday he sailed, under another name, for Canada, and he won't come back for a long, long time. Next, Dick.'

'Albinus,' I said.

'Right. He's the second least important. Well, I've seen a lot of Mr. Erick Albinus. I played bridge with him at Dillon's, which cost me twenty pounds. We went racing together, and I had a boring but illuminating day. I gave a little dinner for him, to which I made a point of asking one or two of his City friends about whom he is most nervous. He's a nasty piece of work, that lad, and it beats me how people tolerate him as they do, for he's the oily faux bonhomme if there ever was one. He's in the job for greed, for financially he's on the edge of Queer Street, and also Troth has some kind of family pull on him. But I think I could scare him out of it, like Varrinder, if I wanted to. But I don't. I've decided that he's safer in than out, for he has a big yellow streak in him, and, though he's a clever devil, he'll be a drag on his friends in the long run. So I've remained on good terms with Mr. Albinus, and he flatters himself that he has thrown dust in my eyes, more power to him.

'Now we get to bigger business. Troth — Mr. Lancelot Troth. I've come to a clear decision about Troth. He's a ruffian,

but I don't think he's altogether a rogue. A fine distinction, you say. Maybe, but it's important. First, he has his friends who genuinely like him, quite honest fellows, some of them. I got myself invited to the annual dinner of his Fusilier regiment, where he made a dashed good speech. I gathered that in the War he was a really good battalion officer, and very popular with the men. I did my best to follow his business tracks, and pretty tangled they are, but my impression is that he is more of a buccaneer than a swindler. He's a bold fellow who runs his head now and then against the law, because he likes taking risks. Did you ever read *The Wrong Box*? There's a touch of Michael Finsbury in Troth.'

'Did you meet him — I mean as yourself?' I asked.

'Indeed I did. Had quite a heart-to-heart talk with him. I went down to his office, sent in my card, and begged for a few minutes' conversation on private business. There was a fine commotion in that office, a client was cleared like a shot out of his private room, and he told his secretary that on no account must we be disturbed. I suppose he thought that I had come to offer terms. I was the guileless innocent — asked if he had read my letter to the Times — said I was very anxious to get all the information I could about old Haraldsen, and that I had heard that he had known him in South Africa. That puzzled him, and in self-defence he became very stiff and punctilious — said he had had nothing to do with Haraldsen, though his father might have met him. You see, he hadn't yet linked me up with you, Dick, and was playing for safety. Then I said that I was trying to get on the track of Haraldsen's family — believed he had a son somewhere, and could he help me to locate him? I had come to him solely as a matter of business, for I had heard good reports of his skill. I said I had got this jade tablet, which I couldn't possibly stick to, and that I proposed to present it to the British Museum unless I could find Haraldsen's heirs, in which case they should have it.

'That fetched him. He suggested luncheon, and took me to one of the few old City places remaining where you feed in a private box. He insisted on champagne, so I remembered a saying of my father's, that if a man gave you champagne at luncheon, you should suspect a catch. He was very civil and forthcoming, and began, quite cleverly, to dig things out of his memory which his father had told him about Haraldsen. He dared say that with a little trouble he could get some information for me about the people who had a claim to the equities in Haraldsen's estate. We parted on excellent terms, after some highly technical talk about spring salmon in Caithness, and he promised to ring me up as soon as he had anything to tell me.'

'Did he?' Lombard asked eagerly. He was the one of us who knew most about Troth.

'No. For in the next day or two his scouts linked me up with Dick — Laverlaw was enough for that — and he must have realized that I knew everything and had been playing with him. But I rang him up myself and got a very dusty answer. However, he agreed to see me again, and I made him lunch with me at Claridge's — planted him down in the middle of a crowded restaurant, where he couldn't make an exhibition of himself. For I meant to make him lose his temper, and if that had happened in his office the end would only have been a shindy. I managed it all right. I orated about old Haraldsen, that wonderful figure half-saint and half-adventurer, and the sacred trust that had been laid on me, and so forth. He listened with a squared jaw and ugly suspicious eyes while I strummed on the falsetto. Then he broke out. "See here, Lord Clanroyden," he said. "I've had enough of this stuff. You've been trying to fool me and I don't like it. I see what your game is, and I don't like it either. You take my advice and keep out of this business, or you'll get hurt, big swell as you are. Old Haraldsen was a scoundrel, and there's some of us who have a lot to get back from him and his precious son."

'I opened my eyes and started on another tack. I said that all this shocked me, and I'm hanged if I didn't get him to believe that I meant it. You see, I was the new-comer who might have heard any kind of story from the other side. He actually seemed to want to put himself right in my eyes, and he gave me his own version. What it was doesn't signify, except that he has a full-sized vendetta on his hands inherited from his father, and isn't going to forget it. I must say I respected his truculence. It was rather like the kind of family legacy you have among the Indian frontier tribes. I pretended to be surprised, and not altogether unsympathetic, and we parted on very fair terms. I had got the two things I wanted. I had kept the gang uncertain what part I meant to play, and I had taken the measure of Troth. A bit of a ruffian as I have said, but not altogether a rogue. If he were the only one in the show I think he might be squared. He wants what he considers to be his rights, not loot in the general way. But of course he's not alone, for there's a bigger and subtler mind behind him. Can you put a name to it?'

'Barralty,' said Lombard and I in unison.

'Yes, Barralty. He is the mind all right. I had to get a full view of Barralty, so I approached him from all kinds of angles.

I've told you already about the Bloomsbury party, where he was a king among the half-baked. I followed up his trail in the City — Lombard started me on that — and my conclusion is that the Lepcha business hasn't done him much harm. He has still plenty of money in the ordinary way, though not a hundredth part of what he wants, and his reputation is still high. I thought I'd have a peep at his political side, so I got Andrew Amos to arrange that I should attend a private conference between some of the intellectuals and the trade-union leaders — I was a boiler-maker from the Clyde and a fairly shaggy comrade. His performance there rather impressed me, for he managed to make himself a bridge between two utterly different worlds — put the idealistic stuff with a flavour of hard good sense, and the practical view with a touch of idealism. There's a considerable future for him in politics, if he decides that way.

'Then I thought that I'd better make his acquaintance. You know Charles Lamancha's taste for freak parties? Well, I got him to give a dinner at the club — himself, Christopher Stannix, an Under-Secretary, a couple of bankers, and Ned Leithen, and I had myself placed next to Barralty. Of course by this time he knew all about me, for the Laverlaw party had begun, and his friends had discovered the way we have tied up Haraldsen's fortune, so naturally I was considered the villain of the piece. He made no mistakes that night. He was very polite to me, and talked intelligently about my Far East Commission and foreign affairs generally, and even condescended to be enthusiastic about this Border country in which he said he often motored. He did not attempt to pump me, but behaved as if I were an ordinary guest of whom he had heard and whom he was quite glad to meet. There was some pretty good talk, for Stannix always manages to put life into a dinner table, and Barralty kept his end up. He had a wrangle with one of the bankers over some financial point, and I thought he put his case uncommonly well. So did the others, for he was listened to with respect. There's no doubt that he has a pretty solid footing in the world, and there's no mistake about his brains. He's as quick as lightning on a point, and I can see him spinning an immense web and keeping his eye on every thread in it.'

'I told you that weeks ago,' said Lombard. 'Barralty is as clever as the devil. But what about the rest of him — besides his mind?'

'I'm coming to that. That was the thing I most wanted to know about, and it wasn't easy to get cross-bearings. I had to dive into queer worlds and half-worlds and, as I've already said, I found that my unfortunate liking for low society came in useful. I found out most of what I wanted, but it has been a long job and not a particularly pleasant one. One piece of luck I had. There was bound to be a woman somewhere, and I scraped up acquaintance with Barralty's particular friend. She's a lovely creature, a red-haired Jewess, who just missed coming off as a film-star. Heaven knows what her real name is, but she calls herself Lydia Ludlow.'

'She came to tea at Fosse,' Peter John put in. 'I remember her name. My mother said she was an actress.'

'Dick,' said Sandy solemnly, 'I think Peter John should be in bed. But I won't enlarge upon Miss Ludlow, except to say that she was hard to get to know, but that she repaid me for my trouble. I was an American film magnate, very well made up, and I don't think she is likely to recognize me again. I had a wonderful scheme for a super-film about Herod Agrippa, which would star her. So we had a number of confidential talks, in which Barralty's name cropped up as a friend who would take a share in the venture. You see, it was to be a great Anglo-American show, a sort of proof of the unity of art and the friendship of the Anglo-Saxon race. I learned from her a good deal about Barralty. He is her slave, it appears, but the fetters don't gall, for his success is to be her success. The two of them represent a pretty high-powered ambition, and Miss Ludlow won't let the pressure slacken.'

'What's your conclusion?' I asked. 'A first-class brain, but how much stuff behind it?'

'Not a great deal. I have collected all my evidence and carefully weighed it, and that is my verdict. Barralty has three spurs to prick him on — ambition, greed, which is part of his ambition, and his lady. But he has a lot of tethers to keep him still — fear of his reputation, fear of his skin, all sorts of funks. He's not the bold class of lad. Rather a sheep in wolf's clothing. If things were as they were a year ago, I believe we could settle the whole business out of hand.'

'You mean — what?' Haraldsen spoke for the first time.

'Well, we could do a deal with Troth, a reasonable deal, and I believe he would stick to it. I could scare Albinus as I have scared Varrinder. And in spite of Miss Ludlow I think I could scare Barralty. Only you see that is impossible now, for a fifth figure has appeared, who puts a darker complexion on the thing. Before, it was not much more than melodrama, but now the tragic actor is on the boards. For the real wolf has arrived.'

'We knew for certain that D'Ingraville was in it after Lombard's escapade,' I said.

I had to tell Sandy some of the details of Lombard's story, for he had not heard them.

'Yes,' he said reflectively. 'He must have been the man who drove the Stutz.' He referred to a pocket diary. 'There were three days when he slipped away from me, and now I know what he was doing. Otherwise I didn't let him often out of my sight. No, I never was in his sight, but there wasn't much he did in those weeks in London that I didn't know. You see, I was on my own ground and he was a stranger, so I had a pull on him. He tried a little contre-espionage, but it was clumsy. I've been sitting tight and watching him, and all I can say is, that if he was formidable in Olifa he's a dashed sight more formidable today.'

I whistled, for I had Sandy's Olifa doings clear in my head, and I remembered just how big a part D'Ingraville had played there.

'He's a beast of prey,' Sandy went on. 'But in Olifa he was a sick beast, living an unnatural life on drugs which must have weakened his nerve. Now he's the cured beast, stronger and much more dangerous than if he had never been sick. It's exactly what happens with a man who gets over infantile paralysis — the strength of will and mind and body required to recover from the disease give the patient a vitality and self-confidence that lasts him for the rest of his days. I don't know why God allowed it and by what magic he achieved it, but D'Ingraville today is as fit a man as any of us here, and with ten times our dæmonic power. . . . And he isn't alone. You remember, Dick, the collection of toughs that Castor called his Bodyguard. I thought that all of them had been gathered in, but I was mistaken. Two at least survive — the ones called Carreras and Martel, the Spaniard and the Belgian. At this moment they're with D'Ingraville in London, and you may bet they're in with him in this show.'

'But Martel was killed in your last scrap,' I put in. 'What was the name of the place? Veiro? You told me so. I don't remember about Carreras, but I'm positive about Martel.'

'So I thought,' said Sandy; 'but I was wrong. Carreras managed to leak out quite early, but I thought Martel was one of the bag at Veiro. But he's very much alive. I could take you any day into a certain Soho restaurant, and show you Martel in a neat blue suit and yellow boots having his apéritif. The same lithe, hard-trained brute, with the scar over his left eye that he got from Geordie Hamilton. We have the genuine beasts of prey on our trail this time, Dick, my lad. . . . And I'll tell you something more. We could have bought off, or scared off, the others, I think, but there's no scaring D'Ingraville's pack, and there's only one price to buy them with and that's every cent of Haraldsen's fortune and my jade tablet. D'Ingraville, I understand, is particularly keen on the jade tablet — naturally, for he's an imaginative blackguard.'

'But how will the old lot mix with the new?' I asked.

'They won't,' said Sandy grimly. 'But if I'm any judge of men, they'll have to do as they're told. None of them can stand up for a moment against D'Ingraville. Troth, the ordinary, not too scrupulous, sedentary attorney — Barralty, the timid intellectual — what can they do against the real desperado? I could almost be sorry for them, for they're young rabbits in the fox's jaw. D'Ingraville is the leader now, and the rest must follow, whether they like it or not. He won't loosen his grip on either his opponents or his allies. He's the real enemy. My old great-great-great-grandfather at Dettingen led his regiment into action after telling them, "Ye see those lads on yon hill? Well, if ye dinna kill them, they'll kill you." That's what I say about D'Ingraville.'

'So much for the lay-out,' I said. 'What do you propose to do about it?'

'At first I was for peace,' Sandy answered. 'I thought that the gang could be squared or scared. I knew that D'Ingraville couldn't, but I fancied he might be dealt with in another way — he and his Bodyguard. I saw the Olifa Embassy people, but it's no good. There's not enough positive evidence against them to make extradition possible. Besides, even if there were, it wouldn't solve Haraldsen's problem. These hounds will stick to his track, and, unless they could be decently strung up, there's no lasting security for him. So I take it that things have come to a crisis. At any rate they're coming, and we must face it. It's no good our sheltering here any longer. I dare say we could stave them off for a bit, but it would be a rotten life for everybody, and some day they would get under our guard. We must fight them, and choose our own ground for it, and, since they are outside civilization, we must be outside it too.'

'I don't see the sense of that,' I said. 'This is a law-abiding country, and that will cramp D'Ingraville's style. If we go down into the jungle the jungle beasts will have the advantage.'

Sandy shook his head.

'First, you can't bring things to the point in a law-abiding land. Second, a move will cramp the style of Troth and

Barralty worse than ever. Third, D'Ingraville is a product of civilization, and I'd be more afraid of him in a Paris street than on a desert island. So I agree with what I overheard Haraldsen say when I overtook you on the hill. We must fight the last round in the Island of Sheep.'

Then Haraldsen spoke.

'That is my resolution,' he said in his slow, quiet voice. He stood up and stretched his great form to its full height, much as I had seen his father do on that moonlit hill long ago. 'I will do as the old dog did this afternoon, and snap back at my tormentors.'

'Right,' said Sandy. We all felt the tension of the moment, and he wanted to keep the temperature down. 'I think that is common sense. I will arrange that the papers announce that you are going back to the Norlands. We had better divide up. I have a friend, a trawler skipper in Aberdeen, who will take you. By the way, what about your daughter?'

'Anna goes with me. I should be a wretched man if she were out of my sight. Also, it is right that she should share in my destiny.'

'I dare say that's wise. If you left her here, they might make a hostage of her. Dick, you can go by the monthly Iceland boat, which sails next week from Leith, and you'd better take Georgie Hamilton. I will come on later. You may be certain that the pack will be hot after us as soon as they learn our plans. Laverlaw and Fosse and Mary and Peter John and Barbara and the infant will be left in peace.'

There was a small groan from Peter John. He had been listening to our talk with eyes like saucers. 'Mayn't I come too?' he pled.

'No, my lad,' I said, though his piteous face went to my heart. 'You're too young, and there's no duty in it for you. We can't afford camp-followers.'

'But I will not permit it,' Haraldsen cried passionately. 'I go to meet my fate, whatever God may send, I and my daughter. But I will not have you endanger yourself for me. You have been most noble and generous; but your task is over, for you have restored me to myself and made me a man again. I go to my home to fight out the battle there with one or two of my own people. You, my friends, will remain in your homes, and thank God that He has given you peace.'

'Not I,' I said. 'I promised your father to stand by you, and I'm jolly well going to stick to that. Besides, I'm getting fat and slack, and I need fining down. I wouldn't be out of this for all your millions. What about you, Lombard?'

'I'm on,' was the answer. 'I swore the same oath as you, and I want some exercise to stir up my liver. I've tidied up my affairs for a month or two, for I meant, anyhow, to take a long holiday. Beryl won't object. She's as keen on this job as I am.'

I had spoken briskly, but my heart was in my boots. I was certain that Mary would raise no objections, as she had raised none in the 'Three Hostages' business, but I knew that she would be desperately anxious. I had no fears for her and Peter John, for the battle-ground would be moved a thousand miles off, but I saw a miserable time ahead for those that I loved best.

Haraldsen stared at us and his eyes filled with tears. He seized on Lombard, who was nearest him, and hugged him like a bear. I managed to avoid an embrace, but he wrung my hand.

'I did not know there was such honour in the world,' he said with his voice breaking. 'Now indeed I may be bold, for I have on either side of me a friend.'

Then he looked at Sandy, of whom he had hitherto been rather in awe.

'But of you, Lord Clanroyden, I can ask nothing. You have sworn no oath, and you are a great man who is valuable to his country. Also, you have a young wife and a little baby. I insist that you stay at home, for this enterprise of ours, I must tell you, will be very difficult. And I think it may be very dangerous.'

'Oh, I know that,' was the answer. 'Barbara knows it too, and she would be the first to tell me to go. I have a bigger interest in this than any of you. Give me some beer, Dick, and I'll tell you a story.'

I filled up his tankard and very deliberately he lit his pipe. His eyes rested on each of us in turn — Lombard a little flushed and excited, me rather solemnized by the line things were taking, Peter John who had suddenly gone pale, and Haraldsen towering above us like a Norse rover. In the end they caught Haraldsen's eyes, and some compelling force in them made him pull up a chair and sit down stiffly, like a schoolboy in the headmaster's room.

'Three days ago,' said Sandy, 'I had a little trip across the Channel. I flew to Geneva, and there got a car and motored

deep into the Savoy glens. In the evening I came to a small, ancient chateau high up on the knees of the mountains. In the twilight I could see a white wedge poking up in the eastern sky, which I knew to be Mont Blanc. I spent the night there, and my host was D'Ingraville.'

We all exclaimed, for it sounded the maddest risk to take.

'There was no danger,' Sandy went on. 'I was perfectly certain about my man. He belongs to a family that goes back to the Crusades and has come badly down in the world. That little dwelling is all that is left to a man whose forbears once owned half Haute Savoie. There's a sentimental streak in D'Ingraville, and that hill-top of his is for him the dearest thing on earth. I had discovered that, never mind how, and I wasn't afraid of his putting poison in my coffee. He's a scoundrel, but on a big scale, and he has some rags of gentility left.

'Well, we had an interesting evening. I didn't try to bargain with him, but we exchanged salutes, so to speak, before battle. I wanted to find out the mood he was in, now that he was a cured man, and to discover just how far he meant to go. There's no doubt on that point. He is playing up to the limit. He is going to skin Haraldsen, and perhaps Troth and Barralty into the bargain. But there's more in it than greed. Once it might have been possible to buy him off with an immense sum — but not now, since he knows I'm in it. He has come to regard me as his eternal enemy. The main quarrel now is not between Haraldsen and the Pack, but between D'Ingraville and me. He challenged me, and I accepted the challenge.'

He must have seen disapproval in my face, for he went on.

'There was no other way, Dick. It wasn't vanity. He might go about the world boasting that he had beaten me, and I would never give it a thought. I'm quite content that he should find his own way to Hell. But there's more to it than that. He's what is left over from my Olifa job, and till those remains are swept up, that job isn't finished. I can't leave the thing half done. I can't let that incarnate devil go loose in the world. If I shirked his challenge I should never sleep in my bed again.'

There had come into Sandy's face that look that I had seen once or twice before — on the little hill outside Erzerum, in Medina's library in Hill Street — and I knew that I might just as well argue with a whirlwind. He was smiling, but his eyes were solemn.

'He saw me off next morning in a wonderful mountain dawn. "It's good to be alive in such a world," he said. "Au revoir. It will not be long, I hope, till we meet again." Well, I'm going to hurry on that meeting. I'm going to join him on your island, and I think that one or the other of us won't leave it.'



PART III

THE ISLAND OF SHEEP

CHAPTER 12

HULDA'S FOLK

I had never before sailed in northern waters, and I had pictured them as eternally queasy and yeasty and wind-scourged. Very different was the reality in that blue August weather. When Lombard, Geordie Hamilton, and I embarked in the Iceland boat at Leith, there was a low mist over the Forth, but we ran into clear air after the May, and next morning, as we skirted the Orkneys, the sea was a level plain, with just enough of a breeze to crisp it delicately, and in the strong sunlight the distant islets stood out sharp and clear like the kopjes in a veld morning.

But the fine weather did nothing to raise my spirits. I had never started out on a job with less keenness or with drearier forebodings. Lombard put me to shame. This man, whom I thought to have grown soft and elderly, was now facing the unknown, not only composedly but cheerfully. He had a holiday air about him, and would have been glad to be in the business, I'm positive, even though he had never sworn that ancient oath. I began to think that the profession of high finance was a better training than the kind of life I had led myself. Part of his cheerfulness was due to the admiration he had acquired for Sandy, which made him follow as docilely as a small boy in the wake of a big brother. I yielded to no one in my belief in Sandy, but we had been through too many things together for me to think him infallible. That rotten Greek sentence that Macgillivray had quoted stuck in my mind. Both Sandy and I had had amazing luck in life, but luck always turned in the end.

My trouble was that I could not see how the affair could finish. We were to get to grips, in some remote island which was clean outside any law, with a gang that knew no law. That could only mean a stand-up fight in the old style. No doubt Haraldsen would have his own people, but the Norlanders were not a warlike folk, and, though we would have numbers on our side, I wasn't prepared to be cocksure about the result. If we beat them off, it might put the wind up Troth and Barralty for good and all, but it would have no effect on D'Ingraville. Not unless we killed him. If, on the other hand, we were beaten, God knows what would happen to Haraldsen and his daughter — and to the rest of us, and especially to Sandy. There could be no end to the business unless either D'Ingraville or Sandy perished. It looked like one of those crazy duels that the old Northmen used to fight, and I remembered that they always chose an island for the purpose. The more I considered the business, the more crazy and melodramatic I thought it. Two sober citizens, Lombard and myself, were being dragged at the chariot wheels of two imaginative desperadoes, for Sandy had always a kind of high-strung daftness about him — that was where his genius lay. And it looked as if Haraldsen had reverted to some wild ancestral type.

But most of all I was worried about those we had left behind. Mary I hoped did not realize the full danger, for I had always put the affair to her as a piece of common blackmail. We had gone to settle Haraldsen in his home, and see that he was comfortable, and the worst that could happen would be that we might have to read the Riot Act to some vulgar blackmailers. Sandy must have put it in the same way to Barbara — at least, I fervently hoped so. Neither knew anything about D'Ingraville. But Mary was an acute person who missed very little, and was extraordinarily sensitive to an atmosphere. She was greatly attached to the Haraldsens, and would never have hinted that I should back out of my duty towards them. But I was pretty certain that she understood that that duty was a more solemn thing than the light holiday task I had pretended. She had said nothing, and had bidden me good-bye as if we were off to Norway to catch salmon. Yet I had a notion that her calm was an enforced thing, for no woman had ever more self-control, and that her anxiety would never sleep till she saw me again. She would remember that August morning at Machray when I had gone out for an ordinary day's stalking, and had been found by her twenty hours later senseless on the top of a crag with Medina dead at the bottom.

With these thoughts in my head I got no good of the bright afternoon, as we skirted the northern butt of the Orkneys and approached the Roost through which our course lay. Suddenly I noticed that the ship was slowing down. The captain, a placid old Dane with whom I had made friends, joined me.

‘We take another passenger, General,’ he said. ‘One who was too late for us at Leith. We were advised of him by wireless. He will have to pay the whole fare between Leith and Reykjavik, or there will be trouble with your British port authorities.’

I followed his eyes and saw approaching us from the land a small motor-boat, with a single figure in the stern.

‘It is a man,’ he said, handing me the glasses. ‘Some Icelfander who has tarried too long in Scotland, or some Scot who would come in for the last of the Iceland salmon.’

There seemed something familiar about the shape of the passenger, but I went below to fetch my tobacco pouch, and I did not see the motor-boat arrive. What was my amazement, when I came on deck again, to find Peter John! He was wearing one of my ulsters, and had his kit in a hold-all. Also, he had Morag the falcon on his wrist. There he stood, looking timid and sheepish like a very little boy. He said nothing, but held out a letter.

It was from Mary. She said simply that she couldn’t bear the sight of her son’s tragic face. ‘He has been wandering about like a lost dog,’ she wrote. ‘I think some sea air would be good for him, for he has been rather limp in the heat lately. And if there is any trouble he might be useful, for he is pretty sensible. He has promised me to keep an eye on you, and I shall be happier in my mind if I know he is with you. Cable from Hjalmarshavn, please, to say he has arrived.’

That was all. Peter John stood very stiff, as if he expected a scolding, but I wasn’t inclined to scold. It was a joy to have him with me, and that Mary should send him after me convinced me that she was not really anxious — though I doubt if that conclusion did justice to her stoicism. Then a thought struck me. The boy knew how dangerous our mission was, for he had heard Sandy expound it.

‘Did you tell your mother that there was some risk in this business?’ I asked.

‘Yes. I thought that was only fair.’

‘What did she say?’

‘She said that she knew it already, and that she would feel easier if I were with you to take care of you.’

That was Mary all over. Another woman would have clutched at her boy to keep at least one of her belongings out of danger. Mary, knowing that a job had to be done, was ready to stake everything to have it well done.

Peter John’s solemn face relaxed into a smile when he saw the change in mine.

‘How did you get here?’ I asked.

‘I flew,’ was the reply. ‘I flew to Inverness and then to Kirkwall. The only difficult things were the motor-boat and the wireless message.’

At that I laughed.

‘I don’t know that you can take care of me. But there’s no doubt you can take care of yourself.’

We came to the little port of Hjalmarshavn, the capital of the Norlands, in the same bright, west-wind weather. The green hills behind the black sea-cliffs, the blue tides creaming white on the little skerries, the wall of dimmer peaks to the north, all seemed to sleep in a peace like that of the Blessed Isles in the story. In Hjalmarshavn there was a gentle bustle, and about a thousand varieties of stinks, from rotting seaweed to decaying whale. The houses were painted in a dozen colours, and the little bay was full of many kinds of small craft — fishing smacks, whale boats, kayaks, and primitive motor-launches. The only big craft were the Grimsby trawlers, and a steamer flying the red and white Danish flag which had just come in from Iceland. Ours was the first passenger ship for a fortnight that had arrived from the south, so the other lot had not preceded us. I made inquiries and heard that the Aberdeen trawler had arrived three days before, and that Haraldsen had at once gone on to his island.

We hired a motor-boat, and that afternoon rounded the south end of the main island, skirted its west side, and threaded our way through an archipelago of skerries till we were abreast of Halder, the second biggest of the group. Its shore was marvellously corrugated, deep-cut glens running down from peaks about 3,000 feet in height and the said peaks sometimes ending in mighty precipices and sometimes falling away into moorish levels and broad shingly beaches. Presently on our port appeared a low coast-line, which from the map I saw was the Island of Sheep. It was separated from Halder by a channel perhaps two miles wide, but its character was wholly different from its neighbour. It reminded me of Colonsay, a low, green place cradled deep in the sea, where one would live as in a ship with the sound of waves always in one’s ear.

Then I saw the House, built on high land above a little voe, half castle, half lighthouse it seemed, belonging both to land and water. There are no trees in the Norlands, but even from a distance I could see that some kind of demesne had been laid out, with stone terraces ending in little thatched pavilions. Below it, close to the shore, nestled a colony of small dwellings. What caught the eye was the amazing greenness. After the greys and browns of the Shetlands the place seemed to be as vividly green as an English meadow in May. The lower part of the House was rough stone, the upper part of a dark timber, but the roof was bright green turf, growing as lustily as in a field. When in the early twilight we put in to the little jetty, I seemed to be looking at a port outside the habitable world in some forgotten domain of peace.

As long as I live I shall remember my first step on land — the whiff of drying stockfish from the shore, the black basalt rocks, the clumps of broad-leaved arch-angelica, and the oyster-catchers piping along the shingle.

Haraldsen and Anna were awaiting us. Haraldsen was wearing the native Norland dress, coat and breeches of russet home-spun, with silver buttons at collar and knees, homespun stockings and silver-buckled shoes, and a queer conical cap of dark blue and red. He looked half squire and half pirate, but wholly in keeping with his surroundings. Anna had a navy-blue skirt and a red jumper, bare legs, and buckled raw-hide mocassins.

'You have brought the boy,' Haraldsen said after his first words of greeting. His eyes looked troubled.

'His mother sent him after us,' I said. 'He is supposed to take care of me.'

'He is very welcome,' was the answer, but his brow was furrowed. I could see that a second child in the party seemed to him to add heavily to his responsibilities. . . . Little did either of us guess that these two children were to be our salvation.

Very different was Anna's greeting. She seemed to have shed the English schoolgirl, and with that all her tricks of speech and manner which had annoyed my son. Hitherto, as I have said, she had treated him cavalierly, and driven him to a moody silence. Now she was a hostess in her own house, and she had the manner of a princess welcoming a friend to her kingdom. Amazingly handsome she looked, with her brilliant hair and eyes, and her ivory skin coloured by the sea-winds and lit by the sun. She took the boy's hand in both of hers.

'I am very glad to see you, Mr. Peter John,' she said. 'We shall have great fun together.'

I was not prepared for such a palace as the old Haraldsen had built. I had accepted the family fortune as a fact, but had seen no evidence in a hunted man and a rather shabby schoolgirl. Now I realized that there must be great wealth in the background. Above the low cliffs the land had been levelled, and there were wide lawns as fine as England could show, for in that moist climate the turf was perfect. There was some attempt at flowers too, roses and larkspur and simple annuals, but only in sunken hollows to avoid the winds, which in the Norlands can blow like the wrath of God. The House itself was of three storeys, sheltered on three sides by a half moon of hills, while the bulk of Halder across the channel was there to break the force of the eastern blasts. Following the old Norland fashion, the ground floor was mainly storerooms, as in a Border keep, with the living-rooms above them, and the bedrooms in the top storey. It was all new except at one end, where stood a queer little stone cell or chapel, with walls about five feet thick. This, according to the tale, had been the home of an Irish hermit, who in the dark ages had found a refuge here till the heathen Northmen were the death of him.

The entrance was by a flight of steps which seemed to be hewn out of the living rock. First came a vast hall, at least a hundred feet long and the full height of the house. This had been constructed, I suppose, on the model of a Viking hall, and in it one seemed to cheat the ages. Where the old Haraldsen had got the timbers I do not know, but they were hoar-ancient, and the black-oak panelling was carved in wild grotesques. The furniture was ancient and immense; there was a long dining-table which would have accommodated fifty Vikings, and gigantic chairs which only Falstaff could have decently filled. For decorations there were some wonderful old pieces of tapestry, and a multitude of ship models of every age in silver and ivory and horn and teak, which must have been worth a ransom.

That was the state apartment, and a pretty comfortless one. But on either side of it were other rooms — a big drawing-room, expensively furnished, but as barren of human interest as a museum, and like a museum full of collector's pieces; a smoking-room, on the walls of which hung every kind of Norland implement from the Stone Age downward; a billiard room, with a collection of sporting trophies, including many of the old man's African heads; and above all a library. That library was the pleasantest room in the house, and it was clearly Haraldsen's favourite, for it had the air of a place cherished and lived in. Its builder had chosen to give it a fine plaster ceiling, with heraldic panels between mouldings of Norland symbols. It was lined everywhere with books, books which had the look of being used, and which consequently made that soft tapestry which no collection of august bindings can ever provide. Upstairs the bedrooms were large and

airy, with bare oak floors, and not too much furniture, but with all modern comforts.

What struck me especially was that everything was of the best and probably of high value. It seemed queer to be contemplating a siege in a treasure house.

'The treasures were my father's,' said Haraldsen. 'Myself I do not want possessions. Only my books.'

The entertainment was as good as the lodging. There was an old steward called Arn Arnason, who wore the same clothes as his master and looked like Rumpelstiltskin in the fairy-tale, and he had under him four elderly serving maids. I gathered from Haraldsen that it was his habit to send his motor-boat once a week to Hjalmarshavn for letters and such things as he imported. But the island itself produced most of his supplies. He had his own cows for milk, the mutton was about the best in the world, and he cured his own hams and bacon; he grew all the simpler vegetables, including superb potatoes: the sea yielded the fish he wanted, not to speak of lobsters, and there were sea-trout and brown trout to be had from the lochs. Indeed, I never ate better food in my life — simple food, but perfect basic material perfectly cooked. In two things only it deviated into luxury. There was a wonderful cellar in which the sherry and the madeira in particular were things to dream of, and following the Northern fashion, our meals began with a preposterous variety of hors d'oeuvre. Peter John, till he learned better, used to eat of so many small outlandish dishes that he had no room for solid food.

We went early to bed, but before turning in I had one word with Haraldsen about serious business.

'We are well in front,' I said. 'Any news of our friends?'

'None. We have a telephone to Hjalmarshavn, and I have arranged to get word of all strangers who arrive there. But I do not think they will come by Hjalmarshavn.'

'Any news of Lord Clanroyden?'

He shook his head. 'No doubt he will soon telegraph, and we will get the message by telephone. He said he would follow at once.'

I asked one other question, and got an answer which sent me to bed with an uneasy mind. 'What men have you on the island?'

He looked perturbed.

'There is Arn Arnason in the house,' he said. 'There are the three gardeners, Dahl and Holm and Evansen. Down at the harbour there is Jacob Gregarsen, who is in charge of the motor-boat. And there is also Absalon the fowler, who is bed-ridden. All these are old men, I fear.'

'Good God!' I cried. 'I thought you had a lot of hefty youths.'

'It is my blunder,' he said penitently. 'I had forgotten. There were a score of young men on the Island of Sheep, but now they are all abroad. Some have gone to Greenland and Iceland after cod, and some are at the halibut fishing. One, on whom I counted most, sailed last month for America.'

The clear blue weather ended that night. Next morning we were back in the typical Norlands, a south-west wind which brought scuds of rain, and mist over all the hills. Halder, as seen across the Channel, was only a grey wraith. The fashion of the household was for a skimpy petit déjeuner and then an elaborate midday meal. Haraldsen had some business of his own, so Lombard, Peter John, and I got into oilskins, and, escorted by Anna, started out to prospect the island.

Its main features were simple, and, since they are important to my story, I must make them clear. The place was about six miles long, and at the greatest two miles wide, and it lay roughly north and south. The House stood about two-thirds of the way up, and the highest ground, only five or six hundred feet in altitude, was just behind it. Towards the north end the land was broken moorland, with two or three small lochs full of trout, and the butt itself was a sheer cliff of at least four hundred feet, over which one of the lochs emptied in a fine waterfall. All that part of the coast was rugged and broken, little gullies descending from the uplands to a boulder-strewn shore.

Below the House, as I have said, was a small voe, with to the south a village close to the water. South of this again were stretches of sand, and, since the coast there ran out to a point, there was good shelter for boats in almost any wind. The southern part of the island was quite different in character. The ground fell to only a few feet above sea-level, and the shore was either sand or sprawling reefs. Inland there was a waste of bent and marsh, with several swampy lochs which looked as if they might furnish difficult fishing. Peter John's eyes brightened as we circumnavigated the place, for it was plainly a paradise for birds. A shout from him called my attention to a pair of purple sandpipers. In the Norlands no shooting is

permitted on land, and only for a short season on the sea, so the islands are pretty well a sanctuary. It was absurd to see curlews almost running between our legs like tame pheasants, and so shy a bird as the golden plover coolly regarding us from a rock two yards off. That great bog must have been at least four square miles in extent, and it was alive with every kind of bird. It wasn't easy to get my son away from it.

Towards the south end the land rose slightly to hummocky downs, and the sea began to poke its fingers into it. There must have been a dozen little inlets, and a big voe a quarter of a mile wide into which one of the lochs discharged a stream. Seatrout were jumping merrily at the stream mouth. I wished to Heaven that I had come here for a holiday and not on a grim job, for I never saw a more promising fishing-ground. We walked to the mouth of the voe, where a swell was breaking under the wind, and looked out on low mists and a restless sea.

We had two days of dripping weather, and, since there was nothing I could do, I put in some hard thinking. Our total strength when Sandy arrived would be four reasonably active men, two children, three or four ancient servitors, and a batch of women. My picture had vanished of a lot of stalwart young Norlanders prepared to fight for their master. That was bad enough, but my real perplexity was what we should be called on to fight about. Sandy had been clear that we must come here to bring things to a head, but I hadn't a notion what that head would be.

I could see perfectly well the old game of Troth and Barralty. It would be easy enough to descend on a lonely island and terrify a nervous recluse into doing their will. It might not have been so difficult to lay their hands on him in England, a stranger in a strange land, and frighten him into compliance. But now he had formidable friends about him, and they knew it. Lombard was a figure in the City, Sandy was a famous man, and I had a reputation of sorts. Haraldsen's enemies were men of a certain position, and one at least was a man of devouring ambition; they couldn't afford to go brazenly outside the law when there were people like Sandy to advertise their trespasses. A raid even on the Island of Sheep would be too clumsy a piece of folly. Besides, it would be futile. Even if they had the bigger man-power, we could summon help. I understood that there were only half a dozen policemen in the Norlands and these not of much account, but a telephone message to Hjalmarshavn would certainly fetch volunteer support, and there was a Danish Government boat cruising somewhere about the fishing-grounds. A wireless message from Hjalmarshavn would bring it to the succour of law and order.

Gradually I argued myself into the conviction that the enemy would not come at all, that, like the wicked, we had fled with no man pursuing, and that the best thing Lombard and I could do was to make a fishing holiday of it. That of course couldn't last for ever. We couldn't roost indefinitely in these outlandish parts, for we had all a good deal to do at home. I decided that I would give the place a fortnight's trial, and then, if nothing happened, we would consider Haraldsen safe and go back to England.

But my decision did not greatly comfort me, for I could not get Sandy's words out of my head. He had been positive that a big climax was impending; and, besides knowing more of our enemies than the rest of us, his instinct wasn't often at fault. And then I remembered the words Macgillivray had spoken in the spring. I remembered the mysterious D'Ingraville, whom I had never seen. He was a different proposition from the others; he had no reputation to lose, no prestige to endanger; he was the outlaw at war with society who would stick at nothing to get his desire. Troth and Barralty were only the jackals that the lion forced to go hunting with him to find him game. Also he had a definite rendezvous with Sandy, and would not fail to keep it. With D'Ingraville in the affair there were no limits. He would bring things to a brute struggle, with death and treasure as the stakes. And we were not only feeble; with two children on our hands we were hopelessly vulnerable. By cunning or by force he would find out our weak points and play ruthlessly to win.

The upshot was that by the second afternoon I was as nervous as a hen; I longed for Sandy to cheer me, but there was no sign or word of him. The thick weather and the leaden prospect, only a rain-drummed sea and the ghost of Halder, and wet bogs and sweating black crags, did not raise my spirits. We could see the Channel fairly plain, and in those two days nothing passed up it except a drifter out of its course, and a little steamer flying the Danish flag which Arnason said was a Government ship sent out for the purpose of marine biology. It hustled north at a great pace, with a bone in its teeth, as seamen say. The fishing fleets were miles to the west, and the Iceland boats took the other side of Halder. I felt that the mist shut us into a dark world far away from the kindly race of men, a world into which at any moment terrible things might irrupt. Though I had Peter John at my side, an impression of deep loneliness settled on me. Also a horrid premonition of coming disaster, which I could not get rid of. A ridiculous sailor's rhyme haunted my memory:

"Take care, beware

The Bight of Benin —
One comes out
Though forty go in.'

But the third morning the wind shifted to the east, and we woke to steel-blue skies, Halder clear in every cranny, and calm sunlit seas. The tonic weather reminded me of South Africa, where in the Boer War I used often to go to bed supperless on the wet ground and wake whistling from pure light-heartedness. I simply could not keep up my reasoned gloom, and all the rest of us fell into the same cheerful mood. It was difficult to believe that this fresh shining place could ever harbour evil folk and dark deeds. Also there came a message from Sandy, telephoned on from Hjalmarshavn. It didn't say much — only, 'Delayed, but coming on. Expect me when you see me,' but it seemed to lighten my responsibility. The Hjalmarshavn office didn't give the date and the place from which it was sent, and it was too much to expect from it a written confirmation.

That day, and for the next day, we put care behind us. Haraldsen came out of his silent spell, and played the host manfully. He took us down to the village and showed us the life of the place — the dry-houses for the fish, the queer old women spinning and weaving and making their native dyes of lichen and seaweed, wild geranium and clover. After the whale and the codfish the important animal was the sheep, which gave the island its name, funny little shaggy fellows with wonderful fleeces. 'Sheep's wool is Norland gold,' was a local proverb. It was a strange clachan, full of uncanny stinks, for the winter fodder for the cows was dried whale's flesh, and you could smell it a mile away. I had a great talk with old bed-ridden Absalon, the fowler, who was a 'king's bonder,' a yeoman whose family for generations had had a croft direct from the king. Haraldsen farmed his land for him, since his two sons had both perished at sea. He sat up in a bed made of ship's timbers, and told yarns, which Haraldsen translated, of seal hunts when there were still seals in the Norlands, and great walruses that had drifted down from the Arctic, and whale hunts when the waters of the voes were red with blood. His crooked old hands clawed at the blankets, and his voice was as wild as a solan's, but he had the benign face of an apostle.

I came out of his house a happier man, and my cheerfulness was increased by the sight of the Danish marine biology boat putting into the bay in Halder across the Channel. Gregarsen, the man in charge of our motor-boat, told me that her name was the Tjaldar, and that she had been trawling off the northern capes. 'This wind will last,' he said, 'for her men are cunning, and only choose that anchorage when it blows steady from the east.' Somehow I felt that the trim little ship kept us in touch with civilized things.

Haraldsen, as I have said, was a good host these days, but he was a queer one. At Laverlaw, when he had got over his nervous trouble, he was very like an ordinary Englishman, apart from a slight foreign trace in his speech. But on his native heath he was a Norlander, steeped in island lore, rejoicing in his home with the passion of a returned exile. He, who had been sparing of words, was now almost garrulous, as if he wanted to explain himself to us and let us into the secrets of his life. He used to recount the folk-tales as if he believed in them — how the seals were the souls of Pharaoh's soldiers who had been drowned in the Red Sea, and the wren who picked at the seams of the houses was the mouse's brother changed into a bird by the Trolls' enchantment. The Trolls by his way of it were the chief plague of the Norlands — with pixies and mermaids as runners-up. They were Hulda's Folk — Hulda being a sort of she-devil — and they were always on the watch to do mankind a mischief. They shipwrecked boats, and hag-rode the cattle, and sucked the blood of young lambs, and even kidnapped little girls — and here his eye would turn anxiously to Anna.

Then he was full of the islands' history, from the famous old saga of Trond of Gate, which is the Norland epic, to the later days when Algerian pirates raided the coast and sent the people into the hills and the sea-caves. By and by I saw the meaning of his talk. He was reminding himself — and us — that in the Norlands life had always been on a razor's edge, and that what he had to expect in the near future was what all his kin had had to face in the past. Clearly it was a comfort to him that he was following a long tradition. He had none of my scepticism; he believed that Fate was waiting for us as certainly as that the sun would rise tomorrow.

He was unlike what he had been at Laverlaw in another sense, for his nerves were all tuned up again, but in a different way. He had become high-coloured in his talk, exalted, rhetorical, speaking often like somebody in a book, as if the words were not his own. There were times when he seemed almost 'fey,' his eye wild, his voice harsh and shrill, and his language like an Israelitish prophet. That was generally when he was telling us some legend, into which he flung himself as if it had been his own experience. One strange thing I noticed — he was always talking about fire, as if fire were the Norland weird. In that damp, salty place fire scarcely seemed the perilous element; one would have thought wind and wave the real enemies. But it was always through fire that his house marched to triumph, and by fire that the luckless ones perished. It

was fire that Hulda's Folk employed to work their most evil deeds. It was fire that somehow at the back of his head he dreaded for himself and his belongings. 'Then fire came,' he would say, as if it was the natural conclusion to all things.

The happy people were Anna and Peter John. The old stiffness between the two had gone, and they had become like brother and sister. She was the mistress of the island, and she had a guest who was worthy of its treasures, for the boy had a whole new world to explore and was wildly excited. A good deal of the place was like Scotland, except that the heather was poor. There were pastures beside the burns, as bright with flowers as any English meadow. I never saw a better bloom of mint and meadow-sweet, ragged robin and cranesbill; flag-irises and a kind of marsh-marigold were everywhere, and the drier slopes were gay with ragwort. The hay was mostly tall clover. On the hills the tormentil grew as I have never seen it grow elsewhere, and the old women used to pound its roots in querns as a substitute for hops. The birds were mostly familiar, but the quantity of them was unbelievable — guillemots and razorbills, puffins as tame as sparrows, and gannets from a colony on the western cliffs. That was on the water, and on the land there was every moor bird known to Peter John except the grouse. There were no hawks, except one Iceland falcon which we got a fleeting glimpse of in the Channel. Peter flew Morag a good deal, and she brought in snipe and curlews for the pot; and she was nearly the end of one of the funny little blue Iceland cats at a cottage door.

I think that I have mentioned that my son was no horseman, but under Anna's coercion he got himself on one of the Norland ponies, and they quartered the island together. But the real passion of both was the sea, a novelty to Peter, who was inland bred. In the soft, bright weather they were hours in or on the water. Peter was a fair swimmer, but Anna was magnificent — old Arnason had a joke that she was web-footed, being descended from seals, which she refuted by displaying her shapely feet.

There was no great variety of craft to play about in-only the motor-boat which Jacob Gregarsen looked after, and which was never used except for an emergency trip to Hjalmarshavn for supplies and once a week to fetch the mail; and one or two ancient Norland boats, double-ended things with high sterns and stern posts, about twenty feet long and very broad in the beam. But there were a couple of kayaks in the houses, the Eskimo kind like a Rob Roy canoe, and these were taken down to the water and launched, and provided the children with their chief amusement. Anna could handle hers brilliantly, and make it turn over like a turtle and right itself, and Peter John was an apt pupil. The two of them racing about in the voe and adventuring out into the Channel were like nothing so much as a pair of diving ducks. The trouble was to get them home for meals, for those long-lighted days were deceptive, and, since neither had a watch, they would wander in about midnight, thinking they were in time for dinner. Anna's great hope was for a shoal of whales to come in and the whole Norlands to assemble for a whale hunt. She had only seen one in her life, but the memory of it was vivid. The whale was the small pilot-whale — what they call the 'ca'in whale' in Scotland — and I heard her discoursing to Peter John of the wild excitement of the chase, and its manifold perils. She spoke like a bloodthirsty young Viking, and was determined that they should join the hunt in their kayaks and be in at the death. I was determined in my own mind that there should be no such escapade.

Anna was wholly care-free, for Haraldsen had not told her the reason of his return to his island, and Peter John was under bond not to enlighten her. He, of course, knew the whole story, and since he was always on the move, I warned him to keep his eyes open for anything that seemed suspicious. He always carried his field glasses, and I was confident that nothing was likely to come to the island without his spotting it. It was well to have such a scout, for the place, except for the House and the village, was at the moment wholly unpeopled. He saw that I was anxious, and he did his best to live up to my instructions. The first day of the fine weather he had nothing to report. The second day he announced that in a voe on the other side of the island he had discovered signs of a visit from some petrol-driven craft. When I told Haraldsen this he paid no attention. 'Some trawler put in for water,' he said; 'many of them carry boats with out-board motors.'

But on the third day the boy came to me with a grave face.

'Gregarsen says that the motor-boat is out of order. Something has gone wrong with the engine — something bad — and he'll have to get a man from Hjalmarshavn to repair it.'

'How on earth did that happen?' I asked crossly, for the motor-boat was our only transport to the outer world. 'He has not had it out.'

'It happened in the night, he thinks. He says some fools have been monkeying with it.'

I went down to the harbour and had a look at it. Sure enough there was bad mischief. The sparking-plug had gone, and

the main feed pipe had been cut through. Gregarsen was a stupid elderly fellow, with a game leg which he had got at the Greenland fishing, and he had only an elementary knowledge of mechanics.

‘How did this happen?’ I demanded, for he could speak a kind of American-English, having once been a hand on a Boston tramp. ‘Have you been walking in your sleep?’

He shook his head. ‘Hulda’s Folk,’ he said darkly.

The thing made me very uneasy, for the damage had been done by some one who had had tools for the purpose. There was nothing for it but to telephone to the little shipyard at Hjalmarshavn and get them to send up a man. I did not do this at once, for I was trysted with Haraldsen to walk to the north end of the island, and put it off till we returned to luncheon.

I did not enjoy that walk, for I kept puzzling over the motor-boat, and I could not shake off the feeling that something was beginning to flaw the peace of the island. The accident was utterly incomprehensible to me, except on the supposition that Gregarsen had been drunk, or had gone temporarily insane and had forgotten what he had done. It was a nuisance, for next day we should have been sending to Hjalmarshavn for letters, and I longed for some word from Sandy. I felt myself set down on a possible battlefield with no sign of the commander-in-chief. Haraldsen’s conversation did not cheer me. He was as mysterious as a spae-wife, and his only answer to my complaint was, ‘What must be, will be.’ Also the weather suddenly began to change. By midday the blue of the sky had dulled, and the heavens seemed suddenly to drop lower. The clear outlines of the Halder hills had gone, and the Channel, instead of a shining crystal, became an opaque pebble. ‘Ran is stoking his ovens,’ was all Haraldsen said on the subject, and it did not comfort me to know that Ran was a sea-god.

Immediately after luncheon I rang up Hjalmarshavn, but could not get through. There was nothing wrong with the apparatus in the House, and the trouble was probably at the other end, but the motor-boat business had filled me with suspicions, and I set out alone in the afternoon to trace the telephone line. It ran on low posts by the back of the garden and then down a shallow cleft to the beach not a quarter of a mile south of the village. It was clearly all right as far as the water’s edge. But then I had a shock. It entered the sea in a copper casing from a little concrete platform. There seemed something odd about the look of that take-off, and I ran my hand down the cable. I lifted up an end which had been neatly cut through.

That put the lid on my discomfort. The fog was thickening. While walking with Haraldsen I had been able to see the other side of the Channel and witness the Tjaldar, returning from one of her dredging expeditions, settling snugly into her little harbour. But now Halder was blotted out, and I could only see a few hundred yards of sea. I felt as if we were being shut into a macabre world where anything might happen. We and our enemies, for that our enemies were near I had no manner of doubt. They had cut our communications and had us at their mercy — three men, two children, and a batch of ancients. Where they were, how they had got here, I never troubled to think. I felt them in the fog around me — Hulda’s Folk, who had their own ways of moving by land and sea.

I ran back to the House in what was pretty near a panic. Lombard and Haraldsen had gone for a walk, and to give myself something to do I overhauled our armoury. We had half a dozen rifles, four shotguns, and plenty of ammunition. There was a revolver for each of us, and a spare one which I had destined for Peter John.

At the thought of him all my anxiety was switched on to the children. If there were evil things afoot in the island they might be at their mercy. Haraldsen and Lombard returned for tea, but not Anna and Peter John. When he heard my story Haraldsen came out of his Nordic dreams and became the distracted parent. The fog had drawn closer, and our search could only be blind, but we got together the garden staff and Gregarsen, and set out in different directions.

The dinner-hour came and there was no sign of them. In the dim, misty brume which was all the northern night, we stumbled about the island. Midnight came and we were still searching. In the small hours of the morning they had not returned.



CHAPTER 13

MARINE BIOLOGY

That morning Anna and Peter John had gone off for the day, with sandwiches in their pockets, to explore in kayaks the voes at the south end of the island. They ate their luncheon on a skerry which the tide had just uncovered, and which was their idiotic notion of comfort. The sea was like a pond, and the mist was slowly coming down, but Anna, after sniffing the air, said that it was only a summer darkening and would clear before evening. Then she proposed an adventure. The Tjaldar had returned to its home at Halder, and over the Channel came the sound of its dropping anchor.

‘Let’s pay a call on it,’ said Anna. ‘Perhaps they’ll ask us to tea. Marine biologists are nice people. I’ve been to tea with them before, when the old Moe was here.’

Peter John demurred. No embargo had been laid on their crossing the Channel, but he dimly felt that the trip would be considered out of bounds.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ Anna retorted. ‘We haven’t been forbidden to go. Besides, in this weather they won’t see us from the shore. We’ll be back long before dinner. There’s not a capful of wind, and it’s as safe as crossing a voe. We’re not likely to get such a chance again.’

Peter John said something about currents, but Anna laughed him to scorn. ‘There’s a rip two miles north, but here there’s nothing to trouble about. I’ve been across in the kayak often. You’re a landlubber, you know, and I’m a seadog, and you ought to believe me. I believe you when it’s about birds.’

Peter John felt this to be true. Children have a great respect for each other’s expertise, and Anna had shown an uncanny knowledge of the ways of boats and tides and the whole salt-water world. She bore down his scruples with another argument. ‘My father would send us across any time we wanted, but it would be with Gregarsen and the motor-boat, which wouldn’t be any fun, or in the long-boat, which is as slow as a cow. In these wieldy little kayaks we’ll slip over in no time. If you like, I’ll give you five minutes’ start and race you.’

No boy can resist a ‘dare,’ so Peter John acquiesced, and they got into their kayaks and headed for Halder, Morag the falcon sitting dejectedly on her master’s knee.

The mist came down closer, but it was only a curtain of silk, through which Halder rose like a wraith. They did not race, but presently fell into an exciting conversation, so that the kayaks often rubbed shoulders. For Anna was telling of the whale-hunts, which she had held forth to Peter John as the chief glory of the Norlands. Only once in her memory had the Grind come to the Island of Sheep, for generally they took the wider channels beyond Halder. But that once was stamped for ever on her mind, though she had only been a little girl at the time. She told how the fiery cross was sent through the islands, by means of beacons on every headland; how every man at the signal tumbled into his boat and steered for the rendezvous; how the rendezvous could not be missed, for all the sea-ways were full of people, and the Grind only came in clear weather. She described how the boats guided the school of whales, as dogs headed sheep, trimming their edges and slowly forcing the leader into one of the voes. Once the leader entered the rest followed, and the voe would be churned white with blind and maddened monsters. Then came the killing, which Anna could only imagine, for her nurse had hurried her away from the scene; but all the same she described it as she had heard of it from others, and she made a barbaric tale of it. Peter John listened with interest, and at the end with disapproval.

‘It sounds pretty beastly,’ he said.

‘Perhaps it is,’ said the girl; ‘but a lot of good things are beastly, like killing pigs and using live bait. Anyhow, it puts money in the pockets of our poor people, and gives them food and lighting for the long winter.’

‘All the same, I’m sorry for the whales.’

‘That’s silly,’ she replied. ‘You’re not sorry for haddocks and halibut and sea-trout. Fish are cold-blooded things and don’t feel.’

‘Whales aren’t fish,’ said the student of natural history, but he was overborne.

Their discussion had brought them across the still water into the shadow of Halder, and they looked up to see the Tjaldar above them. The kayak is a noiseless thing, and the fog had helped them to approach it unperceived. It sat at

anchor very trim and comfortable, with a thin spire of smoke rising from the galley funnel, and a pleasant odour of food drifting from it. Some one was emptying ashes from the stokehold.

‘Couth little craft,’ said Anna appreciatively. ‘I smell tea. Let’s hail her. Tjaldar ahoy!’

The voice brought a face to the bulwark. It was the face of an elderly man, dark and aquiline and rather puffy. He wore a yachting-cap and a flannel suit, but he did not look any kind of sailor. He seemed puzzled and a little startled.

‘That will be one of the Danish scientists,’ Anna whispered. Then she raised her voice.

‘You’re the marine biologists, aren’t you? We’ve come to call on you from the Island of Sheep across the Channel.’

She spoke in Danish, but the face showed no intelligence. Then she repeated her words in English, and the man seemed to understand.

‘Wait. I will ask,’ he said, and disappeared.

He was back in a minute accompanied by another man, a tall fellow with a sunburnt face, wearing an old Harris tweed jacket, and with a pipe in his teeth.

‘Where did you youngsters spring from?’ the second man asked.

‘I’m Miss Haraldsen from the Island of Sheep — and this is my friend, Peter John. We’re visitors. May we come aboard?’

‘You certainly may,’ said the man with the pipe, and he seemed to wink at his companion. The port ladder was lowered and the children tied up the kayaks to its bottom rung, and carefully transhipped themselves. It takes some skill to get out of a kayak.

When they reached the much-encumbered deck they found that three sailors had joined the party.

‘Just wait here a second, my dears,’ said the man with the pipe, and he and the others went forward, leaving Anna and Peter John with the three sailors. The boy saw nothing but a rather untidy deck, very different from the shipshape vessels of his fancy. There seemed to be uncommonly little free space, and what looked like a gigantic net was clumsily heaped abaft of a stumpy mast. The deck-hands were busy at the vessel’s side. But the girl’s experienced eyes darted about, and saw more.

‘This is a funny place,’ she whispered. ‘I don’t much like it, Peter John. These men aren’t a trawler’s crew — they’ve no sores on their hands. Trawlers’ men are always getting stung and poisoned. They aren’t Danes either — at least, they don’t look like it. What are they doing with our kayaks?’

‘They’re getting them aboard.’

‘Whatever for?’ The girl’s voice had suddenly a startled note in it. ‘Look here, I don’t like this. . . . Just look at the trawl. It’s absurd. It has no otter-boards. . . . There’s something wrong with this ship. Let’s make them launch the kayaks again and get off.’

‘We can’t quite do that,’ said Peter John. ‘I think we must see it through now — wait, anyhow, till these men come back.’ But Anna’s suspicions had infected him, and he looked uneasily at the little kayaks as they were swung up on deck.

He turned in obedience to a smothered squawk from Anna. A woman was coming towards them — a woman in a white serge frock with a fur cape thrown over her shoulders. She was bare-headed and had wonderful red hair. It was now Peter John’s turn to long for the kayaks, for he recognized some one he had seen before, the beautiful Miss Ludlow who, two months ago, had come to tea at Fosse.

The pretty lady advanced smiling. At the sight of her Morag the falcon showed the most lively displeasure. Had Peter John not tightened the lead she would have sought a perch with malevolent purpose on an exquisite red coiffure.

‘What a wicked bird!’ said the lady. ‘You’re sure you’ve got it safe. . . . How nice of you to come to see us! You must be ravenous for tea. Come along, my dears, but I think you’d better leave the bird here.’

So Morag’s lead was fastened to a stanchion, and she was left in a very ill temper ruffling her wings on a spare yard. The children followed the lady to a deck-house, which was half chart-room and half cabin. It was a snug little place, and on an oilskin-covered table tea was set out, an ample meal for which their souls hungered. There were three men sitting there, the dark, sallow one to whom they had first spoken, the sunburnt one with the pipe, and another, a tall, slim man with a thin face, high cheek-bones and a moustache which was going grey at the tips. All three rose politely at their entrance and bowed to Anna.

‘Here are our visitors,’ said the lady; ‘and I’m sure they are hungry. They have come over from the Island. The fog is getting thicker, and I don’t think we can let them go till it clears. What do you think, Joe?’

‘It wouldn’t be safe,’ said the tall man. ‘We must wait anyhow till the Skipper returns. The dory should be back in an hour or so.’

A steward brought in hot water and a big plate of toasted scones. The lady made tea, and much conversation. The sallow man she called Erick, and the sunburnt man Lancie, but most of her remarks were addressed to the tall man called Joe. She prattled of the weather and the Norlands, of London, of Cowes, of ships, and the sea. It was very clear that this company was English, and had nothing to do with marine biology, and Anna’s eyes showed her bewilderment.

When the tall man spoke it was to ask questions about the Island of Sheep. His manners were good, and he showed no intrusive curiosity, but it was plain from the others’ faces that this was a topic that interested them. They talked much as a yacht’s party might have talked who had come into strange latitudes and had suddenly got news of other fellow-countrymen.

‘Your father is at home?’ the man called Lancie asked. ‘He has a wonderful place over there, hasn’t he? We heard about it at Hjalmarshavn. Are you two brother and sister?’

‘We’re no relations. This is my friend, Peter John Hannay. He is English. He is staying with us.’

Four pairs of eyes seemed to open wider.

‘Are you by any chance Sir Richard Hannay’s son?’ the man called Joe asked, with a sudden eagerness in his voice.

Peter John nodded. ‘Yes, and Sir Richard is staying with us,’ added Anna.

‘We must return your call,’ said the lady. ‘I’ve always longed to meet Sir Richard — and your father too, my dear.’

Peter John’s mind had been working furiously, ever since the sight of Miss Ludlow had opened for him the door on a dark world. Anna was bewildered, but only because the Tjaldar was so different from the old Moe, and she had had to revise her marine biology notions, but the boy knew enough to realize that they had blundered into the enemy’s camp. He had heard Sandy’s talk, and I had told him the whole story, and ever since his coming to the Island of Sheep his business had been to be on the watch. Behind all his escapades with Anna had been this serious preoccupation. The sight of Lydia Ludlow had awakened him, and now in this little cabin he was face to face with Haraldsen’s enemies, the sallow Albinus, the stalwart Troth, the lean, restless Barralty. Only one was missing, the most formidable of them all. At any cost he and Anna must get off and carry the fateful news.

‘We should be going,’ he said as he got up, ‘or our people will be anxious.’

‘You can’t go in this weather,’ said Barralty. He too rose and opened the door, and sure enough a solid wall of vapour had built itself beyond the vessel’s side.

‘I’ve got a compass,’ said Peter John, ‘and we can’t miss the way.’

‘We daren’t risk it,’ said the man. ‘We should never be able to face your father if anything went wrong.’

‘They must wait till the Skipper comes back,’ said Troth, and the others agreed.

Peter John was getting desperate. ‘We’re rather grubby,’ he said. ‘Could we wash our hands?’

‘Certainly,’ said the lady. ‘Come down to my cabin, both of you.’ She seemed to Peter John to look meaningfully at the others and slightly nod her head. She took Anna’s hand and led her out, and the boy followed. He lingered a little beyond the door, and he heard, or thought he heard, some one of the three exclaim: ‘My God, we have got the trump card now. This will keep the Skipper in order.’

Miss Ludlow took them down a steep companion into a narrow alley lined with cabins. The big one at the end was hers, and she ushered the children into it with the utmost friendliness. ‘You’ll find everything you want there, my dears,’ she said. ‘Towels and hot water. The bathroom is next door. I’ll come down presently to fetch you.’

But as she left them she drew behind her a sliding door at the end of the passage. Peter John darted after her and tried its handle. It was locked from the outside.

Anna proceeded to scrub her hands and use a pocket comb to tidy up her hair. ‘This is a queer ship,’ she said, ‘and queer people. But they’re kind, I think. They’re ordinary yachting folk, but the Tjaldar isn’t much of a yacht. Too much of a grubby trawler for their nice clothes.’

Peter John was looking out of the port-hole into the wall of fog. ‘They aren’t kind,’ he said. ‘They’re our enemies —

your father's and my father's. They're the people who tried to catch you at school. They're the people we were always on the look-out for at Laverlaw. I must tell you all I know, for we're in an awful hole.'

There and then in that dim cabin he told her the story as he knew it, told her many things which Haraldsen had jealously kept hidden from her, and gave point and shape to suspicions which had long lain at the back of her head. He may have told the story crudely, with a boy's instinct for drama, but Peter John was also a realist who made no mistake about the fundamentals. She sat quiet as a mouse, but at the end she gave a low cry.

'They're going to attack our island? And we've let ourselves be made prisoners? Oh, Peter John, it is all my fault! I dragged you on this silly expedition.'

'It is my fault, for I should have remembered. You see, I knew and you didn't.'

Two miserable children clung to each other, while the fog thickened without and the cabin darkened.

Meantime, in the deck-house they had left, there was a feverish council. From what I learned later I can reconstruct the scene as if I had been listening outside the door. In an hour's time the man called the Skipper would arrive, and three men and one woman had much to talk of before then. I can picture their rapid, confused speech, their alternations of eagerness and diffidence, their sudden confidence dashed by sudden fears. Always in the background there must have been this shadow of fear. For the absent Skipper had become to them no longer a colleague but a master. They were people whose plans lay well inside the pale of what we call civilization. They had reputations to lose, ambitions which demanded some respect for the conventions, comfortable lives which they were not inclined to sacrifice. But they had become yoked to one who cared for none of these things, a man from the outlands who had long ago discarded their world. They were like schoolboys playing at pirates who had suddenly found themselves enrolled under the authentic Blackbeard. Barralty, I fancy, was the worst scared. Albinus was the common rogue who had already known the shady side of the law. Troth was a robust fellow, a sportsman accustomed to risks who would not be greatly rattled till he knew the full extent of the trouble. But Barralty was the brittle intellectual, who found himself in a world where his old skill went for nothing, and with him was the woman who had worked with him, and who now saw all their careful schemes on the edge of a fulfilment more disastrous than failure.

Troth must have spoken first, for he had the coolest head.

'Things are brightening,' he said. 'This is a piece of luck for us, for we've got our hostages. Now we can deal.'

'You think so?' said Barralty, in a voice which he tried to keep calm.

'Well, we've got the girl, and she's what Haraldsen cares most for in the world. And we've got the boy, who's the apple of Hannay's eye. There's only Lombard left, and he doesn't count for much. There's no word of Clanroyden.'

'What has happened to Clanroyden?'

'God knows! Run out, perhaps. . . . No, he's not that kind of fellow. The Skipper must have put a spoke in his wheel, for he's devil enough for anything.'

'Have you got a line on the Skipper's plan?'

'Plain enough. Old-fashioned piracy. He'll descend on the Island like a marauding Viking and hold 'em up. If they show fight, as they're likely to, he'll kill. He'll get what he wants and he don't care a damn for bloodshed. When he has got it he'll disappear, he and his gang, into the outer darkness, as he has done before. I daresay he'll play fair with us — I don't know — but we'll have to disappear with him. Do any of you fancy spending the rest of your lives being hunted up and down the globe, even if your pockets are full? D'Ingraville won't mind it, for it's his profession, but what about you, Barralty? What about you, with your big ideas about public life? What about you, Lydia? You like your little comforts. What about you, Erick? No more race-meetings for you, my lad, and flutters at Monte?'

'My God!' Barralty groaned. 'Can't we bring the man to reason?'

'We can't, for all the reason, as he sees it, is on his side. He knows what he wants a little more clearly than we ever have, and he has the power behind him. We're only passengers — he's the fighting force. What can we do to stop him? He has his two infernal trusties from South America, Carreras and Martel — the very sight of them gives me the creeps. He has his crew of gunmen. He's going to implicate us all in his gangster business, so that we'll all hang together.'

'But he can't compel us if we object,' Albinus groaned.

'Can't he? I haven't got him fully taped, but he's the biggest size in desperado I've ever struck. I know what's in your

mind, Erick. You think that we might make terms on our own account with the people on the Island. I've had the same idea myself, but I tell you it won't do. The Skipper knows that game too well. If we try to double-cross him he'll shoot.'

I can picture those four scared conspirators sitting for a moment dismally silent, till Troth's vigour woke them.

'But now things look better,' he said. 'We have got the materials for a civilized deal. Thank heaven for these blessed children! I don't much like using kids in this business — if you remember, I always stuck out against it before — but needs must when the devil drives. The Skipper can't be fool enough to neglect such a chance. It gives us a sitter, when the other way is an ugly gamble.'

'But do we want the same things?' Barralty asked. 'We want a good deal, but the Skipper may want everything. And remember that Haraldsen isn't alone. He has Hannay with him, and Hannay by all accounts is a tough customer.'

'That will be the moment for the double-crossing if the Skipper plays the fool,' said Troth grimly. 'Once we get to bargaining we put the lid on his bloody piracy, and that's what we most want.'

Then the Skipper arrived.

I picture his coming into the stuffy cabin, his face shining with fog crystals, and his pale eyes dazed by the sudden light.

'An hour till dinner,' he said, with a glance at the chronometer. 'There's time for a hot rum-and-milk, for it has been perishingly cold in the dory. But I've done my job. The reconnaissance is complete, gentlemen. To-morrow is The Day.'

Troth told him about Anna and Peter John. He listened with head lifted, rather like a stag at gaze, a smile wrinkling his lean cheeks.

'Fortune is kind to us,' he said. 'Now we can add point to our first cartel. For one kind of possession we can offer another — and a dearer.'

But there was that in his voice which made Barralty look up anxiously.

'Surely that alters our whole plan,' he said. 'Now we can treat, where before we could only coerce.'

'I do not think so, my friend.' D'Ingraville spoke lightly, as if the matter were not of great importance. 'They will not treat — not on our terms. You want much, no doubt, but I want all, you see, and men will fight for their all.'

'But — but —' Barralty stammered. 'Haraldsen cares for his daughter above everything, and Hannay for his son.'

'Maybe,' was the answer. 'But Haraldsen and Hannay are not all.'

'Lombard does not count.'

'I do not think of Lombard. I think of Lord Clanroyden.'

'But Clanroyden isn't there.'

'Not yet. But he will be there tomorrow.'

'How do you know? Have you any news?'

'I have no news. I have heard nothing of Clanroyden since we left London. But I know that he will be there, for I have an assignation with him, and he will not fail me. And Clanroyden will never yield.'

'But what do you mean to do, man?' Troth asked.

'I mean to follow the old way, the way of my Norman kinsfolk. Fate has been marvellously good to us. There is no man on the Island except those three — tomorrow they will be four — only dotards and old women. The telephone is cut and they have no boat. The fog will lift, I think, by the morning, but the Island will be in a deeper fog which cuts it off from the world. We shall have peace and leisure to do our will. If they listen to us, so much the pleasanter for everybody. If they fight we shall fight too, and beyond doubt we shall win.'

'Win!' Barralty muttered. 'What do you mean by win?'

'Everything,' was the answer. 'I shall get my will, though I leave a house in ashes and an island of dead men.'

'And then?' It was Lydia's strained voice that spoke.

'Then we disappear, leaving a riddle in the Norlands which no man will ever expound. Trust me, I have made my plans — for you, my friends, and for you, my fair lady. You may have to face some little adjustments in your lives, but what of that? *Le mouvement c'est la vie.*'

He lifted his glass and looked towards Lydia, drinking the last mouthful as if it were a toast.

‘And now,’ he said, ‘let me have a look at our hostages. Martel,’ he cried to some one outside the door, ‘fetch the babes.’

Peter John takes up the tale again. . . . The children had sat in a stupor of misery and fright, unable to think, deaf to all sounds except the thumping of their hearts. ‘We must get away,’ the boy had repeated at intervals, and the girl had replied, ‘We must,’; but the words were only a kind of groan, so destitute were they of any hope. What Anna thought I do not know, but Peter John’s mind was fuller of mortification than of fear. He had failed in his trust, and by his folly had given the enemy a crushing vantage.

They lost count of time, and it may have been an hour or two hours before the sliding panel in the alley opened and a face showed in the cabin door. A hand switched on the light. They saw a man slightly over the middle height, wearing sea-boots and a seaman’s jersey — a man who did not look like a sailor, for he had a thin, shaven, pallid face, a scar on his forehead, and eyebrows that made a curious arch over weak, blinking eyes. When he spoke it was with a foreign accent in a hoarse, soft voice. ‘You will come with me, please,’ he said. ‘M. le Capitaine would speak with you.’

The sight of the man sent a spasm of sharp fear through Peter John’s dull misery. For he knew him — knew him at least by hearsay. Sandy at Laverlaw had taken some pains to describe to us the two members of the old Bodyguard of Olifa whom D’Ingraville had with him. This was the Belgian Martel — there could be no mistake about the scar and the horseshoe brows. At the door of the deck-house stood another man, a tall stooping fellow whose hatchet face and black beady eyes were plain in the glow from the cabin. This was beyond doubt the Spaniard Carreras. The wolf pack was complete.

‘Don’t answer anything,’ the boy whispered to Anna. A stubborn silence was the one course left to them.

But there was no inquisition. Peter John had the impression of a company mighty ill at ease. The smooth geniality of tea-time had gone, and the four who had then entertained them seemed to have lost interest in their visitors and to be much concerned with their own thoughts. The pretty lady had become haggard and rather old, while Troth had lost his robustness and sucked his pipe nervously. Barralty had become a wisp of a man, and Albinus a furtive shadow. Only the newcomer radiated confidence and vitality. For a moment Peter John forgot his fear, and looked curiously at the tall man whom at Fosse he had assisted to put into the stream. He was so taut and straight that he had the look of an unsheathed sword. His pale eyes glittered like ice, and his smile had as much warmth in it as an Arctic sun. Magnificent, wonderful, terrible, inhuman, like some devastating force of nature. Yet, strangely enough, the boy feared the reality less than the picture he had made in his head. This was a wild thing, like Morag, and wild things could be tamed, curbed, or destroyed.

The Skipper bowed to Anna and nodded pleasantly to Peter John.

‘You must be our guests for the night, I fear,’ he said. ‘We are not a very commodious ship, so you mustn’t mind rather rough beds. You will want to turn in soon. What about supper?’

It was Anna who replied. ‘We don’t want any supper, thank you. But we’d like to turn in, for we’re both very sleepy.’

‘Right. Show the young lady and gentleman to their quarters, Martel. Mr. Hannay will berth forward, and Miss Haraldsen can have Miss Ludlow’s couch. Good-night and pleasant dreams.’

That was all. The two followed Martel the way they had come, and Anna was left in the big cabin, where a bed had been made up for her on the couch. Martel did the expected thing, for he took the key from the inside of the cabin-door and pocketed it; then he pulled the sliding panel which automatically locked itself. The sight of Anna’s desolate face was the last straw to Peter John’s burden. He followed Martel on deck, feeling as if the end of all things had come.

Suddenly an angry squawk woke him to life. Morag, hungry and drenched with fog, sat on her perch in a bitter ill-temper.

‘May I take my falcon with me?’ he begged.

Martel laughed. ‘I guess you may if you want company. Your ugly bird will be better below deck.’

Peter John found himself in a little cubby-hole of a cabin under the fore-deck. It was empty except for a hammock slung from the ceiling, and a heap of blankets which some one had tossed on the floor. There was a big port-hole which Martel examined carefully, trying the bolts and hinges. ‘Don’t go walking in your sleep and drowning yourself, sonny,’ was his parting admonition. He did not clamp it down, but left it ajar.

Peter John’s first act, when he found himself alone, was to open the port-hole wide. It was on the port side, looking west, and close to where they had embarked on the Tjaldar in the afternoon. The fog was thinning, and a full moon made of what remained a half-luminous, golden haze. The boy had a notion of getting out of the port-hole and trying to swim to the

Island, but a moment's reflection drove it out of his head. He was not a strong swimmer, and he could never manage two miles in those cold Norland waters.

Then a squeak from Morag gave him another idea. There was no light in the cabin except what came from the moon, but he tore a leaf from a little writing-book which he kept for bird notes and printed on it a message. 'In Tjaldar, which is enemy ship,' he wrote. 'Expect immediate attack. Don't worry about us for we are all right.' He wrapped the paper in a bit of silk torn from his necktie, and tied it round Morag's leg. Then he slipped the leash, and cast the bird off through the port-hole. Like a stone from a catapult she shot up into the moonlit fog.

'An off-chance,' he told himself, 'but worth taking. She's savagely hungry, and if she doesn't kill soon she'll go back to the House. If she's seen there Mr. Haraldsen has a spare lure and knows how to use it. If he gets the message he'll at least be warned.'

The action he had taken had put sleep out of his head and had cheered him up for the moment. He could make nothing of the hammock, so he sat himself on the heap of blankets and tried to think. But his thoughts did him no good, for he could make no plans. His cabin door was locked and the key in Martel's pocket. Anna was similarly immured at the other end of the ship. They were prisoners, mere helpless baggage to be towed in the wake of the enemy. Oddly enough, the Skipper did not seem to him the most formidable thing. The boy thought of D'Ingraville as a dreadful impersonal force of nature, like a snow blizzard or an earthquake. His horror was reserved for Carreras and Martel, who were evil human beings. As he remembered Martel's horse-shoe brows and soft sneering voice he shivered in genuine horror. The one was the hungry lion, but the other was the implacable, cunning serpent.

How long he sat hunched on the blankets he does not know, but he thinks it must have been hours. Slowly sleep came over him, for body and mind and nerves were alike weary. . . . Then that happened which effectually woke him. The disc of light from the porthole was obscured by something passing over it, slowly and very quietly. He looked out, and saw to his amazement that one of the kayaks was now floating on the water beneath him, attached to a rope from above.

As he stared, a second object dropped past his eyes. It was the other kayak, which lightly shouldered the first and came to rest beside it.

His hand felt for one of the lowering ropes and he found it taut. Grasping it, he stuck his feet through the port-hole, wriggled his body through and slid down the rope. Almost before he knew he was sitting in a kayak, looking up at the dim bulk of the vessel.

Then came another miracle. A human figure was sliding down the rope from the Tjaldar's deck, and he saw that it was Anna, coming down hand over hand as lightly as a squirrel. She saw him, dropped into the second kayak, and reached for the paddle. All was done as noiselessly as in a dream. There was a helper on the deck above, for the taut rope was dropped after her and swished gently into the water.

Anna kissed her hand to the some one above, seized her paddle, and with a slow stealthy stroke sent her kayak out into the golden haze. As Peter John clumsily followed suit, she turned on him fiercely, 'Quiet, you donkey,' she whispered. 'Don't splash for your life. Hang on to me and I'll tow you.'

In half a dozen strokes the little craft were out of sight of the Tjaldar.



CHAPTER 14

THE WAYS OF THE PINK-FOOT

They had travelled a quarter of a mile before Peter John spoke. 'How did you manage that?' he asked excitedly.

Anna slackened pace and dropped into line with him.

'I didn't. It was the man — the one with the funny eyebrows — the one the Skipper called Martin or some name like that.'

Peter John emitted a groan of dismay.

'But he's Martel — the worst of them — my father told me. It's a plot, Anna. He didn't mean any good to us.'

'He's let us escape, anyway, and that's the good I want. I had dropped off to sleep on that beastly couch when he woke me up, and said I'd better be off, for this was no place for kids. He made me follow him up on deck, keeping in the shadow so that we shouldn't be seen. There was no one about anyhow, and not a light except the riding-light. He had already got the kayaks in the water, and he said you would notice them, for they were beside your port-hole, and if you didn't we'd go down and rouse you up. When he saw you sitting in a kayak, he said it was what he expected, for you were a bright citizen.'

'It's all a trick,' Peter John groaned. 'Martel's the worst devil of the lot. He wants us to escape so that we can be caught and brought back, and so give them an excuse to bully us.'

'That sounds to me silly,' said Anna. 'I they wanted to treat us rough there was nothing to prevent them anyhow. I think the man is friendly. He's a Norlander.'

'He isn't. He's a Belgian.'

'Well, he speaks Norland as well as my father. And he knows about the Islands. He was out in the dory this afternoon, and he says the Grind are coming. He says that they will rendezvous at the Stor Rock — the Grind always have a rendezvous. I don't know why he told me that, but he seemed to think it important, for he said it several times. Only a Norlander could know about such things.'

'He may know Norland, but he's a Belgian and the worst of the lot. My father told me. What else did he say?'

'He said that we must hurry like the devil, and we weren't to go straight to the House. If we could shape any kind of course we were to go to the south part of the Island, to the Birdmarsh. That looks as if he thought the Skipper would be after us. I believe he meant well by us, Peter John, and anyway we're free again.'

'We won't be long free,' said the boy. He had his compass out, and halted for a moment to steady it. 'I don't trust him one bit, Anna. A course due west will bring us to the House, and that's where we steer for. If we can't make it, then we'll do the opposite of what Martel said and try for the north.'

'I don't care where we land,' said the girl, 'as long as it's on the Island.'

The boy held up his hand and listened.

'If they find out we're gone — or if Martel tells them — they can overhaul us in ten minutes with their outboard motor. Do you hear anything, Anna?'

The fog was breaking up into alleys and strips of moonlit sea, rayed round them like the points of a star. There was no sound, not even the ripple of water or a gull's cry.

'Come on,' Anna urged. 'We must be a quarter of the way across, and every moment counts. Take longer sweeps, Peter John, like me, and don't behave as if you were making butter-pats.'

Then for half an hour there was no further speech. The boy had not the girl's effortless skill, and put much needless strength into his strokes, so that his shoulders soon began to ache, and his breath to shorten. The fog was oddly intermittent. Now they would be in a circle of clear sea, now back in a haze so thick that Peter John had to keep his compass on his knee, and Anna closed in on him for guidance. On one such occasion she observed that Morag had been left behind, and that she wished well to the first hand that touched her.

'She hasn't,' was his answer. 'I flew her out of the port-hole, and tied a message to her varvel. If she doesn't kill, they may get her at the House.'

‘What message?’ Anna asked.

‘Only that you and I were all right, but that they had better look out for squalls.’

Then, when they were in one of the patches of clear air, there fell on their ears the unmistakable sound of a motor behind them.

‘Now we’re for it,’ said Anna. ‘Heaven send the fog thickens. I was right about Martel. He told me not to go straight for the House, and that’s what we’ve done, and they’ve naturally followed us. . . . Where are you heading for now?’

The compass had dropped to the bottom of the kayak and Peter John had altered course to the north-west.

‘Martel said south,’ said Anna.

‘That’s why we are going north,’ was the answer.

Mid-channel in the small hours with an enemy close behind you is no place for argument. Anna followed obediently, the more as she saw that the new route was taking them into thicker weather. Presently on their port beam they heard the chug of a motor, but could see nothing when they screwed their heads round. Now they were back in dense fog, and the compass was brought into use again. Fear and the sense of pursuit had given both a fresh vigour, and the little craft slipped gallantly through the water. The moon was setting, and its golden light no longer transfused the sea-mist, which was becoming cold and grey. Soon it would be dawn.

Then suddenly they got a dreadful scare. The sound of a motor broke just ahead of them. They stopped and held their breath, living by their ears, for their eyes were useless in the brume. . . . The noise came nearer — soon it was not twenty yards ahead — but they saw nothing. Then slowly it died away towards the west.

‘That was their second motor,’ said Peter John. ‘It had a different sound from the other.’

‘Who was right?’ said Anna triumphantly. ‘I said we should trust that Martin man, but you wouldn’t. We’ve disobeyed both the things he told us to do, and the result is we’ve been jolly nearly copped.’

After that there were no more alarms. The fog grew denser as they approached the Island, but it lifted slightly when the lap of the tide told them that they were close to shore. In this part the cliffs rose sheer from a narrow rock-strewn beach, but the children had visited the place before, and knew that a landing could be made in one of the tiny bays cut by descending streams. One such they found, where there was a half-moon of sand at the foot of a steep gully in the crags. They beached the kayaks and hid them in the cover of some big boulders. Then, taking hands, they proceeded to climb the ravine, which was stony and rough, but quite practicable. Near the top they found a recess of heath and bracken and there Anna resolutely sat down.

‘Thank God for His mercies,’ she said. ‘If we had only some food I’d be happy. I’m going to sleep, and you’d better do the same, Peter John, for Heaven knows what sort of a day we have before us.’

They had no watch, and Peter John, who could usually tell the time by the sky, was out of his reckoning in those northern latitudes. They slept sound in the nook of rock, and it was only the sun on Anna’s face that woke them. The time cannot have been much short of noon.

The mist had gone, and the day was bright and hot, but the visibility was poor. Halder, of which they had a full view, was a cone of dull blue with no details showing, and the Channel between might have been a bottomless chasm, for it had none of the sheen of water.

‘It will be fine till three,’ said Anna, who knew the Norland weather. ‘Then I think it will blow again from the east, and blow hard.’

She stood up to stretch her arms, but Peter John caught her skirt and pulled her back. ‘We mustn’t show ourselves,’ he enjoined. ‘Remember, they’re after us. Wait here while I reconnoiter.’ He crawled out of the cleft, and lay prone on a knuckle of rock from which the view was open eastward. He was back in a few seconds. ‘The Tjaldar has gone,’ he whispered. ‘No sign of her, and I could see twenty miles of water. It must be pretty late in the day, for I’m desperately hungry. Aren’t you?’

‘Perishing, but it’s no good thinking about it. We’ll get no food till we get home. How is that to be managed? I’ve been taking our bearings from Halder, and we should be about two miles north of the House. There’s a track to it on the top of the cliffs, and it’s mostly in sight of the Channel, but if the Tjaldar isn’t there that won’t matter. I expect she is somewhere on the west side of the island.’

‘What lies between the House and the west side?’ Peter John asked. It was about the only part they had not explored.

‘There’s the hill Snowfell. A little hill compared to the ones at Laverlaw. Then there’s a boggy place which we call the Goose Flat, because the pink-foot breed there. Then there’s the sea — a rather nasty bit of coast with only one decent landing. . . . Let’s bustle and get home. If the brutes are going to attack today there’s no reason why they shouldn’t start early, for just now there’s no darkness to wait for.’

They climbed to the top of the gully where it ran out on to the tussocky cliff-top. Peter John, upon whom unpleasant forebodings had descended, insisted on keeping close in cover and showing no part of themselves on the skyline. Presently they looked down on a small tarn, much overgrown with pond-weed, which they remembered as the only lochan which had no boat. The track to the House passed its eastern edge, and by this their road lay.

It was a terribly exposed track, and Peter John regarded it with disfavour.

‘Hadn’t we better hug the cliff-edge where there’s a certain amount of cover?’ he suggested.

‘You may if you like, but I won’t. The Skipper and his lot can’t be near the place yet, and I want to be home soon. They’ll all be mad with anxiety. I must loosen my bones, for I’m as stiff as a ramrod. I’ll race you, Peter John.’

She shook her yellow locks, and before the boy could prevent her was off at a gallop along the track. There was nothing for it but to follow her. He found it hard to catch her up, and the effort put other things out of his head. When they topped the rise, which overlooked the hollow where the House lay a mile distant, they were abreast and going at their best speed.

Then the boy saw something which made him halt in his tracks, clutch at Anna’s arm, and bring her slithering to the ground. . . . Behind a rocky knoll three hundred yards off a man was posted.

He had not heard them, for he continued to smoke and regard the House through binoculars. They had only a back view of him, but he was plainly a sailor from the Tjaldar by his blue jersey and baggy blue serge trousers. He had some notion of landscape, for he was so placed that he must command any access to the House from the north.

Peter, his hand on Anna’s bowed head, lay for a little with his nose in a patch of lousewort. He was thinking hard and studying the environs of the House. Their only chance now was to reach it from the west or south. But west lay Snowfell, where there was scarcely cover for a tomtit. On the south the approaches were better, but to reach the south it was necessary to get to the back of Snowfell and fetch a wide circuit. One ugly thought struck him. If the Tjaldar had gone to the west of the island, might it not have all that side under observation? This watcher came from the Tjaldar. If the enemy had posted his vedettes up to the edges of the House, was he not likely to be holding the intermediate ground?

Nevertheless, it was their only chance. The two very cautiously wormed their way back over the ridge they had crossed, left the track, and made good speed across a marshy field which was the source of the stream that fed the lochan. They saw no sign of life except a group of Norland ponies, as tame as puppies, who came up to have their noses rubbed, and fell to grazing quietly as soon as they had passed. But, warned now, they made the final ascent of the spine of the island, a continuation of Snowfell, with immense care, pulling themselves up between two patches of bracken to look over the far side.

There was no sign of the Tjaldar. The hill fell steeply in screes and rocks to the water’s edge. There seemed to be a bay there, the contours of which were concealed by the hump of the cliffs, with a spire of smoke ascending from it. South, the ground flattened out into a mantelpiece, where pools of water glimmered among rushes and peat. Beyond that a bulge of hill cut off further view. There was no sign of life except the white specks, which were birds down in the Goose Flat, a nimbus of screaming gulls over a dead porpoise on one of the reefs, and the column of smoke.

‘That’s all right,’ said Anna with relief. ‘They’ve been here this morning, and that smoke is the remains of a breakfast fire. They have landed that man to keep an eye on the House, and they have gone off in the Tjaldar on some other business. Probably they’re back at Halder by now to mislead us. Their time is the evening. We can’t go over Snowfell, for the picket would see us, but we can get round by the Goose Flat and reach the House by way of the reservoir. Come on, for I’m weak with starvation.’

Anna would have marched boldly down the hill, but Peter John had sense enough to make her keep cover. This was not so difficult as long as they were on the encumbered slopes, for any road had to be picked among secret tangles of rock and fern. But before they came to the Goose Flat they found themselves on short heather and screes and as conspicuous as rocks on a snow-field. Even Anna was sobered.

‘Let’s run this bit,’ she whispered, ‘and get it over.’

It was no doubt the best plan, but it failed. They had not covered ten yards before a whistle cleft the silence. A figure showed itself on the edge of the seaward cliff — and then another. To Peter John's horror, as he cast his eye in the opposite direction, a man appeared on the ridge of Snowfell.

'Three,' he groaned.

'Four,' Anna corrected. 'There's another behind us — we must have passed close to him.'

A rib descended from Snowfell, and Peter John saw that if they could get beyond that they would be for a moment out of sight of the watchers, even of him on the hill. The rib bisected the Goose Flat, making a kind of causeway across it. There was no real cover in the Flat, for to any one on the edge whatever tried to hide itself among the short rushes and shallow lagoons would be easily visible. But to gain even a minute or two was something. The children in full view raced beyond the rib, waded into the Goose Flat, and flung themselves behind exiguous tussocks.

'We're out of their sight,' Anna panted; 'but they'll be down here in a jiffy to nobble us. Let's get on. We might beat them and get first to the Bird Marsh. We could hide there.'

'No good,' said the boy. 'If we go south, we'll be in their view in twenty yards, and the man on the hill has only got to walk down to cut us off. The chap behind, too. We're done, Anna, unless they think we've broken back.'

'They can't. They saw us come here.'

'Then we're for it. We might as well have stayed on the Tjaldar.'

'Oh, Peter John, what a mess we've made of everything!' the girl wailed.

Suddenly the boy's eyes opened wide to a strange spectacle. Just in front of them the causeway made by the rib of hill was somewhat broken, and a glimpse could be got of the swamp farther to the north. In this gap appeared the foolish heads and poised necks of a little flock of pink-foot. They were young birds who, having been hatched out in the Goose Flat, had spent their early adolescence on the sea skerries, and had now, according to their ancestral habit, returned for a little to their birthplace. They were chattering among themselves, apparently alive to the presence of something novel in front, about which they desired to be better informed.

By the mercy of God Peter John remembered a piece of lore that he had learned from the wildfowlers at Hanham in January. The pink-foot is not a skeery bird. He has resolved that his duty is not to live but to know, and he is nearly the most inquisitive thing in creation. If you want to get in range of him, Samson Grose had said, show yourself, and the odds are that he will move nearer you to discover what sort of thing you are. With young pink-foot, that is; older birds have learned wisdom.

To Anna's amazement the boy got to his feet, while his right hand held her down. . . . She saw the echelon of geese stop and confide things to each other. Every eye of them was on to Peter John, and after a moment's hesitation they began to move forward. They seemed oddly self-conscious, for they did not keep looking in his direction. Some would stop for a second to feed, and all kept turning their heads every way. But the whole flock was steadily drifting south, as if there was some compulsion in their rear. In five minutes they had moved at least ten yards.

The pink-foot were in sight of the watchers, and Peter John was not. Would the watchers draw the inference desired? They must do it at once, for if the geese came too near, they would lose their heads, stream back, and all would be lost. To one who did not know their habits the conclusion must surely be clear. The children were behind them, and their presence there was making them move south. Therefore it was in the north part of the Goose Flat that they must be sought. They had been seen to disappear behind the rib of hill, but they must have crawled back and got in the rear of the geese.

Peter John's heart was in his mouth, as he stood staring at the bobbing heads and projected necks of these absurd pink-foot, who to him and Anna meant everything. At any moment he himself might come within sight of some watcher who had shifted ground. Two lots of human beings, invisible to each other, were regarding some foolish winged creatures with desperate intentness. It was a new way of taking the auspices.

Then on the boy's ear fell that which was like an answer to his prayers. A whistle was blown up on the hillside, and answered by another from the direction of the sea. The pink-foot had been correctly observed. . . . A second later he had confirmation, for something had come north of the geese to alarm them. They stopped their leisurely advance, and straggled to left and right. The watchers had appeared to hunt for the fugitives in the north end of the swamp.

There was no time to lose, for when they found their search fruitless they would undoubtedly cast south. Peter John dragged Anna out of the foot of mud where she sat like a nesting wild-duck, and the two scrambled out of the bog and

raced for their lives along the harder skirts of the hill. They did not stop till they had rounded the flank of the massif of the Isle, and were looking down on the Bird Marsh and the rolling barrens beyond it. Only once had Peter John glanced back, and that was to see the pink-foot, shaken out of their comfortable ways, bunching for a seaward flight. Once they were in the deep of the Marsh, where Anna knew the paths, they felt reasonably secure, and dared to draw breath again. As Anna cast herself on a patch of heather she could not resist one word of reproach. 'I was right all along about the Martin man. If we had steered south as he told us we should have missed this heart-disease. We might even be home and having breakfast.'

When she had recovered her breath she spoke again.

'That was very clever of you, Peter John. I'll never laugh at you again for being silly about birds. I thought you had gone mad till I saw your plan. It was a miracle, and I feel happy now. We are going to win, never fear.'

'I wish I knew how,' said the boy dolefully. 'We have slipped through them, but we have still to get into the House . . . I wonder if they've any notion there what's happening. . . . And after that? The brutes are three or four to our one, and they're desperate.'

'I don't care,' said Anna; 'we're going to win. There'll be another miracle, you'll see.' She raised herself and sniffed the air. From where they sat they had no view of the Channel, but the southern part of Halder was in sight. 'We can't see the Tjaldar's anchorage. I wonder if she has come back. Look at the sky over there, Peter John. I said the weather would change in the afternoon, and it's jolly well going to. There's the father and mother of a thunderstorm coming up over Halder, and after that it will blow like fury from the east. . . . Lordie, it's hot, and there's a plague of daddy-longlegs. That should mean that the Grind are coming. That was what the Martin man said. He may be a scoundrel, but we would have been better off if we had taken his advice this morning.'

Peter John was almost cross. There was no need to rub in the good intentions of Martel, which he knew to be moonshine, and less to babble about pilot whales, when the world was crashing about them. 'Let's start,' he said. 'We'll have our work cut out getting to the House even from this side.'

Anna let her head sink back on the moss.

'I feel dreadfully sleepy,' she said. 'Perhaps it's the storm coming. All the energy has gone out of me. . . . Martin said the Grind would rendezvous at the Stor Rock. That's only about seven miles from the south end of this island — half-way between it and Kalso.'

An exasperated Peter John got to his feet and regarded the girl as she lay with her eyes half-closed. She certainly looked very weary — and different, too, in other ways. She had become like her father — her skin had suddenly acquired his pallor, and her eyes, when she opened them, his light wildness. And her mind was still on her preposterous whales.

'You stay here and rest,' he said, 'and I'll go and prospect. There may be some difficult ground to cover, where one will be safer than two.'

'All right,' she said sleepily. 'Come back before the storm begins, for I hate being alone with thunder. . . . I didn't know there were so many daddy-longlegs in the world.'

Peter John, in a mood between irritation and depression, hopped over the tussocks of the Bird Marsh, struck the shore, and trotted northward on the edge of the shingle. Halder was beginning to veil itself in a gloom as purple as a ripe grape, but the Channel was clear, and there was no sign of the Tjaldar by the other shore. The air was oppressive and still, but he had the feeling that some fury of nature was banking up and would soon be released.

The road, which the other day had seemed but a step or two, was now interminable to his anxious mind. He came in view of the harbour and the cluster of cottages to the south of it; all was peaceful there. Then by way of the channel of a stream he climbed from the shore, and looked suddenly upon the shelf where the House stood.

There was peace there, too, but he saw various ominous things. There were pickets posted — one on the near edge of the main lawn, one on the hill behind, and one above the voe on the road up from the harbour. These pickets were armed. Their business was to see that none entered the House and that none left it. Even as he stared, the one nearest him detected some movement in the back parts and sent over a warning shot; he heard the bullet crack on the stone roof of an outhouse. These watchers were the terriers to guard the earth till the hunters arrived.

Peter John's first impulse was to dodge the cordon and get into the House. He believed that he could do it, for he must know the ground better than they did. But if he once got in he would not get out again, and Anna would be left deserted. If

the House was to be entered it must be in Anna's company.

There was no time to lose, so he turned and made for the Bird Marsh again, no longer hugging the shore, but taking the short cut across the hill. His last glance back showed the Tjaldar rounding the cliffs north of the harbour. He felt miserably depressed and utterly feeble. The people in the House must know their danger now, but what good was that knowledge to them? There were three men there to face a dozen and more — the crew of the Tjaldar had seemed to him unduly large, and its members had not looked innocent. If Anna and he joined the defence they would only be two more non-combatants. . . . Where, oh where, was Lord Clanroyden? Peter John had come to regard Sandy as the sheet anchor in this affair, the man who had planned the whole strategy, the regular soldier among amateurs. His absence gave him a dreadful sense of confusion and impotence.

Before he reached the Bird Marsh the weather had changed with a vengeance. The purple cloud had crossed the Channel from Halder, and the afternoon had grown as dark as a winter's gloaming. There was no lightning, but the gloom suddenly burst in a tornado of hail. So violent was the fall that the boy was beaten to the ground, where he lay with his back humped, protecting every inch of exposed skin from that blistering bastinado.

This lasted for perhaps five minutes. But when the hail ceased the sky did not lighten. The ground was white like winter and a wind as icy as the hail blew out of the east. He threaded the Bird Marsh to where he had left Anna, listless in the heat of the summer afternoon. . . . The girl had gone. Peter John lifted up his voice and called her, but there was no answer.

She had not followed him, for in that case he would have met her. It was scarcely possible that the enemy could have arrived from the Goose Flat and captured her. East and west lay impassable lochs. She could only have gone south on to the low dunes which stretched to the butt of the island. The hail had obliterated her tracks in the heather, but a few yards on there was a deep scar in a peat-hagg as if some one had slipped. A little farther and there was another footmark in the peat. Peter John followed the trail till he was out of the swampy ground and on the thymy slopes.

Suddenly he became aware that there was another sound in his ears beside the whistle of the wind. It came from in front of him, a strange blend of excited shouting and what seemed like the dash of waves on a skerry. At first he thought it the screeching of gulls over a dead porpoise. And then there came a note in it which was human, which must be human — deep voices in the act of giving orders — a note which no animal can compass. He stumbled over the last ridge, and looked down on the big voe into which one of the lochs of the Bird Marsh discharged its waters, and the network of lesser voes which made up the south end of the Island.

The shores of the voe were dense with people, and its surface and that of the lesser voes black with a multitude of boats. But at the heads of each inlet was a spouting and quivering morass in which uncouth men laboured with bloody spears. It was a scene as macabre as any nightmare, but it was orderly too. There were men with papers on the shore pricking off figures. . . . For a second his mind wandered in utter confusion, and then he got the answer. Anna's tales had come true. The Grind had arrived.

At first he did not realize that this meant salvation. The strangeness of the spectacle lifted it clean out of his normal world. He only knew that Anna was down there, and that he must find her. But as he raced down the slopes the scene before him began to change. Men left their toil and moved to a post midway up the big voe. The boats from the lesser voes began to draw to the same place. The people with the papers in their hands did likewise — one of them was shouting what sounded like an order. Long before Peter John had reached the point at least three-fourths of the people had moved there. . . . Then as he came nearer he saw a group make a platform of their arms, and some one was hoisted on to it.

It was Anna, but an Anna whom he had not known before. Around her was bent and shingle grimed with blood — men with conical caps, and beards like trolls and wild eyes and blood-stained whale spears — a few women like mænads — and as a background a channel choked with animals dying or dead. She stood on a human platform, like a Viking girl in the Shield-ring, the wind plucking at her skirts and hair, her figure braced against it, her voice shrill and commanding. Something had been reborn in her out of the ages, some ancient power of domination; and something too had been reborn in her hearers, an ancestral response to her call.

She was speaking Norland, of which he understood not one word. What she said, as he learned afterwards, was that pirates were attacking her house and her father, and she summoned the men of the islands to their defence. She struck a note which reverberated through all their traditions, the note of peril from strangers — Norse and Scots rovers, Algerian

pirates, who had driven the folk to the caves of the hills. The Norlander is not a fighting man, but he has fighting strains in him if the right chord be touched. Moreover, these men had their blood hot and their spirit high from the Grind hunt. . . .

She saw Peter John, and she seemed to use him to point her appeal. An older man spoke and was answered with a frenzied shouting. Certain men were detailed to keep watch on the Grind — they drew themselves off from the rest as the speaker called their names. . . . Then suddenly Anna was no more on her platform. She had Peter John's hand in hers, and behind them, racing northward, was the better part of a hundred islanders babbling like hounds, and in each right hand a reddened whale-spear.



CHAPTER 15

TRANSFORMATION BY FIRE

For sheer misery I give the night when the children were missing the top place in my experience. By dinner-time I was anxious; by midnight I was pretty well beside myself; but when morning came with no word of them, I had fallen into a kind of dull, aching torpor. Haraldsen, Lombard, and I were on our feet for ten hours, and we dragged the ancient servants after us till their legs gave out. My first thought was naturally for the kayaks, and we ascertained that they were not in the harbour. Gregarsen, the skipper of the now useless motor-boat, was positive that the children had been out in them in the morning, but he had a sort of notion that he had seen them return. The sea was like a mill-pond, so they could not have come to grief through ill weather. My special job was to range the coast, but nowhere on the east side of the island was there any sign of the kayaks, and I had to put the west side off till the next day. Lombard tried the fishing-lochs in case there had been a mishap there. As for Haraldsen I don't know what he did except to prowls about like a lost dog. He seemed almost demented, and hardly spoke a word.

When I returned to the House about 5.30, the riding lights of the Tjaldar across the Channel were just going out. I had a momentary idea that the children might have gone there, but I at once rejected it. Neither Peter John nor Anna was the sort of person to condemn their belongings to a night of needless anxiety.

At the corner of the lawn, where a high trellis had been erected to shield a bowling green, I found Haraldsen looking a good deal the worse for wear. But he did not look maniacal, as I must have looked. It was rather as if his mind had withdrawn itself from the outer world altogether. His eyes were almost sightless, like those of an old dog which moons about the doors. He had been in a queer 'fey' mood, ever since we arrived on the Island, but Anna's disappearance seemed to have taken the pin out of his wits altogether.

He was staring owlshly at something which was making a commotion at the top of the trellis — staring helplessly and doing nothing about it. It was a bird which had somehow got tangled in the top wires, and was flapping wildly upside-down on the end of a string, and was obviously in a fair way to perish from apoplexy. I saw that it was Morag, caught by her lead.

It didn't take me long to extricate her, and get savagely bitten in the process. I saw the paper round her leg, and with some difficulty unwound it. My first feeling, as I read it, was a deep thankfulness. At any rate the children were still in the land of the living.

They were on the Tjaldar. I saw the little ship across the Channel. She had got up steam, and was moving away from her anchorage with her head to the north. But she would return. The message had said that she was our enemies' base, and that on that day they would attack us.

The news pulled me out of my stupefied misery into a fury of action. I shouted at Haraldsen as if he were deaf. 'They've got the children,' I cried. 'Out there on the Tjaldar! God knows how, but they've got 'em. They've cut the telephone and wrecked the motor-boat, and today they are coming for us. . . . D'you hear? The children are safe so far. But we must prepare to meet an attack. Don't look like a stuck pig, man. At any rate now we have something to bite on.'

I hustled him into the House, where we found a very gummy-eyed Lombard. I raked up some breakfast from a demoralized household, but I remember that none of us could eat much, though we swallowed a good many cups of tea. And all the time I was discussing our scanty defences, simply to keep my mind and those of the others from ugly speculations. . . . We had a pretty poor lay-out. None of the old servants could be trusted with a gun, for your Norlander knows little of fire-arms. The only man who might have been of any use was old Absalon the fowler down at the clachan, and he was bedridden. The fighting-men were Haraldsen, Lombard, myself, and Geordie Hamilton — all of us fair shots, and Haraldsen, as I had discovered, a bit of a marksman. Happily we had plenty of weapons and ammunition. But we had a big area to hold, and the House was ill-adapted for defence — it could be approached on too many sides. We were bound to be outnumbered, and we were badly handicapped by the fact that the enemy had the two children as hostages. From what Sandy had told me of D'Ingraville it was not likely that he would be too scrupulous in the use of them. . . .

Sandy! The memory of him was like a blow in the face. What in God's name had happened to him? Here were we up to our necks in a row of his devising, and no word of him! I pictured him held up by an accident somewhere on the road, and

frantically trying to get a message through to an island which was now wholly cut off from the world.

I tried to think calmly and picture what an attack would be like. Our enemies were out for business, and their ways would not be gentle. What did they want? To occupy the House and ransack it at their leisure. Yes, but still more to get hold of Haraldsen. He was what really mattered. They must get their hands on him, and force him to do what they wanted. As for Lombard and me, they must silence us. Kill us, or hide us away somewhere for good. Or bribe us. The horrid thought struck me that they would try to bribe me with Peter John as the price.

I have never contemplated an uglier prospect, and the notion that the children were part of it made me sick at heart. No doubt the enemy would begin with overtures — Haraldsen and the House to be handed over — Lombard and myself to sign some kind of bond of conformity. When that was refused they would attack. We might stall them off for a bit and do them a certain amount of damage, but in the end we must be overpowered. . . . Was there any hope? Only to protract the business as long as possible on the chance that something might turn up. I tried to make a picture of Sandy hurrying to our rescue, but got little comfort out of it. If he was going to do anything, he would have been here long ago.

The sole way of spinning out the affair was to keep Haraldsen away from their hands. So long as he was uncaptured they had not won. Therefore he must be got out of the House into hiding. Was there any place of concealment?

He was more reasonable than I expected. He forced his mind back from its wanderings, and his eyes became more like those of a rational being. He saw my point. I had been afraid that his bellicosity would make him refuse to keep out of the scrap, but Anna's loss seemed to have weakened the spirit in him. He agreed that our only chance was to delay his own capture as long as possible. . . . There was one hiding-place known only to Anna and himself. I have mentioned that to the north of the House, at the end of a kind of covered arcade used for pot-plants, stood the little stone cell of an Irish hermit who had brought Christianity to the Norlands and had been murdered by the sea-rovers. The elder Haraldsen had restored this, and had put a roof on it, not of living turf like the House, but of ordinary thatch. In the floor of the cell the workmen had discovered steps which led downward to the sea, ending in a cave in the cliffs at the north side of the harbour. The discovery had been kept secret — which was the only alternative to blocking the place up — and the entrance was through a trap carefully concealed by a heavy bench which old Haraldsen had had made of driftwood.

This seemed to be what we wanted. I told Haraldsen that he must get to it at once, taking with him a lantern and a packet of food. If the worst happened and we were all scuppered or kidnapped, the attack would still have failed if he remained at large. I told him not to try to get out at the sea end, for then he would be certainly taken, but to stay tight in the passage till the enemy had gone, and then to try what he could do in the way of getting help. The one thing that mattered was that he himself should keep out of their hands. Addled as his wits were, I think that he understood this. He looked at me with eyes like a willing, but stupid, dog's. Arn fitted him out with food and light, but the last thing he did was to go up to his bedroom and fetch a light sporting rifle and some clips of cartridges. 'I shall feel safer with this,' he said, and I saw no harm in his being armed. The enemy might find the passage, and the show conclude with a scrap in the bowels of the earth. I saw him into the cell, watched his lantern flickering down a stone staircase like a precipice, and pulled the bench back over the trap. There can have been no lack of ventilation in that passage, for a current of air drew up it like a tornado.

Then Lombard and I set ourselves to barricade the House. It wasn't a great deal that we could do, for the place was big and rambling, and had not been built for defence. We shuttered the windows, and stacked furniture at the doors, and at the back parts, where the entrance was simplest, made a kind of abattis of derelict machines like chaff-cutters and mangles and even an old weaver's loom. The ancient servants were no use except to watch certain entrances and give timely warning. To Geordie Hamilton, who was something of a shot, I gave the front of the House, his post being a little pavilion at the south end. He was to let nobody approach the main door, and challenge anybody who showed his face on the Terrace. Lombard I placed in command of the rear. He distrusted his prowess with a rifle, and preferred to trust to four double-barrelled shot-guns. There was not much of a field of fire in the back parts, owing to the rise of the hill, and any assault there was likely to be close-quarters fighting. For myself I chose the roof, which gave me a prospect of the whole terrain. I could see little of the Island, for the lift of the hill blocked the view to north and south and west, but I had the Channel clear before me, and that would give me early news of the Tjaldar.

So I sat down among the lush greenery of the roof, with a chimney-stack as cover, a revolver in my pocket, a couple of .240 magazine rifles beside me, and my spirits as low as I ever remembered them. The thought of Peter John made me sick at heart. The message on Morag's leg said they were both safe, but that was nothing; they were on the Tjaldar, and that

meant in the enemy's power. D'Ingraville wasn't likely to fling away such a trump card. He would use these helpless children to the limit as bargaining counters, and if I refused to deal, he would not be scrupulous about the counters. . . . I remember wondering just how far his colleagues would approve of his methods — Troth and Barralty and the rest, who were probably more particular about the kind of crime in which they dabbled. But D'Ingraville would not pay much attention to the whimsies of sedentary folk who by this time must be putty in his hands. . . . I longed to see the Tjaldar appear, for, though that would mean the beginning of the end, it would also mean that I was within a mile or so of my son. I tried to concentrate my mind on a plan, but I simply could not think. I must wait and see how D'Ingraville opened the action.

It was a mild morning, growing closer as it neared midday. The visibility was only moderate, but the Channel was clear, and there was no Tjaldar in it. . . . Five minutes after twelve, just when I was thinking of taking a look round our defences, I saw the first sign of the enemy. Some one keeping well in cover came over the skirts of Snowfell, and took up position to the north of the House, about half a mile off. My glass showed me that he had a seaman's boots and jersey, and that he was armed. The timing must have been good, because five minutes later the sudden clamour of a flock of black-backed gulls to the south made me turn that way, and I saw a second man of the same type ensconce himself just behind the reservoir and rake the House and the gardens with his glasses. I knew now what was happening. D'Ingraville was getting his vedettes placed, so as to prevent any movement out of the House. The earths were being stopped before the pack came up. . . . I turned my glass on Snowfell. There were two men squatting on its upper scree.

A thought struck me which gave me a moment of comfort. Why did he take these precautions? He must have thought, not only that we were helpless, but that we were unsuspecting. The breakdown of the telephone and the motor-boat might have alarmed us, but we had no cause to assume the near presence of the enemy. Or the Tjaldar as his base. But Anna and Peter John knew! Could they have escaped? Could D'Ingraville imagine that they were now in the House? . . . I rejected the vain hope. How could the children get out of the clutches of men who left nothing to chance? Or why should these men imagine that we could escape when we had nowhere to fly to? . . .

Nothing happened for an hour or two. I descended from my perch and made a tour of the House. Geordie Hamilton had seen nothing — he was too low down for any long views. Lombard too had not much of a prospect, and the watchmen on Snowfell were just beyond his radius of vision. I left Geordie lunching solidly off bread-and-cheese and beer, had a pow-wow with Lombard, and returned to my watch-tower. I noticed that the weather was changing. It was getting very dark to the east over Halder, the Channel was being flawed with odd little cat's-paws, and, though it was still close, I had the feeling of being in a hot room next to an ice box — as if something sharp and bitter were just round the corner.

Close on three o'clock there came a diversion. There was a shot behind me, and when I looked over the ridge of the roof I saw some stone splinters clattering off one of the byres. I hastened down to investigate, and found that it was Lombard who had drawn fire. He had remembered that Morag was immured in the cheese-house, and would probably be pretty thirsty. So he had set out to water her, and had been observed by a picket, who had fired a warning shot which sent him back to cover. The earth-stoppers were taking their job seriously.

A few minutes later we got our first news of the hounds. Round the seaward cliff north of the harbour came the bows of a ship. I had not seen the Tjaldar at close quarters before, and at first did not recognize her. As seen at her moorings under Halder she had looked a smaller craft. But with my glass I picked out her name. She was showing no colours, for the Danish flag was no longer at her masthead. . . .

I did not see her anchor and lower her boats. For she was no sooner off the mouth of the voe than the gloom which had been brooding over the Channel burst in the father and mother of a storm. I would have been beaten off my perch if I had not found some shelter from the chimney stack. In a minute or two the grass of the roof was white with hailstones the size of a sparrow's eggs. The garden, the terrace, the hillside looked deep in snow. And with the hail came a wind that cut like a knife. It must have been the better part of half an hour before the tornado passed, and I could look seaward at anything but a blinding scurry.

There was the Tjaldar, white as a ship marooned in the Arctic ice, rocking in a sea which had suddenly become sullen and yeasty. Her starboard ladder was down, but there was no sign of boats. These must have landed. On her deck I thought I saw the flutter of a woman's dress. . . . And then I looked at the foreground, where a path from the harbour climbed on to the terrace. In the same second of time I saw heads appear above the terrace's edge, and heard Geordie Hamilton's challenge. The heads disappeared. I found a better stance in the corner of my chimney-stack and picked up one of the

rifles. I considered that presently I might have to get busy.

The Tjaldar's party were no fools. Some of them must have gone south under the cliff to their picket stationed beside the reservoir, and learned from him how we had placed our men. I had hoped that Geordie had kept himself well in cover, but he must have shown himself to the sentry, who told the new-comers of his whereabouts. Anyhow, the next thing I heard was a roar like a bull's from Geordie's little pavilion, and I had a glimpse of a confused struggle there which ended in a sudden silence. The Scots Fusilier had been overpowered, and one of the three defenders put out of action. . . .

The next act followed fast. The terrace became suddenly populous, and the new-comers were unchallenged. D'Ingraville had not underrated his opponents, for to match our miserable trio he had brought at least twenty. I did not count the numbers beneath me, but there were at least a score, and there were also the pickets to be reckoned with. Clearly they knew all about us, for, now that Geordie Hamilton had been dealt with, they seemed at their ease. They were following a prearranged plan, based on exact knowledge of the place, for some made their way to the back parts, and some to the arcade which led to the hermit's cell, but more waited at the foot of the steps which led to the main door. They were grouped in two bodies with an alley between them, and seemed to be waiting for somebody.

Who that was soon appeared. Up the alley came three men. I had no doubt about who they were, for I remembered Sandy's descriptions. D'Ingraville was the tall fellow in the yachting cap and grey flannels — he had grown his beard again and looked like a naval officer, except that his light, springy stride was scarcely the walk of the quarter-deck. The dark, lean man, with the long face made in two planes, was Carreras the Spaniard. And beyond doubt the slim one, in the much-stained blue suit and the cap a little over one eye, was Martel, the Belgian.

Of the others I had only a vague general impression, as of something hard, tough, and ruthless, but well-disciplined. This might be a posse of gangsters, but they would obey orders like a Guards battalion. But the three leaders made the clearest and sharpest impact on my mind. They were perhaps three hundred yards away from me, but their personalities seemed as vivid as if they were in the same room. I had an overpowering impression of a burning vitality which was also evil, a glowing, incandescent evil. It cried out from the taut lines of D'Ingraville, from his poise like that of a waiting leopard. It clamoured from Carreras's white, pitiless face. Above all it seemed to me that it shouted from the Belgian Martel's mean, faun-like presence. It was the last one I hated worst. D'Ingraville was a fallen angel, Carreras a common desperado, but Martel seemed to be apache, sewer-rat, and sneak-thief all in one.

They had something to say to us. I moved out from the shelter of the chimney, was instantly seen, and covered by twenty guns. I dropped my own rifle and held up my hand.

'Will you gentlemen kindly tell me your business?' I shouted against the east wind.

It was D'Ingraville who replied. He bowed, and his two queer companions did the same.

'Sir Richard Hannay, isn't it?' he said, and his pleasant voice coming down wind was easily heard. 'We want a talk with Mr. Haraldsen. But it would perhaps save time — and trouble — if I could first have a word with Lord Clanroyden.'

'Sorry,' I shouted. 'Mr. Haraldsen is not at home. He has left the island.'

From where I stood I could see the smile on his face, repeated in those of his two companions. They knew very well that I was lying.

'How unfortunate!' he said. 'Well, what about Lord Clanroyden?'

Did they know that we were without Sandy? Or was this a fishing question? Or did they believe that he was in the House? Anyhow, it was not for me to enlighten them.

'If you have anything to say you can say it to me,' I said. 'Go ahead, for it's devilish cold waiting.'

'A roof-top is scarcely the place for a conference,' said D'Ingraville. 'Won't you come down, Sir Richard, from your eyrie? It's a cold day, as you justly observe, and we might talk indoors.'

'All right,' I said, 'I'll come down.' And then, as I looked at the three men, I had a sudden inspiration. I had meant to ask that D'Ingraville should be their envoy, when I observed the man Martel standing in an odd position, his left arm flung across his chest and clutching the biceps of his right. That was an attitude I had seen before, and it woke in me a wild surmise. It might be meant as a sign. My mind was pretty hopeless, for their desire to talk seemed to me certain proof that they wanted to make terms about the children, but it was just not sodden enough to miss this little thing.

'You can keep yourself for Lord Clanroyden,' I told D'Ingraville. 'I'll do my talking to that other chap — the one on your

left. Send him forward, and I'll let him indoors.'

'If there's any dirty work,' said D'Ingraville, his voice suddenly becoming shrill, 'you'll pay for it bloodily. You understand that?'

'I do. I'll leave the door open so that you can keep your eye on me, and plug me if I try to be funny.'

I went downstairs with an ugly void at the bottom of my stomach. Old Arn was on guard at the main door, and had built up a perfect battlement of furniture, which it took some minutes to clear away. When I got the door opened and the east wind in my face, I saw that the three men had moved nearer — close to the foot of the steps. I beckoned to Martel.

'You two stay where you are,' I said. 'This man and I will be inside the hall out of the wind. We'll be well in sight.' I turned and reentered the House. I heard footsteps on the stone and was conscious that Martel had joined me. My heart was in my mouth, for I was certain that his first word would be about the children and the price we were prepared to pay for them.

I swung round on him. 'Well?' I demanded. 'What do you want?'

But the words died away on my lips.

Said the man called Martel, 'Dick, my lad, we've made rather a hash of this business.'

God knows how he had managed it. There was no ordinary makeup about him, no false moustache or dyed hair or that sort of thing. But in some subtle way he had degraded himself — that is the only word for it. Everything about him — slanting eyebrows, furtive eyes, tricky mouth, slouching shoulders — was mean and sinister, because he chose that it should be so. But when he looked me in the face, with that familiar twinkle in his eyes and that impish pucker of the lips, he was the friend I knew best in the world.

There was just an instant when his eyes had the old insouciance. Then they became very grave.

'We must talk fast, for there isn't much time. I've made a deuce of a mess of things, and I thought I was being rather clever. First — to ease your mind. Peter John and the girl are safe — for the moment, at any rate.'

'Thank God!' I said fervently. Such a load was lifted from my heart that I felt almost confident. But Sandy's next words disillusioned me.

'I've done most of what I set out to do. I've got Barralty and his lot scared into fits. No more high-handed crimes for them! They're sitting in the Tjaldar sweating with terror. . . . I've collected enough evidence to keep them good for the rest of their lives, and incidentally to hang D'Ingraville and most of his crowd. Do you realize that up to now we had nothing against him that any court would listen to? . . . So I had to make him commit himself. You see that? He had to attack Haraldsen in his island, and have a show-down once and for all. Well, I thought I had got him taped. I was counting on Haraldsen doing as he promised to do, and having a hefty push of young islanders to defend him. I would know D'Ingraville's plans, being his chief staff-officer, and so could play into their hands. And lo and behold! when I get here, I find there's not a soul in the island but dotards, and the whole place is as unprotected as a stranded whale.' He stopped and sniffed, and then said a strange thing. 'Just the weather for the Grind,' he said. 'Gad, that would be a bit of luck.'

Then he demanded, 'Where's Haraldsen?' I told him and he nodded. 'I hope he'll stay in his earth. . . . See here, Dick. The layout as I planned it was that D'Ingraville should be encouraged to attack you and so commit himself. But before he had time to do any harm, your supports would arrive and hold him. Well, that's a wash-out, for there are no supports. I have got word to the Danish destroyer that patrols the fishing banks. She's on her way, but she's coming from the Westmanns, and can't be here much before midnight. That gives D'Ingraville time to do the deuce of a lot of damage. I tried to have the attack delayed, and I managed to have it put off till now — it was arranged for this morning — principally because I got them hunting for the children. But now we're for it. It's seven or eight hours till midnight, time enough for D'Ingraville to cut all our throats if he wants to. If he gets hold of Haraldsen there may be some ugly work. If it's only you and Lombard he'll be content perhaps with ransacking the House. How long can you stick it?'

'An hour maybe,' I said. 'We've no manpower to keep them out. They are old hands, and won't give us much of a chance of picking them off piecemeal.'

'They won't,' he said. 'If you can make it three hours we might do the trick. . . . I'll go back and report that you won't treat. I'll say you can agree to nothing without Haraldsen's consent, and that he isn't here, and that you'll do your damndest to defend his property. I'll try to tangle up things at the other end. I'll have to come over to you some time, but I'll choose my own time for that — the moment when I can be of most use. If D'Ingraville finds that he has been diddled

and gets his hands on me, then my number is up, and I won't be any use to you as a corpse.'

As Sandy spoke I had a vivid memory of a bush-crowned hillock in the African moonlight, when, to defend another Haraldsen, Lombard and I had imperilled our lives. I seemed to have done all this before, and to know what was coming next, and that foreknowledge gave me confidence. I must have smiled, for Sandy looked at me sharply.

'You're taking this calmly, Dick. You know it's a devilish tight fix, don't you? The one hope is midnight and the Danish boat. Spin things out till then without a tragedy and we have won. I must be off.' He waved his hand to D'Ingraville at the foot of the steps and turned to go. His last word was, 'Keep Haraldsen off the stage for Heaven's sake. He's our weakest point.' He went down the steps, and the next second I had clanged the great hall-door behind him and dropped the bolts. I left old Arn piling up the barricade again and skipped up to my post behind the chimney-stack, with the intention of doing some fancy shooting. I saw Sandy conferring with D'Ingraville and Carreras, looking once again the murderous scallywag.

Suddenly, in a pause of the wind, a voice rang out, a voice coming from the north, from the hermit's cell at the end of the arcade.

'Off the terrace,' it shouted. 'Back to your sties, you swine, or I shoot.'

It was Haraldsen — there could be no mistaking that voice — but it seemed to be raised to an unearthly pitch and compass, for it filled the place like the rumour of the sea in a voe. D'Ingraville's ruffians were accustomed to the need for cover, and suddenly the whole gang seemed to shrink in size, as it splayed out and crouched with an uneasy eye on the north. All but one — Carreras. I don't know what took the man. Perhaps he was looking for shelter in the lee of the steps and the House — at any rate, he moved forward instead of back. A shot cracked out, he flung up one arm, spun half-left, and dropped on his face.

In an instant every man of them was flat on the ground, worming his way back to the terrace wall which would give refuge from that deadly rifle. Then the voice spoke again, and what it said must have considerably surprised one at least of the crawlers.

'Clanroyden,' it shouted. 'Back to the House with you! Quick, man! Do as I tell you. I can't handle that scum if there's a friend mixed up in it.'

How on earth he saw who Martel was I cannot tell. But it was a foolish move, and it came very near being the end of Sandy. It was the words 'Back to the House' that did the mischief, for they enabled D'Ingraville to identify the man Martel, when otherwise it might have seemed a mere bluff. At any rate so Sandy thought, for to my horror I saw him scramble to his feet from behind a clump of Arctic willows. He knew his danger, for he twisted and side-slipped like a rabbit. I was choking with fright, for I couldn't get down to the main door in time, and there was Arn's barricade to get out of the way: the front of the House was bare of cover, and till he got round the corner of it he was in the centre of an easy field of fire. But only one shot followed him, and I'm pretty certain it did not come from D'Ingraville; he must have been confident of getting his revenge at leisure. The shot missed its mark — I believe that the reason was that the fugitive at the moment stumbled over the dead Carreras. In a few seconds he was out of my orbit of sight. He would be safe in the back parts for the time being, unless he fell in with a stray picket.

Presently he was out of my mind as well, for all my attention was fixed on D'Ingraville. He had got his main force under cover of the terrace wall — out of Haraldsen's danger, and it was plain enough what he proposed to do. It was child's play to take Haraldsen in flank and rear. The cell's door and window opened to the south, and its inmate could protect himself in that direction, but what could he do against an attack from above by way of the thatched roof? Three sturdy fellows with five minutes' work could uncover the badger's earth.

A figure squeezed in beside me behind the chimney-stack. 'A close call,' said Sandy. 'The bullet went through my pocket. If I hadn't tripped and turned side on, I'd be dead. . . . What's our friend up to? Oh, I see. Fire. They'll burn the thatch and smoke him out. This is our worst bit of luck. If only that damned fool had stuck in his burrow, instead of trying to be heroic. I dare say he's off his head. Did you hear his voice? Only a madman's could ring like that. And he gave me away, the blighter, though God knows how he spotted me! Another proof of lunacy! This show's turning out pretty badly, Dick. In about half an hour D'Ingraville will have got Haraldsen, and very soon he'll have got me, and he won't be nice to either of us.'

A kind of dusk had fallen owing to the cloud-wrack drifting up with the east wind, and the prospect from my roof-top was only of leaden skies and a black, fretful sea. The terrace was empty, but I could see what was happening beyond it, and

I watched it with the fascinated eyes of a spectator at a cinema, held by what I saw, but subconsciously aware of the artifice of it all. My mind simply refused to take this mad world into which I had strayed as an actual thing, though my reason told me that it was a grim enough reality. I caught a glimpse of one figure after another among the stunted shrubberies and sunk plots which lay north and east of the hermit's cell. Then an exclamation from Sandy called my attention to the cell itself. There was a man on its roof pouring something out of a bucket. 'Petrol,' Sandy whispered. 'I guessed right. They'll burn him out.'

A tongue of flame shot up which an instant later became a globe of fire. A spasm of wind swept it upwards in a long golden curl. Directly beneath me I saw men appear again on the terrace. It was safe enough now — for Haraldsen could scarcely shoot from a fiery furnace.

D'Ingraville was looking up at us, for he had guessed where Sandy would have taken position.

'You have kept your promise, Lord Clanroyden,' he cried. 'I am glad of that, for this would have been a dull place without you.'

Sandy showed himself fully.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I like to keep my word.'

'You have won the first trick,' the pleasant voice continued. 'At least you have deceived me very prettily, and I am not easily deceived. I make you my compliments. But I don't think you will win the rubber. When we have secured that madman, I will give myself the pleasure of attending to you.'

I have called his voice pleasant, and for certain it was now curiously soft and gentle, though notably clear. But there was something feline in it, like the purring of a cat. There he stood with his wild crew about him, elegant, debonair, confident, and as pitiless as sin. The sight of him struck a chill in my heart. In a very little we should be at his mercy, and it was hours — hours — before there was any hope of succour. I was not alarmed for myself, or even for Haraldsen, who seemed now to have got outside the pale of humanity; but I saw nothing before Sandy except destruction, for two men had wagered against each other their lives. . . . And the children! Where and in what peril were they crouching in this accursed island? . . .

Suddenly there was a roar which defied the wind and made D'Ingraville's voice a twitter. It was such a thunder of furious exultation as might have carried a Viking chief into his last battle. Out from the cell came Haraldsen. His figure was lit up by the blazing roof and every detail was clear. He was wearing his queer Norland clothes, and his silver buckles and buttons caught the glint of fire. One part of his face was scorched black, the rest was of a ghostly pallor. His shaggy hair was like a coronet of leaves on a tall pine. He had no weapon and he held his hands before him as if he were blind and groping. Yet he moved like a boulder rushing down a mountain, and it seemed scarcely a second before he was below me on the terrace.

There was no mistaking his purpose. The man had gone berserk, and was prepared to face a host and rend them with his naked fingers. Had I been near enough to see his eyes, I knew that they would have been fixed and glassy. . . . Once in Beira I saw a Malay run amok with a great knife. The crowd he was in were almost all armed, but the queer thing was that not a shot was fired at the man, and he had cut a throat and split two skulls before he was tripped up and sat upon by a drunken sailor coming down a side street, who hadn't a notion what was afoot. That was what happened now. There were men behind him with guns, there were twenty men on the terrace with rifles and pistols, yet this tornado with death in its face was permitted to sweep down on them unhindered. A palsy seemed to have taken them, like what happens, I have been told, to mountaineers in the track of a descending avalanche.

What befell next must have taken many minutes, but to me it seemed to be a mere instant of time. I was not conscious till it was all over that Sandy beside me had grabbed my wrist in his excitement and dug his nails into my flesh. . . . D'Ingraville was standing in the front of a little group which seemed to close round him as the whirlwind approached. Haraldsen swept them aside like dead leaves, but whether the compulsion was physical or moral I cannot tell. He plucked D'Ingraville in his arms as I might have lifted a child of three. Then, and not till then, there was a shot. D'Ingraville had used his gun, but I know not what became of the bullet. It certainly did not touch Haraldsen.

Haraldsen held up his captive to the heavens like a priest offering a sacrifice. He had drawn himself to his full height, and in the brume to my scared eyes looked larger than human. D'Ingraville wriggled half out of his clutch, and seemed to be tossed in the air and recaught in a fiercer grip. The next I knew was that Haraldsen had turned north again and was

racing back towards the hermit's cell.

Then the shooting began. The men on the terrace aimed at his legs — I saw rifle bullets kick up flurries of dust from the flower beds. But for some unknown reason they missed him. The men near the cell tried to stop him, but he simply trampled them underfoot. Only one of them fired a shot, and we found the mark of it later in a furrow through his hair. . . . He was past them, and at the blazing cell where the last rafter was now dropping into a fiery pit. For a moment I thought he was going to make a burnt-offering of D'Ingraville, who by this time must have had the life half squeezed out of him in that fierce embrace. But no. He avoided the cell, and swung half-right to the downland above the sea.

By this time he was out of sight of the terrace, but in full view of Sandy and me on the roof-top. We might write off D'Ingraville now, for he was beyond hope. Haraldsen's pace never slackened. He took great leaps among the hags and boulders, and by some trick of light his figure seemed to increase instead of diminish with distance, so that when he came out on the cliff edge, and was silhouetted against the sky, it was gigantic.

Then I remembered one of his island tales which he had told us on our first arrival — told with a gusto and realism like that of an eyewitness. It was the story of one Hallward Skullsplitter who had descended a thousand years ago upon the Island of Sheep and cruelly ravaged it. But a storm had cut him off with two companions from his ships, and the islanders had risen, bound the Vikings hand and foot, and hurled them into the sea from the top of Foulness. . . . It was Foulness I was now looking at, where the land mouth of the harbour ran up to a sea-cliff of three hundred feet.

I had guessed right. At first I thought that Haraldsen meant to seek his own death also. But he steadied himself on the brink, swung D'Ingraville in his great arms, and sent him hurtling into the void. For a second he balanced himself on the edge and peered down after him into the depths. Then he turned and staggered back. I got my glasses on to him and saw that he had dropped on the turf like a dead man.

A tremendous drama is apt to leave one limp and dulled. D'Ingraville was gone, but his jackals remained, and now they would be more desperate than ever with no leader to think for them. Our lives were still on a razor's edge, and it was high time for a plan of campaign. But Sandy and I clutched each other limply like two men with vertigo.

'Poor devil!' said Sandy at last. 'He can't have known what was coming. Haraldsen must have hugged him senseless.'

'We're quit of a rascal,' I said; 'but we've got a maniac on our hands.'

'I don't think so. The fury is out of him. He returned to type for a little, and is now his sober commonplace self again.' He held out his watch. 'Not yet seven! Five hours to keep these wolves at bay. Hungry and leaderless wolves — a nasty proposition! . . . Great God! What is that?'

He was staring southward, and when I looked there I saw a sight which bankrupted me of breath. The murky gloaming was lit to the north by the last flames of the hermit's cell, but to the south there was a breach in the gloom and a lagoon of clear sky was spreading. Already the rim of the southern downs was outlined sharply against it. In that oasis of light I saw strange things happening. . . . At sea a flotilla of boats was nearing the harbour on a long tack, and one or two, driven by sweeps, were coming up the shore. Across the hill moved an army of men, not less than a hundred strong, sweeping past the reservoir, overflowing the sunk lawn, men shaggy and foul with blood, and each with a reeking spear.

The sight was clean beyond my comprehension, and I could only stare and gasp. It was as if a legion of trolls had suddenly sprung out of the earth, for these men were outside all my notions of humanity. They had the troll-like Norland dress, now stained beyond belief with mud and blood; their hair and eyes were like the wild things of the hills; the cries that came from their throats were not those of articulate-speaking men, and each had his shining, crimsoned lance. . . . Dimly I saw the boats enter the harbour and their occupants swarm into the Tjaldar like cannibal islanders attacking a trading ship. Dimly I saw D'Ingraville's men below me cast one look at the murderous invasion and then break wildly for the shore. I didn't blame them. The sight of that maniacal horde had frozen my very marrow.

Dimly I heard Sandy mutter, 'My God, the Grind has come.'

I didn't know what he meant, but something had come which I understood. In the forefront of the invaders were Anna and Peter John.



CHAPTER 16

THE RIDDLE OF THE TABLET

I have often wondered how we should define the courage of the ordinary rascal. A contempt, doubtless, for certain kinds of danger with which he is familiar and which for him have lost the terrors of the unknown. Not a settled habit of mind, for often he will be paralysed by the unexpected, and thrown into a panic by what is outside his experience. The first happened when Haraldsen went berserk and plucked D'Ingraville out of the heart of his gang; the second, when several score of ensanguined Norlanders turned the knees of the gang to water. Certainly it was the wildest spectacle I ever beheld, and he would have been a stout fellow who stood up against that nightmare army of bloodstained trolls. . . . As a matter of fact, two of the gang did put up some kind of resistance with their guns, and perished as if they had been pilot-whales. I doubt if the Norlanders knew what they were doing. Like Haraldsen they had gone back to type — they were their forebears of a thousand years ago making short work of a pirate crew.

The rest, who surrendered like sheep, were not maltreated, but were trussed up like bundles of hay with the home-made ropes that every Norlander carries with him. The detachment in the boats who had swarmed over the Tjaldar behaved with extreme circumspection. I fancy that the atmosphere of a modern steamer got them out of their atavistic dreams quicker than their kinsmen on the land. They were civil to Barralty and his friends, though they found it hard to find a common tongue, and, having brought the vessel round to a better anchorage and left everything shipshape about her, they came ashore soberly to take counsel with the rest of us.

For the madness did not take long to ebb. The case of Haraldsen was curious. As soon as I saw that there was no fear of resistance and that the Norlanders were ready to do whatever Anna told them, I started off with Peter John for the top of the cliffs, for Haraldsen seemed to be the one big problem left. I found him sitting up on the turf, with his huge fists stuck in his eyes like a sleepy child. I think it was the sight of Peter John, who had always been his close friend, that gave him a bridge back to the ordinary world.

'Anna's all right, sir,' said the boy. 'She's down there with all the Norland men behind her.'

'Good!' he said. 'They'll do what she tells them. Have the Grind come to my island?'

Peter John nodded.

'It is the first time for ten years,' said Haraldsen. 'I must go down and arrange about food and drink. The Grind are a hungry and thirsty job, and a dirty one.'

His wits were still wool-gathering, and I tried to steady them.

'You're safe,' I said, 'and the House, and Lord Clanroyden and all of us. You need never give another thought to this trouble.'

'I am glad of that,' he said dully. 'There was a lot of trouble. Where is the tall man with the beard?'

'Dead,' I said, 'in the sea.'

'He would be' was the odd answer. 'He came out of the sea, and he has returned to it.'

Then he yawned, his limbs relaxed, and before I could count five he was fast asleep. I knew better than to waken him. We got together a sort of litter, and had him carried down to the House, where he was put to bed and slept for thirty-two hours. He woke ravenous, had a bath and shaved, and then ate the better part of a ham and emptied three coffee-pots. He remembered not one solitary thing between his discovery that the children were lost and his waking in his own bed, and it wasn't for me to enlighten him. But one thing that berserk fit had done for him: it had drained him for good of timidity. He was now as steady-nerved and confident as his father had been, and a hundred per cent. more restful.

The fishery boat arrived an hour before midnight, by which time we had taken counsel, not only among ourselves, but with the folk on the Tjaldar and had settled on our story. It was no good having the true business broadcast to the world. Barralty and his people had gone yachting with D'Ingraville, who had picked his crew and had forced them into an attack on the Island of Sheep for his own purposes. They had refused to come on shore, and had seen nothing of the doings on land. The fortunate advent of the Grind had averted tragedy. The children had found the Islanders and had led them to the House, where we had been putting up a forlorn defence. Haraldsen had picked off one of the desperadoes, and had fought

with D'Ingraville on the cliff-top to the latter's doom. (Sandy could provide a dossier of D'Ingraville which would prevent unavailing regrets about his end.) The coming of the Islanders had led to the general surrender of the invaders, two of the latter being the only casualties.

D'Ingraville's gang was a collection of blackguards of various races which it was left for the Copenhagen courts to sort out and deal with. Most of them were rather urgently wanted by their several countries. The Tjaldar, which had been chartered in Troth's name, had the rudiments of a regular crew who had not been mixed up in the piracy, and it was arranged that, under the convoy of the Danish destroyer, she should return to Aberdeen.

With the clearing away of our anxieties came a clearing of the skies. The Norlands seemed to swim into a zone of halcyon weather — sunlit days, calm seas, and wonderful, long-lit, golden evenings. When I came there first I thought I was getting outside the world, and then presently I found that I was indeed outside the world in a nightmarish limbo. Now that the nightmare had gone, the Island seemed a happy place, where life could be worthily lived in the company of sea-tides, and friendly wild things, and roaring mornings, and blissful drowsy afternoons. To me it was Fosse, and to Sandy it was Laverlaw, but both, so to speak, set in a world of new dimensions. To Lombard, the man whom I had once thought of as degenerated into a sleek mediocrity, it was a revelation. It had brought back to him something of his youth and his youth's dreams.

I remember that he and I sat together on the highest point of Snowfell, looking across the empty Channel to Haldar, bright as a jewel in the sunshine. The Tjaldar and the fishery boat were at anchor below us; beside us curlew and plover kept up a gentle complaining; around us, except in the east, there was a great circle of glittering sea. The landscape was as delicate and unsubstantial as the country of a dream.

'I shall come back to the Norlands,' said Lombard, shaking out his pipe. 'It was good of you to let me into this show, Hannay; I hope I haven't misconducted myself.'

'You were the steadiest of the lot,' I said warmly. 'You never gave a cheep even when things looked ugliest.'
He laughed.

'I often wanted to. But I'm glad to find I haven't gone quite soft. I never really thought I had. But I've let myself get dull and flat. That's what this business has taught me. I want to get air and space round me, for I live in a dashed stuffy world. . . . So I'm coming back to the Norlands to make my soul.'

I suppose I must have looked at him in surprise, for he laughed again. 'You know well enough what I mean. The Norlands are a spiritual place which you won't find on any map. Every man must discover his own Island of Sheep. You and Clanroyden have found yours, and I'm going to find mine.'

My last recollection is of two meals in the great hall of the House. The first was the night of the coming of the Grind, or rather the small hours of the following morning. The Danish fishery boat had arrived; the malefactors were safely stowed away; and, while Haraldsen lay in his bed upstairs, in the hall were gathered the Norlanders who had saved us, both the boat parties and those who had come by land — the officers of the destroyer — Sandy, Lombard, and myself — and Anna and Peter John. The children seemed to have got their second wind, for, having been very tired and drowsy at first, they woke up before midnight to an astonishing vigour. The Danish officers, who knew the Norlands well and also Haraldsen, were the friendliest of souls. As for the Norlanders, to them the Island of Sheep was the home of legend and the Haraldsen family the centre of their mythology. At first they were shy and laggard, for your Norlander is an excellent giver but a poor taker. But they were very hungry, and Arn had provided a feast of fat things, and in twenty minutes they had squared their elbows to the job and were as merry as grigs.

I shall never forget that scene. Arn had supplemented the electric light by several score of candles, and the huge place was as bright as day. The tapestries, the carved grotesques, the many ships' models, the curious panelling — their minutest lines and their subtlest colours were displayed in that fierce radiance. And below sat a company which might have come out of a picture in a child's Grimm. Many of the islanders wore their cowls, for they were in doubt as to whether that vast hall should be reckoned a dwelling. And at the head of the long oaken table, in a chair like a galley's beak, sat Anna. I had never seen anything quite like her. She had changed from rough clothes into a white silk gown, and the coronel of lights under which she sat made her seem a creature of gold and ivory. She ruled the feast, too. It was she who gave the toasts; it was she who in musical Norland thanked our preservers. Here was the true fairy-tale princess, the Queen out of the North, and to that wild gathering she lent an air of high ceremonial. But she was a stony-hearted princess, for she insisted on

toasting Peter John. I don't know what she said about him, but it got the Norlanders out of their seats and he was hoisted — Morag angrily protesting — on a dozen shoulders. A speech was demanded, and his was of two sentences. 'Thank you all very much. — Anna, you beast, I'll pay you out for this.'

The second meal was the following day, when the Tjaldar was about to sail under the convoy of the Danish destroyer, and the islanders had returned to their homes. We had the Tjaldar party to dinner, and Haraldsen himself was the host. I have never been present on a more fantastic occasion. Sandy said we had to do it, to mark the close of hostilities, but it was a pretty cruel business for the exconspirators. Albinus was a dingy figure, still considerably rattled. Barralty was the frightened intellectual trying to recover his poise, but he was a long way short of getting back his self-esteem. The lady was the most composed. She wore a charming gown, and had the wit not to make any pretences. They had got themselves into an ugly show, and were now quit of it and correspondingly grateful. But they all looked at Sandy in some awe. I gathered that, as Martel, he had been chiefly responsible for scaring the life out of them.

I think I may say that we all behaved well. Lombard talked the City to Barralty and Troth, Sandy had some polite things to say about politics, a great deal of information was vouchsafed about the Norlands, some of Haraldsen's treasures were exhibited, and Miss Ludlow was caressingly sweet to Anna. I should add that old Arn excelled himself, that the food was perfection, and that the best of Haraldsen's cellar was forthcoming. This last point was especially appreciated by Troth, who soon relaxed into bonhomie. I found him a very friendly fellow, with sensible notions about the Essex creeks and tides.

It was he who, before they left, made an attempt at an apology.

'I hope, Mr. Haraldsen,' he said, 'that we're all going to forgive and forget.'

Haraldsen looked down on him from his great height.

'I ask for nothing better,' he said. 'I understand that you feel some grievance against me, Mr. Troth. On my father's account, I think, and for your own father's sake? Well, we are willing that some reparation should be made. Lord Clanroyden will tell you what.'

Sandy took from his pocket something in a chamois-leather wrapping.

'This belonged to the late Mr. Haraldsen,' he said. 'It came into my hands in rather an odd way, about which I wrote to the papers. I do not intend to hand it over to the British Museum. I propose, Mr. Troth, to give it to you in full settlement of any claims you may think you have against the late Mr. Haraldsen's estate.'

He took from a bag the tablet of emerald jade which he had shown us at Fosse.

Troth received it with a face in which surprise, greed, and a kind of shame were mingled. He turned the lovely thing over in his hands, made as if to read the inscription, and then looked at Sandy a little confusedly.

'D'you mean that, Lord Clanroyden?' he asked. 'It's extraordinarily good of you. Of course I give up any claims — I had already given them up. D'you mean me to act on what this tablet may tell me?'

'Certainly.'

'And to keep for myself whatever I may find?'

'Certainly. For yourself, and any friends you want to share with you.'

Troth peered at the inscription.

'One side's in Latin. The other side — the important side — I suppose I can get that translated?'

'It has been already translated,' said Sandy gravely. 'I have seen to that.'

'And you found?' The eternal treasure-hunter was in Troth's voice.

'We found a list of the Twelve Major Virtues and the Ninety-Nine Names of God!'



Sick Heart River

John Buchan



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE

PART I

*"Thus said Alfred:
If thou hast a woe, tell it not to the weakling,
Tell it to thy saddle-bow, and ride singing forth."*

—PROVERBS OF ALFRED.

1

Leithen had been too busy all day to concern himself with the thoughts which hung heavily at the back of his mind. In the morning he had visited his bankers to look into his money affairs. These were satisfactory enough: for years he had been earning a large income and spending little of it; his investments were mostly in trustee stocks; he found that he possessed, at a safe computation, a considerable fortune, while his Cotswold estate would find a ready sale. Next came his solicitors, for he was too wise a man to make the mistake of many barristers and tinker with his own will. He gave instructions for bringing the old one up to date. There were a few legacies by way of mementoes to old friends, a considerable gift to his college, donations to certain charities, and the residue to his nephew Charles, his only near relation.

He forced himself to lunch at one of his clubs, in a corner where no one came near him, though Archie Roylance waved a greeting across the dining-room. Then he spent a couple of hours with his clerk in his Temple chambers, looking through the last of his briefs. There were not a great many, since, for some months, he had been steadily refusing work. The batch of cases for opinion he could soon clear off, and one big case in the Lords he must argue next week, for it involved a point of law in which he had always taken a special interest. The briefs for the following term would be returned. The clerk, who had been with him for thirty years, was getting on in life and would be glad to retire on an ample pension. Still, it was a painful parting.

"It's a big loss to the Bar, Sir Edward, sir," old Mellon said, "and it's pretty well the end of things for me. You have been a kind master to me, sir, and I'm proud to have served you. I hope you are going to have many happy years yet."

But there had been a look of pain in the old man's eyes which told Leithen that he had guessed what he dared not hint at.

He had tea at the House of Commons with the Chief Whip, a youngish man named Ritson, who in the War had been a subaltern in his own battalion. Ritson listened to him with a wrinkled brow and troubled eyes.

"Have you told your local people?" he asked.

"I'll write to them tomorrow. I thought I ought to tell you first. There's no fear of losing the seat. My majority has never been less than six thousand, and there's an excellent candidate ready in young Walmer."

"We shall miss you terribly, you know. There's no one to take your place."

Leithen smiled. "I haven't been pulling my weight lately."

"Perhaps not. But I'm thinking of what's coming. If there's an election, we're going to win all right, and we'll want you badly in the new Government. It needn't be a law office. You can have your pick of half a dozen jobs. Only yesterday the Chief was speaking to me about you." And he repeated a conversation he had had with the man who would be the next Prime Minister.

"You're all very kind. But I don't think I want anything. I've done enough, as Napoleon said, 'pour chauffer la gloire.'"

"Is it your health?" Ritson asked.

"Well, I need a rest. I've been pretty busy all my days and I'm tired."

The Chief Whip hesitated.

"Things are pretty insecure in the world just now. There may be a crisis any day. Don't you think you ought —"

Leithen smiled.

"I've thought of that. But if I stayed on I could do nothing to help. That isn't a pleasant conclusion to come to, but it's the truth."

Ritson stood at the door of his room and watched his departing guest going down the corridor to the Central Lobby. He turned to a junior colleague who had joined him —

“I wonder what the devil’s the matter! There’s been a change in him in the last few months. But he doesn’t look a sick man. He was always a bad colour, of course, but Lamancha says he is the hardest fellow he ever knew on the hill.”

The other shook a wise head. “You never can tell. He had a roughish time in the War and the damage often takes years to come out. I think he’s right to slack off, for he must have a gruelling life at the Bar. My father tried to get him the other day as leader in a big case, and he wasn’t to be had for love or money. Simply snowed under with work!”

Leithen walked from the House towards his rooms in Down Street. He was still keeping his thoughts shut down, but in spite of himself the familiar streets awakened memories. How often he had tramped them in the far-off days when he was a pupil in chambers and the world was an oyster waiting to be opened. It was a different London then, quieter, cosier, dirtier perhaps, but sweeter smelling. On a summer evening such as this the scents would have been a compound of wood paving, horse-dung, flowers, and fresh paint, not the deadly monotony of petrol. The old land-marks, too, were disappearing. In St. James’s Street only Mr. Lock’s modest shop-window and the eighteenth-century façade of Boodle’s recalled the London of his youth. He remembered posting up this street with a high heart after he had won his first important case in court . . . and the Saturday afternoon’s strolls in it when he had changed his black regimentals for tweeds or flannels . . . and the snowy winter day when a tiny coffin on a gun-carriage marked the end of Victoria’s reign . . . and the shiny August morning in 1914 when he had been on his way to enlist with a mind half-anxious and half-exulting. He had travelled a good deal in his time, but most of his life had been spent in this square mile of west London. He did not regret the changes; he only noted them. His inner world was crumbling so fast that he had lost any craving for permanence in the externals of life.

In Piccadilly he felt his knees trembling and called a taxi. In Down Street he took the lift to his rooms, though for thirty years he had made a ritual of climbing the stairs.

The flat was full of powdery sunlight. He sank into a chair at the window to get his breath, and regarded the comfortable, shabby sitting-room. Now that he seemed to be looking at it with new eyes he noted details which familiarity had long obscured. The pictures were school and college groups, one or two mountain photographs, and, over the mantelpiece, Raeburn’s portrait of his grandfather. He was very little of a connoisseur, though at Borrowby he had three Vandykes which suited its Jacobean solemnity. There were books everywhere; they overflowed into the dining-room and his bedroom and the little hall. He reflected that what with these, and the law library in his chambers and his considerable collection at Borrowby, he must have at least twenty thousand volumes. He had been happy here, happy and busy, and for a moment — for a moment only — he felt a bitter pang of regret.

But he was still keeping his thoughts at a distance, for the time had not come to face them. Memories took the vacant place. He remembered how often he had left these rooms with a holiday zest, and how he had always returned to them with delight, for this, and not Borrowby, was his true home. How many snug winter nights had he known here, cheerful with books and firelight; and autumn twilights when he was beginning to get into the stride of his work after the long vacation; and spring mornings when the horns of elfland were blowing even in Down Street. He lay back in his chair, shut his eyes and let his memory wander. There was no harm in that, for the grim self-communion he had still to face would have no room for memories. He almost dozed.

The entry of his man, Cruddock, aroused him.

“Lord Clanroyden called you up, sir. He is in Town for the night and suggests that you might dine with him. He said the Turf Club at eight. I was to let him know, sir.”

“Tell him to come here instead. You can produce some kind of a dinner?” Leithen rather welcomed the prospect. Sandy Clanroyden would absorb his attention for an hour or two and postpone for a little the settlement with himself which his soul dreaded.

He had a bath and changed. He had been feeling listless and depressed, but not ill, and the cold shower gave him a momentary sense of vigour and almost an appetite for food. He caught a glimpse of himself naked in the long mirror, and was shocked anew by his leanness. He had given up weighing himself, but it looked as if he had lost pounds in the past month.

Sandy arrived on the stroke of eight. Leithen, as he greeted him, reflected that he was the only one of his closer friends whom he could have borne to meet. Archie Roylance’s high spirits would have been intolerable, and Lamancha’s air of

mastery over life, and Dick Hannay's serene contentment.

He did not miss the sharp glance of his guest when he entered the room. Could some rumours have got abroad? It was clear that Sandy was setting himself to play a part, for his manner had not its usual ease. He was not talking at random, but picking his topics.

A proof was that he did not ask Leithen about his holiday plans, which, near the close of the law term, would have been a natural subject. He seemed to feel that his host's affairs might be delicate ground, and that it was his business to distract his mind from some unhappy preoccupation. So he talked about himself and his recent doings. He had just been to Cambridge to talk to the Explorers' Club, and had come back with strong views about modern youth.

"I'm not happy about the young entry. Oh! I don't mean all of it. There's plenty of lads that remind me of my own old lot. But some of the best seem to have become a bit too much introverted — isn't that the filthy word? What's to be done about the Owlsh Young, Ned?"

"I don't see much of youth nowadays," said Leithen. "I seem to live among fogies. I'm one myself."

"Rot! You are far and away the youngest of us."

Again Leithen caught a swift glance at his face, as if Sandy would have liked to ask him something, but forbore.

"Those boys make me anxious. It's right that they should be serious with the world slipping into chaos, but they need not be owlsh. They are so darned solemn about their new little creeds in religion and politics, forgetting that they are as old as the hills. There isn't a ha'porth of humour in the bunch, which means, of course, that there isn't any perspective. If it comes to a show-down I'm afraid they will be pretty feeble folk. People with half their brains and a little sense of humour will make rings round them."

Leithen must have shown his unconcern about the future of the world by his expression, for Sandy searched for other topics. Spring at Laverlaw had been diviner than ever. Had Leithen heard the curlews this year? No? Didn't he usually make a pilgrimage somewhere to hear them? For northerners they, and not the cuckoo, were the heralds of spring. . . . His wife was at Laverlaw, but was coming to London next day. Yes, she was well, but —

Again Leithen saw in the other's face a look of interrogation. He wanted to ask him something, tell him something, but did not feel the moment propitious.

"Her uncle has just turned up here. Apparently there's a bit of family trouble to be settled. You know him, don't you? Blenkiron — John Scantlebury Blenkiron?"

Leithen nodded. "A little. I was his counsel in the Continental Nickel case some years ago. He's an old friend of yours and Hannay's, isn't he?"

"About the best Dick and I have in the world. Would you like to see him again? I rather think he would like to see you."

Leithen yawned and said his plans for the immediate future were uncertain.

Just before ten Sandy took his leave, warned by his host's obvious fatigue. He left the impression that he had come to dinner to say something which he had thought had better be left unsaid, and Leithen, when he looked at his face in his dressing-table mirror, knew the reason. It was the face of a very sick man.

That night he had meant, before going to sleep, to have it out with himself. But he found that a weary body had made his brain incapable of coherent thought, so he tumbled into bed.

2

The reckoning came six hours later, when his bedroom was brightening with the fore-glow of a June dawn. He awoke, as he usually did nowadays, sweating and short of breath. He got up and laved his face with cold water. When he lay down again he knew that the moment had arrived.

Recent events had been confused in a cloud of misery, and he had to disengage the details. . . . There was no one moment to which he could point when his health had begun to fail. Two years before he had had a very hard summer at the Bar, complicated by the chairmanship of a Royal Commission, and a trip to Norway for the August sea trout had been disastrous. He had returned still a little fatigued. He no longer got up in the morning with a certain uplift of spirit, work seemed duller and more laborious, food less appetising, sleep more imperative but less refreshing.

During that winter he had had a bout of influenza for the first time in his life. After it he had dragged his wing for a month or two, but had seemed to pick up in the spring when he had had a trip to Provence with the Clanroydens. But the hot summer had given him a set-back, and when he went shooting with Lamancha in the autumn he found to his dismay that he had become short of breath and that the hills were too steep for him. Also he was clearly losing weight. So on his return to London he sought out Acton Croke and had himself examined. The great doctor had been ominously grave. Our fathers, he said, had talked unscientifically about the "grand climacteric," which came in the early sixties, but there was such a thing as a climacteric which might come any time in middle life, when the physical powers adjusted themselves to the approach of age. That crisis Leithen was now enduring, and he must go very carefully and remember that the dose of gas he got in the War had probably not exhausted its effect. Croke put him on a diet, prescribed a certain routine of rest and exercise, and made him drastically cut down his engagements. He insisted also on seeing him once a fortnight.

A winter followed for Leithen of steadily declining health. His breath troubled him and a painful sinking in the chest. He rose languidly, struggled through the day, and went to bed exhausted. Every moment he was conscious of his body and its increasing frailty. Croke sent him to a nursing home during the Christmas vacation, and for a few weeks he seemed to be better. But the coming of spring, instead of giving him new vigour, drained his strength. He began to suffer from night sweats which left him very feeble in the morning. His meals became a farce. He drove himself to take exercise, but now a walk round the Park exhausted one who only a few years back could walk down any Highland gillie. Croke's face looked graver with each visit.

Then the day before yesterday had come the crisis. He went by appointment to Croke — and demanded a final verdict. The great doctor gave it: gravely, anxiously, tenderly, as to an old friend, but without equivocation. He was dying, slowly dying.

Leithen's mind refused to bite on the details of his own case with its usual professional precision. He was not interested in these details. He simply accepted the judgment of the expert. He was suffering from advanced tuberculosis, a retarded consequence of his gas poisoning. Croke, knowing his patient's habit of mind, had given him a full diagnosis, but Leithen had scarcely listened to his exposition of the chronic fibrous affection and broncho-pulmonary lesions. The fact was enough for him.

"How long have I to live?" he asked, and was told a year, perhaps a little longer.

"Shall I go off suddenly, or what?" The answer was that there would be a progressive loss of strength until the heart failed.

"You can give me no hope?"

Croke shook his head.

"I dare not. The lesions MIGHT heal, the fibrous patch MIGHT disappear, but it would be a miracle according to present knowledge. I must add, of course, that our present knowledge may not be final truth."

"But I must take it as such, I agree. Miracles don't happen."

Leithen left Harley Street almost cheerfully. There was a grim satisfaction in knowing the worst. He was so utterly weary that after coffee and a sandwich in his rooms he went straight to bed.

Soon he must think things out, but not at once. He must first make some necessary arrangements about his affairs which would keep him from brooding. That should be the task of the morrow. It all reminded him of his habit as a company commander in the trenches when an attack was imminent: he had busied himself with getting every detail exact, so that his mind had no time for foreboding. . . .

As he lay watching his window brighten with the morning he wondered why he was taking things so calmly. It was not courage — he did not consider himself a brave man, though he had never greatly feared death. At the best he had achieved in life a thin stoicism, a shallow fortitude. Insensibility, perhaps, was the best word. He remembered Dr. Johnson's reply to Boswell's "That, sir, was great fortitude of mind." — "No, sir, stark insensibility."

At any rate he would not sink to self-pity. He had been brought up in a Calvinistic household and the atmosphere still clung to him, though in the ordinary way he was not a religious man. For example, he had always had an acute sense of sin, which had made him something of a Puritan in his way of life. He had believed firmly in God, a Being of ineffable purity and power, and consequently had had no undue reverence for man. He had always felt his own insignificance and imperfections and was not inclined to cavil at fate. On the contrary, he considered that fortune had been ludicrously kind

to him. He had had fifty-eight years of health and wealth. He had survived the War, when the best of his contemporaries had fallen in swathes. He had been amazingly successful in his profession and had enjoyed every moment of his work. Honours had fallen to him out of all proportion to his merits. He had had a thousand pleasures — books, travel, the best of sport, the best of friends.

His friends — that had been his chief blessing. As he thought of their warm companionship he could not check a sudden wave of regret. THAT would be hard to leave. He had sworn Acton Croke to secrecy, and he meant to keep his condition hidden even from his closest intimates — from Hannay and Clanroyden and Lamancha and Palliser—Yeates and Archie Roylance. He could not endure to think of their anxious eyes. He would see less of them than before, of course, but he would continue to meet them on the old terms. Yes — but how? He was giving up Parliament and the Bar — London, too. What story was he to tell? A craving for rest and leisure? Well, he must indulge that craving at a distance, or otherwise his friends would discover the reason.

But where? . . . Borrowby? Impossible, for it was associated too closely with his years of vigour. He had rejoiced in reshaping that ancient shell into a house for a green old age; he remembered with what care he had planned his library and his garden; Borrowby would be intolerable as a brief refuge for a dying man. . . . Scotland? — somewhere in the Lowland hills or on the sounding beaches of the west coast? But he had been too happy there. All the romance of childhood and forward-looking youth was bound up with those places and it would be agony to revisit them.

His memory sprawled over places he had seen in his much-travelled life. There was a certain Greek island where he had once lived dangerously; there were valleys on the Italian side of the Alps, and a saeter in the Jotunheim to which his fancy had often returned. But in his survey he found that the charm had gone from them; they were for the living, not the dying. Only one spot had still some appeal. In his early youth, when money had not been plentiful, he had had an autumn shooting trip in northern Quebec because it was cheap. He had come down on foot over the height of land, with a single Montagnais guide back-packing their kit, and one golden October afternoon he had stumbled on a place which he had never forgotten. It was a green saddle of land, a meadow of wild hay among the pines. South from it a stream ran to the St. Lawrence; from an adjacent well another trickle flowed north on the Arctic watershed. It had seemed a haven of pastoral peace in a shaggy land, and he recalled how loth he had been to leave it. He had often thought about it, often determined to go back and look for it. Now, as he pictured it in its green security, it seemed the kind of sanctuary in which to die. He remembered its name. The spring was called Clairefontaine, and it gave its name both to the south-flowing stream and to a little farm below in the valley.

Supposing he found the proper shelter, how was he to spend his closing months? As an invalid, slowly growing feebler, always expectant of death? That was starkly impossible. He wanted peace to make his soul, but not lethargy either of mind or body. The body! — that was the rub. It was failing him, that body which had once been a mettled horse quickly responding to bridle or spur. Now he must be aware every hour of its ignoble frailty. . . . He stretched out his arms, flexing the muscles as he used to do when he was well, and was conscious that there was no pith in them.

His thoughts clung to this physical shell of his. He had been proud of it, not like an athlete who guards a treasure, but like a master proud of an adequate servant. It had added much to the pleasures of life. . . . But he realised that in his career it had mattered very little to him, for his work had been done with his mind. Labouring men had their physical strength as their only asset, and when the body failed them their work was done. They knew from harsh experience the limits of their strength, what exhaustion meant, and strife against pain and disablement. They had to endure all their days what he had endured to a small degree in the trenches. . . . Had he not missed something, and, missing it, had failed somehow in one of the duties of man?

This queer thought kept returning to him with the force of a revelation. His mood was the opposite of self-pity, a feeling that his life had been too cosseted and fur-lined. Only now that his body was failing did he realise how little he had used it. . . . Among the oddly assorted beliefs which made up his religious equipment, one was conditional immortality. The soul was only immortal if there was such a thing as a soul, and a further existence had to be earned in this one. He had used most of the talents God had given him, but not all. He had never, except in the War, staked his body in the struggle, and yet that was the stake of most of humanity. Was it still possible to meet that test of manhood with a failing body?.. . If only the War were still going on!

His mind, which had been dragging apathetically along, suddenly awoke into vigour. By God! there was one thing that would not happen. He would not sit down and twiddle his thumbs and await death. His ship, since it was doomed, should

go down in action with every flag flying. Lately he had been re-reading *Vanity Fair* and he remembered the famous passage where Thackeray moralises on the trappings of the conventional death-bed, the soft-footed nurses, the hushed voices of the household, the alcove on the staircase in which to rest the coffin. The picture affected him with a physical nausea. That, by God! should never be his fate. He would die standing, as *Vespasian* said an emperor should. . . .

The day had broadened into full sunlight. The white paint and the flowered wallpaper of his bedroom glowed with the morning freshness, and from the street outside came pleasant morning sounds like the jingle of milk-cans and the whistling of errand-boys. His mind seemed to have been stabbed awake out of a flat stoicism into a dim but masterful purpose.

He got up and dressed, and his cold bath gave him a ghost of an appetite for breakfast.

3

His intention was to go down to his chambers later in the morning and get to work on the batch of cases for opinion. As always after a meal, he felt languid and weak, but his mind was no longer comatose. Already it was beginning to move steadily, though hopelessly, towards some kind of plan. As he sat huddled in a chair at the open window Cruddock announced that a Mr. Blenkiron was on the telephone and would like an appointment.

This was the American that Sandy Clanroyden had spoken of. Leithen remembered him clearly as his client in a big case. He remembered, too, much that he had heard about him from Sandy and Dick Hannay. One special thing, too — Blenkiron had been a sick man in the War and yet had put up a remarkable show. He had liked him, and, though he felt himself now cut off from human companionship, he could hardly refuse an interview, for Sandy's sake. The man had probably some lawsuit in hand, and if so it would not take long to refuse.

"If convenient, sir, the gentleman could come along now," said Cruddock.

Leithen nodded and took up the newspaper.

Blenkiron had aged. Eight years ago Leithen recalled him as a big man with a heavy shaven face, a clear skin, and calm ruminant grey eyes. A healthy creature in hard condition, he could have given a good account of himself with his hands as well as his head. Now he was leaner and more grizzled, and there were pouches under his eyes. Leithen remembered Sandy's doings in South America; Blenkiron had been in that show, and he had heard about his being a sort of industrial dictator in Olifa, or whatever the place was called.

The grey eyes were regarding him contemplatively but keenly. He wondered what they made of his shrunken body.

"It's mighty fine to see you again, Sir Edward. And all the boys, too. I've been stuck so tight in my job down south that I've gotten out of touch with my friends. I'm giving myself a holiday to look them up and to see my little niece. I think you know Babs."

"I know her well. A very great woman. I had forgotten she was your niece. How does the old gang strike you?"

"Lasting well, sir. A bit older and maybe a bit wiser and settling down into good citizens. They tell me that Sir Archibald Roylance is making quite a name for himself in your Parliament, and that Lord Clanroyden cuts a deal of ice with your Government. Dick Hannay, I judge, is getting hayseed into his hair. How about yourself?"

"Fair," Leithen said. "I'm going out of business now. I've worked hard enough to be entitled to climb out of the rut."

"That's fine!" Blenkiron's face showed a quickened interest. "I haven't forgotten what you did for me when I was up against the Delacroix bunch. There's no man on the globe I'd sooner have with me in a nasty place than you. You've a mighty quick brain and a mighty sound judgment and you're not afraid to take a chance."

"You're very kind," said Leithen a little wearily. "Well, that's all done with now. I am going out of harness."

"A man like you can't ever get out of harness. If you lay down one job you take up another."

Blenkiron's eyes, appraising now rather than meditative, scanned the other's face. He leaned forward in his chair and sank his voice.

"I came round this morning to say something to you, Sir Edward — something very special. Babs has a sister, Felicity — I guess you don't know her, but she's something of a person on our side of the water. Two years younger than Babs, and married to a man you've maybe heard of, Francis Galliard, one of old Simon Ravelston's partners. Young Galliard's gotten

a great name in the city of New York, and Felicity and he looked like being a happy pair. But just lately things haven't been going too well with Felicity."

In common politeness Leithen forced a show of attention, but Blenkiron had noted his dull eyes.

"I won't trouble you with the story now," he went on, "for it's long and a bit ravelled, but the gist of it is that Francis Galliard has disappeared over the horizon. Just leaked out of the landscape without a word to Felicity or anybody else. No! There is no suggestion of kidnapping or any dirty work — the trouble is in Francis's own mind. He is a Canuck — a Frenchman from Quebec — and I expect his mind works different from yours and mine. Now, he has got to be found and brought back — first of all to Felicity, and second, to his business, and third, to the United States. He's too valuable a man to lose, and in our present state of precarious balance we just can't afford it."

Blenkiron stopped as if he expected some kind of reply. Leithen said nothing, but his thoughts had jumped suddenly to the upland meadow of Clairefontaine of which he had been thinking that morning. Odd that that remote memory should have been suddenly dug out of the lumber-room of the past!

"We want help in the job," Blenkiron continued, "and it's not going to be easy to find it. We want a man who can piece together the bits that make up the jigsaw puzzle, though we haven't got much in the way of evidence. We want a man who can read himself into Francis's mind and understand the thoughts he might have been thinking, and, most of all, we want a man who can put his conclusions into action. Finding Francis may mean a good deal of bodily wear and tear and taking some risks."

"I see." Leithen spoke at last. "You want a combination of detective, psychologist, and sportsman."

"Yep." Blenkiron beamed. "You've hit it. And there's just the one man I know that fills the bill. I've had a talk with Lord Clanroyden and he agrees. If you had been going on at the Bar we would have offered you the biggest fee that any brief ever carried, for there's money to burn in this business — though I don't reckon the fee would have weighed much with you. But you tell me you are shaking loose. Well, here's a job for your leisure and, if I judge you right, it's the sort of job you won't turn down without a thought or two."

Leithen raised his sick eyes to the eager face before him, a face whose abounding vitality sharpened the sense of his own weakness.

"You've come a little late," he said slowly. "I'm going to tell you something which Lord Clanroyden and the others don't know, and will never know — which nobody knows except myself and my doctor — and I want you to promise to keep it secret... I'm a dying man. I've only about a year to live."

He was not certain what he expected, but he was certain it would be something which would wind up this business for good. He had longed to have one confidant, only one, and Blenkiron was safe enough. The sound of his voice speaking these grim words somehow chilled him, and he awaited dismally the conventional sympathy. After that Blenkiron would depart and he would see him no more.

But Blenkiron did not behave conventionally. He flushed deeply and sprang to his feet, upsetting his chair.

"My God!" he cried. "If I ain't the blightedest, God-darned blundering fool! I might have guessed by your looks you were a sick man, and now I've hurt you in the raw with my cursed egotistical worries. . . . I'm off, Sir Edward. Forget you ever saw me. God forgive me, for I won't soon forgive myself."

"Don't go," said Leithen. "Sit down and talk to me. You may be the very man I want."

4

His hostess noticed his slow appraising look round the table, which took each of the guests in turn.

"You were here last in '29," she said. "Do you think we have changed?"

Leithen turned his eyes to the tall woman at his left hand. Mrs. Simon Ravelston had a beautiful figure, ill-chosen clothes, and the weather-beaten face of an English master of fox-hounds. She was magnificently in place on horseback, or sailing a boat, or running with her beagles, but no indoor setting could fit her. Sprung from ancient New England stock, she showed her breeding in a wonderful detachment from the hubbub of life. At her own table she would drift into moods of reverie and stare into vacancy, oblivious of the conversation, and then when she woke up would turn such kind eyes

upon her puzzled interlocutor that all offences were forgiven. When her husband had been Ambassador at the Court of St. James's she had been widely popular, a magnet for the most sophisticated young men; but of this she had been wholly unconscious. She was deeply interested in life and very little interested in herself.

Leithen answered, "Yes, I think you all look a little more fine-drawn and harder trained. The men, that is. The women could never change."

Mrs. Ravelston laughed. "I hope that you're right. Before the depression we were getting rather gross. The old Uncle Sam that we took as our national figure was lean like a Red Indian, but in late years our ordinary type had become round-faced, and puffy, and pallid, like a Latin John Bull. Now we are recovering Uncle Sam, though we have shaved him and polished him up." Her eyes ran round the table and stopped at a youngish man with strong rugged features and shaggy eyebrows who was listening with a smile to the talk of a very pretty girl.

"George Lethaby, for example. Thank goodness he is a career diplomat and can show himself about the world. I should like people to take him as a typical American." She lowered her voice, for she was speaking now of her left-hand neighbour, "Or Bronson, here. You know him, don't you? Bronson Jane."

Leithen glanced beyond his hostess to where a man just passing into middle life was peering at an illegible menu card. This was the bright particular star of the younger America, and he regarded him with more than curiosity, for he counted upon him for help. On paper Bronson Jane was almost too good to be true. He had been a noted sportsman and was still a fine polo player; his name was a household word in Europe for his work in international finance; he was the Admirable Crichton of his day and it was rumoured that in the same week he had been offered the Secretaryship of State, the Presidency of an ancient University, and the control of a great industrial corporation. He had chosen the third, but seemed to have a foot also in every other world. He had a plain sagacious face, a friendly mouth, and deep-set eyes, luminous and masterful.

Leithen glanced round the table again. The dining-room of the Ravelston house was a homely place; it had no tapestries or panelling, and its pictures were family portraits of small artistic merit. In each corner there were marble busts of departed Ravelstons. It was like the rest of the house, and, like their country homes in the Catskills and on the Blue Ridge, a dwelling which bore the mark of successive generations who had all been acutely conscious of the past. Leithen felt that he might have been in a poor man's dwelling, but for the magnificence of the table flowers and silver and the gold soup plates which had once belonged to a King of France. He let his gaze rest on each of the men.

"Yes," he told his hostess, "you are getting the kind of face I like."

"But not the right colour perhaps," she laughed. "Is that worry or too much iced water, I wonder?" She broke off suddenly, remembering her neighbour's grey visage.

"Tell me who the people are," he said, to cover her embarrassment. "I have met Mr. Jane and Mr. Lethaby and Mr. Ravelston."

"I want you to know my Simon better," she said. "I know why you have come here — Mr. Blenkiron told me. Nobody knows about it except in the family. The story is that Mr. Galliard has gone to Peru to look into some pitchblende propositions. Simon is terribly distressed and he feels so helpless. You see, we only came back to America from England four months ago, and we have kind of lost touch."

Simon Ravelston was a big man with a head like Jove, and a noble silvered beard. He was president of one of the chief private banking houses in the world, which under his great-grandfather had financed the first railways beyond the Appalachians, under his grandfather had salvaged the wreckage of the Civil War, and under his father had steadied America's wild gallop to wealth. He had a dozen partners, most of whom understood the technique of finance far better than himself, but on all major questions he spoke the last word, for he had the great general's gift of reducing complexities to a simple syllogism. In an over-worked world he seemed always to have ample leisure, for he insisted on making time to think. When others of his calling were spending twelve hectic hours daily in their offices, Simon would calmly go fishing. No man ever saw him rattled or hustled, and this Olympian detachment gave him a prestige in two continents against which he himself used to protest vigorously.

"They think I'm wise only because I don't talk when I've nothing to say," he used to tell his friends. "Any fool these days can get a reputation if he keeps his mouth shut."

He was happy because his mind was filled with happy interests; he had no itching ambitions, he did his jobs as they

came along with a sincere delight in doing them well, and a no less sincere delight in seeing the end of them. He was the extreme opposite of the man whose nerves demand a constant busyness because, like a bicyclist, he will fall down if he stays still.

Leithen's gaze passed to a young man who had Simon's shape of head but was built on a smaller and more elegant scale. His hostess followed his eyes.

"That's our boy, Eric, and that's his wife, Delia, across the table. Pretty, isn't she? She has the southern complexion, the real thing, which isn't indigestion from too much hot bread at breakfast. What's he doing? He's on the John Hopkins staff and is making a big name for himself in lung surgery. Ever since a little boy he's been set on doctoring and nothing would change him. He had a pretty good training — Harvard — two years at Oxford — a year in Paris — a long spell in a Montreal hospital. That's a new thing about our boys, Sir Edward. They're not so set nowadays on big business. They want to do things and make things, and they consider that there are better tools than dollars. George Lethaby is an example. He's a poor man and always will be, for a diplomat can't be a money-maker. But he's a happier man than Harold Downes, though he doesn't look it."

Mr. Lethaby's rugged face happened at the moment to be twisted into an expression of pain out of sympathy with some tale of the woman to whom he was talking, while his vis-à-vis, Mr. Downes, was laughing merrily at a remark of his neighbour.

"Harold has a hard life," said Mrs. Ravelston. "He's head of the Fremont Banking Corporation and a St. Sebastian for everyone to shoot arrows at. Any more to be catalogued? Why, yes, there are the two biggest exhibits of all."

She directed Leithen's eyes to two men separated by a handsome old woman whose hair was dressed in the fashion of forty years ago.

"You see the man on the far side of Ella Purchass, the plump little man with the eagle beak who looks like he's enjoying his food. What would you set him down as?"

"Banker? Newspaper proprietor?"

"Wrong. That's Walter Derwent. You've heard of him? His father left him all kinds of wealth, but Walter wasted no time in getting out of oil into icebergs. He has flown and mused and tramped over most of the Arctic, and there are heaps of mountains and wild beasts named after him. And you'd never think he'd moved farther than Long Island. Now place the man on this side of Ella."

Leithen saw a typical English hunting man — lean brown face with the skin stretched tight over the cheek-bones, pale, deep-set eyes, a small clipped moustache, shoulders a little stooped from being much on horse-back.

"Virginian squire," he hazarded. "Warrenton at a guess."

"Wrong," she laughed. "He wouldn't be happy at Warrenton, and I'm certain he wouldn't be happy on a horse. His line is deep learning. He's about our foremost pundit — professor at Yale — dug up cities in Asia Minor — edited Greek books. Writes very nice little stories, too. That's Clifford Savory."

Leithen looked with interest at the pleasant vital face. He knew all about Clifford Savory. There were few men alive who were his equals in classical scholarship, and he had published one or two novels, delicate historical reconstructions, which were masterpieces in their way.

His gaze circled round the table again, noting the friendliness of the men's eyes, the atmosphere of breeding and simplicity and stability. He turned to his hostess —

"You've got together a wonderful party for me," he said. "I feel what I always feel when I come here — that you are the friendliest people on earth. But I believe, too, that you are harder to get to know than our awkward, difficult, tongue-tied folk at home. To get to know really well, I mean — inside your plate-armour of general benevolence."

Mrs. Ravelston laughed. "There may be something in that. It's a new idea to me."

"I think you are sure of yourselves, too. There is no one at this table who hasn't steady nerves and a vast deal of common sense. You call it poise, don't you?"

"Maybe, but this is a picked party, remember."

"Because of its poise?"

"No. Because every man here is a friend of Francis Galliard."

“Friend? Do you mean acquaintance or intimate?”

The lady pursed her lips.

“I’m not sure. I think you are right and that we are not an easy people to be intimate with unless we have been brought up with the same background. Francis, too, is scarcely cut out for intimacy. Did you ever meet him?”

“No. I heard his name for the first time a few weeks ago. Which of you knows him best? Mr. Ravelston?”

“Certainly not Simon, though he’s his business partner. Francis has a good many sides, and most people know only one of them. Bronson could tell you most about his work. He likes my Eric, but hasn’t seen much of him in recent years. I know he used to go duck-shooting in Minnesota with George Lethaby, and he’s a trustee of Walter Derwent’s Polar Institute. I fancy Clifford Savory is nearer to him than most people. And yet . . . I don’t know. Maybe nobody has got to know the real Francis. He has that frank, forthcoming manner which conceals a man, and he’s mighty busy too, too busy for intimacies. I used to see him once or twice a week, but I couldn’t tell you anything about him that everybody doesn’t know. It won’t be easy, Sir Edward, to get a proper notion of him from second-hand evidence. Felicity’s your best chance. You haven’t met Felicity yet?”

“I’m leaving her to the last. What’s she like? I know her sister well.”

“She’s a whole lot different from Babs. I can tell you she’s quite a person.”

Leithen felt that if his hostess had belonged to a different social grade she would have called her a “lovely woman.” Her meaning was clear. Mrs. Galliard was someone who mattered.

He was beginning to feel very weary, and, knowing that he must ration his strength, he made his excuses and did not join the women after dinner. But he spent a few minutes in the library, to which the men retired for coffee and cigars. He had one word with Clifford Savory.

“I heard you five years ago at the Bar Association,” Savory said. “You spoke on John Marshall. I hope you’re going to give me an evening on this visit.”

Bronson Jane accompanied him to the door.

“You’re taking it easy, I understand, Sir Edward, and going slow with dinners. What about the Florian tomorrow at half-past five? In these hot days that’s a good time for a talk.”

5

The library of the Florian Club looked out on the East River, where the bustle of traffic was now dying down and the turbid waters catching the mellow light of the summer evening. It might have been a room in an old English country house with its Chippendale chairs and bookcases, and the eighteenth-century mezzo-tints on the walls. The two men sat by the open window, and the wafts of cool evening air gave Leithen for the first time that day a little physical comfort.

“You want me to tell you about Francis Galliard?” Bronson Jane’s wholesome face showed no signs of fatigue, though he had been having a gruelling day.

“I’ll tell you all I can, but I warn you that it’s not much. I suppose I’m as close to him as most people, but I can’t say I knew him well. No one does — except perhaps his wife. But I can give you the general lay-out. First of all, he is a French-Canadian. Do you know anything about French Canada?”

“I once knew a little — a long time ago.”

“Well, they are a remarkable race there. They ought to have made a rather bigger show in the world than they have. Here’s a fine European stock planted out in a new country and toughened by two centuries of hardship and war. They keep their close family life and their religion intact and don’t give a cent for what we call progress. Yet all the time they have a pretty serious fight with nature, so there is nothing soft in them. You would say that boys would come out of those farms of theirs with a real kick in them, for they have always been a race of pioneers. But so far Laurier is their only great man. You’d have thought that now and then they would have produced somebody big in the business line, like the Scots. You have young Highlanders, haven’t you, coming out of the same primitive world, who become business magnates? We have had some of them in this country.”

“Yes. That is not uncommon in Scotland.”

"Well, Francis is the only specimen I've struck from French Canada. He came out of a farm in the Laurentians, somewhere back of the Glaubsteins' new pulp town at Chateau-Gaillard. I believe the Gaillards go right back to the Crusades. They came to Canada with Champlain, and were the seigneurs of Chateau-Gaillard, a tract of country as big as Rhode Island. By and by they came down in the world until now they only possess a little bit of a farm at the end of nowhere."

"What took him out of the farm? The French don't part easily from the land."

"God knows. Ambition? Poverty? He never told me. I don't just know how he was raised, for he never speaks of his early days. The village school, I suppose, and then some kind of college, for his first notion was to be a priest. He had a pretty good education of an old-fashioned kind. Then something stirred in him and he set off south like the fairy-tale Younger Son, with his pack on his back and his lunch in his pocket. He must have been about nineteen then."

Leithen's interest quickened. "Go on," he said, as Bronson paused. "How did he make good?"

"I'm darned if I know. There's a fine story there, but I can't get it out of him. He joined a French paper in Boston, and went on to another in Louisiana, and finished up in Chicago on a financial journal. I fancy that several times he must have pretty nearly starved. Then somehow he got into the bond Business and discovered that he had a genius for one kind of finance. He was with Connolly in Detroit for a time, and after that with the Pontiac Trust here, and then Ravelstons started out to discover new blood and got hold of him. At thirty-five he was a junior partner, and since then he has never looked back. To-day he's forty-three, and there aren't five men in the United States whose repute stands higher. Not bad for a farm boy, I'll say."

"Does he keep in touch with his people?"

"Not he. That door is closed and bolted. He has never been back to Canada. He's a naturalised American citizen. He won't speak French unless he's forced to, and then it's nothing to boast of. He writes his name 'Galliard,' not Gaillard. He has let himself become absorbed in our atmosphere."

"Really absorbed?"

"Well — that's just the point. He has adopted the externals of our life, but I don't know how much he's changed inside. When he married Felicity Dasent five years ago I thought we had got him for keeps. You don't know Mrs. Galliard?"

Leithen shook his head. He had been asked this question now a dozen times since he landed.

"No?" Well, I won't waste time trying to describe her, for you'll soon be able to judge for yourself; but I should call her a possessive personality, and she certainly annexed Francis. Oh, yes, he was desperately in love and only too willing to do what she told him. He's a good-looking fellow, but he hadn't bothered much about his appearance, so she groomed him up and made him the best-dressed man in New York. They've got a fine apartment in Park Avenue and her dinners have become social events. The Dasents are a horsey family and I doubt if Francis had ever mounted a horse until his marriage, but presently she had him out regularly with the Westbrook. He bought a country place in New Jersey and is going to start in to breed 'chasers. Altogether she gives him a pretty full life."

"Children?"

"No, not yet. A pity, for a child would have anchored Francis. I expect he has family in his blood like all his race."

"He never appeared to be restless, did he?" Leithen asked.

"Not that I noticed. He seemed perfectly content. He used to work too hard and wear himself out, and every now and then have to go off for a rest. That's the tom-fool habit we all have here. You see, he hadn't any special tastes outside his business to make him keen about leisure. Felicity changed all that. She isn't anything of the social climber, or ambitious for herself, but she's mighty ambitious for her man. She brought him into all kinds of new circles, and he shines in them, too, for he has excellent brains — every kind of brains. All the gifts which made him a power in business she developed for other purposes. He was always a marvel in a business deal, for he could read other men's minds, and he would have made a swell diplomatist. Well, she turned that gift to social uses, with the result that every type mixes well at their parties. You'll hear as good talk at their table as you'll get anywhere on the civilised globe. He can do everything that a Frenchman can do, or an Englishman or an American. She has made him ten times more useful to Ravelstons than before, for she has made him a kind of national figure. The Administration has taken to consulting him, and he's one of the people that foreigners coming over here have got to see. I fancy she has politics at the back of her mind — last winter, I know, they were a good deal in Washington."

Bronson lit a fresh cigar.

"All set fair, you'd say, for the big success of our day. And then suddenly one fine morning he slips out of the world like the man in Browning's poem, and God knows what's become of him."

"You know him reasonably well? Is he happy?"

Bronson laughed. "That's a question I couldn't answer about my own brother. I doubt if I could answer it about myself. He is gay — that is the French blood, maybe. I doubt if he has ever had time to consider whether he is happy or not, he lives such a bustling life. There can't be much of the introvert in Francis."

A man had entered the room and was engaged in turning over the magazines on one of the tables.

"Here's Savory," Bronson whispered. "Let's have him join us. He's a rather particular friend of Francis." He raised his voice. "Hullo, Clifford! Come and have a drink. Sir Edward wants to see you."

Clifford Savory, looking more like a country squire than ever in his well-cut grey flannels, deposited his long figure in an armchair and sipped the whisky-and-soda which the club servant brought him.

"We were talking about Galliard," Bronson said. "Sir Edward has heard a lot about him and is keen to meet him. It's just too bad that he should be out of town at present. It seems that Francis has got a reputation across the water. What was it you wanted to ask, Sir Edward? How much of his quality comes from his French blood?"

Savory joined his finger-tips and regarded them meditatively.

"That's hard to say. I don't know enough of the French in Canada, for they're different from the French in Europe. But I grant you that Galliard's power is exotic — not the ordinary gifts that God has given us Americans. He can argue a case brilliantly with the most close-textured reasoning; but there are others who can do that. His real strength lies in his flair, which can't be put down in black and white. He has an extra sense which makes him conscious of things which are still in the atmosphere — a sort of instinct of what people are going to think quite a bit ahead, not only in America, but in England and Europe. His mind is equipped with no end of sensitive antennæ. When he trusts that instinct he is never wrong, but now and then, of course, he is over-ridden by prosaic folk. If people had listened to him in '29 we should be better off now."

"That's probably due to his race," said Leithen. "Whenever you get a borderland where Latin and Northman meet, you get this uncanny sensitiveness."

"Yes," said Savory, "and yet in other things his race doesn't show up at all. Attachment to family and birthplace, for instance. Francis has forgotten all about his antecedents. He cares as little about his origin as Melchizedek. He is as rootless as the last-arrived Polish immigrant. He has pulled up his roots in Canada, and I do not think he is getting them down here — too restless for that."

"Restless?" Leithen queried.

"Well, I mean mobile — always on the move. He is restless in another way, too. I doubt if he is satisfied by what he does, or particularly happy. A man can scarcely be if he lives in a perpetual flux."

6

A figure was taking shape at the back of Leithen's mind, a figure without material mould, but an outline of character. He was beginning to realise something of the man he had come to seek. The following afternoon, when he stood in the hall of the Galliards' apartment in Park Avenue, he had the chance of filling in the physical details, for he was looking at a portrait of the man.

It was one of the young Van Rouyn's most celebrated achievements, painted two years earlier. It showed a man in riding breeches and a buff leather coat sitting on a low wall above a flower garden. His hair was a little ruffled by the wind, and one hand was repelling the advances of a terrier. Altogether an attractive detail of what should have been a "conversation piece." Leithen looked at the picture with the liveliest interest. Galliard was very different from the conception he had formed of him. He had thought of him as a Latin type, slim and very dark, and it appeared that he was more of a Norman, with well-developed shoulders like a football player. It was a pleasant face, the brown eyes were alight with life, and the mouth was both sensitive and firm. Perhaps the jaw was a little too fine drawn, and the air of bonhomie too elaborate to be quite natural. Still, it was a face a man would instinctively trust, the face of a good comrade, and there

could be no question about its supreme competence. In every line there was energy and quick decision.

Leithen gazed at it for some time, trying to find what he had expected.

"Do you think it a good likeness?" he asked the woman at his side.

"It's Francis at his best and happiest," she answered.

Felicity Galliard was a fair edition of her sister Barbara. She was not quite so tall or quite so slim, and with all her grace she conveyed an impression, not only of physical health, but of physical power. There was a charming athleticism about her; she had none of Barbara's airy fragility. Her eyes were like her sister's, a cool grey with sudden lights in them which changed their colour. She was like a bird, always poised to fly, no easy swoop or flutter, but, if need be, a long stern flight against weather and wind.

She led Leithen into the drawing-room. Her house was very different from the Ravelstons', where a variety of oddments represented the tastes of many generations. It was a "period" piece, the walls panelled in a light, almost colourless wood, the scanty furniture carefully chosen, an Aubusson carpet, and hangings and chintzes of grey and old rose and silver. A Nattier over the fireplace made a centre for the exquisite harmony. It was a room without tradition or even individuality, as if its possessors had deliberately sought out something which should be non-committal, an environment which should neither reflect nor influence them.

"You never met Francis?" she asked as she made tea. "We have been twice to Europe since we married, but only once in England, and then only for a few days. They were business trips, and he didn't have a moment to himself."

Her manner was beautifully composed, with no hint of tragedy, but in her eyes Leithen read an anxiety so profound that it was beyond outward manifestation. This woman was living day and night with fear. The sight of her, and of the picture in the hall, moved him strangely. He felt that between the Galliards and the friendly eupeptic people he had been meeting there was a difference, not of degree, but of kind. There was a quality here, undependable, uncertain, dangerous perhaps, but rare and unmistakable. There had been no domestic jar — of that he was convinced. But something had happened to one of them to shatter a happy partnership. If he could discover that something he would have a clue for his quest.

"I have never met your husband," he said, "but I've heard a great deal about him, and I think I'm beginning to understand him. That picture in the hall helps, and you help. I know your sister and your uncle, and now that I'm an idle man I've promised to do what I can. If I'm to be of any use, Mrs. Galliard, I'm afraid I must ask you some questions. I know you'll answer them frankly. Tell me first what happened when he went away."

"It was the fourth day of May, a perfect spring day. I went down to Westchester to see an old friend. I said good-bye to Francis after breakfast, and he went to the office. I came back about five o'clock and found a note from him on my writing-table. Here it is."

She produced from an escritoire a half-sheet of paper. Leithen read —

Dearest, I am sick — very sick in mind. I am going away. When I am cured I will come back to you. All my love.

"He packed a bag himself — the butler knew nothing about it. He took money with him — at least there was a large sum drawn from his account. No, he didn't wind up things at the office. He left some big questions undecided, and his partners have had no end of trouble. He didn't say a word to any of them, or to anybody else that I know of. He left no clue as to where he was going. Oh, of course, we could have put on detectives and found out something, but we dare not do that. Every newspaper in the land would have started a hue and cry, and there would have been a storm of gossip. As it is, nobody knows about him except his partners, and one or two friends, and Uncle Blenkiron, and Babs and you. You see he may come back any day quite well again, and I would never forgive myself if I had been neurotic and let him down."

Leithen thought that neurotic was the last word he would have chosen to describe this wise and resolute woman.

"What was he like just before he left? Was there any change in his manner? Had he anything to worry him?"

"Nothing to worry him in business. Things were going rather specially well. And, anyhow, Francis never let himself be worried by affairs. He prided himself on taking things lightly — he was always what the old folk used to call debonair. But — yes, there were little changes in him, I think. All winter he had been almost too good and gentle and yielding. He did everything I asked him without questioning, and that was not always his way. . . . Oh! and he did one funny thing. We used to go down to Florida for a fortnight after Christmas — we had a regular foursome for golf, and he liked to bask in the sun. This year he didn't seem to care about it, and I didn't press him, for I'm rather bored with golf, so we stayed at home. There

was a good deal of snow at Combermere — that's our New Jersey home — and Francis got himself somewhere a pair of snow-shoes and used to go for long walks alone. When he came back he would sit by the hour in the library, not dozing, but thinking. I thought it was a good way of resting and never disturbed him."

"You never asked what he was thinking about?"

"No. He thought a good deal, you see. He always made leisure to think. My only worry was about his absurd modesty. He was sure of himself, but not nearly so sure as I was, and recently when people praised him and I repeated the praise he used to be almost cross. He wrote a memorandum for the Treasury about some tax scheme, and Mr. Beverley said that it was a work of genius. When I told him that, I remember he lay back in his chair and said quite bitterly, 'Quel chien de génie!' He never used a French phrase except when he was tired or upset. I remember the look on his face — it was as if I had really pained him. But I could find nothing to be seriously anxious about. He was perfectly fit and well."

"Did he see much of anybody in particular in the last weeks?"

"I don't think so. We always went about together, you know. He liked to talk to Mr. Jane and Mr. Savory, and they often dined with us. I think young Eric Ravelston came once or twice to the house — Walter Derwent, too, I think. But he saw far more of me than of anybody else."

Her face suddenly stiffened with pain.

"Oh, Sir Edward, you don't think that he's dead — that he went away to die?"

"I don't. I haven't any fear of that. Any conclusion of mine would be worthless at the present stage, but my impression is that Mr. Galliard's trouble has nothing to do with his health. You and he have made a wonderful life together. Are you certain that he quite fitted into it?"

She opened her eyes.

"He was a huge success in it."

"I know. But did the success give him pleasure?"

"I'm sure it did. At least for most of the time."

"Yes, but remember that it was a strange world to him. He hadn't been brought up in it. He may have been homesick for something different."

"But he loved me!" she cried.

"He loved you. And therefore he will come back to you. But it may be to a different world."

7

New scenes, new faces, the interests of a new problem had given Leithen a few days of deceptive vitality. Then the reaction came, and for a long summer's day he sat on the veranda of his hotel bedroom in body a limp wreck, but with a very active mind. He tried to piece together what he had heard of Galliard, but could reach no conclusion. A highly strung, sensitive being, with Heaven knew what strains in his ancestry, had been absorbed into a new world in which he had been brilliantly successful. And then something had snapped, or some atavistic impulse had emerged from the deeps, something strong enough to break the tie of a happy marriage. The thing was sheer mystery. He had abandoned his old world and had never shown the slightest hankering after it. What had caused this sudden satiety with success?

Bronson Jane and Savory thought that the trouble was physical, a delicate machine overwrought and overloaded. The difficulty was that his health had always been perfect, and there was no medical adviser who could report on the condition of his nerves. His friends thought that he was probably lying hidden in some quiet sunny place, nursing himself back to vigour, with the secretiveness of a man to whom a physical breakdown was so unfamiliar that it seemed a portent, almost a crime.

But Savory had been enlightening. Scholarly, critical, fastidious, he had spoken of Galliard, the ordinary successful financier with no special cultural background, with an accent almost of worship.

"This country of ours," he told Leithen, "is up against the biggest problem in her history. It is not a single question like slavery or state rights, or the control of monopolies, or any of the straightforward things that have made a crisis before. It is a conglomeration of problems, most of which we cannot define. We have no geographical frontier left, but we've an

eternal frontier in our minds. Our old American society is really in dissolution. All of us have got to find a new way of life. You're lucky in England, for you've been at the job for a long time and you make your revolutions so slowly and so quietly that you don't notice them — or anybody else. Here we have to make ours against time, while we keep shouting about them at the top of our voices. Everybody and everything here has to have a new deal, and the different deals have to be fitted together like a jig-saw puzzle, or there will be an infernal confusion. We're a great people, but we're only by fits and starts a nation. You're fortunate in your British Empire. You may have too few folk, and these few scattered over big spaces, but they're all organically connected, like the separate apples on a tree. Our huge population is more like a collection of pebbles in a box. It's only the containing walls of the box that keep them together."

So much for Savory's diagnosis.

"Francis is just the kind of fellow we need," he went on. "He sees what's coming. He's the most intellectually honest creature God ever made. He has a mind which not only cuts like a scalpel, but is rich and resourceful — both critical and creative. He hasn't any prejudices to speak of. He's a fascinating human being and rouses no antagonisms. It looks like he has dragged his anchor at present. But if we could get him properly moored again he's going to be a power for good in this country. We've got to get him back, Sir Edward — the old Francis."

The old Francis? Leithen had queried.

"Well, with the old genius. But with an extra anchor down. I've never been quite happy about the strength of his moorings."

8

Walter Derwent at first had nothing to tell him. Francis Galliard had not been interested in travel in far places. He was treasurer of his Polar Institute, but that was out of personal friendship. Francis had not much keenness in field sports either, though his wife had made him take up fox-hunting. He never went fishing, and in recent years he had not shot much, though he sometimes went after duck to Minnesota and the Virginia shore. He was not much of a bird-shot, but he was deadly with the rifle on the one occasion when Derwent had been with him after deer. . . .

Derwent screwed up his pleasant rosy face till, with his eagle beak, he looked like a benevolent vulture. And then suddenly he let drop a piece of information which made Leithen sit up.

"But he did ask me — I remember — if I could recommend him a really first-class guide, a fellow that understood woodcraft and knew the Northern woods. Maybe he was asking on behalf of someone else, for he couldn't have much use himself for a guide."

"When was that?" Leithen asked sharply.

"Some time after Christmas. Early February, I reckon. Yes, it was just after our Adventurers' Club dinner."

"Did you recommend one?"

"Yes. A fellow called Lew Frizel, a 'breed, but of a very special kind. His mother was a Cree Indian and his father one of the old-time Hudson's Bay factors. I've had Lew with me on half a dozen trips. I discovered him on a trap-line in northern Manitoba."

"Where is he now?"

"That's what I can't tell you. He seems to have gone over the horizon. I wanted him for a trip up the Liard this fall, but I can get no answer from any of his addresses. He has a brother Johnny who is about as good, but he's not available, for he has a job with the Canadian Government in one of its parks — Waskesieu, up Prince Albert way."

Leithen paid a visit to the Canadian Consulate, and after a talk with the Consul, who was an old friend, the telegraph was set in motion. Johnny Frizel, sure enough, had a job as a game warden at Waskesieu.

Another inquiry produced a slender clue. Leithen spent a morning at the Ravelston office and had a long talk with Galliard's private secretary, an intelligent young Yale man. From the office diary he investigated the subjects which had engaged Galliard's attention during his last weeks in New York. They were mostly the routine things on which the firm was then engaged, varied by a few special matters on which he was doing Government work. But one point caught Leithen's eye. Galliard had called for the papers about the Glaubstein pulp mill at Chateau-Gaillard and had even taken them home

with him.

“Was there anything urgent about them?” he asked.

The secretary said no. The matter was dead as far as Ravelstons were concerned. They had had a lot to do with financing the original proposition, but long ago they had had their profit and were quit of it.

9

Leithen's last talk was with young Eric Ravelston. During the days in New York he had felt at times his weakness acutely, but he had not been conscious of any actual loss of strength. He wanted to be assured that he had still a modest reservoir to draw upon. The specialist examined him carefully and then looked at him with the same solemn eyes as Acton Croke.

“You know your condition, of course?” he asked.

“I do. A few weeks ago I was told that I had about a year to live. Do you agree?”

“It's not possible to fix a time schedule. You may have a year — or a little less — or a little more. If you went to a sanatorium and lived very carefully you might have longer.”

“I don't propose to lead a careful life. I've only a certain time and a certain amount of dwindling strength. I'm going to use them up on a hard job.”

“Well, in that case you may fluff out very soon, or you may go on for a year or more, for the mind has something to say in these questions.”

“There's no hope of recovery?”

“I'm afraid there's none — that is to say, in the light of our present knowledge. But, of course, we're not infallible.”

“Not even if I turn myself into a complete invalid?”

“Not even then.”

“Good. That's all I wanted to know. Now I've one other question. I'm going to look for Francis Galliard. You know him, but you never treated him, did you?”

Eric Ravelston shook his head.

“He didn't want any treatment. He was as healthy as a hound.”

Something in the young man's tone struck Leithen.

“You mean in body. Had you any doubt about other things — his mind, for instance?”

The other did not at first reply.

“I have no right to say this,” he spoke at last. “And, anyhow, it isn't my proper subject. But for some time I have been anxious about Francis. Little things, you know. Only a doctor would notice them. I thought that there was something pathological about his marvellous vitality. Once I had Garford, the neurologist, staying with me and the Galliards came to dinner. Garford could not keep his eyes off Francis. After they had gone he told me that he would bet a thousand dollars that he crumpled up within a year. . . . So if there's a time limit for you, Sir Edward, there's maybe a time limit also for Francis.”

10

Leithen disembarked on a hot morning from the Quebec steamer which served the north shore of the St. Lawrence. Chateau-Gaillard was like any other pulp-town — a new pier with mighty derricks, the tall white cylinders of the pulp mill, a big brick office, and a cluster of clapboard shacks which badly needed painting. The place at the moment had a stagnant air, for the old cutting limits had been exhausted and the supply of pulp-wood from the new area was still being organised. A stream came in beyond the pier, and the background was steep scrub-clad hills cleft by a wedge-like valley beyond which there rose distant blue lines of mountain.

For the first mile or two the road up the valley was a hard, metalled highway. Leithen had not often felt feeble in body or more active in mind. Thoreau had been a favourite author of his youth, and he had picked up a copy in New York and

had read it on the boat. Two passages stuck in his memory. One was from *Walden* —

“If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimiter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throat and feel the cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.”

The other was only a sentence —

“The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it.”

How valuable was that thing for which he was bartering all that remained to him of life? At first Blenkiron’s story had been no more than a peg on which to hang a private determination, an excuse, partly to himself and partly to the world, for a defiant finish to his career. The task fulfilled the conditions he wanted — activity for the mind and a final activity for the body. Francis Galliard was a disembodied ghost, a mere premise in an argument.

But now — Felicity had taken shape as a human being. There was an extraordinary appeal in her mute gallantry, her silent, self-contained fortitude. Barbara Clanroyden could not under any circumstances be pathetic; her airy grace was immune from the attacks of fate; she might bend, but she would never break. But her sister offered an exposed front to fortune. She was too hungry for life, too avid of experience, too venturesome, and more, she had set herself the task of moulding her husband to her ambitions. No woman, least of all his wife, would attempt to mould Sandy Clanroyden. . . . And the gods had given her tough material — not a docile piece of American manhood, but something exotic and unpredictable, something for which she had acquired a desperate affection, but of which she had only a dim understanding.

As for Francis, that shadow too was taking form. Leithen now had a picture of him in his mind, but it was not that of the portrait in the hall of the Park Avenue apartment. Oddly enough, it was of an older man, with a rough yellow beard. His eyes were different too, wilder, less assured, less benevolent. He told himself that he had reconstructed the physical appearance to match his conception of the character. For he had arrived at a provisional assessment of the man. . . . The chains of race and tradition are ill to undo, and Galliard, in his brilliant advance to success, had loosened, not broken them. Something had happened to tighten them again. The pull of an older world had jerked him out of his niche. But how? And whither?

11

The valley above the township was an ugly sight. The hillsides had been lumbered out and only scrub was left, and the shutes where the logs had been brought down were already tawny with young brushwood. In the bottom was a dam, which had stretched well up the slopes, for the lower scrub was bleached and muddied with water. But the sluices had been opened and the dam had shrunk to a few hundred yards in width, leaving the near hillsides a hideous waste of slime, the colour of a slag-heap. The place was like the environs of a town in the English Black Country.

Suddenly he was haunted by a recollection, a shadow at the back of his mind. The outline of the hills was familiar. Looking back, he realised that he had seen before the bluff which cut the view of the St. Lawrence into a wedge of blue water. He had forgotten the details of that journey thirty years ago when he had tramped down from the mountains; but it must have been in this neighbourhood. There was a navy on some job by the roadside, and he stopped the car and spoke to him.

The man shook his head. “I’m a newcomer here. There’s a guy up there — a Frenchie — maybe he’d tell you.”

Johnny Frizel went up the track in the bush to where a countryman was cutting stakes. He came back and reported.

“He says that before the dam was made there was a fine little river down there. The Clairefontaine was the name of it.”

Leithen’s memory woke into vivid life. This valley had been his road down country long ago. He remembered its loveliness when Chateau-Gaillard had been innocent of pulp mills and no more than a hamlet of painted houses and a white church. There had been a strip of green meadow-land by the waterside grazed by old-fashioned French cattle, and the stream had swept through it in deep pools and glittering shallows, while above it pine and birch had climbed in virgin magnificence to the crests. Now all the loveliness had been butchered to enable some shoddy newspaper to debauch the

public soul. He had only seen the place once long ago at the close of a blue autumn day, but the desecration beat on his mind like a blow. What had become of the little Clairefontaine farm at the river head, and that delicate place on the height of land which had of late been haunting him? . . . He felt a curious nervousness and it brought on a fit of coughing.

At the end of the dam the road climbed the left side of the valley through patches of spruce and a burnt-out area of blackened stumps. A ridge separated it from the stream, and when it turned again to the water's edge the character of the valley had changed. The Clairefontaine rumbled in a deep gorge, and as the aged Ford wheezed its way up the dusty roads Chateau-Gaillard and its ugliness were shut off and Leithen found himself in a sanctuary of the hills. He could not link up the place with his memory of thirty years ago when he had descended it on foot in the gold and scarlet of autumn. Then it had been a pathway to the outer world; now it was the entry into a secret and strange land. There was no colour in the scene, except the hard blue of the sky. The hot noon had closed down like a lid on an oppressive dull green waste which offered no welcome.

His mind was full of Francis Galliard. Once this had been the seigneur of his family, running back from the tide water some scores of miles into the wilderness. He felt the man here more vividly than ever before, but he could not affiliate him with the landscape, except that he also was a mystery. . . .

Why had his wife and his friends in New York been so oddly supine in looking for him? They had waited and left it for a stranger to take on the job. Fear of publicity, of course, in that over-public world. But was that the only reason? Was there not also fear of Galliard? He was not of their world, and they admired and loved him, but uncomprehendingly. Even Felicity. What did they fear? That they might wreck a subtle mechanism by a too heavy hand? They were all sensitive people and highly intelligent, and they would have not walked so delicately without a cause. Only now, when he was entering the cradle of Galliard's race, did he realise how intricate was the task to which he had set himself. And one to be performed against time. He remembered the young Ravelston's words. There was a time limit for Francis Galliard, as there was one for Edward Leithen.

The valley mounted by steps, each one marked by the thunder of a cataract in the gorge. Presently they rose above the woods, and came out on a stretch of open upland where the stream flowed among patches of crops and meadows of hay. Now his memory was clearer, for he remembered this place in exact detail. There was the farm of Clairefontaine, with its shingled, penthouse roof, its white-painted front, its tall weather-beaten barn, its jumble of decrepit outhouses. There was the little church of the parish, the usual white box, with a tin-coated spire now shining like silver in the sun, and beside it a hump-backed presbytery. And there was something beyond of which the memory was even sharper. For the valley seemed to come to an end, the wooded ranges closed in on it, but there was a crack through which the stream must flow from some distant upland. He knew what lay beyond that nick which was like the back-sight of a rifle.

"We won't stop here," he told Johnny, who handled the Ford like an artist. "Go on as far as the road will take us."

It did not take them far. They bumped among stumps and roots over what was now a mere cart track, but at the beginning of the cleft the track died away into a woodland trail. They got out, and Leithen led the way up the Clairefontaine. There was something tonic in the air which gave him a temporary vigour, and he was surprised that he could climb the steep path without too great discomfort. When they rested on a mossy rock by the stream he found that he ate his sandwiches with some appetite. But after that it was heavy going, for there was the inevitable waterfall to surmount, and, weary and panting, he came out into the ultimate meadow of the Clairefontaine, which was fixed so clearly in his recollection.

It was a cup in the hills, floored not with wild hay, but with short, crisp pasture like an English down. From its sides descended the rivulets which made the Clairefontaine, and in the heart of it was a pool fringed with flags, so clear that through its six-foot depth the little stir in the sand could be seen where the water bubbled up from below. The place was so green and gracious that all sense of the wilds was lost, and it seemed like a garden in a long-settled land, a garden made centuries ago by the very good and the very wise.

But it was a watch-tower as well as a sanctuary. Looking south, the hills opened to show Le Fleuve, the great river of Canada, like a pool of colourless light. North were higher mountains, which seemed to draw together with a purpose, huddling to shepherd the streams towards a new goal. They were sending the waters, not to the familiar St. Lawrence, but to untrodden Arctic wastes. That was the magic of the place. It was a frontier between the desert and the sown. To Leithen it was something more. He felt again the spell which had captured him here in his distant youth. It was the borderline

between the prosaic world, where things went by rule and rote and were all fitted to the human scale, and the world as God first made it out of chaos, which had no care for humanity.

He stretched himself full length on the turf, his eyes feasting on the mystery of the northern hills. Almost he had a sense of physical well-being, for his breath was less troublesome. Then Johnny Frizel came into the picture, placidly smoking an old black pipe. He fitted in well, and Leithen began to reflect on his companion, who had docilely, at the order of his superiors, flown over half Canada to join him.

Johnny was a small man, about five feet six, with broad shoulders and sturdy, bandy legs. He wore an old pair of khaki breeches and a lumberman's laced boots, but the rest of his garb was conventional, for he had put on his best clothes, not knowing what his duties might be. He had a round bullet head covered with black hair cut very short, and his ears stuck out like the handles of a pitcher. His Indian mother showed in his even brown colouring, and his father in his mild, meditative blue eyes. So far Leithen had scarcely realised him, except to admire his speech, which was a wonderful blend of the dialect of the outlands, the slang of America, and literary idioms, for Johnny was a great reader — all spoken in the voice of a Scots shepherd, and with a broad Scots accent. When the War broke out Johnny had been in the Labrador and his brother Lew on the lower Mackenzie, and both, as soon as they got the news, had made a bee-line for France and the front. They had been notable snipers in the Canadian Corps, as the notches on the butts of their service rifles witnessed.

"You have been lent to me, Johnny," Leithen said. "Seconded for special service, as we used to say in the army. I had better tell you our job." Briefly he sketched the story of Francis Galliard.

"This is the place where he was brought up," he said. "My notion is that he's in Canada now. I think he is with your brother — at any rate, I know that he was making enquiries about him in the early spring. You haven't heard from your brother lately?"

"Not since Christmas. Lew never troubles to put me wise about his doings. He may be anywhere on God's earth."

"We want to find out if we can, from old Gaillard at the farm and the priest, if the young Galliard has been here. Or your brother. If my guess is right they won't be very willing to speak, but with luck they may give themselves away. If the young Galliard has been here it gives us a bit of a clue. They are a hospitable lot, so I propose that we quarter ourselves on them for the night to have the chance of a talk. You can put up at the farm, and I dare say I can get a shake-down at the presbytery."

Johnny nodded approval. His blue eyes dwelt searchingly on Leithen's thin face, from which the flush of bodily exercise had gone, leaving a grey pallor.

They retraced their steps when the sun had sunk behind the hills and the evening glow was beginning, soft as the bloom on a peach. The Ford was turned, and rumbled down the valley until it was parked in the presbytery yard. The priest, Father Paradis, came out to greet them, a tall, lean old man much bent in the shoulders, who, like all the Quebec clergy, wore the cassock. He had been gardening, and his lumberjack's boots were coated with soil.

To Leithen's relief Father Paradis spoke the French of France, for, though Canadian born, he had been trained in a seminary at Beauvais.

"But of a surety," he cried. "You shall sleep here, monsieur, and share my supper. I have a guest room, though it is as small as the Prophet's Chamber of the Scriptures."

He would have Johnny stay also.

"No doubt Augustin can lodge Monsieur Frizel, but I fear he will have rough quarters."

Leithen's kit was left at the presbytery and he and Johnny walked to the farm to pay their respects to the squire of Clairefontaine. He had ascertained that this Augustin Gaillard, to whom the farm had descended, was an uncle of Francis. The priest had given him a rapid sketch of the family history. The mother had died in bearing Francis; the father a year after Francis had left for the States. There had been an elder brother, Paul, who two years ago had disappeared into the north, leaving his uncle from Chateau-Gaillard in his place. There were also two sisters who were Grey Nuns serving somewhere in the west — the priest did not know where.

Augustin Gaillard was a man of perhaps sixty years, with a wisp of grey beard and a moist, wandering eye. Everything about him bespoke the drunkard. His loud-patterned shirt had a ragged collar and sleeves, his waistcoat was discoloured with the dribbling of food, his trousers had holes at the knees, and his bare feet were shod with bottes-sauvages. There was nothing in his features to suggest the good breeding which Leithen had noted in the picture of Francis. The house, which

was more spacious than the ordinary farm, was in a condition of extreme dirt and disorder. Somewhere in the background Leithen had a glimpse of an ancient crone, who was doubtless the housekeeper.

But Augustin had the fine manners of his race. He placed his dwelling and all that was in it at their disposal. He pressed Leithen to remove himself from the presbytery.

"The good father," he said, "has but a poor table. He will give you nothing to drink but cold water."

Leaving Johnny deep in converse in the habitant patois, Leithen went back in the dusk to the presbytery. He was feeling acutely the frailty of his body, as he was apt to do at nightfall. Had he chosen a different course he would be going back to delicate invalid food, to a soft chair and a cool bed; now he must make shift with coarse fare and the hard pallet of the guest room. He wondered for a moment if he had not been every kind of fool.

But no sick-nurse could have been more attentive than Father Paradis. He had killed and cooked a chicken with his own hands. For supper there was soup and the fowl, and coffee made by one who had learned the art in France. The little room was lit by a paraffin lamp, the smell of which brought back to Leithen far-away days in a Scots shooting box. The old man saw his guest's weakness, and after the meal he put a pillow in his chair and made him rest his legs on a stool.

"I see you are not in good health, monsieur," he said. "Do you travel to restore yourself? The air of these hills is well reputed."

"Partly. And partly in hope of finding a friend. I am an Englishman, as you see, and am a stranger in Canada, though I have visited it once before. On that occasion I came to hunt, but my hunting days are over."

Father Paradis screwed up his old eyes.

"At home you were perhaps a professor?"

"I have been a lawyer — and also a Member of our Parliament. But my working days are past, and I would make my soul."

"You are wise. You are then in retreat? You are not, I think, of the Faith?"

Leithen smiled. "I have my faith to find, and perhaps I have little time in which to find it."

"There is little time for any of us," said the old man. He looked at Leithen with eyes long experienced in life, and shook his head sadly.

"I spoke of a friend," said Leithen. "Have you had many visitors this summer?"

"Few come here nowadays. A pedlar or two, and a drover in the fall for the farm cattle. There is no logging, for our woods are bare. People used to come up from Chateau-Gaillard on holiday, but Chateau-Gaillard is for the moment stagnant. Except for you and Monsieur Frizel it is weeks since I have seen a stranger."

"Had you no visitor from New York — perhaps in May? A man of the name of Francis Galliard?"

Leithen, from long practice in cross-examination, was accustomed to read faces. He saw the priest's eyes suddenly go blank, as if a shutter had been drawn over them, and his mouth tighten.

"No man of that name has visited us," he said.

"Perhaps he did not give that name. The man I mean is still young," and he described the figure as he had seen it in the New York portrait. "He is a kinsman, I think, of the folk at the farm."

Father Paradis shook his head.

"No, there has been no Francis Galliard here."

But there was that in the old man's eyes which informed Leithen that he was not telling all he knew, and also that no cross-examination would elicit more. His face had the stony secrecy of the confessional.

"Well, I must look elsewhere," Leithen said cheerfully. "Tell me of the people at the farm. I understand they are one of the oldest families in Canada."

Father Paradis's face lightened.

"Most ancient, but now, alas! pitifully decayed. The father was a good man, and a true son of the Church, but his farm failed, for he had little worldly wisdom. As for Augustin, he is, as you see, a drunkard. The son Paul was a gallant young man, but he was not happy on this soil. He was a wanderer, as his race was in the old days."

"Wasn't there a second son?"

“Yes, but he left us long ago. He forsook his home and his faith. Let us not speak of him, for he is forgotten.”

“Tell me about Paul.”

“You must know, monsieur, that once the Gaillards were a stirring race. They fought with Frontenac against the Iroquois, and very fiercely against the English. Then, when peace came, they exercised their hardihood in distant ventures. Many of the house travelled far into the west and the north, and few of them returned. There was one, Aristide, who searched for the lost British sailor Frankolin — how do you call him? — and won fame. And only the other day there was Paul’s uncle — also an Aristide — who found a new road to the Arctic shores and discovered a great river. Its name should be the Gaillard, but they tell me that the maps have the Indian word, the Ghost.”

Leithen, who had a passion for studying maps, remembered the river which flowed from north of the Thelon in the least-known corner of Canada.

“Is that where Paul went?” he asked.

“That is what we think. He was restless ever after his father died. He would go off for months to guide parties of hunters — even down to the Labrador, and in his dreams he had always his uncle Aristide; he was assured he was still alive and that if he went to the Ghost River he would find him. So one day he summons the other uncle, the worthless one, and bids him take over the farm of Clairefontaine.”

“You have heard nothing of him since?”

“Not a word has come. Why should it? He has no care for Clairefontaine. . . . Now, monsieur, it is imperative that you go to bed, for you are very weary. I will conduct you to the Prophet’s Chamber.”

Leithen was in the habit of falling asleep at once — it was now his one bodily comfort — but this night he lay long awake. He thought that he had read himself into the soul of Francis Gaillard, a summary and provisional reading, but enough to give him a starting point. He was convinced beyond doubt that he had come to Clairefontaine in the spring. He could not mistake the slight hesitation in the speech of Father Paradis, the tremor of the eyelids, the twitch of the mouth before it set — he had seen these things too often in the courts to be wrong. The priest had not lied, but he had equivocated, and had he been pressed would have taken refuge in obstinate silence. Francis had been here and had enjoined secrecy on the priest and no doubt on old Augustin. He was on a private errand and wanted to shut out the world.

He could picture the sequence of events. The man, out of tune with his environment, had fallen into the clutches of the past. He had come to Chateau-Gaillard and seen the ravaged valley — ravaged by himself and his associates — and thereby a bitter penitence had been awakened. His purpose now was to make his peace with the past — with his family, his birth-place and his religion. No doubt he had confessed himself to the priest. Perhaps he had gone, as Leithen had gone, to the secret meadow at the river head, and, looking to the north, had had boyish memories and ambitions awakened. It was his business — so Leithen read his thoughts — to make restitution, to appease his offended household gods. He must shake off the bonds of an alien civilisation, and, like his uncle and his brother and a hundred Gaillards of old, worship at the altars of the northern wilds.

Leithen fell asleep with so clear a picture in his mind that he might have been reading in black and white Francis’s confession.

12

“We go back to Quebec,” he told Johnny next morning. “But first I want to go up the stream again.”

The mountain meadow haunted his imagination. There, the afternoon before, he had had the first hour of bodily comfort he had known for months. The place, too, inspired him. It seemed to stiffen his purpose and to quicken his fancy.

Once again he lay on the warm turf beside the spring looking beyond the near forested hills to the blue dimness of the far mountains. It was that halcyon moment of the late Canadian summer when there are no flies, and even the midday is cool and scented, and the first hints of bright colour are stealing into the woods.

“I didn’t get a great deal out of the old man,” said Johnny. “He kept me up till three in the morning listenin’ to his stuff. He was soused when he began, and well pickled before he left off, but he was never lit up — the liquor isn’t brewed that could light up that old carcase. I guess he’s got a grouse against the whole world. But I found out one thing. Brother

Lew has been here this year.”

Leithen sat up. “How do you know?”

“Why, he asked me if I was any relation to another man of my name — a fellow with half a thumb on his left hand and a scar above his right eyebrow. That’s Lew to the life, for he got a bit chawed up at Vimy. When I asked more about the chap he felt he had said too much and shut up like a clam. But that means that Lew has been here all right, and that Augustin saw him, for to my certain knowledge Lew was never before east of Quebec, and yon old perisher has never stirred out of this valley. So I guess that Lew and your pal were here, for Lew wouldn’t have come on his own.”

Leithen reflected for a moment.

“Was Lew ever at the Ghost River?” he asked. “I mean the river half-way between Coronation Gulf and the top of Hudson’s Bay.”

“Never heard of it. Nope. I’m pretty sure brother Lew was never within a thousand miles of it. It ain’t his bailliewick.”

“Well, I fancy he’s there now. . . . You and I are setting out for the Ghost River.”

13

Leithen spent two weary days in Montreal, mostly at the telephone, a business which in London he had always left to Cruddock or his clerk. He knew that the Northland was one vast whispering gallery, and that it was easier to track a man there than in the settled countries, so he hoped to get news by setting the machine of the R.C.M.P. to work. There was telephoning and telegraphing far and wide, but no result. No such travellers as Galliard and Lew Frizel had as yet been reported north of the railways. One thing he did ascertain. The two men had not flown to the Ghost River. That was the evidence of the Air Force and the private aeroplane companies. Leithen decided that this was what he had expected. If Galliard was on a mission of penitence he would travel as his uncle Aristide and his brother Paul had travelled — by canoe and trail. If he had started early in May he should just about have reached the Arctic shores.

The next task was to get a machine for himself. He hired an aeroplane from Air-Canada, a Baird-Sverisk of a recent pattern, and was lucky enough to get one of the best of the northern flyers, Job Teviot, for his pilot, and one Murchison as his mechanic. The contract was for a month, but with provision for an indefinite extension. All this meant bringing in his bankers, and cabling home, and the influence of Ravelstons had to be sought to complete the business. The barometer at Montreal stood above 100 degrees, and there were times before he and Johnny took off when he thought that his next move would be to a hospital.

He felt stronger when they reached Winnipeg, and next day, flying over the network of the Manitoba lakes, he found that he drew breath more easily. He had flown little before, and the air at first made him feel very sleepy. This passed, and, since there was no demand for activity, his mind turned in on itself. He felt like some disembodied creature, for already he seemed to have shed all ordinary interests. Aforetime on his travels and his holidays he had been acutely interested in what he saw and heard, and part of his success at the Bar had been due to the wide range of knowledge thus acquired. But now he had no thoughts except for the job on hand. He had meant deliberately to concentrate on it, in order to shut out fruitless meditations on his own case; but he found that this concentration had come about automatically. He simply was not concerned about other things. In New York he had listened to well-informed talk about politics and business and books, and it had woke no response in his mind. Here in Canada he did not care a jot about the present or future of a great British Dominion. The Canadian papers he glanced at were full of the perilous situation in Europe — any week there might be war. The news meant nothing to him, though a little while ago it would have sent him home by the next boat. The world had narrowed itself to Francis Galliard and the frail human creature that was following him.

By and by it was the latter that crowded in on his thoughts. Since he had nothing to do except watch a slowly moving landscape and the cloud shadows on lake and forest, he began to reflect on the atom, Edward Leithen, now hurrying above the world. The memory of Felicity kept returning — the sudden anguish in her eyes, her cry “I love him! I love him!” and he realised how lonely his life had been. No woman had ever felt like that about him; he had never felt like that about any woman. Was it loss or gain? Gain, he told himself, for he implicated no one in his calamity. But had he not led a starved life? A misfit like Galliard had succeeded in gaining something which he, with all his social adaptability, had missed. He found himself in a mood almost of regret. He had made a niche for himself in the world, but it had been a chilly niche.

With a start he awoke to the fact that he was very near the edge of self-pity, a thing forbidden.

In a blue windless twilight they descended for the night at a new mining centre on the Dog–Rib River. Johnny pitched a tent and cooked supper, while the pilot and the mechanic found quarters with other pilots who ran the daily air service to the south. There was a plague of black flies and mosquitoes, but Leithen was too tired to be troubled by them, and he had eight hours of heavy, unrefreshing sleep.

When he stood outside the tent next morning, looking over a shining lake and a turbulent river, he had a moment of sharp regret. How often he had stood like this on a lake shore — in Scotland, in Norway, in Canada long ago — and watched the world heave itself out of night into dawn! Like this — but how unlike! Then he had been exhilarated with the prospect of a day's sport, tingling from his cold plunge, ravenous as a hawk for breakfast, the blood brisk in his veins and every muscle in trim. Now he could face only a finger of bacon and a half-cup of tea, and he was weary before the day had begun.

"There's plenty here knows Lew," Johnny reported. "They haven't come this way. If they're at the Ghost River, my guess is that they've gone by the Planchette and The Old Man Falls."

They crossed Great Slave Lake and all morning flew over those plains miscalled the Barrens, which, seen from above, are a delicate lace-work of lakes and streams criss-crossed by ridges of bald rock and banks of gravel, and with now and then in a hollow a patch of forest. They made camp early at the bend of a river, which Johnny called the Little Fish, for Murchison had some work to do on the engine. While Leithen rested by the fire Job went fishing and brought back three brace of Arctic char. He announced that there was another camp round the next bend — a white man in a canoe with two Crees — a sight in that lonely place as unexpected as the great auk. Somewhat refreshed by his supper, Leithen in the long-lighted evening walked upstream to see his neighbour.

He found a middle-aged American cleaning a brace of ptarmigan which he had shot, and doing it most expertly. He was a tall man, in breeches, puttees, and a faded yellow shirt, and Leithen took him for an ordinary trapper or prospector until he heard him speak. "I saw you land," the stranger said. "I was coming round presently to pass the time of day. Apart from my own outfit you are the first man I've seen for a month."

He prepared a bed of hot ashes, and with the help of rifle rods set the birds to roast. Then he straightened himself, filled a pipe, and had a look at Leithen.

"I'm an American," he said. "New York."

Leithen nodded. He had already detected the unmistakable metropolitan pitch of the voice.

"You're English? Haven't I seen you before? I used to be a good deal in London. . . . Hold on a minute. I've got it. I've heard you speak in the British Parliament. That would be in—" And he mentioned a year.

"Very likely," said Leithen. "I was in Parliament then. I was Attorney–General."

"You don't say. Well, we're birds of the same flock. I'm a corporation lawyer. My name's Taverner. Yours — wait a minute — is Leven."

"Leithen," the other corrected.

"Odd we should meet here in about the wildest spot in North America. It's easy enough to come by air, like you, but Matthew and Mark and I have taken two blessed months canoeing and portaging from railhead, and it will take us about the same time to get back."

"Can corporation lawyers like you take four months' holiday?"

Mr. Taverner's serious face relaxed in a smile. "Not usually. But I had to quit or smash. No, I wasn't sick. I was just tired of the dam' racket. I had to get away from the noise. The United States is getting to be a mighty noisy country."

The cry of a loon broke the stillness, otherwise there was no sound but the gurgle of the river and the grunting of one of the Indians as he cleaned a gun.

"You get silence here," said Leithen.

"I don't mean physical noise so much. The bustle in New York doesn't worry me more than a little. I mean noise in our minds. You can't get peace to think nowadays." He broke off. "You here for the same cause?"

"Partly," said Leithen. "But principally to meet a friend."

"I hope you'll hit him off. It's a biggish country for an assignation. But you don't need an excuse for cutting loose and

coming here. I pretend I come to fish and hunt, but I only fish and shoot for the pot. I'm no sort of sportsman. I'm just a poor devil that's been born in the wrong century. There's quite a lot of folk like me. You'd be surprised how many of us slip off here now and then to get a little quiet. I don't mean the hearty, husky sort of fellow who goes into the woods in a fancy mackinaw and spends his time there drinking whisky and playing poker. I mean quiet citizens like myself, who've simply got to breathe fresh air and get the din out of their ears. Canada is becoming to some of us like a mediæval monastery to which we can retreat when things get past bearing."

Taverner, having been without white society for so long, seemed to enjoy unburdening himself.

"I'm saying nothing against my country. I know it's the greatest on earth. But my God! I hate the mood it has fallen into. It seems to me there isn't one section of society that hasn't got some kind of jitters — big business, little business, politicians, the newspaper men, even the college professors. We can't talk except too loud. We're bitten by the exhibitionist bug. We're all boosters and high-powered salesmen and propagandists, and yet we don't know what we want to propagand, for we haven't got any kind of common creed. All we ask is that a thing should be colourful and confident and noisy. Our national industry is really the movies. We're one big movie show. And just as in the movies we worship languishing Wops and little blonde girls out of the gutter, so we pick the same bogus deities in other walks of life. You remember Emerson speaks about some nations as having guano in their destiny. Well, I sometimes think that we have got celluloid in ours."

There was that in Leithen's face which made Taverner pause and laugh.

"Forgive my rigmarole," he said. "It's a relief to get one's peevess off the chest, and I reckon I'm safe with you. You see, I come of New England stock, and I don't fit in too well with these times."

"Do you know a man called Galliard?" Leithen asked. "Francis Galliard — a partner in Ravelstons?"

"A little. He's a friend of Bronson Jane, and Bronson's my cousin. Funny you should mention him, for if I had to choose a fellow that fitted in perfectly to the modern machine, I should pick Galliard. He enjoys all that riles me. He's French, and that maybe explains it. I've too much of the Puritan in my blood. You came through New York, I suppose. Did you see Galliard? How is he? I've always had a liking for him."

"No. He was out of town."

Leithen got up to go. The long after-glow in the west was fading, and the heavens were taking on the shadowy violet which is all the northern summer darkness.

"When do you plan to end your trip?" Taverner asked as he shook hands.

"I don't know. I've no plans. I've been ill, as you see, and it will depend on my health."

"This will set you up, never fear. I was a sick man three years ago and I came back from Great Bear Lake champing like a prize-fighter. But take my advice and don't put off your return too late. It don't do to be trapped up here in winter. The North can be a darn cruel place."

14

Late next afternoon they reached the Ghost River delta, striking in upon it at an angle from the southwest. The clear skies had gone, and the "ceiling" was not more than a thousand feet. Low hills rimmed the eastern side, but they were cloaked in a light fog, and the delta seemed to have no limits, but to be an immeasurable abscess of decay. Leithen had never imagined such an abomination of desolation. It was utterly silent, and the only colours were sickly greens and drabs. At first sight he thought he was looking down on a bit of provincial Surrey, broad tarmac roads lined with asphalt footpaths, and behind the trim hedges smooth suburban lawns. It took a little time to realise that the highways were channels of thick mud, and the lawns bottomless quagmires. He was now well inside the Circle, and had expected from the Arctic something cold, hard, and bleak, but also clean and tonic. Instead he found a horrid lushness — an infinity of mire and coarse vegetation, and a superfluity of obscene insect life. The place was one huge muskeg. It was like the no-man's-land between the trenches in the War — a colossal no-man's-land created in some campaign of demons, pitted and pocked with shell-holes from some infernal artillery.

They skirted the delta and came down at its western horn on the edge of the sea. Here there was no mist, and he could look far into the North over still waters eerily lit by the thin evening sunlight. It was like no ocean he had ever seen, for it

seemed to be without form or reason. The tide licked the shore without purpose. It was simply water filling a void, a treacherous, deathly waste, pale like a snake's belly, a thing beyond humanity and beyond time. Delta and sea looked as if here the Demiurge had let His creative vigour slacken and ebb into nothingness. He had wearied of the world which He had made and left this end of it to ancient Chaos.

Next morning the scene had changed, and to his surprise he felt a lightening of both mind and body. Sky and sea were colourless, mere bowls of light. There seemed to be no tides, only a gentle ripple on the grey sand. Very far out there were blue gleams which he took to be ice. The sun was warm, but the body of the air was cold, and it had in it a tonic quality which seemed to make his breathing easier. He remembered hearing that there were no germs in the Arctic, that the place was one great sanatorium, but that did not concern one whose trouble was organic decay. Still, he was grateful for a momentary comfort, and he found that he wanted to stretch his legs. He walked to the highest point of land at the end of a little promontory.

It was a place like a Hebridean cape. The peaty soil was matted with berries, though a foot or two beneath was eternal ice. The breeding season was over and the migration not begun, so there was no bird life on the shore; the wild fowl were all in the swamps of the delta. The dead-level of land and sea made the arc of sky seem immense, the "intense inane" of Shelley's poem. The slight recovery of bodily vigour quickened his imagination. This was a world not built on the human scale, a world made without thought of mankind, a world colourless and formless, but also timeless; a kind of eternity. It would be a good place to die in, he thought, for already the clinging ties of life were loosened and death would mean little since life had ceased.

To his surprise he saw a small schooner anchored at the edge of a sandbank, a startling thing in that empty place. Johnny had joined him, and they went down to inspect it. An Eskimo family was on board, merry, upstanding people from far-distant Gordans Land. The skipper was one Andersen, the son of a Danish whaling captain and an Eskimo mother, and he spoke good English. He had been to Herschell Island to lay in stores, and was now on his way home after a difficult passage through the ice of the Western Arctic. The schooner was as clean as a new pin, and the instruments as well kept as on a man-o'-war. It had come in for fresh water, and Job was able to get from it a few tins of gasoline, for it was a long hop to the next fuelling stage. The visit to the Andersens altered Leithen's mood. Here was a snug life being lived in what had seemed a place of death. It switched his interest back to his task.

Presently he found what he had come to seek. On the way to the tent they came on an Eskimo cemetery. Once there had been a settlement here which years ago had been abandoned. There were half a dozen Eskimo graves, with skulls and bones showing through chinks in the piles of stone, and in one there was a complete skeleton stretched as if on a pyre. There was something more. At a little distance in a sheltered hollow were two crosses of driftwood. One was bent and weathered, with the inscription, done with a hot iron, almost obliterated, but it was possible to read. . . . TID. GAIL . . . D. There was a date too blurred to decipher. The other cross was new and it had not suffered the storms of more than a couple of winters. On it one could read clearly PAUL LOUIS GAILLARD and a date eighteen months back.

To Leithen there was an intolerable pathos about the two crosses. They told so much, and yet they told nothing. How had Aristide died? Had Paul found him alive? How had Paul died? Who had put up the memorials? There was a grim drama here at which he could not even guess. But the one question that mattered to him was, had Francis seen these crosses?

Johnny, who had been peering at the later monument, answered that question.

"Brother Lew has been here," he said.

He pointed to a little St. Andrew's cross freshly carved with a knife just below Paul's name. Its ends were funnily splayed out.

"That's Lew's mark," he said. "You might say it's a family mark. Long ago, when Dad was working for the Bay, there was a breed of Indians along the Liard, some sort of Slaveys, that had got into their heads that they were kind of Scots, and every St. Andrew's Day they would bring Dad a present of a big St. Andrew's Cross, very nicely carved, which he stuck above the door like a horse-shoe. So we all got into the way of using that cross as our trade mark, especially Lew, who's mighty particular. I've seen him carve it on a slab to stick above a dog's grave, and when he writes a letter he puts it in somewhere. So whenever you see it you can reckon Lew's ahead of you."

"They can't be long gone," said Leithen.

"I've been figuring that out, and I guess they might have gone a week ago — maybe ten days. Lew's pretty handy with a canoe. What puzzles me is where they've gone and how. There's no place hereaways to get supplies, and it's a good month's journey to the nearest post. Maybe they shot caribou and smoked 'em. I tell you what, if your pal's got money to burn, what about him hiring a plane to meet 'em here and pick 'em up? If that's their game it won't be easy to hit their trail. There's only one thing I'm pretty sure of, and that is they didn't go home. If we fossick about we'll maybe find out more."

Johnny's forecast was right, for that afternoon they heard a shot a mile off, and, going out to inquire, found an Eskimo hunter. At the sight of them the man fled, and Johnny had some trouble rounding him up. When halted he stood like a sullen child, a true son of the Elder Ice, for he had a tattooed face and a bone stuck through his upper lip. Probably he had never seen a white man before. He had been hunting caribou before they migrated south from the shore, and had a pile of skins and high-smelling meat to show for his labours. He stubbornly refused to accompany them back to the tent, so Leithen left him with Johnny, who could make some shape at the speech of the central Arctic.

When Johnny came back Andersen and the schooner had sailed, and Ghost River had returned to its ancient solitude.

"Lew's been here right enough," he said. "He and his boss and a couple of Indians came in two canoes eleven days back — at least I reckoned eleven days as well as I could from yon Eskimo's talk. Two days later a plane arrived for them. The Eskimo has never seen a horse or an automobile, but he knows all about aeroplanes. They handed over the canoes and what was left of the stores to the Indians and shaped a course pretty well due west. They've gotten the start of us by a week or maybe more."

That night after supper Johnny spoke for the first time at some length.

"I've been trying to figure this out," he said, "and here's what I make of it. Mr. Galliard comes here and sees the graves of his brother and uncle. So far so good. From what you tell me that's not going to content him. He wants to do something of his own on the same line by way of squarin' his conscience. What's he likely to do? Now, let's see just where brother Lew comes in. I must put you wise about Lew."

Johnny removed his pipe from his mouth.

"He's a wee bit mad," he said solemnly. "He's a great man; the cutest hunter and trapper and guide between Alaska and Mexico, and the finest shot on this continent. But he's also mad — batty — loony — anything you like that's out of the usual. It's a special kind of madness, for in most things you won't find a sounder guy. Him and me was buck privates in the War until they made a sharpshooter of him, and you wouldn't hit a better-behaved soldier than old Lew. I was a good deal in trouble, but Lew never. He has just the one crazy spot in him, and it reminds me of them Gaillards you talk about. It's a kind of craziness you're apt to find in us Northerners. There's a bit of country he wants to explore, and the thought of it comes between him and his sleep and his grub. Say, did you ever hear of the Sick Heart River?"

Leithen shook his head.

"You would if you'd been raised in the North. It's a fancy place that old-timers dream about. Where is it? Well, that's not easy to say. You've heard maybe of the South Nahanni that comes in the north bank of the Liard about a hundred miles west of Fort Simpson? Dad had a post up the Liard and I was born there, and when I was a kid there was a great talk about the South Nahanni. There's a mighty big waterfall on it, so you can't make it a canoe trip. Some said the valley was full of gold, and some said that it was as hot as hell owing to warm springs, and everybody acknowledged that there was more game there to the square mile than in the whole of America. It had a bad name, too, for at least a dozen folk went in and never came out. Some said that was because of bad Indians, but that was punk, for there ain't no Indians in the valley. Our Indians said it was the home of devils, which sounds more reasonable."

Johnny stopped to relight his pipe, and for a few minutes smoked meditatively.

"Do you get to Sick Heart by the South Nahanni?" Leithen asked.

"No, you don't. Lew's been all over the South Nahanni, and barring the biggest grizzlies on earth and no end of sheep and goat and elk and caribou, he found nothing. Except the Sick Heart. He saw it from the top of a mountain, and it sort of laid a charm on him. He said that first of all you had snow mountains bigger than any he had ever seen, and then ice-fields like prairies, and then forests of tall trees, the same as you get on the coast. And then in the valley bottom, grass meadows and an elegant river. A Hare Indian that was with him gave him the name — the Sick Heart, called after an old-time chief that got homesick for the place and pined away. Lew had a try at getting into it and found it no good — there was precipices thousands of feet that end. But he come away with the Sick Heart firm in his mind, and he ain't going to forget it."

"Which watershed is it on?" Leithen asked.

"That's what no man knows. Not on the South Nahanni's. And you can't get into it from the Yukon side, by the Pelly or the Peel or the Ross or Macmillan — Lew tried 'em all. So it looks as if it didn't flow that way. The last time I heard him talk about it he was kind of thinking that the best route was up from the Mackenzie, the way the Hare Indians go for their mountain hunting. There's a river there called the Big Hare. He thought that might be the road."

"Do you think he's gone there now?"

"I don't think, but I suspicion. See here, mister. Lew's a strong character and mighty set on what he wants. He's also a bit mad, and mad folks have persuasive ways with them. He finds this Galliard man keen to get into the wilds, and the natural thing is that he persuades him to go to his particular wilds, which he hasn't had out of his mind for ten years."

"I think you're probably right," said Leithen. "We will make a cast by way of the Sick Heart. What's the jumping-off ground?"

"Fort Bannerman on the Mackenzie," said Johnny. "Right, we'll start tomorrow morning. We can send back the planes from there and collect an outfit. We'll want canoes and a couple of Hares as guides."

And then he fell silent and stared into the fire. Now and then he took a covert glance at Leithen. At last he spoke a little shyly.

"You're a sick man, I reckon. I can't help noticin' it, though you don't make much fuss about it. If Lew's on the Sick Heart and we follow him there it'll be a rough passage, and likely we'll have to go into camp for the winter. I'm wondering can you stand it? There ain't no medical comforts in the Mackenzie mountains."

Leithen smiled. "It doesn't matter whether I stand it or not. You're right. I'm a sick man. Indeed, I'm a dying man. The doctors in England did not give me more than a year to live, and that was weeks ago. But I want to find Galliard and send him home, and after that it doesn't matter what happens to me."

"Is Galliard your best pal?"

"I scarcely know him. But I have taken on the job to please a friend, and I must make a success of it. I want to die on my feet, if you see what I mean."

Johnny nodded.

"I get you. I'm mighty sorry, but I get you. . . . Once I had a retriever bitch, the best hunting dog I ever knew, and her and me had some great times on the hills. She could track a beast all day, and minded a blizzard no more than a spring shower. Well, she got something mortally wrong with her innards, and was dying all right. One morning I missed her from her bed beside the stove, and an Indian told me he'd seen her dragging herself up through the woods in the snow. I followed her trail and found her dead just above the tree line, the place she'd been happiest in when she was well. She wanted to die on her feet. I reckon that's the best way for men and hounds."

15

For three days Leithen was in abject misery. They had no receiver in their plane and therefore no means of getting weather reports, and when they took off the next morning the only change was an increased chill in the air. By midday they had run into fog, and, since in that area Job was uncertain of his compass, they went north again to the Arctic coast, and followed it to the Coppermine. Here it began to blow from the north, and in a series of rainstorms they passed the Dismal Lakes and came to the shore of the Great Bear Lake. Job had intended to pass the night at the Mines, but there was no going further that evening in the mist and drizzle.

Next day they struggled to the Mines with just enough gasoline. Leithen looked so ill that the kindly manager would have put him to bed, but he insisted on restarting in the afternoon. They had a difficult take-off from the yeasty lake — Job insisted on their getting into their life-jackets, for he said the betting was that in three minutes they would be in the water. The lake was safely crossed, but Job failed to hit off the outlet of the Great Bear River, and with the low "ceiling" he feared to try a compass course to the Mackenzie because of the Franklin mountains. It was midnight before they struck the outlet and they had another wretched bivouac in the rain.

After that things went better. The weather returned to bright sun, clear skies, and a gentle wind from the north-east.

Presently they were above the Mackenzie and far in the west they saw the jumble of dark ridges which were the foothills of the Mackenzie mountains. In the afternoon the hills came closer to the river, and on the left bank appeared a cluster of little white shacks with the red flag of the Hudson's Bay flying from a post.

"Fort Bannerman," said Johnny, as they circled down. "That's the Big Hare, and somewhere at the back of it is the Sick Heart. Mighty rough country."

The inhabitants of the fort were grouped at the mud bank where they went ashore — the Hudson's Bay postmaster, two Oblate Brothers, a fur trader, a trapper in for supplies, and several Indians. The trapper waved a hand to Johnny —

"Hullo, boy!" he said. "How goes it? Lew's been here. He lit out for the mountains ten days ago."

PART II

"There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God."

—PSALM XLVI.

1

It took three days to get the proper equipment together. Johnny was leaving little to chance.

"If we find Lew and his pal we may have to keep 'em company for months. It won't be easy to get to the Sick Heart, but it'll be a darn sight harder to get out. We've got to face the chance of a winter in the mountains. Lucky for us the Hares have a huntin' camp fifty miles up-river. We can dump some of our stuff there and call it our base."

The first question was that of transport. Water was the easiest until the river became a mountain torrent. The common Indian craft was of moose hides tanned like vellum and stretched on poplar ribs; but Johnny managed to hire from a free-trader a solid oak thirty-foot boat with an outboard motor; and, as subsidiaries, a couple of canoes brought years ago from the south, whose seams had been sewn up with strips of tamarack root and caulked with resin. Two Indians were engaged, little men compared with the big Plains folk, but stalwart for the small-boned Hares. They had the slanting Mongol eyes of the Mackenzie River tribes, and had picked up some English at the Catholic mission school. Something at the back of Leithen's brain christened them Big Klaus and Little Klaus, but Johnny, who spoke their tongue, had other names for them.

Then the Hudson's Bay store laid open its resources, and Johnny was no niggardly outfitter. Leithen gave him a free hand, for they had brought nothing with them. There were clothes to be bought for the winter — parkas and fur-lined jerkins, and leather breeches, and lined boots; gloves and flapped caps, blankets and duffel bags. There were dog packs, each meant to carry twenty-five pounds. There was a light tent — only one, for the Hares would fend for themselves at the up-river camp, and Lew and Galliard were no doubt already well provided. There were a couple of shotguns and a couple of rifles and ammunition, and there was a folding tin stove. Last came the provender: bacon and beans and flour, salt and sugar, tea and coffee, and a fancy assortment of tinned stuffs.

"Looks like we was goin' to start a store," said Johnny, "but we may need every ounce of it and a deal more. If it's a winter-long job we'll sure have to get busy with our guns. Don't look so scared, mister. We've not got to back-pack that junk. The boat'll carry it easy to the Hares' camp, and after that we'll cache the feck of it."

Leithen's quarters during these days were in the spare room of the Bay postmaster. Fort Bannerman was a small metropolis, for besides the Bay store it had a Mounted Police post, a hospital run by the Grey Nuns, and an Indian school in charge of the Oblate Brothers. With one of the latter he made friends, finding that he had served in a French battalion which had been on the right of the Guards at Loos. Father Duplessis was from Picardy. Leithen had once been billeted in the shabby flat-chested chateau near Montreuil where his family had dwelt since the days of Henri Quatre. The Fathers had had a medical training and could at need perform straightforward operations, such as that on an appendix, or the amputation of a maimed limb. Leithen sat in his little room at the hospital, which smelt of ether and carbolic, and they talked like two old soldiers.

Once they walked together to where the Big Hare strained to the Mackenzie through an archipelago of sandy islets.

"I have been here seven years," Father Duplessis told him. "Before that I was three years in the eastern Arctic. That, if you like, was isolation, for there was one ship a year, but here we are in a thoroughfare. All through the winter the planes from the northern mines call weekly, and in summer we have many planes as well as the Hudson's Bay boats."

Leithen looked round the wide circle of landscape — the huge drab Mackenzie two miles broad, to the east and south interminable wastes of scrub spruce, to the west a chain of tawny mountains, stained red in parts with iron, and fantastically sculptured.

"Do you never feel crushed by this vastness?" he asked. "This country is out-size."

"No," was the answer, "for I live in a little world. I am always busy among little things. I skin a moose, or build a boat,

or hammer a house together, or treat a patient, or cobble my boots or patch my coat — all little things. And then I have the offices of the Church, in a blessedly small space, for our chapel is a midget.”

“But outside all that?” said Leithen, “you have an empty world and an empty sky.”

“Not empty,” said Father Duplessis, smiling, “for it is filled with God. I cannot say, like Pascal, ‘le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie.’ There is no silence here, for when I straighten my back and go out of doors the world is full of voices. When I was in my Picardy country there were little fields like a parterre, and crowded roads. There, indeed, I knew loneliness — but not here, where man is nothing and God is all.”

2

They left Fort Bannerman on a clear fresh morning when the sky was a pale Arctic blue, so pale as to be almost colourless, and a small cold wind, so tiny as to be little more than a shudder, blew from the north. The boat chugged laboriously up the last feeble rapids of the Big Hare, and then made good progress through long canal-like stretches in a waste of loess and sand. Here the land was almost desert, for the scrub pines had ceased to clothe the banks. These rose in shelves and mantelpieces to the spurs of the mountains, and one chain of low cliffs made a kind of bib round the edge of the range. There was no sound except the gurgle of the water and an occasional sandpiper’s whistle. A selvedge of dwarf willow made the only green in the landscape, though in distant hollows there were glimpses of poplar and birch. The river was split into a dozen channels, and the Hares kept the boat adroitly in deep water, for there was never a moment when it grounded. It was an ugly country, dull as a lunar landscape, tilted and eroded ridges which were the approach to the granite of the high mountains.

The three days at Fort Bannerman had done Leithen good, and though he found his breathing troublesome and his limbs weak, the hours passed in comparative comfort, since there was no need for exertion. On the Arctic shore and in the journey thence he had realised only that he was in a bleak infinity of space, a natural place in which to await death. But now he was conscious of the details of his environment. He watched the drifting duck and puzzled over their breed, he noted the art with which the Hares kept the boat in slack and deep water, and as the mountains came nearer he felt a feeble admiration for one peak which had the shape of Milan Cathedral. Especially he was aware of his companion. Hitherto there had been little conversation, but now Johnny came into the picture, sitting on the gunwale, one lean finger pressing down the tobacco in his pipe, his far-sighted eyes searching the shelves for game.

Johnny was very ready to talk. He had discovered that Leithen was Scots, and was eager to emphasise the Scottish side of his own ancestry. On the little finger of his left hand he wore a ring set with a small blood stone. He took it off and passed it to Leithen.

“Dad left me that,” he said. “Lew has a bigger and better one. Dad was mighty proud of the rings and he told us to stick to them, for he said they showed we come of good stock.”

Leithen examined it. The stone bore the three cinquefoils of Fraser. Then he remembered that Frizel had been the name for Fraser in the Border parish where he had spent his youth. He remembered Adam Fraser, the blacksmith, the clang of his smithy on summer mornings, the smell of sizzling hooves and hot iron on summer afternoons. The recollection gave Johnny a new meaning for him; he was no longer a shadowy figure in this fantastic world of weakness; he was linked to the vanished world of real things, and thereby acquired a personality.

As they chugged upstream in the crisp afternoon, hourly drawing nearer to the gate of the mountains, Leithen enjoyed something which was almost ease, while Johnny in his slow drawling voice dug into his memory. That night, too, when they made camp at the bottom of a stone-shoot, and, since the weather was mild, kept the driftwood fire alight more for show than for warmth, Johnny expanded further. Since in his experience all sickness was stomachic, he had included invalid foods among the stores, and was surprised when Leithen told him that he need not fuss about his diet. This made him take a more cheerful view of his companion’s health, and he did not trouble to see him early to bed. In his sleeping-bag on a couch of Bay blankets Leithen listened to some chapters of Johnny’s autobiography.

He heard of his childhood on Great Slave Lake and on the Liard, of his father (his mother had died at his birth), of his brother Lew — especially of Lew.

“We was brothers,” said Johnny, “but also we was buddies, which ain’t always according to rule.”

He spoke of his hunting, which had ranged from the Stikine to the Churchill, from the Clearwater to the Liard, and of his trapping, which had been done mostly about the upper waters of the Peace. Johnny as talker had one weak point — he was determined that his auditor should comprehend every detail, and he expounded in minutiae. He seemed resolved that Leithen should grasp the difference in method between the taking of mink and marten, the pen on the river bank and the trap up in the hills. He elaborated also the technique of the spearing of muskrats, and he was copious on the intricate subject of fox. . . . In every third sentence there was a mention of Lew, his brother, until the picture that emerged for Leithen from the talk was not that of wild animals but of a man.

It was a picture which kept dislimning, so that he could not see it clearly; but it impressed him strangely. Lew came into every phase of Johnny's recollections. He had said this or that; he had done this or that; he seemed to be taken as the ultimate authority on everything in heaven and earth. But Johnny's attitude was something more than the admiration for an elder brother, or the respect of one expert for a greater. There was uneasiness in it. He seemed to bring in Lew's name in a kind of ritual, as if to convince himself that Lew was secure and happy. . . . What was it that he had said on the Arctic shore? He had called Lew mad, meaning that he was possessed by a dream. Now Lew was hot on the trail of that dream, and Johnny was anxious about him. Of that there was no doubt.

Leithen laughed. He looked at Johnny's bat ears and bullet head. Here was he, one who had seen men and cities and had had a hand in great affairs, with his thoughts concentrated on an unknown brother of an Indian half-breed! Galliard had almost gone out of the picture; to Johnny he was only Lew's "pal," the latest of a score or two of temporary employers. Even to Leithen himself the errant New Yorker, the husband of Blenkiron's niece, the pillar of Ravelstons, seemed a minor figure compared to the masterful guide who was on the quest for a mysterious river. Had Lew inspired Galliard with his fancies? Or was the inspiration perhaps Galliard's? What crazy obsession would he find if and when he overtook the pair somewhere in that wild world behind which the sun was setting?

That night they made camp at the very doorstep of the mountains, where the river, after a string of box-canyons, emerged from the foothills. It was an eerie place, for the Big Hare, after some miles of rapids, drowsed in a dark lagoon beneath sheer walls of rock. Leithen's mind, having been back all day in the normal world, now reacted to a mood of black depression. What had seemed impressive a few hours before was now merely grotesque and cruel. His errand was ridiculous — almost certainly futile, and trivial even if it succeeded. What had he to do with the aberrations of American financiers and the whims of half-breeds? Somewhere in those bleak hills he would die — a poor ending for a not undignified life! . . . But had his life been much of a thing after all? He had won a certain amount of repute and made a certain amount of money, but neither had meant much to him. He had had no wife, no child. Had his many friends been more, after all, than companions? In the retrospect his career seemed lonely, self-centred, and barren, and what was this last venture? A piece of dull stoicism at the best — or, more likely, a cheap bravado.

3

All next morning they smelt their way through the box-canyons, sometimes with the engine shut off and the Hares poling madly. There were two dangerous rapids, but navigation was made simpler by the fact that there were no split channels and no shallows. They were going through the limestone foothills, and the cliffs on either side were at least seven hundred feet high, sheer as a wall where they did not overhang. Johnny had a tale about the place. Once the Hares had been hunted by the Crees — he thought it was the Crees, his own people, but it might have been the Dogribs. At that time the Big Hare River had come out of the mountains underground. The Hare boats were no match for the fleet Cree canoes, and the wretched tribe, fleeing upstream, looked for annihilation when they reached the end of the waterway. But to their amazement they found the mountains open before them and a passage through the canyons to the upper valley where was now the Hares' hunting camp. When they looked back there were no pursuing Crees, for the mountain wall had closed behind them. But some days later, when the disappointed enemy had gone back to their Athabaska swamps, the passage opened again, and the Hares could return when they pleased to the Mackenzie.

"Big magic," said Johnny. "I reckon them Hares got the story out of the Bible, when the missionaries had worked a bit on them, for it's mighty like the children of Israel and old Pharaoh."

Suddenly the boat shot into a lake, the containing walls fell back, and they were in a valley something less than a mile

wide, with high mountains, whose tops were already powdered with snow, ringing it and blocking it to the north. The shores were green with scrub-willow, and the lower slopes were dark with spruce and pine.

At the upper end of the lake, on a half-moon of sward between the woods and the water, was the Hares' encampment. Big Klaus and Little Klaus set up a howl as they came in sight of it, and they were answered by a furious barking of dogs.

The place was different from Leithen's expectation. He remembered from old days the birch-bark lodges of eastern Canada; but in this country, where the birches were small, he had looked for something like the tall teepees of the Plains, with their smoke-holes and their covering of skins. Instead he found little oblong cabins thatched with rush-mats or brushwood. They had a new look as if they had recently been got ready for the winter, and a few caribou-skin tents showed what had been the summer quarters. On the highest point of ground stood what looked like a chapel, a building of logs surmounted at one end by a rough cross. Penned near it was an assortment of half-starved dogs who filled the heavens with their clamour.

The place stank foully, and when they landed Leithen felt nausea stealing over him. His legs had cramped with the journey and he had to lean on Johnny's shoulder. They passed through a circle of silent Indians, and were greeted by their chief, who wore a medal like a soup plate. Then a little old man hobbled up who introduced himself as Father Wentzel, the Oblate who spent the summer here. He was about to return to Fort Bannerman, he said, when his place would be taken for the winter by Father Duplessis. He had a little presbytery behind the chapel, where he invited Leithen to rest while Johnny did his business with the Hares.

The priest opened the door which communicated with the chapel, lit two tapers on the altar, and displayed with pride a riot of barbaric colours. The walls were hung with cloths painted in bedlamite scarlets and purples and oranges — not the rude figures of men and animals common on the teepees, but a geometrical nightmare of interwoven cubes and circles. The altar cloth had the same byzantine exuberance.

"That is the work of our poor people," said the priest. "Helped by Brother Onesime, who had the artist's soul. To you, monsieur, it may seem too gaudy, but to our Indians it is a foretaste of the New Jerusalem."

Leithen sat in the presbytery in a black depression. The smells of the encampment — unclean human flesh, half-dressed skins of animals, gobbets of putrefying food — were bad enough in that mild autumn noon. The stuffy little presbytery was not much better. But the real trouble was that suddenly everything seemed to have become little and common. The mountains were shapeless, mere unfinished bits of earth; the forest of pine and spruce had neither form nor colour; the river, choked with logs and jetsam, had none of the beauty of running water. In coming into the wilderness he had found not the majesty of Nature, but the trivial, the infinitely small — an illiterate half-breed, a rabble of degenerate Indians, a priest with the mind of a child. The pettiness culminated in the chapel, which was as garish as a Noah's Ark from a cheap toyshop. . . . He felt sick in mind and very sick in body.

Father Wentzel made him a cup of tea, which he could barely swallow. The little priest's eyes rested on him with commiseration in them, but he was too shy to ask questions. Presently Johnny arrived in a bustle. He would leave certain things, if he were permitted, in the presbytery cellar. He had arranged with the chief about dogs when they were wanted, but that was not yet, for it would be a fortnight at least before snow could be looked for, even in the high valleys, and, since they would travel light, they did not need dogs as pack animals. They would take the boat, for a stage or two was still possible by it; after that they would have the canoes, and he had kept the Hares as canoe-men — "for the portagin' business would be too much for you, mister."

He had news of Lew. The two men were not more than a week ahead, for a sudden flood in the Big Hare had delayed them. They had canoes, but no Indians, and had gone in the first instance to Lone Tree Lake. "That's our road," said Johnny. "Maybe they've made a base camp there. Anyhow, we'll hit their trail."

He had other news. It was the end of the seven years' cycle, and disease had fallen on the snow-shoe rabbit, upon which in the last resort all wild animals depend. Therefore the winter hunting and trapping of the Hares would be poor, and there might be a shortage of food in their camp. "You tell Father Duplessis that when you get back to Fort Bannerman," he told the priest. Their own camp, if they were compelled to make one, might run short. "Lucky we brought what we did," he told Leithen. "If we catch up with Lew we'll be all right, for he'd get something to eat off an iceberg."

They passed one night in the presbytery. While Johnny slept the deep, short sleep of the woodsman, Leithen had a word with Father Wentzel.

"The two men who have gone before?" he asked. "One is the brother of my guide, and the other is a friend of my friends. How did they impress you?"

The child-like face of the priest took on a sudden gravity.

"The gentleman, he was of the Faith. He heard mass daily and made confession. He was a strange man. He looked unhappy and hungry and he spoke little. But the other, the guide, he was stranger. He had not our religion, but I think he had a kind of madness. He was in a furious haste, as if vengeance followed him, and he did not sleep much. When I rose before dawn he was lying with staring eyes. For his companion, the gentleman, he seemed to have no care — he was pursuing his own private errand. A strong man, but a difficult. When they left me I did not feel happy about the two messieurs."

4

Out of the encumbered river by way of easy rapids the boat ran into reaches which were like a Scottish salmon stream on a big scale, long pools each with a riffle at its head. The valley altered its character, becoming narrower and grassier, with the forest only in patches on infrequent promontories. The weather, too, changed. The nights were colder, and a chill crept into even the noontide sunshine. But it was immensely invigorating, so that Johnny sang snatches of Scots songs instead of sucking his pipe, and Leithen had moments of energy which he knew to be deceptive. The air had a quality which he was unable to describe, and the scents were not less baffling. They were tonic and yet oddly sedative, for they moved the blood rather to quiescence than to action. They were aromatic, but there was nothing lush or exotic in them. They had on the senses the effect of a high violin note on the ear, as of something at the extreme edge of mortal apprehension.

But the biggest change was in Leithen's outlook. The gloomy apathy of the Oblate's presbytery disappeared, and its place was taken by a mood which was almost peace. The mountains were no longer untidy rock heaps, but the world which he had loved long ago, that happy upper world of birds and clouds and the last magic of sunset. He picked out ways of ascent by their ridges and gullies, and found himself noting with interest the riot of colour in the woods: the grey splashes of caribou moss, the reds of partridge-berry, cranberry, blueberry, and Saskatoon; the dull green interspaces where an old forest fire had brought forth acres of young spruces; above all the miracle of the hardwood trees. The scrub by the river, red-dog-willow, wolfberry willow, had every shade of yellow, and poplar and birch carried on the pageant of gold and umber far up the mountain sides. Birds were getting infrequent; he saw duck and geese high up in the heavens, but he could not identify them. Sometimes he saw a deer, and on bare places on the hills he thought he detected sheep. Black bears were plentiful, revelling among the berries or wetting their new winter coats in the river's shallows, and he saw a big grizzly lumbering across a stone shoot.

Three long portages took them out of the Big Hare valley to Lone Tree Lake, which, in shape like a scimitar, lay tucked in a mat of forest under the wall of what seemed to be a divide. They reached it in the twilight, and, since the place was a poor camping-ground, they launched the canoes and paddled half-way up till they found a dry spit, which some ancient conflagration had cleared of timber. The lake was lit from end to end with the fires of sunset, and later in the night the aurora borealis cast its spears across the northern end. The mountains had withdrawn, and only one far snow peak was visible, so that the feeling of confinement, inevitable in the high valleys, was gone, and Leithen had a sense of infinite space around him. He seemed to breathe more freely, and the chill of the night air refreshed him, for frost crisped the lake's edges. He fell asleep as soon as he got under his blankets.

He awoke after midnight to see above him a wonderful sky of stars, still shot with the vagrant shafts of the aurora. Suddenly he felt acutely his weakness, but with no regret in his mind, and indeed almost with comfort. He had been right in doing as he had done, coming out to meet death in a world where death and life were colleagues and not foes. He felt that in this strange place he was passing, while still in time, inside the bounds of eternity. He was learning to know himself, and with that might come the knowledge of God. A sentence of St. Augustine came into his head as he turned over and went to sleep again: "Deum et animam scire cupio. Nihil ne plus? Nihil omnino."

5

He woke to find himself sweating under his blankets. The weather had changed to a stuffy mildness, for a warm chinook wind was blowing from the south-west. Johnny was standing beside him with a grave face.

"Lew's been here," he said. "He's left his mark all right. Eat your breakfast and I'll show you."

At the base of the promontory there was a stand of well-grown spruce. A dozen of the trees had been felled, stripped, cut into lengths, and notched at each end. An oblong had been traced on a flat piece of ground, and holes dug for end-posts. A hut had been prospected, begun — and relinquished.

"Lew's been on this job," said Johnny. "You can't mistake his axe-work."

He stood looking with unquiet eyes at the pile of cut logs.

"Him and his pal put in a day's work here. And then they quit. What puzzles me is why Lew quit. It ain't like him."

"Why shouldn't he change his mind?" Leithen asked. "He must have decided that this was not the best place for a base camp."

Johnny shook his head.

"It ain't like him. He never starts on a job until he has thought all round it and made sure that he's doin' right, and then hell fire wouldn't choke him off it. No, mister. There's something queer about this, and I don't like it. Something's happened to Lew."

The mild blue eyes were cloudy with anxiety.

"They've back-packed their stuff and gone on. They've cached their canoe," and he nodded to where a bulky object was lashed in the lower branches of a tall poplar. "We've got to do the same. We'll cache most of our stuff, for when we catch up with Lew we can send back for it. We'll take the Indians, for you ain't fit to carry a load. Their trail won't be hard to follow. I've been over the first bit of it. Lew pushed on ahead, and the other was about fifty yards back of him and limping. Looks like they've quarrelled."

6

The trail led away from the lake shore up a tributary stream towards what looked like the main wall of the divide. The berry-clad, ferny hillside made easy walking, and since the timber was small there were few troublesome windfalls. Johnny carried his .44 rifle, his axe, and a bag containing his own personal effects and most of Leithen's; the Hares, Big Klaus and Little Klaus, had the heavy stuff, tent, cooking utensils, portable stove, stores; while Leithen had no more than a light haversack about the weight which he had often carried in the Alps. The pattern of his day was now so familiar that he found it hard to fit into it the astounding novelties in his life — his quest for a man whom he had never seen, in the least-known corner of North America — the fact that presently somewhere in this wilderness he must die.

New also in his experience were the weather and his own weakness. The sun was getting low and the days were shortening; each night frost crisped the edges of the streams, and the first hour of the morning march was through crackling pools and frozen herbage. But by noon the sun was warm and it set daily over their left shoulders in a haze of opal and pearl. The morning and evening chills were keenly felt, but the tonic air seemed to soothe his coughing. It was the very quintessence of air, quickening every sense so that he smelt more keenly, heard more clearly, saw things in sharper outline. He had never used spectacles, and he found that his eyes were fully the equal of Johnny's when he knew what to look for.

He might have had an appetite, too, had it not been for his fatigue. He was so tired when they made camp for the night that he could scarcely eat, and Johnny had to turn his beans and bacon into a kind of soup before he could swallow them. He would lie in a half-stupor drawing his breath painfully for the better part of an hour, while Johnny and the Hares built the fire. Johnny was merciful, and accommodated his pace to his dragging feet, but the easiest gait was too much for him, and soon he had to have hourly rests. The trail went in and out of the glens, rising slowly to the higher benches, and, but for a few patches of swamp and one laborious passage over a rockfall, it was a road a child could have walked. But except for a very few minutes in the day it was for Leithen one long purgatory.

He started out in the morning with wobbling legs. After a mile or so, when his blood moved more briskly, he had a short spell of comfort. Then his breath began to trouble him, and long before midday he was plodding like a conscientious

drunkard. He made it a point of honour to continue until Johnny called a halt, and, though Johnny did this often, he found himself always near the limits of his strength, and would drop like a log when the word was given. He returned unconsciously to an old habit of his mountaineering days, when he had had a long dull course to complete, counting his steps up to a thousand and walking to the rhythm of "Old Soldiers never Die. . . ."

At the head of a little pass Johnny halted, though the march had only been going for twenty minutes. The Hares, when they came up, set down their packs and broke into a dismal howling, which seemed to be meant for a chant. There was a big jack-pine with the lower branches lopped off, and some fifty feet from the ground a long bundle was lashed to the trunk, something wrapped in caribou skin tanned white.

Johnny removed his disreputable hat. "That's a chief up there. Good old scout he was — name of Billy Whitefish. . . . Passed out last fall."

7

One blue day succeeded another, and each was followed by a colder night. The earth was yawning before it turned to its winter sleep. Leithen, though the days tired him to desperation, yet found the nights tolerable, and could let his thoughts stray from his bodily discomfort. He listened to Johnny's talk.

Johnny talked much, for he had lost his shyness of Leithen, and this kind of trip was child's play to him.

"This is a pretty good land," he said, "to them that knows their way about. I guess a man could starve in the barrens, but not in the woods. Why, there's forty kinds of berries — and a whole lot of different sorts of mushrooms — and rock-tripe — and bark you can boil to make porridge. And there's all the animals that Noah had in the Ark. And there's nothing to hurt a body provided the body's got sense, and don't tackle a grizzly up-hill."

He had strong views on food. "B'ar's right enough in the fall when he's fat. A young un's as good as mutton, but an old un's plain shoe leather." He did not care for moose meat, preferring caribou or deer, and he liked best partridge or ptarmigan in half-plumage.

"What's here? Grizzly, black b'ar, brown b'ar, moose, caribou, three kinds of sheep — everything except goats. The Almighty left goats out when He stocked them mountains."

It was clearly his purpose to picture the land as an easy place even for a sick man to travel in. "Canadians," he said (he used the word as the equivalent of strangers, embracing everybody except the men of the North-west), "think we've got hell's own climate up here. They're wrong. We get milder winters than the Prairies. Besides, winter's a fine time to travel if you know the ways of it. You'll be snugger in a hole in the snow at forty below than in an apartment house in Winnipeg, and a darn lot healthier."

"But you've got to watch your step in the Northland," he would add. He would tell experiences of his own to show the cruelty of the wilds, though he was always careful to explain that his misfortunes were due to his own folly. He was a white-water man, though not of Lew's class, and above all things he hated towing a boat with a long trackline. "The thing's just waitin' to murder you," he said, "trip you over a cliff, or drown you, or get round your neck and saw your head off. . . ."

He had been near starvation. "I can go three days without food and not feel it, and I've done it pretty often. I reckon Lew could go five. But there's never been no reason for it except my own dam' folly. Once I lost all my kit in a river, including my knife which I had in my teeth, and I had to make shift with flint-flakes to kill and skin. I once lived for a week on berries and one porcupine."

He had had his accidents, too, as when a pine he was chopping down split with the cold and sent a sliver through his shoulder. He had once walked twenty miles to find a bottle of pain-killer which he had cached, his throat choking with laryngitis. But his worst adventure — he seemed shy in telling it — was when he was caught without snow-shoes in an early fall blizzard, and crossed unknowingly a bottomless half-frozen sphagnum swamp which heaved under his tread and made him vomit up his soul.

He would talk, too, about the secret lore of the woods. He could make the crows speak to him, and the squirrels, but not the whisky-jacks, because they were fools with only a cry and no speech. Lew could make anything talk.

It was always Lew, the mentor, the magician. But he never spoke his brother's name, or so it seemed to Leithen,

without an accent of disquiet. He followed unerringly Lew's blazing of the trail, and often the blazes were so small that only a skilled woodman could have noticed them. He studied carefully every bivouac. Sometimes in marshy places he found the moccasin tracks still fresh, and then his anxiety seemed to increase.

"Lew's settin' a terrible pace," he said, "and the other's laggin'. They're still messin' together at night, but the other must be getting in pretty late, and he can't be having much sleep, for each morning they starts together. . . . I don't like it somehow. I wonder what brother Lew's aiming at?"

8

The trail wound intricately along the slopes of deep parallel glens, now and then crossing from one to another by a low pass. Johnny had been over it before, and was puzzled. "Them rivers run down to the Yukon," he told Leithen. "But Lew swears the Sick Heart don't do that, and we're over the divide from the Mackenzie. I reckon it can't have nothin' to do with the Peel, so it must disappear into the earth. That's my guess. Anyhow, this trail ain't going to get us nowhere except to the Yukon."

The celestial weather continued, wintry in the small hours of the night, but in the sun as balmy as June. Leithen had fallen into a state which was neither ease nor mal-ease, but something neutral like his bodily condition at the end of a hard term at the Bar, when he was scarcely ill but assuredly not well. He could struggle through the day and have a slender margin for the interests of the road.

There was one new thing — the wild animals were beginning to show themselves, as if they were stretching their legs for the last time before the snows came. One morning he saw the first moose — well up the hillside in a patch of dwarf spruce, showing against the background like elephants.

"Them beasts ain't happy here," Johnny said. "They want the hardwood country, for they ain't like caribou that feed on moss — they likes the juicy underbrush. I guess they'll come down before the snow to the bottoms and stamp out a ravage so as to get to the shoots. I'll tell you a queer thing. The moose is pushin' further north. I mind the day when there wasn't one north of the Great Slave Lake, and now Lew has seen them on the Arctic shore east of the Mackenzie. I wonder what's bitin' them?"

The caribou had not yet appeared, being still on the tundras, but there were birds — ptarmigan and willow grouse — and big Arctic hares just getting into their winter coats. Also there were wolves, both the little grey wolves and the great timber wolves. They did not howl, but Johnny — and Leithen also — could hear them padding at night in the forest. Sometimes dim shapes slipped across a glade among the trees. One night, too, when Leithen could not sleep, he got up and watched the northern heavens where the aurora flickered like a curtain of delicate lace wrought in every tint of the rainbow. It lit up the foreground across which stalked a procession of black forms like some frieze on a Greek urn.

He found Johnny at his side. "That's the North," he said solemnly. "The wolves and the Aurory. God send us a kind winter."

9

One day the trail took an odd turn, for it left the parallel ridges and bore away to the east to higher ground. Johnny shook his head. "This is new country for me," he said. "Here's where Lew has taken the big chance."

Mountains prematurely snow-covered had been visible from the Hares' settlement, and Leithen at Lone Tree Camp had seen one sharp white peak in a gap very far off. Ever since then they had been moving among wooded ridges at the most two thousand feet high. But now they suddenly came out on a stony plateau, the trees fell away, and they looked on a new world.

The sedimentary rocks had given place to some kind of igneous formation. In front were cliffs and towers as fantastic as the Dolomites, black and sinister against a background of great snowfields, sweeping upward to ice arêtes and couloirs which reminded Leithen of Dauphiné. In the foreground the land dropped steeply into gorges which seemed to converge in a deep central trough, but they were very unlike the mild glens through which they had been ascending. These were rifts in

the black rock, their edges feathered with dwarf pines, and from their inky darkness in the sunlight they must be deep. The rock towers were not white and shining like the gracious pinnacles above Cortina, but as black as if they had been hewn out of coal by a savage Creator.

But it was not the foreground that held the eye, but the immense airy sweep of the snow-fields and ice pinnacles up to a central point, where a tall peak soared into the blue. Leithen had seen many snow mountains in his time, but this was something new to him — new to the world. The icefield was gigantic, the descending glaciers were on the grand scale, the central mountain must compete with the chief summits of the southern Rockies. But unlike the Rockies the scene was composed as if by a great artist — nothing untidy and shapeless, but everything harmonised into an exquisite unity of line and colour.

His eyes dropped from the skyline to the foreground and the middle distance. He shivered. Somewhere down in that labyrinth was Galliard. Somewhere down there he would leave his own bones.

Johnny was staring at the scene without speaking a word, without even an exclamation. At last he drew a long breath.

“God!” he said. “Them’s the biggest mountains in the Northland and only you and me and Lew and his pal has seen ’em, and some Indians that don’t count. But it’s going to be a blasted country to travel. See that black gash? I reckon that’s where the Sick Heart River flows, and it’ll be hell’s own job to get down to it.”

“D’you think Lew and Galliard are there?” Leithen asked.

“Sure. I got their trail a piece back on the sand of that little pond we passed. We’ll pick it up soon on them shale slides.”

“Is the road possible?”

“Lew thinks it is. I told you he’d seen the Sick Heart once but couldn’t get down the precipices. It couldn’t have been this place or he wouldn’t have gone on, for he don’t try impossibilities. He sure knows there’s a way down.”

Leithen, sitting on the mountain gravel, had a sudden sharp pang of hopelessness, almost of fear. He realised that this spectacle of a new mountain-land would once have sent him wild with excitement, the excitement both of the geographer and the mountaineer. But now he could only look at it with despair. It might have been a Pisgah-sight of a promised land; but now it was only a cruel reminder of his frailty. He had still to find Galliard, but Galliard had gone into this perilous labyrinth. Could he follow? Could he reach him? . . . But did it matter after all? The finding of Galliard was a task he had set himself, thinking less of success than of the task. It was to tide away the time manfully before his end so that he could die standing. A comforting phrase of Walt Whitman’s came back to him, “the delicious near-by assurance of death.”

Sometimes lately he had been surprised at himself. He had not thought that he possessed this one-idea’d stoicism which enabled him to climb the bleak staircase of his duty with scarcely a look behind. . . . But perhaps this was the way in which most men faced death. Had his health lasted he would be doing the same thing a dozen or a score of years ahead. Soon his friends would be doing it — Hannay and Lamancha and Clanroyden — if they were fated to end in their beds. It was the lot of everyone sooner or later to reach the bleak bag’s-end of life into which they must creep to die.

10

They soon picked up the tracks of their forerunners in the long spouts of gravel, and as they slowly zigzagged downhill to the tree line the weather changed. The cold blue sky beyond the mountains dulled to a colder grey and all light went out of the landscape. It was like the coming of the Polar Night of which he had read, the inexorable drawing down of a curtain upon the glory of the world. The snow began to fall in big flakes, not driven by any wind, but like the gentle emptying of a giant celestial bin. Soon there was nothing but white round them, except the tops of the little gnarled firs.

Luckily they had reached the tree line before the snow began, for otherwise they might have lost the trail. As it was, Johnny soon picked it up from the blazes on the diminutive trunks. It led them down a slope so steep that it was marvellous that any roots could cling to it. They had to ford many ice-cold streams, and before they reached flat ground in the evening Leithen was tottering on the very outside edge of his strength. He scarcely heard Johnny’s mutter, “Looks like Lew has lost his pal. Here’s where he camped and there’s just the one set of tracks.” He was repeating to himself Whitman’s words like a prayer.

Johnny saw his weariness and mercifully said no more, contenting himself with making camp and cooking supper. Leithen fell asleep as soon as he had finished his meal, and did not wake until he heard the crackling of the breakfast fire. The air was mild and most of the snow had gone, for the wind had shifted to the south-west. Every limb ached after the long march of yesterday, but his chest was easier and there seemed more pith in his bones.

Johnny wore an anxious face. "We've made up on 'em," he said. "I reckon Lew's not two days ahead."

Leithen asked how he knew this, but Johnny said he knew but could not explain — it would take too long and a stranger to the wilds would not understand.

"He's gone on alone," he repeated. "This was his camping-ground three nights back, and the other wasn't here. They parted company some time that day, for we had the trail of both of 'em on the shale slides. What in God's name has happened? Lew has shook off his pal, and that pal is somewhere around here, and, being new to the job, he'll die. Maybe he's dead already."

"Has Lew gone on?"

"Lew's gone on. I've been over a bit of his trail. He's not wastin' time."

"But the other — my friend — won't he have followed Lew's blazes?"

"He wouldn't notice 'em, being raw. Lew's blazed a trail for his use on the way back, not for any pal to follow."

So this was journey's end for him — to have traced Galliard to the uttermost parts of the earth only to find him dead. Remembrance of his errand and his original purpose awoke exasperation, and exasperation stirred the dying embers of his vitality.

"Our job is to find Mr. Galliard," he said. "We stay here until we get him, dead or alive."

Johnny nodded. "I guess that's right, but I'm mighty anxious about brother Lew. Looks like he's gone haywire."

The snow was the trouble, Johnny said. It was disappearing fast under sun and wind, and its melting would obliterate all tracks on soft ground, almost as completely as if it still covered them. He thought that the Hares were better trackers than himself and they might find what he missed. He proposed that Leithen should lie up in camp while he and the Indians went back on yesterday's trail in the hope of finding the place where the two men had parted.

Johnny packed some food and in half an hour he and the Hares were climbing the steep side of the glen. Leithen carried his blankets out to a patch which the sun had already dried, and basked in the thin winter sunshine. Oddly enough, Johnny's news had not made him restless, though it threatened disaster to his journey. He had wanted that journey to succeed, but the mere finding of Galliard would not spell success, or the loss of him failure. Success lay in his own spirit. A slight increase of bodily comfort had given him also a certain spiritual ease. This sun was good, though soon for him it would not rise again.

The search-party did not return until the brief twilight. Johnny, as he entered the tent, shook his head dolefully.

"No good, mister. We've found where the other feller quit the trail — them Hares are demons at that game. Just what I expected — up on the barrens where there ain't no trees to blaze and brother Lew had got out of sight. But after that we couldn't pick up no trail. He might have gone left or he might have gone right, but anyhow he must have gone down into the woods. So we started to beat out the woods, each of us takin' a line, but we've struck nothin'. Tomorrow we'll have another try. I reckon he can't have gone far, for he's dead lame. He must be lyin' up somewhere and starvin'."

Johnny counted on his fingers.

"Say, look! He's been three days quit of Lew — he's dead lame, and I reckon he wasn't carryin' more'n his own weight — if he didn't catch up with Lew at night he didn't have no food — maybe he wasn't able to make fire — maybe he didn't carry more'n one blanket — if he's alive he's mighty cold and mighty hungry."

He was silent until he went to bed, a certain proof of anxiety.

"This sure is one hell of a business," he said as he turned in. "Lew kind of mad and streakin' off into space, and his pal aimin' to be a corpse. It's enough to put a man off his feed."

Johnny and the Hares were off at dawn next morning. The weather was mild, almost stuffy, and there had been little frost in the night. Leithen sat outside the tent, but there was no sun to warm him, only a grey misty sky which bent low on the hills. He was feeling his weakness again, and with it came a deep depression of spirit. The wilds were brutal, inhuman, the abode of horrid cruelty. They had driven one man mad and would be the death of another. Not much comfort for Felicity Galliard in his report — “Discovered where your man had gone. Followed him and found him dead.” That report would be carried by Johnny some time down into the civilised places, and cabled to New York, signed with the name of Leithen. But he would not see Felicity’s grief, for long before then he would be out of the world.

In the afternoon the weather changed. The heavens darkened and suddenly burst into a lace-work of lightning. It was almost like the aurora, only it covered the whole expanse of sky. From far away there was a kind of muttering, but there were no loud thunder peals. After an hour it ceased and a little cold wind came out of the west. This was followed by a torrential rain, the heaviest Leithen had ever seen, which fell not in sheets but with the solid three dimensions of a cataract. In five minutes the hillside was running with water and the floor of the tent was a bog. In half an hour the brook below was a raving torrent. The downpour ceased and was followed by a burst of sunshine from a pale lemon sky, and a sudden sharpening of the air. Johnny had spoken of this; he had said that the winter would not properly be on them until they had the father and mother of a thunderstorm and the last rains.

Leithen pulled on his gum-boots and went out for a breath of air. The hill was melting under him, and only by walking in the thicker patches of fern and berries could he find decent foothold. Somehow his depression had lifted with the passing of the storm, and in the sharp air his breath came easier. It was arduous work walking in that tangle. “I had better not go far,” he told himself, “or I’ll never get home. Not much chance for Johnny and the Indians after such a downpour.”

He turned to look back. . . . There seemed to be a lumbering body at the door of the tent trying to crawl inside. A bear, no doubt. If the brute got at the food there would be trouble. Leithen started to slither along the hillside, falling often, and feeling his breath run short.

The thing was inside. He had closed the door-flap before leaving, and now he tore it back to let in the light. The beast was there, crouching on its knees on the muddy floor. It was a sick beast, for it seemed to nuzzle the ground and emit feeble groans and gasps of pain. A bear! Its hinder parts were one clot of mud, but something like a ragged blanket seemed to be round its middle. The head! The head looked like black fur, and then he saw that this was a cap and that beneath it was shaggy human hair.

The thing moaned, and then from it came a sound which, though made by dry lips, was articulate speech.

“Frizelle!” it said. “Oh, Frizelle! . . . pour l’amour de Dieu!”

12

It took all Leithen’s strength to move Galliard from the floor to his bed. He folded a blanket and put it under his head. Then he undid the muffler at his throat and unbuttoned the shirt. The man’s lips were blue and sore, and his cheeks were shrunk with hunger and fatigue. He seemed to be in pain, for as he lay on his back he moaned and screwed up his eyes. His wits were dulled in a stupor, and, apart from his first muttered words, he seemed to be unconscious of his environment.

Leithen mixed a little brandy and tinned milk and forced it between his lips. It was swallowed and immediately vomited. So he lit the stove and put on the kettle to boil, fetching water from the nearby spring. The moaning continued as if the man were in pain, and he remembered that Johnny had guessed at a wounded foot. The sight of another mortal suffering seemed to give Leithen a certain access of strength. He found himself able to undo Galliard’s boots, and it was no light task, for they were crusted thick with mud. The left one had been sliced open like a gouty man’s shoe, to give ease to a wound in his shin, a raw, ragged gash which looked like an axe cut. Before the boot could be removed the moaning had several times changed to a gasp of pain. Leithen made an attempt to wash the wound, and bound it up with a handkerchief, which was all he had in the way of a bandage. That seemed to give Galliard relief, and the moaning ceased.

The kettle was boiling and he made tea. Galliard tried to take the pannikin, but his hands were shaking so that Leithen had to feed him like a child. He swallowed all that he did not spill and seemed to want more. So Leithen tried him again with brandy and milk, the milk this time thinned and heated. Now two brown eyes were staring at him, eyes in which consciousness was slowly dawning. The milk was drunk and Galliard lay for a little blinking at the tent wall. Then his eyes

closed and he slept.

Leithen laid himself down on Johnny's mattress and looked at the shapeless heap which had been the object of his quest. There was the tawny beard which he had come to expect, but for the rest — it was unfamiliar wreckage. Little in common had it with the gracious portrait in the Park Avenue hall, or the Nattier, or the Aubusson carpet, or Felicity's rose-and-silver drawing-room. This man had chosen the wilderness, and now the wilderness had taken him and tossed him up like the jetsam of a flood.

There was no satisfaction for Leithen in the fact that he had been successful in his search. By an amazing piece of luck he had found Galliard and in so doing had achieved his purpose. But now the purpose seemed trivial. Was this derelict of so great importance after all? The unaccustomed bending in his handling of Galliard had given him a pain in his back, and the smell of the retched brandy and milk sickened him. He felt a desperate emptiness in his body, in his soul, and in the world.

It was almost dark when Johnny and the Hares returned. Leithen jerked his thumb towards the sleeping Galliard. Johnny nodded.

"I sort of suspicioned he'd be here. We got his tracks, but lost them in the mud. The whole darned hill is a mud-slide." He spoke slowly and flatly, as if he were very tired.

But his return set the little camp going, and Leithen realised what a blundering amateur he was compared with Johnny and the Indians. In a few minutes a fire was crackling before the tent door. Galliard, still in a coma, was lifted and partly unclothed, and his damaged leg was washed and rebandaged by Johnny with the neatness of a hospital nurse. The tent was tidied up and supper was set cooking — coffee on the stove and caribou steaks on the fire. Johnny concocted a dish of his own for the sick man, for he made a kind of chicken broth from a brace of willow grouse he had shot.

"You'd better eat," he said. "We'll feed the soup to that feller when he wakes. Best let him sleep a little longer. How you feelin' yourself? When I come in you looked mighty bad."

"I found Galliard more than I could manage; but never mind me. What about him?"

Johnny's bat's ears seemed to prick up as he bent over the sleeping figure. He was like a gnome in a fairy-tale; but he was human enough when he turned to Leithen, and the glow of the fire showed his troubled blue eyes.

"He'll come through a' right," he said. "He's been a healthy man and he ain't bottomed his strength yet. But he's plumb weary. He can't have fed proper for three days, and I reckon he can't have slept proper for a week."

"The wound?"

"Nasty cut he's got, and he'll have to watch his self if he don't want to go lame all his days. He can't move for a good spell."

"How long?"

"Ten days — a fortnight — maybe more."

Leithen had the appetite of a bird, but Johnny was ordinarily a good trencherman. Tonight, however, he ate little, though he emptied the coffee-pot. His mind was clearly on his brother, but Leithen asked no questions. At last, after half an hour's sucking at his pipe, he spoke.

"I figure that him" — and he nodded towards Galliard — "and brother Lew has been agreein' about as well as a carcajou and a sick b'ar. Lew'd gotten into a bad mood and this poor soul didn't know what the matter was, and got no answer when he asked questions. But he was bound to hang on to Lew or get lost and perish. Pretty nasty time he's been havin'. Lew's been actin' mighty mean, I'd say. But you can't just blame Lew, for, as I figure it, he don't know what he's doin'. He ain't seein' his pal, he ain't seein' nothin' except the trail he's blazin' and somethin' at the end of it."

"What's that?"

"The old Sick Heart River."

"Then he's gone mad?"

"You might say so. And yet Lew for ordinar' is as sane as you, mister, and a darn lot saner than me. He's gotten a vision and he's bound to go after it."

"What's to be done?"

"Our first job is to get this feller right. That was the reason you come down North, wasn't it? Every man's got to skin

his own skunk. But I don't mind tellin' you I'm worried to death about brother Lew."

The attention of both was suddenly diverted to Galliard, who had woke up, turned on his side, and was looking at them with wide-awake eyes — pained eyes, too, as if he had awakened to suffering. Johnny took the pannikin of soup which had been heating on the stove, and began to feed the sick man, feeding him far more skilfully than Leithen had done, so that little was spilt. The food seemed to revive him and ease his discomfort. He lay back for a little, staring upward, and then he spoke.

His voice was hoarse, little above a croak. Johnny bent over him to catch his words. He shook his head.

"It's French, but Godamighty knows what he means. It don't sound sense to me."

Leithen dragged himself nearer. The man was repeating some form of words like a litany, repeating it again and again, so that the same phrase kept recurring. To his amazement he recognised it as a quotation from Chateaubriand, which had impressed him long ago and which had stuck to his fly-paper memory.

"S'il est parmi les anges," the voice said, "comme parmi des hommes, des campagnes habitées et des lieux déserts."

There was a pause. Certain phrases followed, "Solitudes de la terre"—"Solitudes célestes." Then the first sentence was repeated. Galliard spoke the words in the slurred patois of Quebec, sounding harshly the final consonants.

"He is quoting a French writer who lived a century ago," Leithen told Johnny. "It's nonsense. Something about the solitary places of heaven."

Galliard was speaking again. It was a torrent of habitant French and his voice rose to a pitch which was almost a scream. The man was under a sudden terror, and he held out imploring hands which Johnny grasped. The latter could follow the babble better than Leithen, but there was no need of an interpreter, for the pain and fear in the voice told their own tale. Then the fit passed, the eyes closed, and Galliard seemed to be asleep again.

Johnny shook his head. "Haywire," he said. "Daft — and I reckon I know the kind of daftness. He's mortal scared of them woods. You might say the North's gotten on his mind."

"But it was a craze for the North that dragged him here."

"Yep, but having gotten here he's scared of it. His mind's screwed right round. It's a queer thing, the North, and you need to watch your step for fear it does you down. This feller was crazy for it till he poked his head a wee bit inside, and now he's scared out of his life, and would give his soul to quit. I've known it happen before. Folks come down here thinking the North's a pretty lady, and find that she can be a cruel, bloody-minded old bitch, and they scurry away from her like jack-rabbits from a forest fire. I've seen them as had had a taste of her ugly side, and ever after the stink of smoke-dried Indian moccasins, and even the smell of burning logs, would turn out their insides. . . . I reckon this feller's had a pretty purifyin' taste of it. Ever been lost?"

"Never."

"Well, it ain't nice, and it tests a man's guts."

The air sharpened in the night and the little tent with its three occupants was not too stuffy. Galliard never stirred. Johnny had the short sound slumbers of a woodman, waking and rising before dawn; but Leithen slept badly. He had found his man, but he was a lunatic — for the time being. His task now was to piece together the broken wits. It seemed to him a formidable and unwelcome business. Could a dying man minister to a mind diseased? He would have preferred his old job — to go on spending his bodily strength till he had reached the end of it. That would, at any rate, have given him peace to make his soul.

Johnny set the camp stirring and was everywhere at once, like a good housewife. Galliard was washed and fed and his wound dressed. Leithen found that he had more power in his legs, and was able to make a short promenade of the shelf on which the camp stood, breathing air which was chilly as ice and scented with a thousand miles of pines. Johnny and the Hares were busy with measurements.

Leithen, huddled in the lee of the fire, watched the men at work. They were laying out the ground plan of a hut. It was to be built against the hillside, the gravel of which, when cut away, would make its back wall, and it seemed to be about twenty feet square. The Hares did the levelling of the shelf, and presently came the sound of Johnny's axe from the woods. In a couple of hours the four corner posts were cut, trimmed, and set up, and until the midday meal all three were busy felling well-grown spruce and pine.

Johnny's heavy preoccupation lightened a little as they ate.

"We need a hut whatever happens," he said. "The feller"—that was how he referred to Galliard—"will want something snugger than a tent when the cold sets in, for he ain't goin' to get well fast. Then there's you, a mighty sick man. And, please God, there'll be brother Lew."

"Is there no way of getting back to the Hares' camp?"

"For Lew and me — not for you and the feller. We got to plan to spend the winter here, or hereabouts. We can send the Indians back for stores and dog teams, and maybe we could get out in February when the good snows come. But we got to plan for the winter. I can fix up a tidy hut, and when we get the joints nicely chinked up with mud, and plenty of moss and sods on the roof, we'll be as snug as an old b'ar in its hole. I'm aimin' to fix a proper fireplace inside, for there's the right kind of clay in the creek for puddlin'."

"Let me help."

"You can't do nothin' yet, so long as we're on the heavy jobs, but I'll be glad of you when it comes to the inside fixin'. You get into the tent beside the feller and sleep a bit. I'm all right if I wasn't worried about Lew."

Johnny was attending to the bodily needs of the sick man like a hospital nurse, feeding him gruel and chicken broth and weak tea. Galliard slept most of the time, and even his waking hours were a sort of coma. He was asleep when Leithen entered the tent, and presently, to the accompaniment of Johnny's axe in the woods, Leithen himself drowsed off, for by this time of the day he was very weary. But sleep was for him the thinnest of films over the waking world and presently he was roused by Galliard's voice. This time it sounded familiar, something he had heard before, and not the animal croak of yesterday.

Two dull brown eyes were staring at him, eyes in which there was only the faintest spark of intelligence. They moved over his person, lingering some time at his boots, and then fastened on his face. There was bewilderment in them, but also curiosity. Their owner seemed to struggle for words, and he passed his tongue over his dry lips several times before he spoke.

"You are — what?"

He spoke in English, but his hold on the language seemed to slip away, for when Leithen replied in the same tongue the opaque eyes showed no comprehension.

"I am a friend of your friends," he said. "We have come to help you. I have the brother of Lew Frizel with me."

After a pause he repeated the last sentence in French. Some word in it caught Galliard's attention. His face suddenly became twisted with anxiety, and he tried to raise himself on his bed. Words poured from him, words tumbling over each other, the French of Quebec. He seemed to be imploring someone to wait for him — to let him rest a little and then he would go on — an appeal couched in queer childish language, much of which Leithen could not understand. And always, like the keynote of a threnody, came the word Rivière — and Rivière again — and once Rivière du Cœur Malade.

The partner of Ravelstons had suffered a strange transformation. Leithen realised that it would be idle to try to link this man's memory with his New York life. He had gone back into a very old world, the world of his childhood and his ancestors, and though it might terrify him, it was for the moment his only world.

The babbling continued. As Leithen listened to it the word that seemed to emerge from the confusion was Lew's name. It was on Lew that Galliard's world was now centred. If he was to be brought back to his normal self Lew must be the chief instrument. . . . And Lew was mad himself, raving mad, far away in the mountains on a crazy hunt for a mystic river! A sudden sense of the lunatic inconsequence of the whole business came over Leithen and forced from him a bitter laugh. That laugh had an odd effect upon Galliard, for it seemed to frighten him into silence. It was as if he had got an answer to his appeals, an answer which slammed the door.

13

Next day the cold was again extreme, but the sun was out for six hours, and the shelf in the forest was not uncomfortable. Johnny, after sniffing the air, pronounced on the weather. The first snow had fallen; there would be three days of heavy frost; then for maybe ten days there would be a mild, bright spell; then a few weeks before Christmas would come the big

snows and the fierce cold. The fine spell would enable him to finish the hut. A little drove of snow-buntings had passed yesterday; that meant, he said, since the birds were late in migrating, that winter would be late.

"You call it the Indian Summer?"

"The Hares call it the White Goose Summer. It ends when the last white goose has started south."

That day Leithen made an experiment. Galliard was mending well, the wound in the leg was healing, he could eat better, only his mind was still sick. It was important to find out whether the time had come to link his memory up with his recent past, to get him on the first stage on the road back to the sphere to which he belonged.

He chose the afternoon, when his own fatigue compelled him to rest, and Galliard was likely to be wakeful after the bustle of the midday meal. He had reached certain conclusions. Galliard had lost all touch with his recent life. He had reverted to the traditions of his family, and now worshipped at ancestral shrines, and he had been mortally scared by the sight of the goddess. These fears did not impel him to mere flight, for he did not know where to flee to. It drove him to seek a refuge, and that refuge was Lew. He was as much under the spell of Lew as Lew was under the spell of his crazy river. Could this spell be lifted?

So far Galliard had been a mere automaton. He had spoken like a waxwork managed by a ventriloquist. It was hardly possible to recognise a personality in that vacant face, muffled in a shaggy beard, and unlit by the expressionless eyes. Yet the man was regaining his health, his wound was healing fast, his cheeks had lost their famished leanness. As Leithen looked at him he found it hard to refrain from bitterness. He was giving the poor remnants of his strength to the service of a healthy animal with years of vigour before him.

He crushed the thought down and set himself to draw Galliard out of his cave. But the man's wits seemed to be still wandering. Leithen plied him with discreet questions but got an answer to neither French nor English. He refrained from speaking his wife's name, and the names of his American friends, even of Ravelstons itself, woke no response. He tried to link up with Chateau-Gaillard, and Clairefontaine — with Father Paradis — with Uncle Augustin — with the Gaillards, Aristide and Paul Louis, who had died on the Arctic shores. But he might have been shouting at a cenotaph, for the man never answered, nor did any gleam of recognition show in his face. It was only when Leithen spoke again of Lew that there was a flicker of interest; more than a flicker, indeed, for the name seemed to stir some secret fear; the pupils of the opaque eyes narrowed, the lean cheeks twitched, and Galliard whimpered like a lost dog.

Leithen felt wretchedly ill all that day, but after supper, according to the strange fashion of his disease, he had a sudden access of strength. He found that he could think clearly ahead and take stock of the position. Johnny, who was labouring hard all day, should have tumbled into bed after supper and slept the sleep of the just. But it was plain that there was too much on his mind for easy slumber. He sucked at his pipe, kept his eyes on the fire outside the open door, and spoke scarcely a word.

"How is he getting on?" Leithen asked.

"Him? The feller? Fine, I guess. He's a mighty tough body, for he ha'n't taken no scaith, barrin' the loss of weight. He'll be a' right."

"But his mind is gone. He remembers nothing but what happened in the last weeks. A shutter has come down between him and his past life. He's a child again."

"Aye. I've known it happen. You see he was scared out of his skin by something — it may have been Lew, or it may have been jest loneliness. He's got no sense in him and it's goin' to take quite a time to get it back. That's why I'm fixin' this hut. He wants nursin' and quiet, and a sort of feel that he's safe, and for that you need four walls, even though they're only raw lumber. If you was to take him out in the woods you'd have him plumb ravin' and maybe he'd never get better. I've seen the like before. It don't do to play tricks with them wild places."

"I don't understand," said Leithen. "Lew goes mad and terrifies Galliard and lets him lag behind so that he nearly perishes. Galliard has the horror of the wilds on him, but no horror of Lew. He seems to be crying for him like a child for his nurse."

"That's so. That's the way it works. The feller don't know that his troubles was all Lew's doin'. He's gotten scared of loneliness in this darned great wild country, and he claws on to anything human. The only human thing near at hand is brother Lew. But that ain't all. If it was all you and me might take Lew's place, for I guess we're human enough. But, as I figure it, Lew has let him in on his Sick Heart daftness, and kind of enthused him about it, and, the feller bein' sick anyhow,

it has got possession of his mind. You told me back in Quebec that he'd a notion, which runs in his family, of pushing north, and we seen the two graves at Ghost River."

"Still I don't understand," said Leithen. "He's frightened of the wilds and yet he hankers to get deeper into them, right to a place where nobody's ever been."

Johnny shook out his pipe.

"He's not thinkin' of the Sick Heart as part of the woods. He's thinkin' of it the same as Lew, as a sort of Noo Jerusalem — the kind of place where everything'll be a' right. He and Lew ain't thinkin' of it with sane minds, and if Lew's there now he won't be lookin' at it with sane eyes. Sick Heart is a mighty good name for it."

"What sort of place do you think it is?"

"An ordinary creek, I guess. It's hard to get near, and that's maybe why Lew's crazy about it. My father used to have a sayin' that he got out of Scotland, 'Faraway hills is always shiny.'"

"Then how is Galliard to be cured of this madness?"

"We've got to get Lew back to him — and Lew in his right mind. At least, that's how I figure it. I mind once I was huntin' with the Caribou-Eaters in the Thelon, east of Great Slave Lake. There was an Indian boy — Two-sticks, his name was — and he come under the spell of my Chipewyan hunter, him they called White Partridge. Well, the trip came to an end and we all went home, but next year I heard that Two-sticks had been queer all winter. He wasn't cured until they fetched old White Partridge to him. And that meant a three-hundred-mile trip from Nelson Forks to the Snowdrift River."

"How can we get Lew back?"

"Godamighty knows! If I was here on my own I'd be on his trail like a timber wolf. Maybe he's sick in body as well as in mind. Anyhow, he's alone, and it ain't good to be alone down North, and he's all that's left to me in the family line. But I can't leave here. I took on a job with you and I've got to go through with it. There's the feller, too, to nurse, and he'll want a tidy bit o' nursin'. And there's you, mister. You're a pretty sick man."

"Go after Lew and fetch him back and I'll stay here."

Johnny shook his head.

"Nothin' doin'. You can't finish this hut. The Hares are willin' enough, but they've got to be told what to do. And soon there'll be need of huntin' for fresh supplies, for so far we've been living mostly on what we back-packed in. And we've got to send out to the Hares' camp for some things. Besides, you ain't used to the woods, and what's easy for me would be one big trouble for you. But most of all you're sick — godawful sick — a whole lot sicker than the feller. So I say Nothin' doin', though I'm sure obliged to you. We've got to carry on with our job and trust to God to keep an eye on brother Lew."

Leithen did not reply. There was a stubborn sagacious dutifulness in that bullet head, that kindly Scots face, and those steadfast blue eyes which was beyond argument.

14

He spent a restless night, for he felt that the situation was slipping out of his control. He had come here to expend the last remnants of his bodily strength in a task on which his mind could dwell, and so escape the morbidity of passively awaiting death. He had fulfilled part of that task, but he was as yet a long way from success. Galliard's mind had still to be restored to its normal groove. This could only be done — at least so Johnny said — by fetching and restoring to sanity the man who was the key to its vagaries. Johnny could not be spared, so why should he not go himself on Lew's trail, with one of the Hares to help him? It was misery to hang about this camp, feeling his strength ebbing and getting no further on with his job. That would be dying like a rat in a hole. If it had to be, far better to have found a hole among the comforts of home. If he followed Lew, he would at any rate die in his boots, and whether he succeeded or failed, the end would come while he was fighting.

He told Johnny of his decision and at first was derided. He would not last two days; a Hare might be a good enough tracker, but he wanted a white man to guide him, one who was no novice. The road to the Sick Heart was admittedly difficult and could only be traversed, if at all, by a fit man; there might be storms and the mountains made impassable. Moreover, what would he say to Lew, to whom he was a stranger? If Lew was found he would for certain resent any

intrusion in his lair. This was the point to which Johnny always returned.

"You've heard of mad trappers and the trouble they give the Mounties. If Lew's mad he'll shoot, and he don't miss."

"I know all that," said Leithen, "and I've made my book for it. You must understand that anyhow I am going to die pretty soon. If I hurry on my death a little in an honest way, I won't be the loser. That's how I look at it. If I never get to Lew, and perish on the road, why, that's that. If I find Lew and his gun finds me, well, that's that. There is just the odd chance that I may persuade him to be reasonable and bring him back here, and that is a chance I'm bound to take. Don't you worry about me, for I tell you I'm taking the easiest way. Since I've got to die, I want to die standing."

Johnny held out his hand. "You got me beat, mister. Lew and myself ain't reckoned timid folk, but for real sand there's not your like on this darned continent."

15

Leithen found the ascent of the first ridge from the valley bottom a stern business, for Lew had not zigzagged for ease, but had cut his blazes in the straight line of a crow's flight. But once at the top the road led westerly along a crest, the trees thinned out, and he had a prospect over an immense shining world.

The taller of the Hares, the one he called Big Klaus, was his companion. He himself travelled light, carrying little except a blanket and extra clothing, but the Indian had a monstrous pack which seemed in no way to incommode him. He had the light tent (the hut being now far enough advanced to move Galliard into it), a rifle and shot-gun, axes, billy-can, kamiks to replace moccasins, and two pairs of snow-shoes. The last were of a type new to Leithen — not the round "bear-paws" of eastern Canada made for the deep snow of the woods, but long, narrow things, very light, constructed of two separate rods joined by a toe-piece, and raised in front at a sharp angle. The centres were of coarse babiche with a large mesh, so as to pick up the least amount of snow, and since the meshing entered the frame by holes and was not whipped round it, the wooden surface was as smooth as skis. On such shoes, Johnny said, an active man could travel forty miles in a day.

Once the ridge had been gained, Leithen found that his breath came a little more easily. He seemed to have entered a world where the purity of the air was a positive thing, not the mere absence of impure matter, but the quintessence of all that was vital in Nature. The Indian Summer forecast by Johnny had begun. There was a shuddering undercurrent of cold, but the sun shone, and though it gave light rather than warmth, it took much of the bleakness out of the landscape. Also there was no wind. The huge amphitheatre, from the icy summit of the central peak to the gullies deep-cut in the black volcanic rock, was as quiet as a summer millpond. Yet there was nothing kindly in this peace; it seemed unnatural, as if the place were destined for strife. On the scarps the little spruces were bent and ragged with the winds, and the many bald patches were bleached by storms. This cold, raw hilltop world was not made for peace; its temporary gentleness was a trap to lure the unwary into its toils.

It was not difficult to follow Lew's blazes, and in a little swamp they found his tracks. He must be a bigger man than Johnny, Leithen thought, or else heavily laden, for the footprints went deep.

The Hare plodded steadily on with his queer intoed stride. He could talk some English, and would answer questions, but he never opened a conversation. He was a merciful man, and kept turning in his tracks to look at Leithen, and when he thought he seemed weary, promptly dropped his pack and squatted on the ground. His methods of cooking and camping were not Johnny's, but in their way they were efficient. At the midday and evening meals he had a fire going at miraculous speed with his flint and steel and punk-box, and he could make a good bed even of comfortless spruce boughs. His weapon was a cheap breech-loader obtained from some trader, and with it he managed to shoot an occasional partridge or ptarmigan, so that Leithen had his bowl of soup. The second night out he made a kind of Dutch oven and roasted a porcupine, after parboiling it, and he cooked ash-cakes which were nearly as palatable as the pease-meal bannocks which Leithen had eaten in his youth.

That second night he talked. It had been a melancholy summer, for it had been foretold that many of the Hare people would presently die, and the whole tribe had fasted and prepared for their end. The manner of death had not been predicted — it might be famine, or disaster, or a stupendous storm. They had been scolded for this notion by Father Duplessis at Fort Bannerman and by Father Wentzel at the mountain camp, and before the end of the summer the spirits

of the tribe had risen, and most believed that the danger had passed. But not all; some wise men thought that bad trouble was coming in the winter.

“It is not good to wait too long on death,” said Big Klaus. “Better that it should come suddenly when it is not expected.” He looked reflectively at Leithen as if he knew that here was one who was in the same case as the Hares.

For three days they followed the network of ridges according to Lew’s blazing. They seemed rarely to lose elevation, for they passed gullies and glens by the scarps at their head waters. But nevertheless they had been steadily descending, for the great rift where the Sick Heart was believed to flow was no longer in the prospect, and the hanging glaciers, the ice couloirs and arêtes, and the poised avalanches of the central peak now overhung and dominated the landscape.

It was a strange world through which Leithen stumbled, conserving his strength greedily and doling it out like a miser. There was sun, light, no great cold, no wind; but with all these things there was no kindness. Something had gone out of the air and that something was hope. Night was closing down, a long night from which there would be a slow awakening. Scarcely a bird could be seen, and there were no small innocent frightened beasts to scurry into hiding. Everything that could move had gone to sanctuary against the coming wrath. The tattered pines, the bald, blanched pastures, were no more a home for life than the pinnacles of intense ice that glittered in mid-heaven. Dawn came punctually, and noon, and nightfall, and yet the feeling was of a perpetual twilight.

In these last weeks Leithen’s memory seemed to have become a closed book. He never thought of his past, and no pictures from it came to cheer or torture him.

He might have been like the Hare, knowing no other world than this of laborious days and leaden nights. A new discomfort scarcely added to his misery, and food and fine weather did not lighten it. Every hour he was looking at marvels of natural beauty and magnificence, but they did not affect him. Life now awoke no response in him, and he remembered that some wise man had thus defined death. The thought gave him a queer comfort. He was already dead; there only remained the simple snapping of the physical cord.

16

They came on it suddenly in the afternoon of the third day. The scraggy forest of jack-pines, which seemed to stretch to the very edge of the snows, suddenly gave place to empty air, and Leithen found himself staring breathlessly not up, but down — down into a chasm nearly a mile wide and two thousand feet deep. From his feet the ground fell away in scree to a horizontal rib of dark rock, below which, in a blue mist very far down, were the links of a river. Beyond it were meadows and woods, and the woods were not of scrub pine, but of tall timber — from one or two trees in scattered clumps he judged them to be a hundred feet high. Beyond them again the opposite wall rose sheer to fantastic aiguilles of dark rock. He was looking at some mighty volcanic rift which made a moat to the impregnable castle of the snows.

The strength seemed to go from his limbs, and he collapsed among the crowberries and pine cones. He fumbled in a pocket to find his single Zeiss glass, but gave up the search when he realised the weakness of his hands. This sudden vision had drained the power from his body by its intense quickening of his senses and mind. It seemed to him that he was looking at the most marvellous spectacle ever vouchsafed to man. The elements were commonplace — stone and wood, water and earth — but so had been the pigments of a Raphael. The celestial Demiurge had combined them into a masterpiece.

He lay full in the pale sun and the air was mild and mellow. As his eyes thirstily drank in the detail he saw that there was little colour in the scene. Nearly all was subfusc, monochrome, and yet so exquisite was the modelling that there was nothing bleak in it; the impression rather was of a chaste, docile luxuriance. The valley bottom, so far as he could see it, seemed to be as orderly as a garden. The Sick Heart was like a Highland salmon river, looping itself among pools and streams with wide beaches of pebbles, beaches not black like the enclosing cliffs, but shining white. Along its course, and between the woods, were meadows of wild hay, now a pale russet against the ripple of the stream and the evergreen of the trees Something from his past awoke in Leithen. He was far up in the Arctic north; winter had begun, and even in this false summer the undercurrent of cold was stinging his fingers through his mitts. But it was not loneliness or savagery that was the keynote of this valley. Pastoral breathed from it; it was comforting and habitable. He could picture it in its summer pride, a symphony of mild airs and singing waters. Stripped and blanched as it was, it had a preposterous suggestion of

green meadows and Herrick and sheep.

"We'll camp here," he told Big Klaus. "There's nothing to show us the road down. It'll take some finding."

He found the Zeiss glass at last and tried to make out further details. There must be hot springs, he thought, natural in a volcanic country; that would explain the richness of the herbage. The place, too, was cunningly sheltered from the prevailing winds, and probably most of the river that he could see never froze. That would mean wildfowl and fish, even in the depths of winter. . . . He pocketed his glass, for he did not want to learn more. He was content with what he saw. No wonder the valley had cast its spell on the old Indian chief and on Lew Frizel. It was one of those sacred places on which Nature had so lavished her art that it had the magic of a shrine.

Big Klaus made camp in a little half-moon of shingle on the verge of the cliffs, with trees to shelter it on north and east. He built an enormous fire on a basis of split wood, piled like a little wigwam, and felled two spruces so that they met in the centre of the heap, and as their ends burned away would slip further down and keep alight without tending until morning.

"It will be very cold," said the Hare, sniffing towards the north like a pointer dog.

Leithen ate little at supper, for his mind was in a fever. He had won a kind of success as he was nearing the brink of death, for he had found something which other men had longed to find and about which the world knew nothing. Some day there would be books of travel and guide-books, and inevitably it would be written that among the discoverers of the secret valley was one Edward Leithen, who had once been His Majesty's Attorney-General in England, and who had died soon afterwards. . . . This unexpected feat obscured the fact that he had also found Galliard, for, setting out on one task he had incidentally accomplished a greater, like Saul the son of Kish who, seeking his father's asses, stumbled upon a kingdom.

The big fire roared and crackled at the mouth of the little tent, and beyond it was a blue immensity, sapphire in the mid-heaven, but of a milky turquoise above the mountains where the moon was rising.

He fell asleep early, and awoke after midnight to a changing world. The fire had sunk, but it was still fierce around the point where the spruce trunks intersected. The moon had set and the sky was hung with stars and planets — not inlaid, but hung, for the globes of sheer light were patently suspended in the heavens, and it seemed as if the eye could see behind them into aboriginal darkness. The air had suddenly become bitterly cold, cold almost beyond bearing. The shudder which had for some days lurked behind the sunlight had sharpened to an icy rigour. Frost like a black concrete was settling over everything, gumming the eyes and lips together. He buried his head under his blankets but could not get warm again . . .

Some time towards dawn he fell into an uneasy sleep. When he awoke Big Klaus was tending the fire, white as an icicle and bent double against the fury of a northwest wind. Snow was drifting in flakes like pigeons' eggs. With a bound winter had come upon them.

Movement was impossible, and the two men lay all day in the tent, Leithen half in a stupor, for the sudden onrush of cold seemed to have drained the remnants of his strength. With the snow the first rigour abated, and presently the wind sank, and the smoke of the fire no longer choked the tent. The Hare split wood and rose every hour or so to tend the fire; for the rest he dozed, but he had a clock in his brain and he was never behindhand in his stoking. There was no fresh meat, so he cooked bacon and camp biscuit for luncheon, and for supper made a wonderful stew of tinned bully-beef and beans.

At twilight the snow ceased, and with the dark the cold deepened. The silence deepened, too, except for trees cracking in the fierce stricture of the frost. Leithen had regained some vitality during the day, enough to let him plan ahead. It was his business to get down into the valley where, beyond question, Lew had preceded him. It would be hard to find Lew's route, for there were no trees to blaze, and the weather of the past week would have obliterated his trail. To a mountaineer's eye it seemed an ugly place to descend, for the rock did not fissure well into foot-holds and handgrips. But the snow might solve the problem. The wind from the north-west had plastered it against the eastern side of the valley, the side on which they had made camp. It must have filled the couloirs and made it possible to get down by step-cutting or glissade. He had only two fears — whether his body was not too feeble, and whether the Hare was sufficient of a mountaineer for the attempt.

Morning brought no fresh snow, and the extreme cold seemed to slacken. Leithen thought that it could not be more than ten degrees below zero. Having an immediate practical task before him, he found himself possessed of a certain energy. He ate his meagre breakfast almost with relish, and immediately after was on his feet. There must be no delay in getting down into the valley.

With Big Klaus he explored the rim of the cliffs, following the valley downward, as he was certain Lew had done. Mercifully it was easy going, for with the trees withdrawn from the scarp there was no tangle of undergrowth, and what normally might have been loose screes was now firm snow.

For a little the cliffs overhung or fell sheer. Then came fissures by which, in open weather, a trained mountaineer might have descended, but which now were ice-choked and impossible. Leithen had walked more than a mile and come very near the limit of his strength before he found what he sought. The rocks fell back into a V-shaped bay, and down the bay to the valley floor swept a great wave of snow, narrow at the top and spreading out fanwise beneath. The angle was not more than thirty or thirty-five degrees. This must have been Lew's route, and no doubt he had had to face awkward rock falls and overhangs which now were obliterated in one great smooth white swirl. Leithen got out his glass and searched the lower slopes. No, there seemed to be no snags there; a good skier would tackle the descent without a thought.

"We must shift our stuff here," he told the Hare. "But first make a fire or I will freeze."

He cowered beside the blaze until Big Klaus had brought up the camp baggage. They cooked the midday meal, and then ransacked the stores. There was rope, but not enough of it. First they must pack their kit so that it would be kept together in the descent, for Leithen knew what a sepulchre snowdrifts could be for a man's belongings. Then he would have liked another hundred feet of rope for the Hare and himself. He meant to go down slowly and carefully, feeling his way and humouring his wretched body.

The baggage took up every inch of rope. Leithen had the gun and rifle lashed on his own back, and the rest made up a huge bundle which was attached to Big Klaus and himself by short lengths of cord. It was the best he could do, but it was an unwieldy contraption, and he prayed that there might be no boulders or pockets in the imperfectly seen lower reaches, for it would be impossible to steer a course. The Hare was sent into the wood to cut two long poles. He did not seem to realise the purpose until he returned and Leithen explained what must be done.

"The snow is firm enough," he said. "It will give good foot-holds. One step at a time, remember, and we must never move together. I stand still when you move. For God's sake keep your balance. If you slip, turn on your face and dig in your hands and feet. Don't let the kit pull you out of your steps. You understand?"

He repeated the instructions several times, but Big Klaus stared at him dully. When at last he realised that it was proposed to descend the shoot, he shook his head violently. He patted his stomach and made the motions of one about to be sick. Twice he went to the edge and peered down, and each time there was something like panic in his heavy eyes.

"Come on! There's no time to be lost. Even if we roll all the way it won't kill us."

Leithen took two steps down, leaning inward as he moved.

"Come on, you fool!"

The Hare put out a foot, like a timid bather in cold water. He was a brave man, for, though he was mortally afraid, he kept his eyes away from the void and imitated Leithen in hugging the slope.

At first all went well. The grade was steeper than had appeared above, but not much, and, though the baggage wobbled and swayed, they managed to keep their balance.

They had emerged from the throat of the couloir, and were out on the fan of the lower and easier slopes when disaster overtook them. The Hare miscalculated a foot-hold at a place where there was glazed ice on the snow, and shot downward on his back. He, and the weight of the baggage, plucked Leithen from his stance, and the next second the whole outfit had started a mad glissade. The rope round Leithen's middle choked the breath out of him. He cannoned into the baggage and ricocheted off; he cannoned into Big Klaus; his mouth and eyes were choked with snow; some rib of rock or ice caught his thigh and hurt him. . . . Once, climbing at Courmayeur alone, he had slipped on a snowfield and been whirled to what he believed to be his end in a bergschrund (which happened to be nearly full of snow into which he had dropped comfortably). Now once again, before his senses left him, he had the same certainty of death and the same apathy. . . .

He recovered consciousness to find the Hare attempting a kind of rough massage of his chest. For a minute or two he lay comatose, breathing heavily, but not suffering pain except for his bruised thigh. Slowly, with immense difficulty, he tested

his body for damage. There seemed to be little — no concussion — the bruise — the breath knocked out of him but returning under the Hare's ministrations. It was not until he tried to get to his feet that he realised how much the glissade had taken toll of his strength.

The valley bottom was like a new creation, for the whole flavour of the landscape was changed. It was no longer the roof of the world where the mind and eye were inured to far horizons, but a place enclosed, muffled, defended by great rock bastions from the bleak upper air. Against the eastern wall the snow lay piled in big drifts, but there was no snow on the western side and very little in the intervening meadows. In these same meadows there was what looked like frozen pools, but the rigour of the frost had not touched the whole river, for below one of the patches of forest there was a gleam of running water. There was not a breath of wind, the slanting sunlight gilded the russet grasses and snow patches, the air was unbelievably mild. Here in this fantastic sanctuary was nothing of North America. Apart from the sheer containing walls, the scene might have been a Northumbrian pasture in an English December.

But all the pith had gone out of him. It seemed as if the strain of the descent had damaged some nerve control, for his weakness was worse than pain. He struggled to his feet and clutched at the Hare to keep himself from falling. The latter had got the baggage straightened out and was restrapping the guns. He nodded down the valley —

"He has gone that way," he said. But how he had guessed Lew's route he did not tell, nor did the other inquire.

For to Leithen it looked as if in this strange place he had got very near his journey's end. He toiled in the wake of the Hare for something less than a mile, counting each step, utterly oblivious of anything but the dun herbage under foot. He tried to step in the Indian's prints, but found them too long for his enfeebled legs. He who had once had the stride of a mountaineer now teetered like an affected woman. He made little bets with himself — how many steps until he fell? — would Big Klaus turn back, see his distress, and stop of his own accord? . . . The latter guess was right. The Indian, turning, saw a face like death, and promptly flung down his pack and announced that he would make camp.

There was a patch of gravel where the stream made a sharp bend, and there, in the lee of a tall coppice, a fire was lit. The Hare had to loosen the light pack from Leithen's shoulders, for he had lost all muscular power. His fingers seemed to bend back on him if he tried to lift a blanket. Also his breath was so troublesome that in that open place he panted like a man suffocating in a hole. The fit passed and by the time the tent was up and the beds laid his main trouble was his desperate weakness. Big Klaus fed him for supper with gruel and strong tea, but he was able to swallow little. His throat was as impotent as his hands and legs.

But his mind was no longer wholly apathetic, for he had stumbled on a queer corner of recollection. He had been conscious of the apathy of his memory, for, had he been able to choose, he would have been glad in those evil days to "count his mercies," to remember with a wry satisfaction the many pleasant things in his life. No present misery could kill his gratitude for past joys. But the past had remained a closed book to him, and he had had no thoughts except for the moment.

Now suddenly, with blinding clearness, he saw a picture. Outside his bedroom door in a passage on the upper floor of the old Scots country house of his boyhood, there had hung a print. It was a Munich photogravure called *Die Toten-Insel*, and showed an island of tall cliffs, and within their angle a grove of cypresses, while a barge full of bent and shrouded figures approached this home of the dead. The place was Sick Heart Valley — the same sheer cliffs, the same dark, evergreen trees; the Hare and he, bowed and muffled figures, were approaching the graveyard. . . . As a boy he had been puzzled by the thing, but had rather liked it. As he dashed out on a spring morning its sombreness had pleased him by its contrast with his own sunlit world. . . . Now, though he saw the picture of those April days, he could not recapture the faintest flavour of that spring rapture. He saw only the dark photogravure on the distempered passage wall, and his interest was faintly touched by its likeness to his present environment. . . . Surely he was already dead, for he had ceased to react to life!

Through the open tent door he could see the northern heavens ablaze with the aurora. The frost was closing down again, for the Dancers seemed to give out a crackling sound as if the sky were the back-cloth of a stage with the painted canvas strained to cracking — point. The spectacle did not stir his apathy. This blanched world was rioting in colour, but it was still blanched and bleached, the enemy of all life.

As he lay wakeful, scarcely conscious of the dull pain in his chest or of the spasms in his breathing, but desperately aware of his weakness, he felt the shadow of eternity deepening over him. Like Job, the last calamities had come on him.

Thank Heaven he was free from loquacious friends. Like Job he bowed his head and had no impulse to rebel. The majesty of God filled his universe. He was coming face to face with his religion.

He had always been in his own way a religious man. Brought up under the Calvinistic shadow, he had accepted a simple evangel which, as he grew older, had mellowed and broadened. At Oxford he had rationalised it in his philosophical studies, but he had never troubled to make it a self-sufficing logical creed. Certain facts were the buttresses of his faith, and the chief of them was the omnipotence and omnipresence of God. He had always detested the glib little humanism of most of his contemporaries.

But his creed had remained something aloof from his life. He had no communion with the omnipotent God and no craving for it. It rarely impinged on his daily experience. When things went well he felt a dim gratitude to Omnipotence; when badly, it was a comfort to tell himself that it was God's will and to take misfortune cheerfully. In the War it had been different. Then he felt a relation so close as to be almost communion — that he was not only under God's ultimate command, but under His direct care. That was why his nerves had been so steady. It was foolish to worry about what was preordained.

Then had come long years of spiritual sloth. The world had been too much with him. But certain habits had continued. Still in his heart he had praised God for the pleasures of life, and had taken disappointments with meekness, as part of a divine plan. Always, when he reflected, he had been conscious of being a puppet in Almighty hands. So he had never been much cast down or much puffed up. He had passed as a modest man — a pose, some said; a congenital habit, said others. His friends had told him that if he had only pushed himself he might have been Prime Minister. Foolish! These things were ordained.

Now his castles had been tumbled down. Pleasant things they had been, even if made of paste-board; in his heart he had always known that they were pasteboard. Here was no continuing city. God had seen fit to change the sunlight for a very dark shadow. Well, under the shadow he must not quail but keep his head high, not in revolt or in defiance, but because He, who had made him in His image, expected such courage. "Though Thou slay me, yet will I trust in Thee."

There was no shade of grievance in Leithen's mind, still less self-pity. There was almost a grim kind of gratitude. He was now alone with God. In these bleak immensities the world of man had fallen away to an infinite distance, and the chill of eternity was already on him. He had no views about an after-life. That was for God's providence to decree. He was an atom in infinite space, the humblest of slaves waiting on the command of an august master.

He remembered a phrase of Cromwell's about putting his mouth in the dust. That was his mood now, for he felt above everything his abjectness. In his old bustling world there were the works of man's hands all around to give a false impression of man's power. But here the hand of God had blotted out life for millions of miles and made a great tract of the inconsiderable ball which was the earth, like the infinite interstellar spaces which had never heard of man.

18

He woke to a cold which seemed to sear that part of his face which the blanket left exposed. There was a great rosy light all about the tent which the frost particles turned into a sparkling mist.

The Hare stood above him.

"There is a man," he said, "beyond the river under the rocks. I have seen a smoke."

The news gave Leithen the extra incentive that made it possible for him to rise. He hung on to the Hare's shoulder, and it was in that posture that he drank some strong tea and swallowed a mouthful of biscuit. The smoke, he was told, was perhaps a mile distant in a nook of the cliffs. The long pool of the river was frozen hard, and beyond it was open ground.

Leithen's strength seemed suddenly to wax. A fever had taken him, a fever to be up and doing, to finish off his business once for all. His weakness was almost a physical anguish, and there was a horrid background of nausea. . . . But what did it all matter? He was very near his journey's end. One way or another in a few hours he would be quit of his misery.

The Hare guided him — indeed, half carried him — over the frozen hummocks of the pool. Beyond was a slight rise, and from that a thin spire of smoke could be seen in an angle of the cliffs. In the shelter of the rise Leithen halted.

"You must stay here," he told the Indian, "and see what happens to me. If I am killed you will go back to where we

came from and tell my friend what has happened. He may want to come here, and in that case you will show him the road. If I do not die now you will make camp for yourself a little way off and at dawn tomorrow you will come where the smoke is. If I am alive you may help me. If I am dead you must return to my friend. Do you understand?"

The Hare shook his head. The orders seemed to be unacceptable, and Leithen had to repeat them again before he nodded in acquiescence.

"Good-bye," he said. "God bless you for an honest man."

The turf was frozen hard, but it was as level as a croquet lawn and made easy walking. All Leithen's attention was concentrated on his crazy legs. They wobbled and shambled and sprawled, and each step was a separate movement which had to be artfully engineered. He took to counting them — ten, twenty, thirty, one hundred. He seemed to have made no progress. Two hundred, three hundred — here he had to scramble in and out of a small watercourse — four hundred, five hundred.

A cry made him lift his eyes, and he saw a man perhaps two hundred yards distant.

The man was shouting, but he could not hear what he said. A horrid nausea was beginning to afflict him — the overpowering sickness which comes to men who reach the extreme limits of their strength. Then there was a sound which was not the human voice, and something sang not far from his left shoulder. He had taken perhaps six further steps when the same something passed somewhere on his right.

His dulled brain told him the meaning of it. "He must be bracketing," he said to himself. "The third shot will get me in the heart or the head, and then all will be over." He found himself longing for it as a sick man longs for the morning. But it did not come. Instead came the nausea and the extremity of weakness. The world swam in a black mist, and strength fled from his limbs, like air from a slit bladder.

19

When Leithen's weakness overpowered him he might lose consciousness, but when he regained it there was no half-way house of dim perception to return to. He alternated between a prospect of acid clarity and no prospect at all. . . . Now he took in every detail of the scene, though he was puzzled at first to interpret them.

At first he thought that it was night and that he was lying out of doors, for he seemed to be looking up to a dark sky. Then a splash of light on his left side caught his attention, and he saw that it outlined some kind of ceiling. But it was a ceiling which lacked at least one supporting wall, for there was a great blue vagueness pricked out with points of light, and ruddy in the centre with what looked like flames. It took him some time to piece together the puzzle. . . . He was in a cave, and towards the left he was looking to the open where a big fire was burning.

There was another light, another fire it seemed. This was directly in front of him, but he could not see the flames, only the glow on floor and roof, so that it must be burning beyond a projecting rib of rock. There must be a natural flue there, he thought, an opening in the roof, for there was no smoke to make his eyes smart.

He was lying on a pile of spruce boughs covered with a Hudson's Bay blanket. There was a bitter taste on his lips as he passed his tongue over them — brandy or whisky it seemed; anyhow some kind of spirit. Somebody, too, had been attending to him, for the collar of his dicky had been loosened, and he was wearing an extra sweater which was not his own. Also his moccasins had been removed and his feet rolled snugly in a fold of the blanket. . . .

Presently a man came into the light of the inner fire. The sight of him awoke Leithen to memory of the past days. This could only be Lew Frizel, whom he had come to find — a man who had gone mad, according to his brother's view, for he had left Galliard to perish; one who a few hours back had beyond doubt shot at himself. Then he had marched forward without a tremor, expecting a third bullet to find his heart, for it would have been a joyful release. Now, freed from the extreme misery of weakness, he found himself nervous about this brother of Johnny's — why, he did not know, for his own fate was beyond caring about. Lew's madness, whatever it was, could not be wholly malevolent, for he had taken some pains to make comfortable the man he had shot at. Besides, he was the key to Galliard's sanity, and Galliard was the purpose of his quest.

He was a far bigger man than Johnny, not less, it appeared, than six feet two; a lean man, and made leaner by his

dress, which was deerskin breeches, a tanned caribou shirt worn above a jersey, and a lumberman's laced boots. His hair, as flaxen as a girl's, had been self-cut into a bunch and left a ridiculous fringe on his forehead. It was only the figure he saw, a figure apparently of immense power and activity, for every movement was like the releasing of a spring.

The man glanced towards him and saw that he was awake. He lit a lantern with a splinter from the fire, and came forward so that Leithen could see his face. Plainly he was Johnny's brother, for there was the same shape of head and the same bat's ears. But his eyes were a world apart. Johnny's were honest, featureless pools of that indistinct colour which is commonly called blue or grey, but Lew's were as brilliant as jewels, pale, but with the pallor of intense delicate colour, the hue of a turquoise, but clear as a sapphire, and with an adamantine brilliance. They were masterful, compelling eyes, wild, but to Leithen not mad — at least it was the madness of a poet and not of a maniac.

He bent his big shoulders and peered into Leithen's face. There was nothing of the Indian in him, except the round head and the bat's ears. The man was more Viking, with his great high-bridged nose, his straight, bushy eyebrows, his long upper lip, and his iron chin. He was clean-shaven, too, unlike his brother, who was as shaggy as a bear. The eyes devoured Leithen, puzzled, in a way contemptuous, but not hostile.

"Who are you? Where do you come from?"

The voice was the next surprise. It was of exceptional beauty, soft, rich, and musical, and the accent was not Johnny's lingua franca of all North America. It was a gentle, soothing Scots, like the speech of a Border shepherd.

"I came with Johnny — your brother. He's in camp three days' journey back. We've found Galliard, the man who was with you. He was pretty sick and wanted nursing."

"Galliard!" The man rubbed his eyes. "I lost him — he lost himself. Come to think of it, he wasn't much of a pal. Too darned slow. I had to hurry on."

He lowered his blazing splinter and scanned Leithen's thin face and hollow eyes and temples. He looked at the almost transparent wrist. He lifted the blanket and put his head close to his chest so that he could hear his breathing.

"What brought you here?" he asked fiercely. "You haven't got no right here."

"I came to find you. Galliard needs you. And Johnny."

"You took a big risk."

"I'm a dying man, so risk doesn't matter."

"You're over Jordan now. The Sick Heart is where you come to when you're at the end of your road. . . . I had a notion it was the River of the Water of Life, same as in Revelation."

The man's eyes seemed to have lost their glitter and become pools of melancholy.

"Well, it ain't. It's the River of the Water of Death. The Indians know that and they only come here to die. Some, at least; but it isn't many that gets here, it being a damn rough road."

He took Leithen's hand in his gigantic paw.

"You're sick. Terrible sick. You've got what the Hares call tfitsiki and white folk T.B. We don't suffer from it anything to signify, but it's terrible bad among the Indians. It's poor feeding with them; but that's not what's hunting you. Where d'you come from? Edmonton way, or New York like the man Galliard?"

"I come from England. I'm Scots, same as you."

"That's mighty queer. You've come down north to look for Galliard? He's a sick man, too, sick in his mind, but he'll cure. You're another matter. You've a long hill to climb and I doubt if you'll win to the top of it."

"I know. I'm dying. I made my book for that before I left England."

"And you're facing up to it! There's guts left in the old land. What's your name? Leithen! That's south country. We Frizels come from the north."

"I've seen Johnny's ring with the Frazer arms."

"What's brother John thinking about me?"

"He's badly scared. He had to stay to attend to Galliard, and it's partly to ease his mind that I pushed on here."

"I guess his mind wanted some easing. Johnny's thinking about mad trappers. Well, maybe he's right. I was as mad as a loon until this morning. . . . I've been looking for the Sick Heart River since I was a halfling, and Galliard come along and

gave me my chance at last. God knows what HE was looking for, but he fell in with me all right, and I treated him mighty selfish. I was mad and I don't mind telling you. That's the way the Sick Heart takes people. I thought when I found it I'd find a New Jerusalem with all my sins washed away, and the angels waiting for me. . . . Then you come along. I shot at you, not to kill, but to halt you — when I shoot to kill I reckon I don't miss. And you came on quite regardless, and that shook me. Here, I says, is someone set on the Sick Heart, and he's going to get there. And then you tumbled down in a heap, and I reckoned you were going to die anyway."

Lew was speaking more quietly and the light had gone from his eyes.

"Something sort of clicked inside my head," he went on, "and I began to look differently at things. The sight of you cleared my mind. One thing I know — this is the River of the Water of Death. You can't live in this valley. There's no life here. Not a bird or beast, not a squirrel in the woods, not a rabbit in the grass, let alone bear or deer."

"There are warm springs," Leithen said. "There must be duck there."

"Devil a duck! I looked to find the sedges full of them, geese and ducks that the Eskimos and Indians had hurt and that couldn't move south. Devil a feather! And devil a fish in the river! When God made this place He wasn't figuring on humans taking up lots in it. . . . I got a little provender, but if you and I don't shift we'll be dead in a week."

"What have you got?"

"A hindquarter of caribou — lean, stringy meat — a couple of bags of flour — maybe five pounds of tea."

"There's an Indian with me," said Leithen. "He's gone to earth a mile or so back. I told him to wait and see what happened to me. He'll be hanging about tomorrow morning, and he's got some food."

Lew rapped out a dozen questions, directed to identifying the Hare. Finally he settled who he was and gave him a name.

"What's he got?" he demanded.

"Flour and oatmeal and bacon and tea, and some stuff in tins. Enough for a week or so."

"That's no good," said Lew bitterly. "We' got to winter here or perish. Man, d'you not see we're in a trap? Nothing that hasn't wings could get out of this valley."

"How did you get in?"

Lew smiled grimly. "God knows! I was mad, as I told you. I found a kind of crack in the rocks and crawled down it like a squirrel, helping myself with tree roots and creepers. The snow hadn't come yet. I fell the last forty feet, but by God's mercy it was into a clump of scrub cedar. I lost nothing except half my kit and the skin of my face. But now the snow is here and that door is shut."

"The Hare and I came down by the snow, and it's the snow that's going to help us out again."

Lew looked at him with unbelief in his eyes.

"You're a sick man — sick in the head, too. Likewise you're tireder than a flightin' woodcock. You've got to sleep. I'm goin' to shift your bed further out. Frost won't be bad tonight, and you want the air round you. See, I'll give you another blanket."

Leithen saw that Lew was robbing his own bed, but he was too feeble to protest. He dropped straight away into the fathomless depths of exhausted sleep.

When he woke, with rime on his blankets and sunlight in his eyes, he saw that the Hare had been retrieved and was now attending to the breakfast fire. For a little he lay motionless, puzzling over what had happened to him. As always now at the start of a day, he felt wretchedly ill, and this morning had been no exception. But his eyes were seeing things differently. . . . Hitherto the world had seemed to him an etching without colour, a flat two-dimensioned thing which stirred no feeling in his mind of either repulsion or liking. He had ceased to respond to life. A landscape was a map to him which his mind grasped, but which left his interest untouched. . . .

Now he suddenly saw the valley of the Sick Heart as a marvellous thing. This gash in the earth, full of cold, pure sunlight, was a secret devised by the great Artificer and revealed to him and to him only. There was no place for life in it — there could not be — but neither was there room for death. This peace was beyond living and dying. He had a sudden vision of it under a summer sun — green lawns, green forests, a blue singing stream, and cliffs of serrated darkness. A classic loveliness, Tempe, Phæaciac. But no bird wing or bird song, no ripple of fish, no beast in the thicket — a silence rather of the

world as God first created it, before He permitted the coarse welter of life.

Lew boiled water, gave Leithen his breakfast, and helped him to wash and dress.

"You lie there in the sun," he said. "It's good for you. And listen to what I've got to say. How you feeling?"

"Pretty bad."

Lew shook his head. "But I've seen a sicker man get better."

"I've had the best advice in the world, so I don't delude myself. I haven't got the shadow of a chance."

Lew strode up and down before the cave like a sentry.

"You haven't a chance down here, living in a stuffy hole and eating the sweepings of a store. You want strong air, it don't matter how cold, and you want fresh-killed meat cooked rare. I've seen that work miracles with your complaint. But God help you! there's no hope for you here. You're in your grave already — and so are all of us. The Hare knows. He's squatting down by the water and starting on the dirges of his tribe."

Then he took himself off, apparently on some futile foraging errand, and Leithen, half in the sun, half in the glow of the fire, felt his weakness changing to an apathy which was almost ease. This was the place to die in-to slip quietly away with no last convulsive attempt to live. He had reacted for a moment to life, but only to the afterglow of it. The thought of further effort frightened him, for there could be no misery like the struggle against such weakness as his. It looked as if the fates which had given him so much, and had also robbed him so harshly, had relented and would permit a quiet end. Whitman's phrase was like a sweetmeat on his tongue: "the delicious nearby assurance of death."

Lew and the Indian spent a day of furious activity. They cut huge quantities of wood and kept both fires blazing. Fire-tending seemed to give Lew some comfort, as if it spelled life in a dead place. He wandered round the outer fire like a gigantic pixie, then, as the evening drew on, he carried Leithen into the cave, and, having arranged a couch for him, stood over him like an angry schoolmaster.

"D'you believe in God?" he demanded.

"I believe in God."

"I was brought up that way too. My father was bed-rock Presbyterian, and I took after him — not like brother Johnny, who was always light-minded. There was times when my sins fair bowed me down, and I was like old Christian in The Pilgrim's Progress — I'd have gone through fire and water to get quit of 'em. Then I got the notion of this Sick Heart as the kind of place where there was no more trouble, a bit of the Garden of Eden that God had kept private for them as could find it. I'd been thinking about it for years, and suddenly I saw a chance of gettin' to it and findin' peace for evermore. Not dying — I wasn't thinking of dying — but living happily ever after, as the story books say. That was my aim, fool that I was!"

His voice rose to a shout.

"I was mad! It was the temptation of the Devil and not a promise of God. The Sick Heart is not the Land-of-Beulah but the Byroad-to-Hell, same as in Bunyan. It don't rise like a proper river out of little springs — it comes full-born out of the rock and slinks back into it like a ghost. I tell you the place is no' canny. You'd say it had the best grazing in all America, and yet there's nothing can live here. There's a curse on this valley when I thought there was a blessing. So there's just the one thing to do if we're to save our souls, and that's to get out of it though we break our necks in the job."

The man's voice had become shrill with passion, and even in the shadow Leithen could see the fire in his eyes.

"You're maybe thinking different," he went on. "You think you're dying and that this is a nice quiet place to die in. But you'll be damned for it. There's a chance of salvation for you if you pass out up on the cold tops, but there's none if your end comes in this cursed hole."

Leithen turned wearily on his side to face the speaker.

"You'd better count me out. I'm finished. I'd only be a burden to you. A couple of days here should see me through, and then you can do what you like."

"By God I won't! I can't leave you — I'd never hold up my head again if I did. And I can't stay here with Hell waitin' to grab me. Me and the Hare will help you along, for our kit will be light. Besides, you could show us the road out. The Hare says you know how to get along on steep snow."

"Have you any rope?" Leithen asked.

Lew's wild face sobered. "It's about all I have. I've got two hundred feet of light rope. Brought it along with the notion

it might come in handy and I can make some more out of caribou skin.”

Leithen had asked the question involuntarily, for the thing did not interest him. The deep fatigue which commonly ended his day had dropped on him like a mountain of lead. Death was very near, and where could he meet it better than in this gentle place, remote alike from the turmoil of Nature and of man?

But after his meagre supper, as he watched Lew and the Indian repack their kit, the power of thought returned to him. This was the last lap in the race; was he to fail in it? Why had he come here when at home he might have had a cushioned death-bed among friends? Was it not to die standing, to go out in his boots? And that meant that he must have a purpose to fill his mind, and let that purpose exclude foolish meditations on death. Well, he had half-finished his job — he had found Galliard; but before he could get Galliard back to his old world he must bring to him the strange man who had obsessed his mind and who, having been mad, was now sane. Therefore he must get Lew out of the Sick Heart valley. He did not believe that Lew could find his way out alone. The long spout of snow was ice in parts, and Lew knew nothing of step-cutting. Leithen remembered the terror of the Hare in the descent. Mountaineering to men like Lew was a desperate venture. Could he guide them up the spout? It would have been child’s play in the old days, but now! . . . He bent his knees and elbows. Great God! his limbs were as flaccid as indiarubber. What kind of a figure would he cut on an ice slope?

And yet what was the alternative? To lie here dying by inches — by feet and yards, perhaps, but still slowly — with Lew in a panic and restrained from leaving him only by the iron camaraderie of the North. His own utter weakness made him crave for immobility, but something at the back of his mind cried out against it. Why had he left England if he was to cower in a ditch and not stride on to the end? That had always been his philosophy. He remembered that long ago in his youth he had written bad verses on the subject, demanding that he meet death “with the wind in his teeth and the rain in his face.” It was no false stoicism, but the creed of a lifetime.

By and by he fell asleep, and — a rare thing for one whose slumbers seemed drugged — woke in the small hours. Lew could be heard snoring, but he must have been recently awake, for he had stoked both fires. A queer impulse seized Leithen to get up. With some difficulty he crawled out of his sleeping-bag and stumbled to his feet, wrapping a blanket round him

It was a marvellous night, cold, but not bitterly cold, and the flames of the outer fire were crimson against a sky of burnished gold. Moonshine filled the valley and brimmed over the edge of the cliffs. Those cliffs caught no reflection of light, but were more dark and jagged than by day; except that on the eastern side, where lay the snowdrifts, there was a wave of misty saffron.

Moonlight is a soothing thing, softening the raw corners of the world, but suddenly to Leithen this moonlight seemed monstrous and unearthly. The valley was a great golden mausoleum with ebony walls, a mausoleum, not a kindly grave for a common mortal. Kings might die here and lie here, but not Edward Leithen. There was a tremor in his steady nerves, a fluttering in his sober brain. He knew now what Lew meant. . . . With difficulty he got back into his sleeping-bag and covered his head so that he could not see the moon. He must get out of this damned place though he used the last pennyweight of his strength.

20

Lew and the Indian had Leithen between them, steadying himself with a hand on each of their huge back-packs. The Hare’s rope had gone to the cording of the dunnage, and Lew’s was in a coil on Leithen’s shoulder. The journey to the snow shoot was made in many short stages, across a frozen pool of the river, and then in the snow-sprinkled herbage below the eastern crags. The weather was changing, for a yellow film was creeping from the north over the sky.

“There’ll be big snow on the tops,” said Lew, “and maybe a god-awful wind.”

It was midday before they reached the foot of the couloir. The lower slopes, down which Leithen and the Hare had rolled, were set at a gentle angle, and the firm snow made easy going; it was up in the narrows of the cleft that it changed to a ribbon of ice. The problem before him stirred some forgotten chord in Leithen’s mind, and he found himself ready to take command. First he sent Lew and the Hare with the kit up to the edge of the ice, and bade them anchor the packs there to poles driven into the last soft snow. That done he made the two men virtually carry him up the easy slopes. He had a meagre remnant of bodily strength, and he would need it all for the task before him.

In an hour's time the three were at the foot of the sunless narrows where the snow was hard ice. There he gave Lew his orders.

"I will cut steps, deep ones with plenty of standing room. Keep looking before you, and not down. I'll rope, so that if I fall you can hold me. If I get to the top I'll try to make the rope fast, and the Hare must follow in the steps. He will haul up the kit after him; then he will drop the rope for you, and you must tie it on. If you slip he will be able to hold you."

Leithen chose the Hare to go second, for the Indian seemed less likely than Lew to suffer from vertigo. He had come up the lower slopes impassively while Lew had had the face of one in torment.

Lew's hatchet was a poor substitute for an ice axe. Leithen's old technique of step-cutting had to be abandoned, and the notches he hacked would have disgusted a Swiss guide. He had to make them deep and sloping inward for the sake of Lew's big moccasined feet. Also he had often to cut hand-holds for himself so that he could rest plastered flat against the ice when his knees shook and his wrists ached and his head swam with weariness.

It was a mortal slow business, and one long agony. Presently he was past the throat of the gully and in snow again, soft snow with a hard crust, but easier to work than the ice of the narrows. Here the wind, which Lew had foretold, swirled down from the summit, and he almost fell. The last stage was a black nightmare. Soon it would be all over, he told himself — soon, soon, there would be the blessed sleep of death.

He reached the top with a dozen feet of rope to spare, and straightway tumbled into deep snow. There he might have perished, drifting into a sleep from which there would be no awakening, had not tugs on the rope from Lew beneath forced him back into consciousness. With infinite labour he untied the rope from his middle. With frail, fumbling, chilled hands he made the end fast to a jack-pine which grew conveniently near the brink. He gave the rope the three jerks which was the agreed signal that he was at the summit and anchored. Then a red mist of giddiness overtook him, and he dropped limply into the snow at the tree roots.

21

When Leithen came to his senses he found it hard to link the present with the past. His last strong sensation had been that of extreme cold; now it was as warm as if he were in bed at home, and he found that his outer garments had been removed and that he was wearing only underclothes and a jersey. It was night, and he was looking up at a sky of dark velvet, hung with stars like great coloured lamps. By and by, as his eyes took in the foreground, he found that he was in a kind of pit scooped in deep snow with a high rampart of snow around it. The floor was spread with spruce boughs, but a space had been left in the middle for a fire, which had for its fuel the butt-ends of two trees which met in the middle and slipped down as they smouldered.

He did not stay long awake, but in those minutes he was aware of something new in his condition. The fit of utter apathy had passed. He was conscious of the strangeness of this cache in the snow, this mid-winter refuge in a world inimical to man. The bitter diamond air, like some harsh acid, had stung him back to a kind of life — at any rate to a feeble response to life.

Next day he started out in a state of abject decrepitude. Lew put snow-shoes on him, but he found that he had lost the trick of them, and kept on tangling up his feet and stumbling. The snow lay deep, and under the stricture of the frost was as dry and powdery as sand, so that his feet sank into it. Lew went first to break the trail, but all his efforts did not make a firm track, so that the stages had to be short, and by the midday meal Leithen was at the end of his tether. The glow of a fire and some ptarmigan broth slightly revived him, but his fatigue was such that Lew made camp an hour before nightfall.

That night, in his hole in the snow, Leithen's thoughts took a new turn. For long his mind had been sluggish, cognisant of walls but of no windows. Now suddenly it began to move and he saw things. . . .

Lew was taking shape in his thoughts as a man and not as a portent. At first he had been a mystery figure, an inexplicable Providence which dominated Johnny's mind, and which had loomed big on Leithen's own horizon. Then he had changed to a disturbing force which had mastered Galliard and seemed to be an incarnation of the secret madness of the North. And then in the Sick Heart valley he had become a Saul whose crazy fit was passing, a man who was seeking something that he had lost and had reached his desired goal only to find that it was not there. Lew and Galliard were in the same boat, sufferers from the same spell.

But Lew had returned by way of panic to normal life. For a moment this strong child of Nature had been pathetic, begging help and drawing courage from Leithen himself, a dying man. The splendid being had been a suppliant to one whose body was in decay. The irony of it induced in Leithen a flicker of affection. He seemed, too, to draw a transitory vigour from a creature so instinct with life. His numb stoicism was shot with a momentary warmth and colour. Lew on the trail, shouting oddments of Scots songs in his rich voice, and verses of the metrical Psalms of his youth, engaged in thunderous discourse with the Hare in his own tongue, seemed to dominate the snowdrifts and the blizzards and the spells of paralysing cold. Leithen found that he had won a faint warmth of spirit from the proximity of Lew's gusto. And the man was as gentle as a woman. His eyes were never off Leithen; he arranged the halts to suit his feebleness, and at each of them tended him like a mother. At night he made his bed and fed him with the care of a hospital nurse.

"This ain't the food for you," he declared. "You want fresh meat. It's time we were at Johnny's camp where I can get it for you."

Half a gale was blowing. He detected the scepticism in Leithen's eye and laughed.

"It don't look good for hunting weather, says you. Maybe not, but I'll get you what you need. We're not in the barrens to depend on wandering caribou. There's beasts in these mountains all the year round, and I reckon I know where to find 'em. There's caribou, the big woods kind, and there's more moose than anyone kens, except the Hares. They'll have stamped out their yards and we've got to look for 'em."

"What's that?"

"Stamping the snow to get at the shoots. Yards they call 'em down east. But the Hares call 'em ravages. Got the name from the French missionaries."

Next day the stages were short and difficult. There was a cruel north-east wind, and the snow was like kitchen salt and refused to pack. The Hare broke the trail, but Leithen, who followed, often sank to his knees in spite of his snow-shoes. ("We need bear-paws like they use down East," Lew proclaimed. "These northern kind are too narrow to spread the weight.") An hour's march brought him to utter exhaustion, and there were moments when he thought that that day would be his last.

At the midday meal he heard what stung his sense of irony into life. Lew had placed him in the lee of a low-growing spruce which broke the wind, and had forgotten his presence, for while he and the Indian collected wood for the fire they talked loudly, shouting against the blast. The Hare chose to speak English, in which he liked to practise himself.

"Him lung sick," he said. There could be no doubt about his reference.

"Yeah," Lew grunted.

"Him soon die, like my brother and my uncles."

The reply was an angry shout.

"No, by God, he won't! You chew on that, you bloody-minded heathen. He's going to cheat old man Death and get well."

Leithen smiled wryly. It was Uncle Toby's oath, but Uncle Toby's efforts had failed, and so would Lew's.

That night, since the day's journey had been short, his fatigue was a little less than usual, and after supper, instead of falling at once into a heavy sleep, he found himself watching Lew, who, wrapped in his blankets, was smoking his short pipe, and now and then stirring the logs with the spruce pole which he used as a poker. His eyes were half-closed, and he seemed to be in a not unpleasant reverie. Leithen — to his surprise, for he had resolved that his mind was dead to all mundane interests — found his curiosity roused. This was one of the most famous guides in the North. The country fitted him as a bearskin fitted the bear. Never, surely, was man better adapted to his environment. What had shaken him loose from his normal life and sent him on a crazy pilgrimage to a legendary river? It could not have been only a craving to explore, to find out what lay far away over the hills. There had been an almost mystical exaltation in the quest, for it had caused him to forget all his traditions, and desert Galliard, and this exaltation had ended in a panicky rebound. When he had met him he had found a strong man in terror, shrinking from something which he could not name. It must have been a strange dream which resulted in so cruel an awakening.

He asked Lew the question point-blank. The man came out of his absorption and turned his bright eyes on the questioner.

"I've been trying to figure that out myself," he said. "All my life since I was a callant I've been looking for things and never findin' 'em."

He stopped in some embarrassment.

"I don't know that I can rightly explain, for you see I'm not used to talking. When I was about eighteen I got kinda sick of my life, and wanted to get away south, to the cities. Johnny was never that way, nor Dad neither. But I reckon there were Frizels far back that had been restless too. Anyway, I was mighty restless. Then Dad died, and I had to take on some of his jobs, and before I knew I was deep in the business of guiding and feeling good about it. I wanted nothing except to know more about pelts than any trapper, and more about training than any Indian, and to keep my body as hard as whinstone, and my hearing like a timber wolf's, and my eyesight like a fishhawk's."

"That was before the War?"

Lew nodded. "Before the War. The War came and Johnny and me went overseas. We made a bit of a name as snipers, Johnny pretty useful and me a wee bit better. I enjoyed it right enough, and barring my feet, for I wasn't used to wearing army boots, I was never sick or sorry. But I was god-awful homesick, and when I smelt a muskeg again and saw the pointed sticks I could have grat with pleasure."

Lew shook out his pipe.

"But the man that came back wasn't the same as him that crossed the sea. I was daft about the North, and never wanted to leave it, but I got a notion that the North was full of things that I didn't know nothing about — and that it was up to me to find 'em. I took to talking a lot with Indians and listening to their stories. And then I heard about the Sick Heart and couldn't forget it."

Lew's embarrassment had returned. His words came slowly, and he kept his eyes on the hot ashes.

"It happened that I'd a lot of travelling to do by my lone — one trail took three months when I was looking for some lost gold-diggers. For two years I hadn't much guiding."

"You were with Mr. Walter Derwent, weren't you?"

"Yeah. Mr. Derwent's a fine little man and my very good friend. But mostly I was alone and I was thinkin' a lot. Dad brought us up well, for he was mighty religious, and I got to puzzling about my soul. I had always lived decent, but I reckoned decent living wasn't enough. Out in the bush you feel a pretty small thing in the hands of God. There was a book of Dad's I had a fancy for, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and I got to thinking of myself as the Pilgrim, and looking for the same kind of thing to happen to me. I can see now it wasn't sense, but at the time it seemed to me I was looking at a map of my own road. At the end there was the River for the Pilgrim to cross, and I got to imagining that the River was the Sick Heart. I guess I was a bit loony, but I thought I was the only sensible man, for what did it matter what the other folks were doing, running about and making money, and marrying and breeding, when there was this big business of saving your soul?"

"Then Mr. Galliard got hold of me. He was likewise a bit loony, but his daftness and mine was different, for he was looking for something in this world and, strictly speaking, I was looking for something outside the world. He didn't know what I wanted, and I didn't worry about him. But as it fell out he gave me the chance I'd been looking for, and we took the trail together. I behaved darned badly, for I wasn't sane, and by the mercy of God you and Johnny found the man I deserted. . . . I pushed on like a madman and found the Sick Heart, and then, praise God, my daftness left me."

"I don't know what I'd expected. A land flowing with milk and honey, and angels to pass the time of day! What opened my eyes was when I found there was no living thing in that valley. That was uncanny, and gave me the horrors. And then I considered that that great hole in the earth was a grave, a place to die in but not to live in, and not a place either for an honest man to die in. I'm like you, I'm sworn to die on my feet."

Lew checked himself with a glance of apology.

"I had to get out," he said, "and I had to get you out, for there's no road to Heaven from the Sick Heart. What did I call it? — a by-road to Hell!"

"You are cured?" Leithen asked.

"Sure I am. I'm like a man getting better of a fever. I see things in their proper shape and size now, and not big as mountains and dancing in the air. I've got to save my soul, and that's to be done by a sane man, and not by a loony, and in a man's job. I'm the opposite to King David, for God's goodness to me has been to get me away from yon green pastures

and still waters, back among the rocks and the jack-pines.”

22

In two days, said Lew, they should make Johnny’s camp and Galliard. But he would not talk about Galliard. He left that problem to the Omnipotence who had solved his own.

The man was having a curious effect on Leithen, the same effect on his spirit that food had on his body, nourishing it and waking it to a faint semblance of life. The blizzard died away, and there followed days of sun, when a rosy haze lay on the hills, and the air sparkled with frost crystals. That night Leithen was aware that another thought had stabbed his dull mind into wakefulness.

When he left England he had reasoned himself into a grim resignation. Life had been very good to him, and, now that it was ending, he made no complaint. But he could only show his gratitude to life by maintaining a stout front to death. He was content to be a pawn in the hands of the Almighty, but he was also a man, and, as Lew put it, must die standing. So he had assumed a task which interested him not at all, but which would keep him on his feet. That task he must conscientiously pursue, but success in it mattered little, provided always he relaxed no effort.

Looking back over the past months, he realised that his interest in it, which at first had been a question of mere self-coercion, was now a real thing. He wanted to succeed, partly because of his liking for a completed job, and partly because the human element had asserted itself. Galliard was no longer a mathematical symbol, a cipher in a game, but a human being and Felicity’s husband, and Lew was something more, a benefactor, a friend.

It was the remembrance of Lew that convinced Leithen that a change had come over his world of thought. He had welcomed the North because it matched his dull stoicism. Here in this iron and icy world man was a pigmy and God was all in all. Like Job, he was abashed by the divine majesty and could put his face in the dust. It was the temper in which he wished to pass out of life. He asked for nothing — “not in the husk, nor dawn in the dusk, nor life beyond death.” He had already much more than his deserts! and what Omnipotence proposed to do with him was the business of Omnipotence; he was too sick and weary to dream or hope. He lay passive in all-potent hands.

Now there suddenly broke in on him like a sunrise a sense of God’s mercy — deeper than the fore-ordination of things, like a great mercifulness. . . . Out of the cruel North most of the birds had flown south from ancient instinct, and would return to keep the wheel of life moving. Merciful! But some remained, snatching safety by cunning ways from the winter of death. Merciful! Under the fetters of ice and snow there were little animals lying snug in holes, and fish under the frozen streams, and bears asleep in their lie-ups, and moose stamping out their yards, and caribou rooting for their grey moss. Merciful! And human beings, men, women, and children, fending off winter and sustaining life by an instinct old as that of the migrating birds. Lew nursing like a child one whom he had known less than a week — the Hares stolidly doing their jobs, as well fitted as Lew for this harsh world — Johnny tormented by anxiety for his brother, but uncomplainingly sticking to the main road of his duty. . . . Surely, surely, behind the reign of law and the coercion of power there was a deep purpose of mercy.

The thought induced in Leithen a tenderness to which he had been long a stranger. He had put life away from him, and it had come back to him in a final reconciliation. He had always hoped to die in April weather when the surge of returning life would be a kind of earnest of immortality. Now, when presently death came to him, it would be like dying in the spring.

23

That night he spoke of plans. The laborious days had brought his bodily strength very low, but some dregs of energy had been stirring in his mind. His breath troubled him sorely, and his voice had failed, so that Lew had to come close to hear him.

“I cannot live long,” he said.

Lew received the news with a stony poker face.

"Something must be settled about Galliard," he went on. "You know I came here to find him. I know his wife and his friends, and I wanted a job to carry me on to the end. . . . We must get him back to his own people."

"And who might they be?" Lew asked.

"His wife. . . . His business associates. He has made a big place for himself in New York."

"He didn't talk like that. I never heard him mention 'em. He hasn't been thinkin' much of anythin' except his old-time French forbears, especially them as went North."

"You went to Clairefontaine with him?"

"Yeah. I wasn't supposed to tell, but you've been there and you've guessed it. It was like coming home for him, and yet not comin' home. We went to a nice place up the stream and he sat down and grat. Looked like it had once been his home, but that his home had shifted and he'd still to find it. After that he was in a kind of fever — all the way to the Arctic and then on here. He found that his brother and his uncle had died up there by the Ghost River."

"I know. I saw the graves."

Lew's eyes opened. "You and Johnny went there? You stuck mighty close to our trail. . . . Well, up to then Galliard had been the daft one. I could get no sense out of him, and most of the time he'd sit dreaming like an old squaw by the fire. After Fort Bannerman it was my turn. I don't rightly remember anything he said after that, for I wasn't worryin' about him, only about myself and that damned Sick Heart. . . . What was he like when you found him?"

"He was an ill man, but his body was mending. His mind — well, he'd been lost for three days and had the horrors on him. But I won't say he was cured. You can have the terror of the North on you and still be under its spell."

"That's so. It's the worst kind."

"He kept crying out for you. It looks as though you were the only one that could release him. Your madness mastered his, and now that you are sane again he might catch the infection of your sanity."

Lew pondered. "It might be," he said shortly.

"Well, I'm going out, and it's for you to finish the job. You must get him down country and back to his friends. I've written out the details and left them with Johnny. You must promise, so that I can die with an easy mind."

For a little Lew did not speak.

"You're not going to die," he said fiercely.

"The best authorities in the world have told me that I haven't the ghost of a chance."

"They're wrong, and by God we'll prove them wrong!" The blue eyes had a frosty sternness.

"Promise me, anyhow. Promise that you'll see Galliard back among his friends. You could get him out, even in winter?"

"Yeah. We can get a dog-team from the Hares' camp if he isn't fit for the trail. And once at Fort Bannerman we can send word to Edmonton for a plane. . . . If it's to do you any good I promise to plant the feller back where he belongs. But you've got to take count of one thing. He must be cured right here in the bush. If he isn't cured before he goes out he'll never be cured. It's only the North can mend what the North breaks."

24

Next day Leithen collapsed utterly, for the strength went from his legs, and his difficult breathing became almost suffocation. The business of filling the lungs with air, to a healthy man an unconscious function, had become for him a desperate enterprise where every moment brought the terror of failure. He felt every part of his decrepit frame involved, not lungs and larynx only, but every muscle and nerve from his brain to his feet. The combined effort of all that was left of him to feed the dying fires of life. A rough sledge was made and Lew and the Hare dragged him laboriously through the drifts. Fortunately they had reached the wind-swept ridges, where the going was easier. Twenty-four hours later there was delivered at Johnny's camp a man who looked to be in the very article of death.

PART III

"I had a singular feeling at being in his company. For I could hardly believe that I was present at the death of a friend, and therefore I did not pity him."

—PLATO, *PHÆDO* 58.

1

In the middle of January there was a pause in the sub-zero weather, and a mild wind from the west made the snow pack like cheese, and cleared the spruce boughs of their burden. In front of the hut some square yards of flat ground had been paved by Johnny with stones from the brook, and, since the melting snow drained fast from it, it was dry enough for Leithen to sit there. There was now a short spell of sun at midday, and though it had no warmth it had light, and that light gave him an access of comfort.

He reminded himself for the thousandth time that a miracle had happened, and that he was not in pain. His breath was short, but not difficult. He was still frail, but the utter overwhelming weakness had gone.

As yet he scarcely dared even to hint to himself that he might get well. His reason had been convinced that that was impossible. There had been no doubts in the minds of Acton Croke and young Ravelston. . . . Yet Croke had refused to be too dogmatic. He had said, "in the present position of our knowledge." He had admitted that medical science was only beginning to understand the type of tuberculosis induced by gas-poisoning. Technicalities had begun to recur to Leithen's memory: Croke's talk of "chronic fibrous infection," and "broncho-pulmonary lesions." Sinister-sounding phrases, but he remembered, too, reading or hearing somewhere that fibrous areas in the lungs could be walled off and rendered inert. That meant some sort of cure, at any rate a postponement of death.

Lew and the Hares had no doubt about it. "You're getting well," the former repeated several times a day. "Soon you'll be the huskiest of the lot of us." And the Indians had ceased to look at him furtively like something stricken. They ignored him, which was a good sign, for they knew better than most the signs of the disease which had decimated their people.

Lew's nursing had been drastic and tireless. Leithen's recollections of his arrival in camp from the Sick Heart River were vague, for he had been in a stupor of weakness. He remembered his first realisation that he was under a roof — the smoke from the fire which nearly choked him — alternate over-doses of heat and cold — food which he could not swallow — horrid hours of nausea. And then his memories were less of pain and weakness than of grim discomfort. Lew's tyrannical hand had been laid on him every hour. He was made to eat food when he was retching, or at any rate to absorb the juices of it. His tongue was like a stick, and he longed for cold water, but he was never allowed it. He was wrapped in blankets like a mummy, and kept in the open air when frost gummed his lips like glue, and every breath was like swallowing ice, and the air smote on his exposed face like a buffet.

He bore it dumbly, wretched but submissive. He might have been in a clinic, for he had surrendered his soul — not to a parcel of doctors and nurses, but to one fierce backwoodsman. Lew was life incarnate, and the living triumphed over what was half dead. The conscious effort involved in every hour of his past journey was at an end. He was not called on for decisions; these were made for him, and his mind sank into a stagnation which was almost painless.

Then strange things began to happen. He was stirred out of his apathy by little stabs of feeling which were remotely akin to pleasure. The half-raw meat seemed to acquire a flavour; he discovered the ghost of an appetite; he actually welcomed his morning cup of tea. He turned on his side to sleep without dismal forebodings about his condition when he woke. . . . His beard worried him, for in his old expeditions he had always shaved regularly, and one morning, to his immense surprise, he demanded his razor, and with Lew's approval shaved himself clean. He made a messy business of it, and took a long time over it, but the achievement pleased him. Surely the face that he looked at in the mirror was less cadaverous, the eyes less leaden, the lips less pallid, the texture of the skin more wholesome!

There was one memorable morning when, the intense cold having slackened, Lew stripped him to the buff, and he lay on a pile of skins before the fire while one of the Hares massaged his legs and arms. After that he took tottering walks about the hut, and one midday ventured out to the little platform. Presently Lew made him take daily exercise and in all

weathers.

He was becoming conscious, too, of his surroundings. First came the hut. Assuredly Johnny was no slouch at hut-making. The earthen floor had been beaten flat and smooth by the Hares, whose quarters were a little annexe at one end. The building was some sixty feet square, but the floor space within was oblong, since four bunks had been built into one side. The walls were untrimmed spruce logs, and the roof was the same, but interwoven and overlaid with green boughs. Every chink in both walls and roof was filled with moss or mud. Johnny had constructed a fireplace of stones, with a bottle-shaped flue made of willow saplings puddled with clay. The fire was the special charge of the smaller Hare, and was kept going night and day to supplement the stove.

Warmth was a simple matter, but, though Leithen did not know it, food soon became a problem. Lew and Galliard had had scanty supplies, for they had set out on their journey with fevered brains. Johnny and the Hares had back-packed a fair amount, but the bulk of what they had brought from Fort Bannerman was cached at the Hares' camp or at Lone Tree Lake. It had been Johnny's intention to send the Hares back to bring up the reserves with a dog-team, and in the meantime to supplement the commissariat by hunting. He was a good shot, Lew was a famous shot, and the Indians were skilled trappers. That was well enough for the first weeks after Lew and Leithen joined them. There were ptarmigan and willow grouse to be got in the bush, and the woodland caribou, still plump from his autumn guzzling, whence came beef tea and under-done steaks for Leithen, and full meals of flesh for all.

But in the tail-end of December for ten days a blizzard blew. It came out of the north-east and found some alleyway into the mountains, for these gave no protection, so that it raged as fiercely as in the open barrens. The cold was not great, and it was therefore possible to keep the fire low and prevent the back smoke from choking the hut. But there was little fresh air for Leithen, though in the gaps of the storm Lew carried him out of doors and brought him back plastered like a snow man. There were three days when a heavy weight of snow fell, but for the rest it was rather a carnival of the winds, which blew sometimes out of a clear sky, swirling the fallen snow in a tourmente, and sometimes filled every aisle of the woods with thick twisting vapours.

Hunting was all but impossible — whether in the driving snow or in the Scots-mist type of weather the visibility was nil. Leithen was aware that the men were out, for often he was left alone, and in the few light hours there was never more than one at home, but his mind was still dull and he had no curiosity about what they were doing. It was as well, for he did not notice the glum faces and the anxious eyes of the others. But he did notice the change in his food.

He had come to like the fresh, bitter flavour of the half-raw caribou meat. That was his staple fare, that and his carefully measured daily dose of tomato juice; he rarely tasted Johnny's flap-jacks. Now there was little fresh meat, and instead he was given pemmican, which he swallowed with difficulty, or the contents of one of the few remaining tins.

Johnny was getting very grave about supplies. As soon as the weather cleared an attempt must be made to get up the reserves from the Hares' camp. They were out of sugar, almost out of tea and coffee, and their skins would give trouble unless they had fruit juice. But, above all, the hunting must be resumed. That was their main source of supply, and since Christmas the caribou had been harder to get, and February might bring savage weather.

Of these anxieties Leithen knew nothing. He was overwhelmed with the miracle of vigour creeping back into his moribund body. On the road from the Sick Heart River he had found himself responding again to life, and had welcomed the change as the proper mood in which to die. But this was different — it was not the recognition of life, but life itself, which had returned to him.

At night in the pit in the snow with Lew and the Hare he had become suddenly conscious of the mercifulness of things. There was a purpose of pity and tenderness in the iron compulsion of fate. Now this thought was always with him — the mercy as well as the omnipotence of God. His memory could range over the past and dwell lovingly and thankfully on its modest pleasures. A little while ago such memories, if he could have revived them, would have been a torment.

His mind ran up and down the panorama of his life, selecting capriciously. Oddly enough, it settled on none of the high lights. There had been moments of drama in his career — an adventure in the Ægean island of Plakos, for example, and more than one episode in the War. And there had been hours of special satisfaction — when he won the mile at school and college, his first big success at the Bar, his maiden speech in the House, his capture of the salmon when he and Lamancha and Palliser-Yeates poached in the Highlands. But though his memory passed these things in review, it did not dwell on them. Three scenes seemed to attract it especially, and he found that he could spend hours contentedly in

reconstructing them and tasting their flavour.

The first belonged to his childhood. One morning in spring he had left his Border home determined to find what lay beyond the head of a certain glen. He had his rod with him, for he was an ardent fisherman, and lunch in his pocket — two jam sandwiches, a dainty known as a currant scone, two bread-and-butter sandwiches, a hard-boiled egg, and an apple — lovingly he remembered every detail. His short legs had crossed the head of the glen beyond the well-eye of the burn, and had climbed to the tableland of peat hags and gravel, which was the watershed. Here he encountered an April hailstorm, and had to shelter in a hagg, where he ate his luncheon with intense relish. The hail passed, and a mild blue afternoon succeeded, with the Cheviots clear on the southern sky-line.

He had struggled across the peat bog, into the head of the glen beyond the watershed, where another burn fell in delectable pools among rowans and birches, and in these pools he had caught trout whose bellies were more golden and whose spots were brighter than the familiar fish in his own stream. Late in the evening he had made for home, and had crossed the hills in an April sunset of rose and saffron. He remembered the exultation in his small heart, the sense of being an explorer and an adventurer, which competed with a passionate desire for food.

Everything that day had gone exactly right. No one had upbraided him for being late. The trout had been justly admired. He had sat down to a comfortable supper, and had fallen asleep and rolled off his chair in the middle of it. Assuredly a day to be marked with a white stone. He could recall the sounds that accompanied it — the tinkle of the burn in its tiny pools, the perpetual wail of curlews, the sudden cackle of a nesting grouse. And the scents, too — peat, wood smoke, crushed mountain fern, miles of dry bent, the pure, clean odour of icy water.

This memory came chiefly in the mornings. In the afternoons, when he was not asleep, he was back at Oxford. The scene was always the same — supper in the college hall, a few lights burning, the twilight ebbing in the lancet windows, the old portraits dim as a tapestry. There was no dinner in hall in the summer term, only supper, when you could order what you pleased. The memory of the fare almost made him hungry — fried eggs, cold lamb and mint sauce and salad, stewed gooseberries and cream, cheese and wheaten bread, and great mugs of home-brewed beer. . . . He had been in the open air most of the day, riding over Shotover or the Cumnor hills, or canoeing on the upper Thames in the grassy meadows above Godstow, or adventuring on a bicycle to fish the dry-fly in the Cotswold streams. His body had been bathed in the sun and wind and fully exercised, so his appetite was immense. But it was not the mere physical comfort which made him dwell on the picture. It was the mood which he remembered, and could almost recapture, the mood which saw the world as a place of long sunlit avenues leading to marvellous horizons. That was his twentieth year, he told himself, which mankind is always longing to find again.

The third memory was the most freakish. It belonged to his early days at the Bar, when he lived in small ugly rooms in one of the Temple courts, and had very little money to spend. It was the first day of the Easter vacation, and he was going to Devonshire with Palliser-Yeates to fish the Exmoor hill streams. The cheapest way was to drive with his luggage direct to Paddington, after the meagre breakfast which his landlady provided. But it seemed an occasion to celebrate, so he had broken his journey at his club in St. James's Street, a cheerful, undistinguished young man's establishment, and had breakfasted there with his friend. It had been a fresh April morning; gulls had been clamorous as he drove along the Embankment, and a west wind had been stirring the dust in Pall Mall. . . . He remembered the breakfast in the shabby old coffee room, and Palliser-Yeates' fly-book which he spilt all over the table. Above all he remembered his own boyish anticipations. In twenty-four hours he would be in a farmhouse which smelt of paraffin and beeswax and good cooking, looking out on a green valley with a shallow brown stream tumbling in riffles and drowsing in pools under banks of yellow bent. The larch plantations would be a pale mist on the hillsides, the hazel coverts would be budding, plovers would be everywhere, and water ouzels would be flashing their white breasts among the stones. . . . The picture was so dear and home-like that he found himself continually returning to it. It was like a fire at which he could warm his hands.

But there came a time when this pleasant picture-making ceased, and his mind turned back on itself. He had lost the hard stoical mood in which he had left London, but he was not clear as to what had replaced it. What was he doing here in a hut inside the Arctic Circle, among mountains which had never been explored and scarcely visited, in the company of Indians and half-breeds? . . . And then he slowly became conscious of Galliard.

All these weeks he had not noticed Galliard's presence or inquired what had happened to him. This man, the original purpose of his journey, had simply dropped out of his line of vision. He pondered on the queer tricks which the mind can play. The Frizels and the Indians were the human background to his life, but it was a background undifferentiated, for he

never troubled to distinguish between the two Hares, and Lew, who was his daily ministrant, seemed to have absorbed the personality of Johnny. Galliard had sunk also into this background. One evening, when he saw what appeared to be three Frizels in the hut, he thought his mind wandering.

Moreover, the broken man, bedridden, half crazy, whom he had left behind when he set out for the Sick Heart River had disappeared. What he saw now was a big fellow, dressed in the same winter kit as Lew and Johnny, and busy apparently on the same jobs. He cut down young spruces and poplars for fuel, he looked after the big fire which burned outside and was used chiefly for melting snow and ice into water, and sometimes he hunted and brought back game. Slowly his figure disentangled itself from its background and was recognised. It had followed Leithen's example and shaved its beard, and the face was very much like that of the picture in the Park Avenue apartment.

Leithen's vitality had sunk so low that he had spoken little during his early recovery, and afterwards had been too much engaged with his own thoughts. This detachment had prevented him listening to the talk in the hut. His attention was only engaged when he was directly addressed, and that was done chiefly by Lew. But now, while he did not attempt to overhear, he was conscious of the drone of conversation after supper in the evening, and began to distinguish the different notes in it. There was no mistaking Lew's beautiful rich tones with their subtle Scots cadences, and Johnny's harsher and more drawling voice. Then he became aware of a third note, soft like Lew's, but more nasal, and one afternoon, at the tail-end of a blizzard, when Leithen lay abed in the firelight and the others were getting kindlings from the wind-felled trees, this voice addressed him.

"Can we talk now?" it said. "I've been waiting for this chance now that you're mending. I think we have much to say to each other."

Leithen was startled. This was what he had not heard for months, an educated voice, a voice from his own world. A stone had been thrown into the pool of his memory and the ripples stretched to the furthest shore. This was Galliard; he remembered everything about Galliard, reaching back to Blenkiron's first mention of him in his Down Street rooms.

"Tell me who you are," the voice continued.

Leithen did not answer. He was wondering how to begin an explanation of a purpose which must seem wholly fantastic. He, the shell of a creature, had set out to rescue this smiling frontiersman who seemed to fit perfectly into his environment.

"Johnny says that you know some of my friends. Do you mind telling me your name? I don't trust Johnny's ear, but I think he said 'Leven.'"

"Not quite. Leithen."

Galliard repeated the word, boggling, like all his countrymen, at the "th." "Scotch, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I live in England."

"You've been a pretty sick man, I gather, but you're mending fast. I wonder what brought a sick man to this outlandish place in midwinter? These mountains are not exactly a sanatorium. . . . You don't mind my asking questions? You see, we come out of the same world, and we're alone here — the only people of our kind for a thousand miles."

"I want you to ask questions. It's the easiest way for me to tell you my story. . . . I crossed the Atlantic last summer thinking that I was a dying man. The best English authority said so, and the best American authority confirmed his view. I'm unmarried, and I didn't want to die in a nursing-home. I've always been an active man, and I proposed to keep going until I dropped. So I came out here."

Galliard nodded. His brown eyes had a smiling, comprehending friendliness.

"That I understand — and admire. But why to America? — Why just here? — And on a trip like this?"

"I had to have a job. I must be working under orders, for it was the only way to keep going. And this was the job that offered itself."

"Yes, but please tell me. How did it happen that a sick Englishman was ordered to the Arctic Circle? What kind of job?"

Leithen smiled. "You will think it fantastic. The idea came from a kinsman of yours — a kinsman by marriage. His name is Blenkiron."

Galliard's face passed from an amused inquisitiveness to an extreme gravity.

"Our Uncle John! Tell me, what job did he give you?"

"To find out where you had gone, and join you, and, if possible, bring you back. No, not BRING you — for I expected to be dead before that — but to persuade you."

"You were in New York? You saw our Uncle John there?"

"No. In London. I know his other niece, Lady Clanroyden — Clanroyden was at school and college with me — and I had some business once with Blenkiron. He came to my rooms one morning last summer, and told me about you."

Galliard's eyes were on the ground. He seemed to have been overcome by a sudden shyness, and for a moment he said nothing. Then he asked —

"You took on the job because you liked Blenkiron? Or perhaps Lady Clanroyden?"

"No. I happen to like Lady Clanroyden very much — and old Blenkiron, too. But my motive was purely selfish. I wasn't interested in you — I didn't want to do a kindness to anybody — I wanted something that would keep me on my feet until I died. It wouldn't have mattered if I had never heard the name of any of the people concerned. I was thinking only of myself, and the job suited me."

"You saved my life. If you and Johnny hadn't followed our trail I would long ago have been a heap of bones under the snow." Galliard spoke very softly, as if he were talking to himself.

Leithen felt acutely uncomfortable.

"Perhaps," he said. "But that was an accident, and there's no gratitude due, any more than to the policeman who calls an ambulance in a street accident."

Galliard raised his head.

"You were in New York? Whom did you meet there? My wife?"

"Yes. The Ravelstons, of course. And some of your friends like Bronson Jane, and Derwent, and Savory. But principally your wife."

"Can you" — the man stuttered — "can you tell me about her?"

"She is a brave woman, but I need not tell you that. Anxious and miserable, of course, but one would never guess it. She keeps a stiff face to the world. She tells people that you are in South America inquiring into a business proposition. She won't have any fuss made, for she thinks it might annoy you when you come back."

"Come back! She believes I will come back?"

"Implicitly. She thinks you had reached crossroads in your mind and had to go away and think it out and decide which one to take. When you have decided, she thinks you will come back."

"Then why did she want you to go to look for me?"

"Because there was always a chance you might be dead — or sick. I sent her a message from Fort Bannerman saying that I had ascertained you were alive and well up to a week before."

"How did you find me?"

"I guessed that you had gone first to Clairefontaine. I got no news of you there, but some little things convinced me that you had been there. Then I guessed you had gone North where your brother and your uncle had gone. So I followed. I saw their graves, and then Johnny told me about Lew's craze for the Sick Heart River, and I guessed again that he had taken you there. It was simply a series of lucky guesses. If you like, you can call them deductions from scanty evidence. I was lucky, but that was because I had made a guess at what was passing in your mind, and I think I guessed correctly."

"You didn't know me — never met me. What data had you?"

"Little things picked up in New York and at Clairefontaine. You see I am accustomed to weighing evidence."

"And what did you make of my psychology?"

"I thought you were a man who had got into a wrong groove and wanted to get out before it was too late. . . . No, that isn't the right way to put it. If it had been that way, there was no hope of getting you back. I thought you were a man who thought he had sold his birthright and was tortured by his conscience and wanted to buy it back."

"You think that a more hopeful state of affairs?"

"Yes. For it is possible to keep your birthright and live in a new world. Many men have done it."

Galliard got up and pulled on his parka and mitts. "I'm going out," he said, "for I want to think. You're a wizard, Mr.

Leithen. You've discovered what was wrong with me; but you're not quite right about the cure I was aiming at. . . . I was like Lew, looking for a Sick Heart River. . . . I was seeking the waters of atonement."

For a moment Leithen was alarmed. Galliard had seemed the sanest of men, all the saner because he had divested himself of his urban trappings and had yet kept the accent of civilisation. But his last words seemed an echo of Lew — Lew before his cure. But a glance at the steady eyes and grave face reassured him.

"I mean what I say," Galliard continued. "I had been faithless to a trust and had to do penance for it. I had forgotten God and had to find Him. . . . We have each of us to travel to his own Sick Heart River."

2

In the days of short commons Lew was a tower of strength. He ran the camp in an orderly bustle, the Indians jumped to his orders, and Johnny worked with him like an extra right hand. His friendly gusto kept up everyone's spirits, and Leithen was never aware of the scarcity of rations.

It was a moment when he seemed to have reached the turning-point of his disease. Most of his worst discomforts had gone, and only weakness vexed him and an occasional scantiness of breath. The night sweats had ceased, and the nausea, and he could eat his meals with a certain relish. Above all, power was creeping back into his limbs. He could put on his clothes without having to stop and pant, and something of his old striding vigour was returning to his legs. He felt himself fit for longer walks than the weather and the narrow camp platform permitted.

Lew watched him with an approving eye. As he passed he would stop and pat him on his shoulder.

"You're doing fine," he would say. "Soon you'll be fit to go huntin'. You much of a shot?"

"Fair."

Lew laughed. "If an Old Countryman 'lows he's a fair shot, it means he's darned good."

One evening just before supper when the others were splitting firewood, Lew sat himself down before Leithen and tapped him on the knee.

"Mr. Galliard," he said — "I'd like to say something about Mr. Galliard. You know I acted mighty bad to him, but then I was out of my senses, and he wasn't too firm in his. Well, I'm all right now, but I'm not so sure that he is. His health's fine, and he can stand a long day in the bush. But he ain't happy — no happier than when he first hired me way back last spring. I mean he's got his wits back, and he's as sensible as you and me, but there's a lot worryin' him." Lew spoke as if he found it difficult to say what he wanted.

"I feel kindo' responsible for Mr. Galliard," he said, "seeing that he's my master and is paying me pretty high. And you must feel kindo' responsible for him or you wouldn't have come five thousand miles looking for him. . . . I see you've started talking to him. I'd feel easier in my mind if you had a good long pow-wow and got out of him what's biting him. You don't happen to know?"

Leithen shook his head.

"Only that he wasn't happy and thought he might feel better if he went North. But the plan doesn't seem to have come off."

The conversation, as it fell out, was delayed until early in February, when, in a spell of fine weather, Johnny and the smaller Indian had set off to the Hares' camp to bring back supplies by dog-team. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and the sun was beginning to go down in a sea of gold and crimson. Leithen sat at the hut door, facing the big fire on the platform which Galliard had been stoking. The latter pulled out a batch of skins and squatted on them opposite him.

"Can we talk?" he said. "I've kept away from you, for I've been trying to think out what to say. Maybe you could help me. I'd like to tell you just how I was feeling a year ago."

Then words seemed to fail him. He was overcome with extreme shyness, his face flushed, and he averted his eyes.

"I have no business to trouble you with my affairs," he stammered. "I apologise . . . I am a bore."

"Get on, man," said Leithen. "I have crossed half the world to hear about your affairs. They interest me more than anything on earth."

But Galliard's tongue still halted, and he seemed to find it impossible to start.

"Very well," said Leithen. . . . "I will begin by telling you what I know about you. You come from the Clairefontaine valley in Quebec, which Glaubsteins have now made hideous with a dam and a pulp mill. I believe your own firm had a share in that sacrilege. You belong to an ancient family, now impoverished, and your father farmed a little corner of the old seigneurie. . . . When you were nineteen or so you got sick of your narrow prospects and went down to the States to try your luck. After a roughish time you found your feet, and are now a partner in Ravelstons, and one of the chief figures in American finance. . . . Meantime your father died, soon after you left him. Your brother Paul carried on the farm, and then he also got restless, and a year or two ago went off to the North, pretending he was going to look for your uncle Aristide, who disappeared there years before. Paul got to the river which Aristide discovered, and died there — the graves of both are there, and you saw them last summer. . . . At the other end something happened to YOU. You started out for Clairefontaine with Lew, and then you were at Ghost River, and then came on here. Is that sketch correct?"

Galliard nodded. His eyes were abstracted, as if he were in the throes of a new idea.

"Well, you must fill out the sketch. But let me tell you two other things. I went to Clairefontaine after you, and after you to the Ghost River, and I saw the crosses in the graveyard. Also, long ago, when I was a young man, I went hunting in Quebec, and I came out by way of Clairefontaine. I found the little meadow at the head of the stream, and I have never forgotten it. When I knew I had to die, my first thought was to go there, for it seemed the place to find peace."

Galliard's face woke to a sudden animation.

"By God! that's a queer thing. I went to that meadow — the first thing I did after I left New York. There's a fate in this! . . . I think now I can get on with my story. . . ."

It was a tale which took long in the telling, and it filled several of the short winter twilights. There were times when the narrative lagged, and times when it came fast and confusedly. Galliard had curious tricks of speech; sometimes elaborate, the product of wide reading, and sometimes halting, amateurish, almost childlike, as if he were dragging his thoughts from a deep well.

From the village school of Chateau-Gaillard, he said, he had gone to the University of Laval. He was intended for the law, and his first courses were in classics and philosophy. He enjoyed them, and for a little even toyed with the notion of giving his life to those studies and looking for a university post. What switched his thoughts to another line was a slow revolt against the poverty-stricken life at Clairefontaine. He saw his father and brother bowed down with toil, for no purpose except to win a bare living. In the city he had occasional glimpses of comfort and luxury, and of a wide coloured world, and these put him wholly out of temper with his home. He did a good deal of solid thinking. If he succeeded as a lawyer he would exchange the narrow world of a country farm for the narrow world of a provincial city — more ease, certainly, but something far short of his dreams. He must make money, and money could only be made in big business. In Canada his own French people did little in business, having always left that to the English, and in Canada he might have to fight against prejudice. So he determined to go to the country where he believed there was no prejudice, where business was exalted above all callings, and where the only thing required of a man was to be good at his job.

He left Laval and went to a technical college, where he acquired the rudiments of accounting and a smattering of engineering science. The trouble came when his father discovered the change. The elder Gaillard had something of the seigneur left in him. There was a duty owed to gentle birth. A gentleman might be a farmer who laboured from dawn to dusk in the fields; he could be a priest; he could be a lawyer; but if he touched trade he forfeited his gentility. Moreover, the father hated the very word America. So when the son frankly announced his intention there was a violent family quarrel. Next day he left for Boston and he never saw his father again.

Galliard scarcely mentioned his early struggles. They had to be taken for granted like infantile ailments. He took up the tale when he had come to New York and had met Felicity Dasent.

To Leithen's surprise he spoke of Felicity without emotion. He seemed to be keeping his mind fixed on the need to make his story perfectly clear — an intellectual purpose which must exclude sentiment.

He had fallen deeply in love with her after a few meetings. To him she represented a new world very different from the tough world of buying and selling in which he had found his feet. It was a world which satisfied all the dreams of his boyhood and youth, a happy, gracious place with, as its centre, the most miraculous of beings. It was still more different from Clairefontaine with its poverty and monotony and back-breaking toil. Felicity seemed far further removed from

Clairefontaine than from the grubbiest side of Wall Street. The old petty world of Mass and market was infinitely remote from her gracious and civilised life. It was a profanation to think of the two together. Only the meadow at the head of the stream seemed to harmonise with his thoughts about her.

Then came their marriage, and Galliard's entry into society, and his conspicuous social success. After that the trouble began in his soul. . . .

He was not very clear about its beginnings. He found things in which he had had an acute interest suddenly go stale for him. He found himself in revolt against what he had once joyfully accepted, and when he probed for the reason he discovered, to his surprise, that it was because it clashed with some memory which he thought he had buried. At first he believed that it was only regret for his departing youth. Boyish recollections came back to him gilded by time and distance. But presently he realised that the trouble was not nostalgia for his dead boyhood, but regret for a world which was still living and which he had forsaken. Not exactly regret, either; rather remorse, a sense that he had behaved badly, had been guilty in some sense of a betrayal.

He fought against the feeling. It was childish, with no basis of reason. He was a rich man, and, if he liked, could have a country house in Quebec, which would offer all the enchantments of his youth without its poverty. . . . But he realised miserably that this was no solution. It was not Quebec that he wanted, but a different world of thought, which was hopelessly antagonistic to that in which he now dwelt. To his consternation he discovered that distaste for his environment was growing fast. What had been the pleasures of his life became its boredom; high matters of business were only a fuss about trifles; men whom he had once revered seemed now trivial and wearisome. A lost world kept crowding in on him; he could not recover it, but he felt that without it there was no peace for him in life. There was only one stable thing, Felicity, who moved in a happy sphere of her own, from which he daily felt more estranged.

Ridiculous little things tormented him — a tune which reminded him of a French chanson, the smell of a particular tobacco which suggested the coarse stuff grown at Clairefontaine. He dared not go shooting or fishing because of their associations; golf, which belonged wholly to his new world, he came to loathe.

"It was like a cancer," he said. "A doctor once told me that cancer was a growth of certain cells at a wild pace — the pace at which a child grows in the womb — a sort of crazy resurgence of youth. It begins by being quite innocent, but soon it starts pressing in on other cells and checking their growth, and the thing becomes pathological. That was what happened to me. The old world came to bulk so big in my life that it choked the rest of me like a cancer in the mind."

He had another trouble, the worst of all. He had been brought up a strict Catholic, but since he left home he had let his religion fall from him. He had never been to Mass. Felicity was an Episcopalian who took her creed lightly, and they had been married in a fashionable New York church. Now all the fears and repressions of his youth came back to him. He had forgotten something of desperate importance, his eternal welfare. He had never thought much about religion, but had simply taken it for granted till he began to neglect it, so he had no sceptical apparatus to support him. His conduct had not been the result of enlightenment, but flat treason.

"I came to realise that I had forgotten God," he said simply.

The breaking-point came because of his love for Felicity. The further he moved away from her and her world, the dearer she became. The one thing he was resolved should not happen was a slow decline in their affection. Either he would recover what he had lost and harmonise it with what he had gained, or a clean cut would be made, with no raw edges to fester. . . . So on a spring morning, with a breaking heart, he walked out of Felicity's life. . . .

"You have guessed most of this?" he asked.

"Most of it," said Leithen. "What I want to know is the sequel. You have been nearly a year looking for your youth. What luck?"

"None. But you don't put it quite right, for I was willing enough to grow old decently. What I had to recover was the proper touch with the world which I had grown out of and could no more reject than my own skin. Also I had to make restitution. I had betrayed something ancient and noble, and had to do penance for my sins."

"Well?" Leithen had to repeat the question, for words seemed to have failed Galliard.

"I did both," he said slowly. "To that extent I succeeded. I got into touch with my people's life, and I think I have done penance. But I found that more was needed. I belong to the North, and to go on living I had to master the North. . . . But it mastered me."

Leithen waited for Galliard to expound this saying, but he waited a long time. The other's face had darkened, and he seemed to be wrestling with difficult thoughts. At last he asked a question.

"I cannot explain," said Galliard, "for I don't quite know what happened. . . . I thought that if I found my brother, or at least found out what had become of him, that I should have done the right thing — done the kind of thing my family have always been doing — defied the North, scored off it. It didn't work out like that. Up there on the Ghost River I was like a haunted man — something kept crushing me down. Yes, by God! I was afraid. Naked fear! — I had never known it before. . . . I had to go on or give up altogether. Then Lew started in about his Sick Heart River. He was pretty haywire, but I thought he was on the track of something wonderful. He said it was a kind of Paradise where a man left his sins behind him. It wasn't sense, if I'd stopped to think, but I was beyond thinking. Here was a place where one could be reconciled to the North — where the North ceased to be a master and became a comforter. I can tell you I got as mad about the thing as Lew.

"But Lew was no good to me," he went on. "He forgot all about me. Being mad, he was thinking only of himself. I hurt my foot and had a difficult time keeping up with him. Pretty bad days they were — I don't want to go through anything of the sort again. Then I lost him and would have perished if you hadn't found me. You know the rest. Johnny nursed me back to bodily health, and partly to sanity, for he is the sanest thing ever made. But not quite. Lew has come back cured, but not me, though I dare say I look all right."

He turned his weather-beaten, wholesome face to Leithen, and in his eyes there was an uncertainty which belied the strong lines of mouth and jaw.

"I will tell you the truth," he said. "I'm afraid, black afraid of this damned country. But I can't leave it until I've got on terms with it. And God knows how that is to be managed."

3

Leithen found that his slowly mending health was having a marked effect upon his mind. It was like a stream released from the bondage of frost. Before, he had been plodding along in a rut with no inclination to look aside; now he was looking about him and the rut was growing broad and shallow. Before, he had stopped thinking about his body, for it was enough to endure what came to it; now he took to watching his sensations closely, eager to find symptoms of returning strength. This must mean, he thought, a breakdown of his stoicism, and he dreaded that, for it might be followed by the timidity which he despised.

But this new mental elasticity enabled him to reflect on the problem of Galliard — on Galliard himself, who was ceasing to be a mere problem and becoming flesh and blood. For months Leithen had been insensitive to human relationships. Even his friends at home, who had warmed and lit his life, had sunk into the background, and the memory of them when it revived was scarcely an extra pang. His mind had assessed the people he met in New York, but they might have been ninepins for all he cared about them, though for Felicity he had felt a certain dim tenderness. But the return journey from Sick Heart River had wrought a change. His sudden realisation of the mercifulness behind the rigour of Nature had made him warm towards common humanity. He saw the quality of Lew and Johnny, and thanked God for it. Now he was discovering Galliard, and was both puzzled and attracted by him.

A man — beyond question. Leithen saw that in him which had won him an enchanting wife and a host of friends. There was warmth, humour, loyalty. Something more, that something which had made Clifford Savory insistent that he must be brought back for the country's sake. There was a compelling charm about him which would always win him followers, and there was intellect in his brow and eyes. Leithen, accustomed all his life to judge men, had no doubt about Galliard.

But he was broken. As broken by fear as Lew had been at Sick Heart River, and, being of a more complex make-up than Lew, the mending would be harder. A man of a stiff fibre had been confronted by fear and had been worsted by it. There could be no settlement for Galliard until he had overcome it.

Leithen brooded over that mysterious thing, the North. A part of the globe which had no care for human life, which was not built to man's scale, a remnant of that Ice Age which long ago had withered the earth. As a young man he had felt its spell when he looked from the Clairefontaine height of land towards the Arctic watershed. The Gaillard family for

generations had felt it. Like brave men they had gone out to wrestle with it, and had not returned. Johnny, even the stolid Johnny, had confessed that he had had his bad moments. Lew — Heaven knows what aboriginal wildness was mingled with his Highland blood! — had gone hunting for a mystic river and had then got the horrors of the unknown and fled from it. But he was bred to the life of the North and could fall back upon its ritual and defy it by domesticating it. Yet at any moment the fire might kindle again in him. As for Galliard, he was bound to the North by race and creed and family tradition; it was not hard for the gods of the Elder Ice to stretch a long arm and pluck him from among the flesh-pots.

What puzzled him was why he himself had escaped. He had had an hour of revulsion at Sick Heart River, but it had passed like a brief nightmare. His mind had been preoccupied with prosaic things like cold and weariness, and his imagination had been asleep. The reason was plain. He had been facing death, waiting stoically on its coming. There was no space for lesser fears when the most ancient terror was close to him, no room for other mysteries when he was nearing the ultimate one.

What had happened to him? Had he come out of the Valley of the Shadow, or had the Shadow only shifted for a moment to settle later on, darker and deeper? He deliberately refused to decide. A sense of reverence, almost of awe, deterred him. He had committed himself to God's hands and would accept with a like docility mercy and harshness. But one thing he knew — he had found touch with life. He was reacting to the external world. His mind had feelers out again to its environment. Therefore Galliard had assumed a new meaning. He was not a task to be plodded through with, but a fellow-mortal to be helped, a companion, a friend.

4

Johnny and the Hares reached camp when a sudden flurry of snow ended the brief daylight. Lew and the other Indian ran to receive them, and presently Galliard joined the group.

"Queer folk in the North," Leithen thought. "They don't make much fuss over a reunion, though it's three weeks since they parted." Out of the corner of his eye he saw the team of dogs, great beasts, half wolf, half malamute, weighing a hundred pounds each, now sending up clouds of grey steam into the white snowfall. He had a glimpse, too, of Johnny, who looked tired and anxious.

The better part of an hour passed, while Leithen sat alone in the hut mending a pair of moccasins. Then Johnny appeared with a grave face, and handed him a letter.

"Things ain't goin' too well with them Hares," he said. "They've got a blight on 'em like Indians get. They're starvin', and they're goin' mad."

The letter, written on a dirty half-sheet of mission paper, and secured between two pieces of birch-bark, was from the priest, Father Duplessis, who had taken Father Wentzel's place for the winter. It was written with indelible pencil in a foreign pointed script.

"They tell me you are recovering health, my friend, and for your sake I rejoice. Also for my own, for I am enabled to make you an appeal. My poor people here are in great sorrow. They have little food, and they will not try to get more, for a disease has come upon them, a dreadful accidie which makes them impotent and without hope. Food must be found for them, and above all they must be roused out of their stupor and made to wish to live. I wrestle with them, and I have the might of the Church behind me, but I am alone and I am but a weak vessel. If you can come to my aid, with God's help we may prevail, but if not I fear this little people will be blotted out of the book of life."

5

That night after supper four men sat in council. Johnny made his report, much interrupted by Lew's questions, and once or twice the two Hares were summoned to give information. Johnny was a very weary man, for his bandy legs had broken the trail for the dogs through the snow-encumbered forest, and he had forced the pace for man and beast. His pale blue eyes, which had none of Lew's brilliance, had become small and troubled. One proof of his discomfort was that when he broke off to speak to his brother it was in the Cree tongue. Never before had Leithen heard him use his mother's speech.

Leithen found himself presiding over the council, for the others seemed to defer to him, after Lew had cross-examined his brother about what supplies he had brought.

“Father Duplessis says there’s trouble in the Hares’ camp,” he said. “Let’s hear more about it. Father Wentzel in the fall was afraid of something of the sort.”

Johnny scratched the tip of one of his bat’s ears.

“Sure there’s trouble. Them gol-darned Hares has gone loony and it ain’t the first time neither. They think they’re Christians, but it’s a funny kind of religion, for they’re always hankerin’ after old bits of magic. Comin’ up in the fall I heard they’d been consultin’ the caribou bone.”

He explained a little shamefacedly.

“It’s a caribou’s shoulder-blade, and it’s got to be an old buck with a special head of horns. They’d got one and there’s a long crack down the middle, and their medicine men say that means famine.”

Lew snorted. “They needn’t have gone to an old bone for that. This year the hares and rabbits has gone sick and that means that every other beast is scarce. The Hares ain’t much in the way of hunters — never have been — but they know all about rabbits. That’s how they’ve gotten their name. Maybe you thought they was so-called because they hadn’t no more guts than a hare. That ain’t right. They’re a brave enough tribe, though in old days the Crees and the Chipewyans had the upper hand of them. But the truth is that they haven’t much sense and every now and then they go plumb crazy.”

“You say they’re starving,” Leithen addressed Johnny. “Is that because they cannot get food or because they won’t try to get it?”

“Both,” was the answer. “I figured it out this way. As a general thing they fish all summer and dry their catch for the winter. That gives ’em both man’s meat and dog’s meat. But this year the white fish and pike was short in the lakes and the rivers. I heard that in the fall when we were comin’ in. Well then, it was up to them to make an extra good show with the fall huntin’. But, as Lew says, the fall huntin’ was a washout anyhow. Moose and caribou and deer were scarce, because the darned rabbits had gone sick. It happens that way every seven years or so. So them pitiful Hares started the winter with mighty poor prospects.”

Johnny spat contemptuously.

“For you and me that would’ve meant a pretty hard winter’s work. There’s food to be got up in them mountains even after the freeze-up, if you know where to look for it. You can set bird traps, for there’s more partridges here than in Quebec. You can have deadfalls for deer, and you can search out the moose’s stamping grounds. I was tellin’ you that the moose were shifting further north. The Hares ain’t very spry hunters, as Lew says, for they’ve got rotten guns, but they’re dandies at trappin’. Well, as I was sayin’, if it’d been you and me we’d have got busy, and, though we’d have had to draw in our belts, somehow or other we’d have won through. But what does them crazy Hares do?”

Johnny spat again, and Lew joined him in the same gesture of scorn.

“They done nothin’! Jest nothin’. The caribou shoulder-blade had ’em scared into fits. It’s a blight that comes on ’em every now and then, like the rabbit sickness. If a chief dies they mourn for him, sittin’ on their rumps, till they’re pretty well dead themselves. In the old fightin’ days what they lost in a battle was nothin’ to what they lost afterwards lamentin’ it. So they’re takin’ their bad luck lyin’ down and it jest ain’t sense. It looks as if that tribe was fixed to be cleaned out before spring.”

Johnny’s contemptuous eyes became suddenly gentle.

“It’s a pitiful business as ever I seen. Their old chief — Zacharias they call him — he must be well on in the eighties, but he’s the only one that ain’t smit with paralysis. Him and Father Duplessis. But Zacharias is mighty bad with lumbago and can’t get about enough, and the Father ain’t up to the ways of them savages. He prays for ’em and he argues with ’em, but he might as well argue and pray with a skunk. A dog whip would be the thing if you’d the right man to handle it.”

Johnny’s melancholy eyes belied his words. They were not the eyes of a disciplinarian.

“And yet,” he went on, “I don’t know, but I somehow can’t keep on bein’ angry with the creatures. They sit in their shacks and but for the women they’d freeze, for they don’t seem to have the strength to keep themselves warm. The children are bags of bones and crawl about like a lot of little starved owls. It’s only the women that keep the place goin’, and they won’t be able to stick it much longer, for everythin’s runnin’ short — food for the fire as well as food for the belly. The

shacks are fallin' into bits and the tents are gettin' ragged, and the Hares sit like broody hens reflectin' on their sins and calculatin' how soon they'll die. You couldn't stir 'em if you put a charge of dynamite alongside of 'em- you'd blow 'em to bits, but they'd die broody."

"Father Duplessis has the same story," Leithen said.

"Yep, and he wants your help. I guess he's asked for it. He says it's a soldier's job and you and him are two old soldiers, but that he's a private and you're the sergeant-major."

Galliard, who had been listening with bowed head, suddenly looked up.

"You fought in the War?" he asked.

Leithen nodded. His eyes were on Lew's face, for he saw something there for which he was not prepared. Lew had hitherto said little, and he had been as scornful as Johnny about the Hares. The brothers had never shown any pride in their Indian ancestry; their pride was reserved for the Scots side. They had treated the Hares with friendliness, but had been as aloof from them and their like as Leithen and Galliard. It was not any sense of kinship that had woke the compassion in Lew's face and the emotion in his voice.

"You can't be angry with the poor devils," he said. "It's an act of God, and as much a disease as T.B. I've seen it happen before, happen to tougher stocks than the Hares. Dad used to talk about the Nahannis that once ranged from the Peace to the Liard. Where are the Nahannis today? Blotted out by sickness of mind. Blotted out like the Snakeheads and the White Pouches and the Big Bellies. And the Hares are going the same way, and then it'll be the turn of the Chipewyans and the Yellow Knives and the Slaves. We white folk can treat the poor devils' bodies, but we don't seem able to do anything for their minds."

No, it was not race loyalty. Leithen saw in Lew and Johnny at that moment something finer than the duty of kinship. It was the brotherhood of all men, white and red and brown, who have to fight the savagery of the North.

His eyes turned to Galliard, who was looking puzzled. He wondered what thoughts this new situation had stirred in that subtle and distracted brain.

"We'd better sleep over this," he announced, for Johnny seemed dropping with fatigue. . . .

Yet Johnny was the last to go to bed. Leithen was in the habit of waking for a minute or two several times in the night. When his eyes opened shortly after midnight he saw Johnny before the fire, not mending it, but using its light to examine something. It was the shoulder-blade of a caribou, which he had dug out of the rubbish-heap behind the camp. The Hares were not the only dabblers in the old magic.

6

Leithen slept ill that night. He seemed to have been driven out of a sanctuary into the turmoil of the common earth. Problems were being thrust on him, and he was no longer left to that narrow world in which he was beginning to feel almost at ease.

Of course he could do nothing about the wretched Hares. Father Duplessis' appeal left him cold. He had more urgent things to think about than the future of a few hundred degenerate Indians who mattered not at all in his scheme of things. His business was with Galliard, who mattered a great deal. But he could not fix his mind on Galliard, and presently he realised something which made him wakeful indeed and a little ashamed. At the back of his head was the thought of his own health. The curtain which had shut down on his life was lifting a corner and revealing a prospect. He was conscious, miserably conscious, that the chief hope in his mind was that he might possibly recover. And that meant a blind panicky fear lest he should do anything to retard recovery.

He woke feeling a tightness in his chest and a difficulty in breathing, from which for some weeks he had been free. He woke, too, to an intense cold. The aurora had been brilliant the night before; and now in the pale sky there were sun-dogs, those mock suns which attend the extreme winter rigours of the North. Happily there was no wind, but the temperature outside the hut struck him like a blow, and he felt that his power of resistance had weakened. This was how he had felt on the road to the Sick Heart River.

He was compelled by his weakness to lie still much of the day and could watch the Frizels and Galliard. Something had

happened to change the three — subtly, almost imperceptibly in Galliard's case, markedly in the other two. Johnny had a clouded face; he had seen the Hares' suffering and could not forget it. In Lew's face there were no clouds, but it had sharpened into a mask of intense vitality, in which his wonderful eyes blazed like planets. The sight made Leithen uneasy. Lew had shed the sobriety for which he had been conspicuous in recent weeks. He looked less responsible, less intelligent, almost a little mad. Leithen, intercepting his furtive looks, was unpleasantly reminded of the man who had met him at Sick Heart River. As for Galliard, he was neither dejected nor exalted, but he seemed to have much to think about. He was doing his jobs with a preoccupied face, and he, too, was constantly stealing a glance at Leithen. He seemed to be waiting for a lead.

It was this that Leithen feared. For some strange reason he, a sick man — till the other day, and perhaps still, a dying man — was being forced by a silent assent into the leadership of the little band. It was to him that Father Duplessis had appealed, but that was natural, for they had served together under arms. But why this mute reference to his decision of the personal problems of all the others? These men were following the urge of a very ancient loyalty. Perhaps even Galliard. Who was he to decide on a thing wholly outside his world?

His own case was first in his mind. All his life he had been mixed up in great affairs. He had had his share in "moulding a state's decrees" and "shaping the whisper of a throne." He had left England when Europe was a powder magazine and every patriot was bound to put himself at the disposal of his distracted land. Well, he had cast all that behind him — rightly, for he had to fight his own grim battle. In that battle he seemed to have won a truce, perhaps even a victory, and now he was being asked to stake all his winnings on a trivial cause — the malaise of human kites and crows roosting at the end of the earth.

It may have been partly due to the return of his malady, but suddenly a great nausea filled his mind. He had been facing death with a certain courage because an effort was demanded of him, something which could stir the imagination and steel the heart. But now he was back among trivialities. It was not a surrender to the celestial will that was required of him, but a decision on small mundane questions — how to return a batch of lunatics to sanity, what risks a convalescent might safely run? He felt a loathing for the world, a loathing for himself, so when Lew sat himself down beside him he found sick eyes and an ungracious face.

"We've got to leave," Lew said. "We're too high up here for the winter hunting, and it'll be worse when the big snows come in February. We should be getting down to the bird country and the moose country. I reckon we must take the Hares' camp on our road to see about our stuff. There's a lot of tea and coffee left cached in the priest's cellar."

Leithen turned a cold eye on him.

"You want to help the Hares?" he said.

"Why, yes. Johnny and me thought we might give the poor devils a hand. We could do a bit of hunting for them. We know the way to more than one moose ravage, and a few meals of fresh deer meat may put a little life into them."

"That sounds a big job. Am I fit to travel?"

"Sure you're fit to travel! We've got the huskies and we'll go canny. It's cold, but you'll be as snug in a hole in the snow as in this camp. When you're in good timber and know the way of it you can be mighty comfortable though it's fifty under. Man! it's what's wanted to set you up. By the time the thaw-out comes you'll be the toughest of the bunch."

"But what can I do? Hunt? I haven't the strength for it, and I would only be an encumbrance."

"You'll hunt right enough."

Lew's frosty eyes had a smile in their corners. He had clearly expected argument, perhaps contradiction, but Leithen had no impulse to argue. He was too weary in body and sick in soul.

It was different when Galliard came to him. Here was a man who had nothing to suggest, one who was himself puzzled. Confined for months to a small company, Leithen had become quick to detect changes of temper in his companions. Johnny never varied, but he could read Lew's mutations like a book. Now he saw something novel in Galliard, or rather an intensifying of what he had already observed. This man was afraid, more than afraid; there was something like panic in his face when he allowed it to relax from restraint. This tale of the Hares' madness had moved him strongly — not apparently to pity, but to fear, personal fear. It was another proof of the North's malignity and power.

He was clinging to Leithen through fear, clinging like a drowning man to a log. Leithen could bring the forces of a different world to fight the dominance of that old world which had mastered him. He wanted to be reassured about

Leithen, to know that this refuge could be trusted. So he asked him a plain question.

"Who are you? I know your name. You know my friends. But I know nothing more about you . . . except that you came out here to die — and may live."

The appeal in Galliard's voice was so sincere that his question had no tinge of brusqueness. It switched Leithen's mind back to a forgotten world which had no longer any meaning. To reply was like recalling a dream.

"Yes, you are entitled to ask me that," he said. "Perhaps I should have been more candid with you. . . . My name is Edward Leithen — Sir Edward Leithen — they knighted me long ago. I was a lawyer — with a great practice. I was also for many years a Member of Parliament. I was for a time the British Attorney-General. I was in the British Cabinet, too — the one before the present."

Galliard repeated the name with mystified eyes which seemed straining after a recollection.

"Sir Edward Leithen! Of course I have heard of you. Many people have spoken of you. You were for my wife's uncle in the Continental Nickel case. You had a big reputation in the States. . . . You are a bachelor?"

"I have no wife or any near relations."

"Anything else?"

"I don't know. But I was once what I suppose you would call a sportsman. I used to have a kind of reputation as a mountaineer. I was never sick or sorry until this present disease got hold of me — except for a little damage in the War."

Galliard nodded. "You told me you were in the War. As what?"

"I was chief staff officer of a rather famous British division."

Galliard looked at him steadily and in his face there was something like hope.

"You have done a lot. You are a big man. To think of you roosting with us in this desert! — two half-breeds, two Indians, and a broken man like me. By God! Sir Edward, you've got to help me. You've got to get well, for I'm sunk without you."

He seized the other's right hand and held it in both his own. Leithen felt that if he had been a woman he would have kissed it.

7

Galliard's emotion gave the finishing touch to Leithen's depression. He ate no supper and fell early asleep, only to waken in the small hours when the fire was at its lowest and the cold was like the clutch of a dead hand. He managed to get a little warmth by burying his head in the flap of his sleeping-bag. Drowsiness had fled from him, and his brain was racing like a flywheel.

He had lost all his philosophy. The return of pain and discomfort after an apparent convalescence had played havoc with his stoicism. Miserably, penitently, he recalled the moods he had gone through since he had entered the North. At first there had been sullen, hopeless fortitude, a grim waiting upon death. There had been a sense of his littleness and the omnipotence of God, and a resignation like Job's to the divine purpose. And then there had come a nobler mood, when he had been conscious not only of the greatness but of the mercy of God, and had realised the vein of tenderness in the hard rock of fate. He had responded again to life, and after that response his body seemed to have laboured to reach the sanity of his mind. His health had miraculously improved. . . . And now he had lost all the ground he had made, and was down in the dust again.

His obsession was the fear that he would not recover and — at the heart of everything — lay the fear of that fear. He knew that it meant that his whole journey to the North had failed of its true purpose, and that he might as well be dying among the pillows and comforts of home. The thought stung him so sharply that he shut his mind to it and fixed his attention resolutely on the immediate prospect.

Lew and Johnny wanted to go to the Hares' assistance. Lew said that in any case they must be getting down country. Once there they must hunt both for the Hares' sake and for their own. Lew had said that he, Leithen, would be able to hunt — arrant folly, for a few days of it in his present state would kill him.

Had he been a mere subaltern in the party he would have accepted this programme as inevitable. But he knew that

whatever Lew might plan it would be for him to approve, and ultimately to carry out. The Frizels were old professionals at the business, and yet it would be he, the novice, who would have to direct it. His weakness made him strongly averse to any exertion of mind and body, especially of mind. He might endure physical torment like a Spartan, but he shrank with horror from any necessity to think and scheme. Let the Frizels carry him with them wherever they liked, inert and passive, until the time came when they could shovel his body into the earth.

But then there was Galliard. He was the real problem. It was to find him and save him that he had started out. He had found him, but he had yet to save him. . . . Now there seemed to be a way of salvation. The man was suffering from an ancient fear and there could be no escape except by facing that fear and beating it. This miserable business of the Hares had provided an opportunity. Here was a chance to meet one of the North's most deadly weapons, the madness with which it could affect the human mind, and by checking that madness defeat the North. He had seen this motive confusedly in Galliard's eyes.

He could not desert a man who belonged to his own world, and who mattered much to that world, a man, too, who had flung himself on his mercy. But to succeed in Galliard's business would involve more than hunting docilely in Lew's company with Lew to nurse him.

As he fell asleep to the sound of one of the Hares making up the morning fire he had the queer fancy that the Sick Heart River was dogging them. It had come out of its chasm and was flowing in their tracks, always mastering their course and their thoughts. Waters of Death! — or Waters of Healing?

8

They broke camp on a morning which, as Johnny declared in disgust, might have been April. In the night the wind had backed to the south-west and the air was moist and heavy, though piercingly cold. It was the usual thaw which, in early February, precedes the coming of the big snows.

The sledges were loaded with the baggage and the dogs harnessed. Johnny and one of the Hares were in charge of them, while Lew went ahead to break the trail. All of the men except Leithen had back-packs. He carried only a slung rifle, for Lew had vetoed his wish to take a share of the burden. The hut was tidied up, all rubbish was burnt, and, according to the good custom of the North, a frozen haunch of caribou and a pile of cut firewood were left behind for any belated wanderer.

Leithen looked back at the place which for weeks had been his home with a sentimental regret of which he was half-ashamed. There he had had a promise of returning health and some hours of what was almost ease. Now that promise seemed to have faded away. The mental perturbation of the last days had played the devil with his precarious strength. His breath was troubling him again, and his legs had a horrid propensity to buckle under him.

The first part of the road was uphill, out of the woods into the scattered spruces, and then to the knuckle of barrens which was the immediate height of land, and from which he had first had a view of the great mountain country where the Sick Heart flowed. That ascent of perhaps three miles was a heavy task for him. Lew mercifully set a slow pace, but every now and then the dogs would quicken and the rest of the party had to follow suit. Leithen found that after the first half-mile his feet were no longer part of his body, his moccasins clogged with the damp snow, and at each step he seemed to be dragging part of the hillside after him. His thighs, too, numbed, and he had a sickening ache in his back. He managed to struggle beyond the tree line into the barrens and then collapsed in a drift.

Galliard picked him up and set him on the end of one of the sledges. He promptly got off and again fell on his face. A whistle from Galliard brought Lew back and a glance showed the latter where the trouble lay.

"You got to ride," he told Leithen. "The dogs ain't too heavy loaded, and the ground's easy. If you don't you'll be a mighty sick man, and there's no camp for a sick man until we get over the divide into the big timber."

Leithen obeyed, and finished the rest of the ascent in a miserable half-doze, his arms slung through the baggage couplings to keep him from falling off. But at the divide, where a halt was called and tea made, he woke to find his body more comfortable. He was able to swallow some food, and when they started again he insisted on walking with Galliard. They were now descending, and Galliard's arm linked with his steadied his shambling footsteps.

"You're getting well," Galliard told him.

"I'm feeling like death!"

"All the same you're getting well. A month ago you couldn't have made that first mile. You are feeling worse than you did last week, but you've forgotten how much worse you were a month ago. You remember young Ravelston, the doctor man? I once heard him say that Nature's line of recovery was always wavy and up and down, and that if a man got steadily better without any relapse there was trouble waiting for him."

Leithen felt himself preposterously cheered by Galliard's words. They were now descending into the nest of shallow parallel glens which ultimately led to Lone Tree Lake. They followed the trail which Johnny had lately taken, and though it required to be broken afresh owing to recent snow, it was sufficiently well marked to make easy travelling. Before the light faded in the afternoon it was possible for Leithen and Galliard to lag well behind the sledges without any risk of losing themselves. The descent was never steep, and the worst Leithen had to face were occasional slopes of mushy snow where the foot-holds were bad. He had a stick to help him, and Galliard's right arm. There was no view, for the clouds hung low on the wooded ridges, and streamers of mist choked the aisles of the trees. Exertion had for Leithen taken the sting out of the cold, and his senses were alive again. There were no smells, only the bleak odour of sodden snow, but the woods had come out of their winter silence. The hillside was noisy with running water and the drip of thawing spruces.

Galliard had the intoed walk which centuries ago his race learned from the Indians. He moved lightly and surely in difficult places where the other slipped and stumbled, and he could talk with no need to save his breath.

"You left England a month or two after I left New York. What was the situation in Europe in the summer? It was bad enough in the spring."

"I wasn't thinking about Europe then," Leithen answered. "You see, I did not see how it could greatly concern me. I didn't give much attention to the press. But my impression is that things were pretty bad."

"And in the United States?"

"There I think they took an even graver view. They did not talk about it, for they thought I would not live to see it. But again my impression is that they were looking for the worst. I heard Bronson Jane say something to Lethaby about zero hour being expected in September."

"Then Europe may have been at war for months. Perhaps the whole world. At this moment Canadian troops may be on the seas. American, too, maybe. And up here, on the same continent, we don't know one thing about it. You and I have dropped pretty completely out of the world, Sir Edward."

"Supposing there is war," he went on. "Some time or other Lew and Johnny will get the news. They won't say much, but just make a bee-line for the nearest end of steel, same as they did in '14. They won't worry what the war is about. There's a scrap, and Britain is in it, and, being what they are, they're bound to be in it too. It must be a wonderful thing to have an undivided mind."

He glanced curiously at his companion. "You have that mind," he said. "You've got a hard patch to hoe, but you've no doubts about it."

"If I live I shall have doubts in plenty," was the answer. "But YOU— you seem to fit into this life pretty well. You go hunting with Lew as if you were bred to it. You're as healthy as a hound. You have a body that can defy the elements. What on earth is there for you to fear? Look at me. I'd be an extra-special crock in a hospital for the sick and aged. You stride like a free man and I totter along like a sick camel. The cold invigorates you and it paralyses me. You face up to the brutishness of Nature, and I shrink and cower and creep under cover. You can defy the North, but my only defiance is that the infernal thing can't prevent my escape by death."

"You are wrong," said Galliard solemnly. "You have already beaten the North — you have never been in danger — because you know in your heart that you do not give a cent for it. I am beaten because it has closed in on me above and below, and I cannot draw breath without its permission. You say I stride like a free man. I tell you that whatever my legs do my heart crawls along on sufferance. I look at those hills and I am terrified at what may lie behind them. I look at the sky and think what horrid cruelty it is planning — freezing out the little weak sprouts of life. You would say that the air here is as pure as mid-ocean, but I tell you that it sickens me as if it came from a charnel house. . . . That's the right word. It's a waft of death. I feel death all around me. Not swift, clean annihilation, but death with torture and horror in it. I am in a world full of spectres, and they are worse than the Wendigo ghouls that the Montagnais Indians used to believe in at home."

They said that you knew it was coming by the smell of corruption in the air. And I tell you I feel that corruption — here — now.”

Galliard’s square, weather-beaten face was puckered like an old woman’s. He had given Leithen his arm to support him, and now he pressed the other’s elbow to his side as if the contact was his one security.

9

That night when Leithen stumbled into camp he found that even in the comfortless thaw Lew had achieved comfort. The camp was made in an open place away from the dripping trees. The big hollow which the men had dug with their snow-shoes was floored with several layers of spruce branches, and on a bare patch in the centre a great fire was blazing. The small tent had been set up for Leithen, but since there was no fall the others were sufficiently dry and warm on the fir boughs.

Movement and change had revived him and though his legs and back ached he was not too much exhausted by the day’s journey. Also he found to his surprise that his appetite had come back. Lew had managed to knock down a couple of grouse, and Leithen with relish picked the bones of one of them. All soon went to sleep except Johnny, who was busy mending one of his snow-shoes by the light of the fire.

Leithen watched him through the opening of his tent, a humped, gnome-like figure that cast queer shadows. He marvelled at his energy. All day Johnny had been wrestling with refractory dogs, he had been the chief worker in pitching camp, and now he was doing odd jobs while the others slept. Not only was his industry admirable; more notable still were his skill and resourcefulness. There was no job to which he could not turn his hand. That morning Leithen had admired the knots and hitches with which he bound the baggage to the sledges — each exactly appropriate to its purpose, and of a wonderful simplicity. A few days earlier one of the camp kettles was found to be leaking. Johnny had shaved a bullet, melted the lead, and neatly soldered a patch to cover the hole. . . . He remembered, too, what Galliard had said about the summons to war. Lew and Johnny were supremely suited to the life which fate had cast for them. They had conquered the North by making an honourable deal with it.

And yet . . . As Leithen brooded in the flicker of the firelight before he fell asleep he came to have a different picture. He saw the Indians as tenuous growths, fungi which had no hold on the soil. They existed in sufferance; the North had only to tighten its grip and they would disappear. Lew and Johnny, too. They were not mushrooms, for they had roots and they had the power to yield under strain and spring back again, but were they any better than grassy filaments which swayed in the wind but might any day be pinched out of existence? Johnny was steadfast enough, but only because he had a formal and sluggish mind; the quicker, abler Lew could be unsettled by his dreams. They, too, lived on sufferance. . . . And Galliard? He had deeper roots, but they were not healthy enough to permit transplanting. Compared to his companions Leithen suddenly saw himself founded solidly like an oak. He was drawing life from deep sources. Death, if it came, was no blind trick of fate, but a thing accepted and therefore mastered. He fell asleep in a new mood of confidence.

10

In the night the wind changed, and the cold became so severe that it stirred the men out of sleep and set them building up the fire. Leithen awoke to an air which bit like a fever, and a world which seemed to be made of metal and glass.

The cold was more intense than anything he had ever imagined. Under its stress trees cracked with a sound like machine-guns. The big morning fire made only a narrow circle of heat. If for a second he turned his face from it the air stung his eyelids as if with an infinity of harsh particles. To draw breath rasped the throat. The sky was milk-pale, the sun a mere ghostly disc, and it seemed to Leithen as if everything — sun, trees, mountains — were red-rimmed. There was no shadow anywhere, no depth or softness. The world was hard, glassy, metallic; all of it except the fantasmal, cotton-wool skies.

The cold had cowed the dogs, and it was an easy task to load the sledges. Leithen asked Johnny what he thought the temperature might be.

"Sixty below," was the answer. "If there was any sort of wind I reckon we couldn't have broke camp. The dogs wouldn't have faced it. We'd have had to bury ourselves all day in a hole. Being as it is, we ought to make good time. Might make Lone Tree Lake by noon tomorrow."

Leithen asked if the cold spell would last long.

"A couple of days. Maybe three. Not more. A big freeze often comes between the thaw and the snows. The Indians call it the Bear's Dream. The cold pinches the old bear in his den and gives him bad dreams."

He sniffed the air.

"We're getting out of the caribou country, but it's like they'll be round today. They're not so skeery in a freeze. You keep a rifle handy, and you'll maybe get a shot."

Leithen annexed Johnny's Mannlicher and filled the magazine. To his surprise the violent weather, instead of numbing him, had put life into his veins. He walked stiffly, but he felt as if he could go on for hours, and his breath came with a novel freedom. Galliard, who also carried a rifle, remarked on his looks as they followed the sledges.

"Something has come over you," he said. "Your face is pasty with the cold, but you've gotten a clear eye, and you're using your legs different from yesterday. Feeling fine?"

"Fair," said Leithen. "I'm thankful for small mercies."

He was afraid to confess even to himself that his body was less of a burden than it had been for many months. And suddenly there woke in him an instinct to which he had long been strange, the instinct of the chase. Once he had been a keen stalker in Scottish deer forests, but of late he had almost wholly relinquished gun and rifle. He had lost the desire to kill any warm-blooded animal. But that was in the old settled lands, where shooting was a sport and not a necessity of life. Here in the wilds, where men lived by their marksmanship, it was a duty and not a game. He had heard Lew say that they must get all the caribou they could, since it was necessary to take a load of fresh meat into the Hares' camp. Johnny and the Indians were busy at the sledges, and Lew had the engrossing job of breaking the trail, so such hunting as was possible must fall to him and Galliard.

He felt a boyish keenness which amazed and amused him. He was almost nervous. He slung his Zeiss glass loose round his neck and kept his rifle at the carry. His eyes scanned every open space in the woods which might hold a caribou.

Galliard observed him and laughed.

"You take the right side and I'll take the left. It'll be snap shooting. Keep your sights at two hundred yards."

Galliard had the first chance. He swung round and fired standing at what looked to Leithen to be a grey rock far up on the hillside. The rock sprang forward and disappeared in the thicket.

"Over!" said a disgusted voice. The caravan had halted and even the dogs seemed to hold their breath.

Leithen's chance came half an hour later. The sledges were toiling up a hill where the snow lay thin over a maze of tree-roots, and the pace was consequently slow. His eyes looked down a long slope to a little lake; there had been a bush fire recently, so the ground was open except for one or two skeleton trunks and a mat of second-growth spruce. Something caught his eye in the tangle, something grey against the trees, something which ended in what he took to be withered boughs. He saw that they were antlers.

He tore off his right-hand mitt and dropped on one knee. He heard Galliard mutter "Three hundred," and pushed up his sights. The caribou had its head down and was rooting for moss in the snow. A whistle from Galliard halted the sledges. The animal raised its head and turned slightly round, giving the chance of a rather difficult neck shot.

A single bullet did the job. The caribou sank on the snow with a broken spine, and the Indians left the sledges and raced downhill to the gralloch.

"Good man!" said Galliard, who had taken Leithen's glass and was examining the kill.

"A bull — poorish head, but that doesn't matter — heavy carcase. Every inch of three-fifty yards, and a very prettily placed shot."

"At home," said Leithen, "I would have guessed one-twenty. What miraculous air!"

He was ashamed of the childish delight which he felt. He had proved that life was not dead in him by bringing off a shot of which he would have been proud in his twenties.

The caribou was cut up and loaded on one of the sledges, maddening the dogs with the smell of fresh meat. For the

rest of the afternoon daylight Leithen moved happily in step with Galliard. The road was easy, the extreme cold was abating, he felt a glow of satisfaction which he had not known for many a day. He was primitive man again who had killed his dinner. Also there was a new vigour in his limbs — not merely the absence of discomfort and fatigue, but something positive, a “plus” quantity of well-being.

When they made camp he was given the job of attending to the dogs, whose feet were suffering. The malamutes, since their toes were close together, were all right, but with the huskies the snow had balled and frozen hard, and in biting their paws to release the congested toes they had broken the skin and left raw flesh. Johnny provided an antiseptic ointment which tasted evilly and so would not be licked off. The beasts were wonderfully tractable, as if they knew that the treatment was for their good. Leithen had always been handy with dogs, and he found a great pleasure in looking into their furry, wrinkled faces and sniffing their familiar smell. Here was something which belonged most intimately to the North and yet had been adapted to the homely needs of man.

That night he dined with relish off caribou steaks and turned early to bed. But he did not fall asleep at once. There was a pleasant ferment in his brain, for he was for the first time envisaging what life would be if he were restored to it. He allowed his thoughts to run forward and plan.

It was of his friends that he thought chiefly, of his friends and of one or two places linked with them. Their long absence from his memory had clarified his view of them, and against the large background of acquaintances a few stood out who, he realised, were his innermost and abiding comrades. None of his colleagues at the Bar were among them, and none of his fellow-politicians. With them he had worked happily, but they had remained on the outer rim of his life. The real intimates were few, and the bond had always been something linked with sport and country life. Charles Lamancha and John Palliser–Yeates had been at school and college with him, and they had been together on many hillsides and by many waters. Archie Roylance, much younger, had irrupted into the group by virtue of an identity of tastes and his own compelling charm. Sandy Clanroyden had been the central star, radiating heat and light, a wandering star who for long seasons disappeared from the firmament. And there was Dick Hannay, half Nestor, half Odysseus, deep in Oxfordshire mud, but with a surprising talent for extricating himself and adventuring in the ends of the earth.

As he thought of them he felt a glow of affection warm his being. He pictured the places to which they specially belonged: Lamancha on the long slopes of Cheviot; Archie Roylance on the wind-blown thymy moors of the west; Sandy in his Border fortress; and Dick Hannay by the clear streams and gentle pastures of Cotswold. He pictured his meeting with them — restored from the grave. They had never been told about his illness, but they must have guessed. Sandy at least, after that last dinner in London. They must have been talking about him, lamenting his absence, making futile inquiries. . . . He would suddenly appear among them, a little thinner and older perhaps, but the same man, and would be welcomed back to that great companionship.

How would he spend his days? He had finished with his professions, both law and politics. The State must now get on without him. He would be much at Borrowby — thank Heaven he had not sold it! He would go back to his Down Street rooms, for though he had surrendered the lease he would find a way of renewing it. He had done with travel; his last years would be spent at home among his friends. Somebody had once told him that a man who recovered from tuberculosis was pretty well exempt from other maladies. He might live to an old age, a careful, moderate old age filled with mild pleasures and innocent interests. . . . On the pillow of such thoughts he fell asleep.

11

The snow began just as they reached Lone Tree Lake. At first it came gently, making the air a dazzle of flakes, but not obscuring the near view. At the lake they retrieved the rest of their cached supplies, and tramped down its frozen surface until they reached its outlet, a feeder of the Big Hare, now under ten feet of ice and snow. Here the snow’s softness made the going difficult, for the northern snow-shoes offered too narrow a surface. The air had become almost mild, and that night, when a rock shelf gave them a comparatively dry bivouac, Leithen deliberately laid his blankets well away from the fire.

Next day they halted to hunt, looking for fresh meat to take to the Hares’ camp. Johnny and Lew found a small stamping-ground of moose, and since in the snow the big animals were at a disadvantage, they had no difficulty in getting

two young bulls. Leithen helped to drag in the meat and found that the change in the weather had not weakened his new vigour. His mind was in a happy maze, planning aimlessly and making pictures which he did not try to complete.

Lew watched him with satisfaction.

"I've got to learn you things," he said. "You haven't got the tricks, and you're wasting your strength, but"— and he repeated his old phrase—"you're going to be the huskiest of the lot of us. And I seen you shoot!"

They reached the Hares' camp late on an afternoon, when the snow had so thickened that it had the look of a coarse-textured cloth ceaselessly dropped from the skies. Huts, tents, the little church were for the moment buried under the pall. Lew chose a camping site about a quarter of a mile distant, for it was important to avoid too close a contact at first with the stricken settlement.

Johnny and the Indians went off to prospect. Half an hour later Johnny returned with startled eyes.

"I got news," he stammered. "The Father told me — seems there was a dog-team got down to the Fort, and come back. There's fightin' in Europe — been goin' on for months. Seems it's them darned Germans again. And Britain's in it. Likewise Canada."

12

The taller Indian spoke from behind Johnny.

"My father is dead," he said, and slipped back into the dusk.

"Yes," said Johnny, "there's been a lot of deaths among them Hares. Their camp's like a field hospital. Talkin' of field hospitals, what about this war?"

"We'll sleep on that," Leithen answered.

Lew did not open his mouth, nor Galliard. Supper was prepared and eaten in silence, and each man by tacit consent went immediately to his blankets. Leithen, before turning in, looked at the skies. The snowfall was thinning, and the air was sharpening again. There was an open patch in the west and a faint irradiation of moonshine. Tomorrow would be very cold.

His bodily well-being continued. The journey down from the mountains had left its mark, for his face was scarred by patches of frost-bite, his lips were inflamed, the snow-shoes had made the calves of his legs ache like a bad tooth, and under his moccasins his feet were blistered. Nevertheless he felt that vigour had come back to him. It reminded him of his mountaineering days, when he would return to London with blistered cheeks and aching shoulder muscles and bleared eyes, and yet know that he was far fitter than the smoothly sunburnt creature that emerged from a holiday at home.

But though his body craved for it his mind would not permit of sleep. He had been living with life, and now suddenly death seemed to have closed down on the world. The tall Indian's cry rang in his ears like a knell.

What had become of the bright pictures he had been painting?

The world was at war again and somewhere in Europe men were grappling with death. The horrors of campaigning had never been much in his mind, for as a soldier he had been too busy to brood over the macabre. But now a flood of dimly remembered terrors seemed to flow in upon him — men shot in the stomach and writhing in no-man's-land; scarecrows that once were human crucified on the barbed wire and bleached by wind and sun; the shambles of a casualty clearing station after a battle.

His thoughts had been dwelling on his reunion with friends. Those friends would all be scattered. Sandy Clanroyden would be off on some wild venture. Archie Roylance would be flying, game leg and all. Hannay, Palliser-Yeates, Lamancha, they would all be serving somehow and somewhere. He would be out of it, of course. A guarded flame, a semi-invalid, with nothing to do but to "make" his soul. . . . As he fell asleep he was ashamed of his childishness. He had promised himself a treat which was not going to come off, and he was whining about it.

He woke with a faint far-off tinkle in his ears. He had been dreaming of war and would not have been surprised if he had heard a bugle call. He puzzled over the sound until he hit on the explanation. Father Duplessis in his little church was ringing the morning Angelus.

That tinny bell had an explosive effect on Leithen's mind. This was a place of death, the whole world was full of death

— and yet here was one man who stood stubbornly for life. He rang the bell which should have started his flock on their day's work. Sunk in weakness and despair they would remain torpid, but he had sounded the challenge. Here was one man at any rate who was the champion of life against death.

13

It was a silent little band that broke camp and set out in the late winter dawn. Johnny's face was sullen with some dismal preoccupation, and Lew's eyes had the wildness of the Sick Heart River, while Galliard's seemed to have once again the fear which had clouded them when he was recovering from his exhaustion.

To his surprise Leithen found that this did not depress him. The bell still tinkled in his ears. The world was at war again. It might be the twilight of the gods, the end of all things. The globe might swim in blood. Death might resume his ancient reign. But, by Heaven, he would strike his blow for life, even a pitiful flicker of it.

The valley opened before them. Frost had stiffened the snow to marble, and they were compelled to take off their snow-shoes, which gave them no foot-hold. The sky was a profound blue, and the amphitheatre of peaks stood out against it in a dazzling purity, matched below by the unbroken white sheet of the lake. The snow was deep, for the near woods were so muffled as to have lost all clean contours, and when they came to the flat where the camp lay the wretched huts had no outlines. They might have been mounds to mark where the dead lay in some hyperborean graveyard. Only the little church on the higher ground looked like the work of men's hands. From the adjoining presbytery rose a thin wisp of smoke, but elsewhere there was no sign of humanity.

Lew spoke at last.

"God! The Hares have gone to earth like chipmunks! Or maybe they're all dead."

"Not all," said one of the Indians, "but they are dying."

They soon had evidence. They passed a small grove of spruce and poplar, and in nearly every tree there was a thing like a big nest, something lashed to snowy boughs. Lew nodded towards them. "That's their burying-ground. It's new since we was here before." Leithen thought freakishly of Villon and "King Louis's orchard close." There were funny little humps, too, on the flat, with coverings of birch and spruce branches peeping from under the snow.

"Them's graves," said Johnny. "The big ones go up in the trees, the smaller ones are under them humps, and them of no account, like babies and old folk, just get chucked out in the drifts. There's been a power o' dyin' here."

Lew turned to Leithen for orders.

"Which comes first?" he asked, "Zacharias or the priest?"

"We will go to the presbytery," was the answer.

14

There was at first no sign of life in the irregular street of huts that made the ascent to the presbytery. The roofs of some of them were sagging with the weight of snow, and one or two had collapsed. But there were people in them, for, now that they were seen at closer quarters, wraiths of smoke came from the vents, which proved that there were fires within, though very meagre ones. Once a door opened and a woman looked out; she at once drew back with a scared look like an animal's; a whimper of a child seemed to come from indoors.

Then suddenly there rose a wild clamour from starving dogs picketed in the snow. Their own dogs answered it and the valley resounded with the din. After the deathly quiet the noise seemed a horrid impiety. There was nothing in it of friendly barking; it was like the howling of a starving wolf pack lost and forgotten at the world's end.

The sound brought Father Duplessis to the presbytery door. He was about Leithen's own age, but now he looked ten years older than at Fort Bannerman. Always lean, he was now emaciated, and his pallor had become almost cadaverous. He peered and blinked at the newcomers, and then his face lit up as he came forward with outstretched hands.

"God be praised!" he cried. "It is my English comrade-inarms."

“Get hold of the chief,” Leithen told Johnny. “Take the Indians with you and make a plan for distributing the meat. Then bring Zacharias up here.”

He and Galliard and Lew followed the priest into the presbytery. In Father Wentzel’s time the place had smelt stuffy, like a furniture store. Now it reeked of ether and carbolic, and in a corner stood a trestle table covered with a coarse linen cloth. He remembered that Father Duplessis was something of a doctor.

He was also most clearly a soldier, a soldier tired out by a long and weary campaign. There was nothing about him to tell of the priest except the chain which showed at his neck and which held a cross tucked under his shirt. He wore kamiks and a dicky of caribou skin and a parka edged with wolverine fur, and he needed all his clothing, for the presbytery was perishing cold. He might have been a trapper or a prospector but for his carriage, his squared shoulders and erect head, which showed the discipline of St. Cyr. His silky brown beard was carefully combed and trimmed. A fur skull-cap covered the head where the hair had been cut to the bone. He had the long, high-bridged nose of Picardy gentlefolk, and a fine forehead, round the edges of which the hair was greying. His blue eyes looked washed out and fatigued, but the straight lines of the brows gave an impression of power and reserve. The osseous structure of his face was as sharply defined as the features on a newly minted coin.

“Thank Heaven you have come,” he said. “This campaign is too hard for one man. And perhaps I am not the man. In this task I am only a subaltern and I need a commanding officer.”

He looked first at Galliard and then at Leithen, and his eyes remained on the latter.

“We are fighting a pestilence,” he went on, “but a pestilence of the soul.”

“One moment,” Leithen broke in. “What about this war in Europe?”

“There is war,” said the priest gravely. “The news came from the Fort when I sent a dog-team for supplies. But I know no more than that the nations are once again at each other’s throats. Germany with certain allies against your country and mine. I do not think of it — Europe is very far away from my thoughts.”

“Supplies? What did you get?”

“Not much. Some meal and flour, of which a balance remains. But that is not the diet for the poor folk here. Also a little coffee for myself. See, I will make you a cup.”

He bustled for a minute or two at the stove, and the pleasant odour of coffee cut sharply into the frowst of the room.

“A pestilence of the mind?” Leithen asked. “You mean —?”

“In myself — and in you — it would be called accidie, a deadly sin. But not, I think, with this people. They are removed but a little way from the beasts that perish, and with them it is an animal sickness.”

“They die of it?”

“But assuredly. Some have T.B. and their sickness of the mind speeds up that disease. Some are ageing and it makes them senile, so that they perish from old age. With some it unhinges the wits so that the brain softens. Up to now it is principally the men who suffer, for the women will still fight on, having urgent duties. But soon it will mean the children also, and the women will follow. Before the geese return in spring, I fear, I greatly fear, that my poor people will be no more in the land.”

“What are you doing about it?”

Father Duplessis shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands.

“There is little I can do. I perform the offices of the Church, and I strive to make them worship with me. I preach to them the way of salvation. But I cannot lift them out of the mire. What is needed is men — a man — who will force their life again into a discipline, so that they will not slip away into death. Someone who will give them hope.”

“Have you no helpers?”

“There is the chief Zacharias, who has a stout heart. But he is old and crippled. One or two young men, perhaps, but I fear they are going the way of the rest.”

Leithen had asked questions automatically and had scarcely listened to the replies, for in that dim, stuffy, frigid presbytery, where the only light came through the cracks in the door and a dirty window in the roof, he was conscious of something in the nature of a revelation. His mind had a bitter clarity, and his eyes seemed to regard, as from a high place, the kingdoms of the world and men's souls.

His will was rising to the same heights. At last, at long last, his own course was becoming crystal clear.

Memories of the war in which he had fought raced before him like a cinema show, all in order and all pointing the same truth. It had been waste, futile waste, and death, illimitable, futile death. Now the same devilment was unloosed again. He saw Europe as a carnage pit — shattered towns, desecrated homes, devastated cornlands, roads blocked with the instruments of war — the meadows of France and of Germany, and of his own kind England. Once again the free peoples were grappling with the slave peoples. The former would win, but how many free men would die before victory, and how many of the unhappy slaves!

The effluence of death seemed to be wafted to his nostrils over the many thousand miles of land and sea. He smelt the stench of incinerators and muddy trenches and bloody clothing. The odour of the little presbytery was like that of a hospital ward.

But it did not sicken him. Rather it braced him, as when a shore-dweller who has been long inland gets a whiff of the sea. It was the spark which fired within him an explosive train of resolution.

There was a plain task before him, to fight with Death. God for His own purpose had unloosed it in the world, ravaging over places which had once been rich in innocent life. Here in the North life had always been on sufferance, its pale slender shoots fighting a hard battle against the Elder Ice. But it had maintained its brave defiance. And now one such pathetic slip was on the verge of extinction. This handful of Hares had for generations been a little enclave of life besieged by mortality. Now it was perishing, hurrying to share in the dissolution which was overtaking the world.

By God's help that should not happen — the God who was the God of the living. Through strange circuits he had come to that simple forthright duty for which he had always longed. In that duty he must make his soul.

There was a ring of happiness in his voice. "You have me as a helper," he said. "And Mr. Galliard. And Lew and Johnny. Between us we will save your Hares from themselves."

Lew's face set, as if he had heard something which he had long feared.

"You mean we've got to feed 'em?"

Leithen nodded. "Feed them — body and mind."

Lew's eyebrows fell.

"You coming out in the woods with us? I guess that's the right thing for you."

"No, that's your job, and Johnny's. I stay here."

Lew exploded. Even in the dimness his eyes were like points of blue fire.

"Hell!" he cried. "You can't do it. You jest can't do it. I was afeared you'd have that dam' foolish notion. Say, what d'you think life here would be like for you? You're on the road to be cured, but you ain't cured yet. Come out with me and Johnny and you'll be living healthy. We won't let you do too much. It's a mighty interesting job hunting moose in their ravages and you'll get some fine shooting. We'll feed you the kind of food that's good for you, and at night we'll make you as snug as a wintering bear. I'll engage by the spring you'll be a mighty strong man. That's good sense, ain't it?"

"Excellent good sense. Only it's not for me. My job is here."

"Man, I tell you it's suicide. Fair suicide. I've seen plenty cases like yours, and I've seen 'em get well and I've seen 'em die. There's one sure way to die and that's to live in a shack or among shacks, and breathe stinking air and be rubbing shoulders with sick folks, and wearing your soul out trying to put some pep into a herring-gutted bunch of Indians. You'll be sicker than ever before a week is out, and a corp in a month, and that'll be darned little use to anybody."

Lew's soft rich voice had become hoarse with passion. He got up from his seat and stood before Leithen like a suppliant, with his hands nervously intertwining.

"You may be right," Leithen said. "But all the same I must stay. It doesn't matter what happens to me."

"It matters like hell," said Lew, and there was that in his voice which made the presbytery a solemn place, for it was the cry of a deep affection.

"This is a war and I obey orders. I've got my orders. In a world where Death is king we're going to defy him and save life. The North has closed down on us and we're going to beat the North. That is to your address, Galliard."

Galliard was staring at him with bright comprehending eyes.

"In this fight we have each got his special job. I'm in command, and I hand them out. I've taken the one for myself that I believe I can do best. We're going to win, remember. What does my death matter if we defeat Death?"

Lew sat down again with his head in his hands. He raised it like a frightened animal at Leithen's next words.

"This is my Sick Heart River. Galliard's too, I think. Maybe yours, Lew. Each of us has got to find his river for himself, and it may flow where he least expects it."

Father Duplessis, back in the deep shadows, quoted from the Vulgate psalm, "Fluminis impetus laetificat civitatem Dei."

Leithen smiled. "Do you know the English of that, Lew? There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God. That's what you've always been looking for."

16

The place was suddenly bright, for the door had opened. A wave of icy air swept out the frowst, and Leithen found himself looking into a radiant world, rimmed with peaks of bright snow and canopied by a sky so infinitely far away that it had no colour except that of essential light.

It was the old chief, conducted by Johnny. Zacharias was a very mountain of a man, and age had made him shapeless while lumbago had bent him nearly double. He walked with two sticks, and Johnny had to lower him delicately to a seat. The Hares were not treaty Indians, but nevertheless he wore one of the soup-plate Victorian silver medals, which had come to him through a Cree grandmother. His heavy face had a kind of placid good sense, and age and corpulence had not dimmed the vigour of his eye.

He greeted Leithen ceremonially, realising he was the leader of the newcomers. He had a few words of English, but Johnny did most of the interpreting. He sat with his hands on his knees, like a schoolboy interviewed by a headmaster, but though his attitude suggested nervousness his voice was calm.

"We are a ver' sick people," he repeated several times. It was his chief English phrase.

What he had to tell was much the same story that Johnny had brought to the mountain camp. But since then things had slipped further downhill. There had been more deaths of children and old people, and even of younger men. They did not die of actual starvation, but of low diet and low spirits. Less than half a dozen went hunting, and not many more brought in fuel, so there was little fresh meat and too little firewood. People sat huddled in icy shacks in all the clothes they could find, and dreamed themselves into decay. The heart had gone out of them. The women, too, had ceased to scold and upbraid, and would soon go the way of their menfolk.

"Then our people will be no more," said Zacharias grimly.

Leithen asked what help he could count on.

"There is myself," said the chief, "and this good Father. I have three sons who will do my bidding, and seven grandsons — no, five, for two are sick. There may be a few others. Say at the most a score."

"What would you advise?"

The old man shook his head.

"In our fathers' day the cure would have been a raid by Chipewyans or Dog-ribs! Then we would have been forced to be up and doing or perish. A flight of arrows is the best cure for brooding. Now — I do not know. Something harsh to get the sullenness out of their bones. You are a soldier?"

"The Father and I served in the same war."

"Good! Soldiers' ways are needed. But applied with judgment, for my people are weak and they are also children."

Leithen spoke to the company.

"There are a score of us for this job then. Mr. Galliard and I stay here. Lew and Johnny go hunting, and will take with

them whom they choose. We shall need all the dog-teams we can get to bring back meat and cordwood. But first there are several jobs to be done. You've got to build a shack for Mr. Galliard and myself. You've got to get a mighty big store of logs, for a fire must be kept burning day and night."

He was addressing Lew, whose eyes questioned him.

"Why? Because these people must be kept in touch with life, and life is warmth and colour. A fire will remind them that there is warmth and colour in the world. . . . Tomorrow morning we will have a round-up and discover exactly what is the size of our job. . . . You've made camp, Johnny? Mr. Galliard and I will be there by supper-time. Now you and Lew go along and get busy. We've a lot to do in the next few days."

The door opened again and disclosed the same landscape of primitive forms and colours, its dazzle a little dimmed by the approach of evening.

This second glimpse had a strange effect on Leithen, for it seemed to be a revelation of a world which he had forgotten. His mind swooped back on it and for a little was immersed in memories. Zacharias was hoisted to his feet and escorted down the hill. Father Duplessis prepared a simple meal. There was a little talk about ways and means after Lew left, Galliard questioning Leithen and getting answers. Yet all the time the visualising part of Leithen's mind was many thousands of miles away in space and years back in time.

The stove had become too hot, so the door was allowed to remain half open, for the year had turned, and the afternoon sun was gaining strength. So his eyes were seeing a segment of a bright coloured world. The intense pure light brought a flood of pictures all linked with moments of exultant physical vigour. Also with friendships. He did not probe the cause, but these pictures seemed to imply companionship. In each Archie Roylance, or Clanroyden, or Lamancha was just round the corner waiting. . . . There was a July morning, very early, on the Nantillons glacier, on his way to make a traverse of the Charmoz which had once been famous. There was a moonlit night on an Ægean isle when he had been very near old mysteries. There were Highland dawns and twilights — one especially, when he sat on a half-submerged skerry watching for the wild geese — an evening when Tir-nan-og was manifestly re-created. There were spring days and summer days in English meadows, Border bent with the April curlews piping, London afternoons in May with the dear remembered smells fresh in his nostrils. . . . In each picture he felt the blood strong in his veins and a young power in his muscles. This was the man he once had been.

Once! He came out of his absorption to realise that these pictures had not come wholly through the Ivory Gate. He was no longer a dying man. He had been reprieved on the eve of execution, and by walking delicately the reprieve might be extended. His bodily strength was like a fragile glass vessel which one had to carry while walking on a rough road; with care it might survive, but a jolt would shatter it. . . . No, that was a false comparison. His health was like a small sum of money, all that was left of a big fortune. It might be kept intact by a stern economy, or it might be spent gallantly on a last venture.

Galliard and Father Duplessis were sitting side by side and talking earnestly. He caught a word of the priest's: "Dieu fait bien ce qu'il fait" and remembered the quotation. Was it La Fontaine? He laughed, for it fitted in with his own mood.

He had found the right word both for Galliard and himself. They were facing the challenge of the North, which a man must accept and repel or submit to servitude. Lew and Johnny and their kind did not face that challenge; they avoided it by walking humbly; they conciliated it by ingenious subterfuges; its blows were avoided and not squarely met, and they paid the price; for every now and then they fell under its terrors.

He was facing, too, the challenge of Death. Elsewhere in the world the ancient enemy was victorious. If here, against all odds, he could save the tiny germ of life from its maw he would have met that challenge, and done God's work.

Leithen's new-found mission for life gave him a happy retrospect over his own career. At first, when he left England, he had looked back with pain at the bright things now forbidden. In his first days in the North his old world had slipped from him wholly, leaving only a grey void which he must face with clenched teeth and with grim submission. He smiled as he remembered those days, with their dreary stoicism. He had thought of himself like Job, as one whose strength lay only in humbleness. He had been crushed and awed by God.

A barren creed! He saw that now, for its foundation had been pride of defiance, keeping a stiff neck under the blows of fate. He had been abject but without true humility. When had the change begun? At Sick Heart River, when he had a vision of the beauty which might be concealed in the desert? Then, that evening in the snow-pit had come the realisation of the

tenderness behind the iron front of Nature, and after that had come thankfulness for plain human affection. The North had not frozen him, but had melted the ice in his heart. God was not only all-mighty but all-loving. His old happinesses seemed to link in with his new mood of thankfulness. The stream of life which had flowed so pleasantly had eternity in its waters. He felt himself safe in the hands of a power that was both God and friend.

Father Duplessis was speaking, and Galliard was listening earnestly. He seemed to be quoting the New Testament — “Heureux sont les morts qui meurent dans le Seigneur.”

He had been inhuman, Leithen told himself, with the dreary fortitude of a sick animal. Now whatever befell him he was once again in love with his fellows. The cold infernal North magnified instead of dwarfing humanity. What a marvel was this clot of vivified dust! . . . The universe seemed to spread itself before him in immense distances lit and dominated by a divine spark which was man. An inconsiderable planet, a speck in the infinite stellar spaces; most of it salt water; the bulk of the land rock and desert and austral and boreal ice; interspersed mud, the detritus of æons, with a thin coverlet of grass and trees — that vegetable world on which every living thing was in the last resort a parasite! Man, precariously perched on this rotating scrap-heap, yet so much master of it that he could mould it to his transient uses and, while struggling to live, could entertain thoughts and dreams beyond the bounds of time and space! Man so weak and yet so great, the chief handiwork of the Power that had hung the stars in the firmament!

He was moved to a strange exaltation. Behind his new access of strength he felt the brittleness of his body. His stock of vigour was slender indeed, but he could spend it bravely in making his soul. Most men had their lives taken from them. It was his privilege to GIVE his, to offer it freely and joyfully in one last effort of manhood. The North had been his friend, for it had enabled him, like Jacob, to wrestle with the dark angel and extort a blessing.

The presbytery had warmed up, and Galliard had fallen asleep. He slept with his mouth shut, breathing through his nose, and the sleeping face had dignity and power in it. It would be no small thing to release this man from ancestral fears and gird him for his task in the world. In making his own soul he would also give back Galliard his. He would win the world too, for now the great, shining, mystic universe above him was no longer a foe but a friend, part with himself of an eternal plan.

Father Duplessis' voice broke in on his meditation and seemed to give the benediction words. He was reading his breviary, and broke off now and then to translate a sentence aloud in his own tongue — “Car celui qui voudra sauver sa vie la perdra; et celui qui perdra sa vie pour l'amour de moi, la retrouvera.”

17

From a report by Corporal S—— R.C.M.P., Fort Bannerman, to Inspector N—— R.C.M.P., Fort Macleod.

“Pursuant to instructions received, I left Fort Bannerman on the 21st day of April, accompanied by Constable F—— and after some trouble with my dog-team arrived at the Hares' winter camp on Big Hare Lake at 6.30 p.m. on the 22nd. The last part of the journey was in the dark, but we were guided by a great blaze coming apparently from the camp which was visible from the outlet of the lake. At first I thought the place was on fire, but on arrival found that this evening bonfire had become a regular custom.

“Rumours of distress among the Hares had reached Fort Bannerman during the winter. Father Wentzel, on his return to the Fort, had predicted a bad time, and Father Duplessis, who replaced him, had sent an urgent message asking not only for supplies of food but for someone to go up and advise. I duly reported this to you, and received your instructions to take an early opportunity of visiting the camp. This opportunity I was unable to find for several months, since the Force was short-handed, owing to the departure of men to the provost company in France, and, as you are aware, I was compelled to make two trips to Great Bear Lake in connection with the dispute at the Goose Bay Mine. So, as stated above, I could not leave Fort Bannerman until the 21st inst.

“Constable F—— and I were put up by Father Duplessis, and I received from him a satisfactory account of the condition of the Hare tribe. They are now in good health, and, what is more important, in good heart, for it seems that every now and then they get pessimism, like the measles, and die of it, since it prevents their looking for food. It appeared that they had had a very bad bout in the winter, of the risk of which Father Wentzel had warned us. Up to the beginning of February they were sitting in their huts doing nothing but expecting death, and very soon getting what they expected. A

schedule attached to this report gives the number of deaths, and such details as could be ascertained.

"The Hares were saved by an incident which I think is the most remarkable I have ever heard of in my long experience of the Territory. In the early fall a party went into the Mackenzie mountains, travelling up the Big Hare River to a piece of country which has been very imperfectly explored. Or rather, two parties who ultimately joined hands. The party consisted of an American gentleman named Galliard, a New York business man, and an Englishman named Leithen. It had with it two Hare Indians, and as guides the brothers Frizel. The Frizels, Lew and Johnny, are men of high character and great experience. They both served with distinction in the — Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the last war, and have long been favourably known to the Police. The younger, until recently, was a game warden at the National Park at Waskesieu.

"I received further information about the Englishman, Leithen. It appears that he was Sir Edward Leithen, a famous London lawyer and a British Member of Parliament. He was suffering from tuberculosis, and had undertaken the expedition with a view to a cure. The winter in the high mountains, where the weather has been mild for a Mackenzie River winter, had done him good, and he was believed to be on the way to recovery.

"The party, coming out early in February, reached the Hares' camp to find it in a deplorable condition. Sir E. Leithen at once took charge of the situation. He had been a distinguished soldier in the last war — in the Guards, I believe — and he knew how to handle men. With Mr. Galliard to help him, who had had large administrative experience in America, and with the assistance of Father Duplessis and the old chief Zacharias, they set to work at once.

"Their first job was to put some sense into the Hares. With the help of the Frizels, who knew the tribe well, a number of conferences were held, and there was a lot of straight talk. Father Duplessis said that it was wonderful how Sir E. Leithen managed to strike the note which most impressed the Indian mind.

"This, of course, was only the beginning. The next step was to organise the survivors into gangs, and assign to each a special duty. Food was the most urgent problem, for the Hares had been for a long time on very short commons, and were badly undernourished. As you are aware, the moose have been moving north in recent years. The two Frizels, with a selected band of Hares, made up a hunting party, and, knowing how to find the moose stamping-grounds, were able to send in a steady supply of fresh meat. They also organised a regular business of trapping hares and partridges, at which the Hares are very skilful, but which they had been too dispirited to attempt.

"The tribe had also got short of fuel, so wood-cutting parties were organised. Sir E. Leithen insisted on a big fire being kept going by night and day in the centre of the camp, in order to hearten the people.

"Transport was a serious problem. The dogs of the tribe had been allowed to become very weak from starvation, and many had died, for the fishing in the summer had been poor and the store of dried fish, which they use for dog feed, was nearly exhausted. Sir E. Leithen made them start again their winter fishing through the ice in the lake. Here they had a bit of luck, for it turned out very productive, and it was possible to get the dogs back into condition. This was important, since the dog-teams were in constant demand, to haul in firewood from the wood-cutters and fresh meat from the hunters.

"The Frizels did the field work, and Sir E. Leithen and Mr. Galliard managed the camp. I am informed by Father Duplessis that Leithen obtained almost at once an extraordinary influence over the Hares' minds. 'Far greater than mine,' the Father said, 'though I have been living for years among them.' This was partly due to his great ability and the confidence he inspired, but partly to the fact that he had been a very sick man, and was still regarded by the Hares as a sick man. The Indians have a superstitious respect for anyone whom they believe to be facing death.

"Sick man or not, in a month Sir E. Leithen had worked little short of a miracle. He had restored a degenerating tribe to something like health. He made them want to live instead of being resigned to die.

"And now, sir, I come to the event which kills all satisfaction in this achievement. It seems that the elder Frizel had repeatedly warned Sir E. Leithen that the work which he was undertaking would undo all the good of his sojourn in the high mountains, and would lead to certain death; but that Sir E. Leithen had declared that that work was his duty, and that he must take the risk. Frizel's prophecy proved only too true.

"I understand that his strength slowly declined. The trouble with his lungs revived, and, while he continued to be the directing mind, his power of locomotion gradually lessened. Lew Frizel, who came in frequently from the bush to inquire into his health, and implored him in vain to lessen his efforts, told me that by the end of March he had reached the conclusion that nothing could save him. The shack in which he lived was next door to the presbytery, and Father Duplessis,

who has some knowledge of medicine, did his best to supply treatment. According to his account, the malady was such that only a careful life could have completed the cure begun in the mountains, and Sir E. Leithen's exertions by night and day were bound to bring it back in a violent form. The sick man, the Father told me, attended the Easter Mass, and after that was too weak to move. Myocarditis set in, and he died without pain during the night of April 19th.

"As I have already informed you, I arrived with Constable F— on the evening of the 22nd. The camp was in mourning, and for a little there seemed a danger of the Hares slipping back to their former state of melancholy supineness. From this they were saved by the exhortations of Father Duplessis, and especially by Lew Frizel, who told them they could only show their love for Sir E. Leithen by continuing the course he had mapped out for them. Also, the tribe was now in a better mood, as spring was very near.

"Mr. Galliard was anxious that Sir E. Leithen should be buried at a spot in Quebec Province for which he had a special liking. On April 24th we started by dog-team with the body, the party being myself, Constable F— Mr. Galliard, and the two Frizels. We had considerable difficulty with the ice in the Big Hare River, for the thaw-out promised to be early. We reached Fort Bannerman on the 25th, and were able, by radio, to engage a plane from Edmonton, Mr. Galliard being willing to pay any price for it.

"I have since heard by radio that the destination at Quebec was safely reached. The two Frizels were dropped at Ottawa, it being their intention, at all costs, to join the Canadian Forces in Europe. . . ."

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An extract from the journal of Father Jean-Marie Duplessis, O.M.I., translated from the French.

"In this journal, which I have now kept for more than twenty years, I shall attempt to set down what I remember of my friend. I call him my friend, for though our intercourse was measured in time by a few weeks, it had the intimacy of comradeship in a difficult undertaking. Let me say by way of prologue that during our friendship I saw what is not often vouchsafed to mortal eyes, the rebirth of a soul.

"In the fall I had talked with L. at Fort Bannerman. He was clearly a man in bad health, to whom the details of living were a struggle. I was impressed by his gentleness and his power of self-control, but it was a painful impression, for I realised that it meant a continuous effort. I felt that no circumstances could break the iron armour of his fortitude. But my feeling for him had warmth in it as well as respect. We had been soldiers in the same campaign, and he knew my home in France.

"When things became bad early in the New Year I was in doubt whom to turn to. Father Wentzel at Fort Bannerman was old and feeble; and I could not expect the Police to spare me a man. Besides, I wanted something more than physical assistance. I wanted a man of education who could understand and cope with the Hares' malaise. So when one of L.'s guides reached the camp in early February I thought at once of him, and ventured to send him a message.

"It was a shot at a venture, and I was not prepared for his ready response. When he arrived with Monsieur Galliard I was surprised by the look of both. I had learned from Father Wentzel that Galliard was a man sick in the spirit, and I knew that L. was sick in body. Now both seemed to have suffered a transformation. Galliard had a look of robust health, though there was that in his manner which still disquieted me — a lack of confidence, an air of unhappy anticipation, a sense of leaning heavily upon L. As for L., he was very lean and somewhat short of breath, but from my medical experience I judged him to be a convalescent.

"The first day the party spent with me I had light on the situation. L. was all but cured — he might live for years with proper care. But proper care meant life in the open, no heavy duties, and not too much exertion. On this one of the hunters, Louis Frizelle, insisted passionately. Otherwise, he said, and M. Galliard bore him out, that in a little time he would be dead. This L. did not deny, but he was firm in his resolution to take up quarters in the camp and to devote all his powers to saving what was left of the Hare tribe. On this decision plans were made, with the successful result explained in the Police corporal's report, which I here incorporate. . . .

"At first I thought that L.'s conduct was that of a man of high humanitarian principles, who could not witness suffering without an attempt at relief. But presently I found that the motives were subtler, and if possible nobler, and that they involved his friend M. Galliard. L., not being of the Church, made no confession, and he did not readily speak of himself,

but in the course of our work together I was able to gather something of his history.

"We talked first, I remember, about the war in Europe. I was deeply apprehensive about the fate of my beloved France, which once again in my lifetime would be bled white by war. L. seemed curiously apathetic about Europe. He had no doubts about the ultimate issue, and he repeated more than once that the world was witnessing again a contest between Death and Life, and that Life would triumph. He saw our trouble with the Hares as part of the same inscrutable purpose of the Almighty, and insisted that we were on one battlefield with the allies beyond the Atlantic. This he said often to M. Frizelle, whom it seemed to comfort.

"I observed that as the days passed he showed an increasing tenderness towards the Hares. At first I think he regarded their succour as a cold, abstract duty. But gradually he began to feel for them a protective and brotherly kindness. I suppose it was the gift of the trained lawyer, but he mastered every detail of their tribal customs and their confused habits of thought with a speed that seemed not less than miraculous. He might have lived most of his life among them. At first, when we sat at the conferences and went in and out of the huts, his lean, pallid face revealed no more than the intellectual interest which might belong to a scientific inquirer. But by degrees a kind of affection showed in his eyes. He smiled oftener, and his smile had an infinite kindness. From the beginning he dominated them, and the domination became in the end, on their part, almost worship.

"What is the secret, I often ask myself, that gives one human being an almost mystical power over others? In the War I have known a corporal have it, when it was denied to a general of division. I have seen the gift manifest in a parish priest and lacking in an archbishop. It does not require a position of authority, for it makes its own authority. It demands a strong preeminence in brain and character, for it is based on understanding, but also, I think, on an effluence of sincere affection.

"I was puzzled at first by the attitude of Monsieur Galliard. He was a Catholic and had resumed — what he had for a time pretermitted — the observances of the Church. He came regularly to Mass and confession. He was ultimately of my own race, though Les Canadiens differ widely from Les Français de France. He should have been easy for me to comprehend, but I confess that at first I was at a loss. He was like a man under the spell of a constant fear — not panic or terror, but a vague uneasiness. To L. he was like a faithful dog. He seemed to draw strength from his presence, as the mistletoe draws strength from the oak.

"What was notable was his steady advance in confidence till presently his mind was as healthy as his body. His eye cleared, his mouth no longer twitched when he spoke, and he carried his head like a soldier. The change was due partly to his absorption in his work, for to L. he was a right hand. I have rarely seen a man toil so devotedly. But it was largely due to his growing affection for L. When the party arrived from the mountains he was obviously under L.'s influence, but only in the way in which a strong nature masters a less strong. But as the days passed, I could see that his feeling was becoming a warmer thing than admiration. The sight of L.'s increasing weakness made his face often a tragic mask. He fussed as much as the elder Frizelle over L.'s health. He would come to me and implore my interference. 'He is winning,' he would repeat, 'but it will be at the cost of his life, and the price is too high.'

"Bit by bit I began to learn about Galliard, partly from L. and partly from the man himself. He had been brought up in the stiff tradition of Les Canadiens, had revolted against it, and had locked the door on his early life. But it was the old story. His ancestry had its revenge, a revenge bound to be especially harsh, I fancy, in the case of one of his breeding. He had fled from the glittering world in which he had won success and from a devoted wife, to the home of his childhood. And here came a tangle of motives. He had in his blood the pioneer craving to move ever further into the wilds; his family, indeed, had given more than one figure to the story of Arctic exploration. He conceived that he owed a duty to the family tradition which he had forsaken, and that he had to go into the North as an atonement. He also seems to have conceived it as part of the penance which he owed for the neglect of his family religion. He is a man, I think, of sentiment and imagination rather than of a high spirituality.

"But his penance turned out severer than he dreamed. He fell into a malaise which, it is my belief, was at bottom the same as the Hares' affliction, and which seems to be endemic in the North. It may be defined as fear of the North, or perhaps more accurately as fear of life. In the North, man to live, has to fight every hour against hostile forces; if his spirit fails and his effort slackens he perishes. But this dread was something more than a rational fear of a potent enemy. There was superstition in it, a horror of a supernatural and desperate malevolence. This set the Hares mooning in their shacks awaiting death, and it held Galliard, a man of education and high ability, in the same blind, unreasoning bondage. His

recovered religion gave him no defence, for he read this fear as part of the price to be paid for his treason.

“Then L. came on the scene. He saved Galliard’s life. He appeared when Frizelle, in a crazy fit, deserted him, and he had come from England in the last stage of a dire sickness to restore Galliard to his old world. In L.’s grim fortitude Galliard found something that steadied his nerves. More, he learned from L. the only remedy for his malaise. He must fight the North and not submit to it; once fought and beaten, he could win from it not a curse but a blessing.

“Therefore he eagerly accepted the task of grappling with the Hares’ problem. Here was a test case. They were defying the North; they were resisting a madness akin to his own. If they won, the North had no more terrors for him — or life either. He would have conquered his ancestral fear.

“Then something was added to his armour. He had revered L., and soon he came to love him. He thought more of L.’s bodily well-being than of his own nerves. And in forgetting his own troubles he found they had disappeared. After a fortnight in the camp he was like the man in the Scriptures out of whom the devil spirit was cast — wholly sane and at peace, but walking delicately.

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“But L. was my chief concern. I have said that in him I witnessed the rebirth of a soul, but that is not quite the truth. The soul, a fine soul, was always there. More, though not of the Church, I do not hesitate to say that he was of the Faith. Alids oves habeo quae non sunt ex hoc ovili. But he had been frozen by hard stoicism which sprang partly from his upbringing and partly from temperament. He was a strong man with an austere command of himself, and when he had to face death he divested himself of all that could palliate the suffering, and stood up to it with a stark resolution which was more Roman than Christian. What I witnessed was the thawing of the ice.

“He had always bowed himself before the awful majesty of God. Now his experience was that of the Church in the thirteenth century, when they found in the Blessed Virgin a gentle mediatrix between mortal and divine. Or perhaps I should put it thus: that he discovered that tenderness and compassion which Our Lord came into the world to preach, and, in sympathy with others, he lost all care for himself. His noble, frosty egoism was merged in something nobler. He had meant to die in the cold cathedral of the North, ceasing to live in a world which had no care for life. Now he welcomed the humblest human environment, for he had come to love his kind, indeed, to love everything that God had made. He once said (he told me he was quoting an English poet) that he ‘carried about his heart an awful warmth like a load of immortality.’

“When I first met him at Fort Bannerman he seemed to me the typical Englishman, courteous, aloof, the type I knew well in the War. But now there seemed to be a loosening of bonds. He talked very little, but he smiled often, and he seemed to radiate a gentle, compelling courtesy. But there was steel under the soft glove. He had always the air of command, and the Hares obeyed his lightest word as I am certain they never obeyed any orders before in their tribal history. As his strength declined he could speak only in a whisper, but his whispers had the authority of trumpets. For he succeeded in diffusing the impression of a man who had put all fear behind him and was already in communion with something beyond our mortality.

“He shared his confidences with no one. Monsieur Galliard, who had come to regard him with devotion, would never have dared to pierce his reserve. I tried and failed. With him I had not the authority of the Church, and, though I recognised that he was nearing death, I could not offer the consolations of religion unless he had asked for them. I should have felt it an impiety, for I recognised that in his own way he was making his soul. As the power of the sun waxed he liked to bask in it with his eyes shut, as if in prayer or a daydream. He borrowed my Latin Bible and read much in it, but the book would often lie on his knees while he watched with abstracted eyes the dazzle of light on the snow of the far mountains.

“It is a strange fact to chronicle, but I think his last days were his happiest. His strength was very low, but he had done his work and the Hares were out of the pit. Monsieur Galliard tended him like a mother or a sister, helped him to dress and undress, keeping the hut warm, cooking for him and feeding him. The hunters, the Frizelles and the Hares, came to visit him on every return journey. Old Zacharias would remain for hours near his door in case he might be summoned. But all respected his privacy, for they felt that he had gone into retreat before death. I saw him oftenest, and the miracle was that,

as the spring crept back to the valley, there seemed to be a springtime in his spirit.

“He came often to Mass — the last occasion being the High Mass at Easter, which for the Hares was also a thanksgiving for recovery. The attendance was now exemplary. The little church with its gaudy colouring — the work of old Brother Onesime, and much admired by Father Wentzel — was crowded to the door. The Hares have an instinct for ritual, and my acolytes serve the altar well, but they have none for music, and I had found it impossible to train much of a choir. L. would sit in a corner following my Latin with his lips, and he seemed to draw comfort from it. I think the reason was that he was now sharing something with the Hares, and was not a director, but one of the directed. For he had come to love those poor childish folk. Hitherto a lonely man, he had found a clan and a family.

“After that Easter Sunday his body went fast downhill. I do not think he suffered much, except from weakness. His manner became gentler than ever, and his eyes used often to have the pleased look of a good child. He smiled, too, often, as if he saw the humours of life. The huskies — never a very good-tempered pack, though now they were well fed — became his friends, and one or two of the older beasts would accompany him out of doors with a ridiculous air of being a bodyguard. One cold night, I remember, one of them suddenly ensconced itself in an empty box outside the presbytery door. I can still hear L. talking to it. ‘I know what you’re saying, old fellow. “I’m a poor dog and my master’s a poor man. I’ve never had a box like this to sleep in. Please don’t turn me out.”’ So there it remained — the first time I have seen a husky with ambitions to become a house dog.

“He watched eagerly for the signs of spring. The first was the return of the snow buntings, shimmering grey flocks which had wintered in the south. These he would follow with his eyes as they fluttered over the pine woods or spread themselves like a pied shadow on the snow. Then the mountain we call Baldface suddenly shed most of its winter covering, the noise of avalanches punctuated the night, and the upper ribs were disclosed, black as ink in the daytime, but at evening flaming into the most amazing hues of rose and purple. I knew that he had been an alpinist of note, and in these moments I fancy he was recapturing some of the activities of his youth. But there was no regret in his eyes. He was giving thanks for another vision of the Glory of God.

“The last time he was able to go abroad Monsieur Galliard and I assisted him down to the edge of the lake. There was still a broad selvedge of ice — what the Canadian French call *batture* — but in the middle the ice was cracking, and there were lanes of water to reflect the pale blue sky. Also the streams were being loosed from their winter stricture. One could hear them talking under their bonds, and in one or two places the force of water had cleared the boulders and made pools and cascades. . . . A wonderful thing happened. A bull moose, very shaggy and lean, came out of the forest and stood in an open shallow at a stream’s mouth. It drank its fill and then raised its ugly head, shook it and stared into the sunset. Crystal drops fell from its mouth, and the setting sun transfigured the beast into something magical, a beneficent dragon out of a fairy tale. I shall never forget L.’s delight. It was as if he had his last sight of the beauty of the earth, and found in it a pledge of the beauty of Paradise; though I doubt if there will be anything like a bull-moose in the Heavenly City Three days later he died in his sleep. There was no burial, for Monsieur Galliard wished the interment to be at his old home in Quebec. The arrival of two of the R.C.M.P. made it possible to convey the body to Fort Bannerman, whence it would be easy to complete the journey by air.

“Such is my story of the end of a true man-at-arms whose memory will always abide with me. He was not of the Church, but beyond doubt he died in grace. In his last hours he found not peace only, but beatitude. *Dona aeternam quietem Domine et lux perpetua luceat ei.*”

20

The chief beauty of the Canadian spring is its air of fragility. The tints are all delicate; the sky is the palest blue, the green is faint and tender, with none of the riot of an English May. The airy distances seem infinite, for the mind compels the eye to build up other lands beyond the thin-pencilled horizons.

A man and a woman were sitting on the greening turf by the well of the Clairefontaine stream. The man wore a tweed suit of a city cut, but he had the colour and build of a countryman. The woman had taken off her hat, and a light wind was ruffling her hair. Beneath them was a flat pad of ground, and on it, commanding the source of both the north and south-flowing rivulets, was a wooden cross which seemed to mark a grave.

The eyes of both were turned northward where the wooded hills, rising sometimes to rocky scarps, shepherded the streams to the Arctic watershed.

Galliard slowly filled a pipe. His face had filled out, and his jaw was firmer. There were now no little lines of indecision about his mouth. Also his eyes were quiet and content.

For a little the two did not speak. Their eyes followed the slender north-flowing stream. It dropped almost at once into a narrow ravine, but it was possible to mark where that ravine joined a wider valley, and where that valley clove its way into the dark tangle of forested mountains.

"What happens away up there?" the woman asked. "I should like to follow the water."

"It becomes a river which breaks into the lowlands and wanders through muskegs and bush until it reaches the salt. Hudson's Bay, you know. Dull, shallow tides at first, and then the true Arctic, ice-bound for most of the year. Away beyond are the barrens, and rivers of no name, and then the Polar Sea, and the country where only the white bear and the musk ox live. And at the end a great solitude. Some day we will go there together."

"You don't fear it any more?"

"No. It has become part of me, as close to me as my skin. I love it. It is myself. You see, I have made my peace with the North, faced up to it, defied it, and so won its blessing. Consider, my dear. The most vital forces of the world are in the North, in the men of the North, but only when they have annexed it. It kills those who run away from it."

"I see," she said after a long pause. "I know what you mean. I think I feel it. . . . But the Sick Heart River! Wasn't that a queer fancy?"

Galliard laughed.

"It was the old habit of human nature to turn to magic. Lew Frizel wanted a short cut out of his perplexities. So did I, and I came under the spell of his madness. First I came here. Then I went to the Ghost River. Then I heard Lew's story. I was looking for magic, you see. We both had sick hearts. But it was no good. The North will always call your bluff."

"And Leithen? He went there, didn't he?"

"Yes, and brought Lew away. Leithen didn't have a sick heart. He was facing the North with clear eyes. He would always have won out."

"But he died!"

"That was victory — absolute victory. . . . But Leithen had a *fleuve de rêve* also. I suppose we all have. It was this little stream. That's why we brought his body here. It is mine, too — and yours — the place we'll always come back to when we want comforting."

"Which stream?" she asked. "There are two."

"Both. One is the gate of the North and the other's the gate of the world."

She faced round and looked down the green cup of the Clairefontaine. It was a pleasant, pastoral scene, with none of the wildness of the other — the white group of farm buildings in the middle distance and the patches of plough-land, and far beyond a blue shimmer which was the St. Lawrence.

The woman laughed happily.

"That is the way home," she said.

"Yes, it is the way home — to our home, Felicity, which please God will never again be broken. I've a lot of atoning to do. The rest of my life cannot be long enough to make up to you for what you have suffered."

She stroked his hair. "We'll forget all that. We're starting afresh, you know. This is a kind of honeymoon."

She stopped and gazed for a little at the glen, which suddenly overflowed with a burst of sunlight.

"It is also the way to the wars," she said gravely.

"Yes, I'm bound for the wars. I don't know where my battlefield will be. In Europe, perhaps, or maybe in New York or Washington. The North hasn't sent me back to malingering."

"No, of course not. But, anyhow, we're together — we'll always be together."

The two by a common impulse turned their eyes to the wooden cross on the lawn of turf. Galliard rose.

"We must hurry, my dear. The road back is none too good."

She seemed unwilling to go.

“I feel rather sad, don’t you? You’re leaving your captain behind.”

Galliard turned to his wife, and she saw that in his eyes which made her smile.

“I can’t feel sad,” he said. “When I think of Leithen I feel triumphant. He fought a good fight, but he hasn’t finished his course. I remember what Father Duplessis said — he knew that he would die; but he knew also that he would live.”

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